Restaurant Meal Experiences from Customers’ Perspectives
To:
Ester
and
my Mother:
Karen B. Hansen
Örebro Studies in Culinary Arts and Meal Science IV

Kai Victor Hansen

Restaurant Meal Experiences from Customers’ Perspectives
A Grounded Theory Approach


Abstract

The purpose of this doctoral dissertation has been to increase the knowledge of customers’ view on relation to commercial restaurant meals and thereby increase the knowledge within the restaurant industry about customers’ perspectives about meals. The dissertation is based on four studies of customers’ meal experiences in à la Carte restaurants in Norway. In addition, a methodological paper has been written to illuminate central aspects of the method used in the dissertation.

An explorative and qualitative approach was selected in the data collection, and focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews of experienced restaurant customers from à la Carte restaurants were used and analysed within a modified grounded theory approach. The participants were from the cities of Oslo and Stavanger in Norway. The conceptual models in the four studies are the result of the analysis of the data collected. The first study includes a conceptual model illustrating different aspects of the payment process of the bill; important aspects were expectations, sensibility, and reactions. It was demonstrated how a delay in the payment process had negative affects on the customers’ meal experiences. In the second study, the five important elements of customers’ meal experiences were: The core product, the restaurant interior, the personal social meeting, the company, and the restaurant atmosphere. These five aspects were woven tightly together and the restaurant atmosphere acted as the “glue” that connected the different meal experience aspects into a whole. The third study focused on the customers’ choices of restaurants, and the occasion occurred as an important element in the decision-making process of choosing a restaurant. The fourth study revealed which consumer values were important in restaurant visits, and identified 13 single values that were integrated into five consumer value categories: Excellence, harmony, emotional stimulation, acknowledgement, and circumstance value. The fifth paper provides a thorough discussion of the usefulness of the modified grounded theory applied in the studies.

When an overall comparison of the different studies is made, there are several indications that the restaurant employees, and especially the waiting staff, represent the restaurant’s most important assets in the meetings with customers. Increasing the knowledge level of the staff about the customers seems to be an actual element, and thus education and training will be of great importance for development of the restaurant field.

Key words: Customers, meal, à la Carte restaurants, grounded theory, payment, focus group, semi-structured interviews, Norway, choice, consumer values, meal experience categories

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Original publications

The present thesis is based on the papers listed below, refereed to by their Roman numerals. Some additional unpublished results are also included I–V.


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Reprinted from (The Meal Experiences of à la Carte Restaurant Customers) by (Hansen, K. V., Jensen, Øystein, and Gustafsson, Inga-Britt.) from (Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism), www.tandf.no/sjht, 2005, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 135–151, by permission of Taylor and Francis AS.


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**Sammendrag**

Hensikten med denne avhandlingen har vært å øke kunnskapen omkring kunders oppfatninger i forhold til kommersielle måltider, og gjennom det, øke kunnskapen til restaurantnæringen om kundenes perspektiv. Avhandlingen er en artikkelbasert doktorgrad, og består av fire ulike studier knyttet til kunders måltidsopplevelser på à la Carte restauranter i to ulike byer i Norge. I tillegg er en metodeartikkel skrevet for å belyse sentrale metodiske aspekter som er viktige for å forstå de ulike deler av metoden som er benyttet.

En eksplorativ og kvalitativ metodisk tilnærming til forskningsfeltet ble valgt, datainnsamlingen er basert på ulike typer intervjuer, fokusgruppe og semi-strukturerte intervjuer av erfarne restaurantgjester med ulike bakgrunn verdrørende deres måltidsopplevelser på à la Carte restauranter. De empiriske data er analyseret ved bruk av en modifisert grounded theory tilnærming. Deltagerne i intervjuene kom fra to byer i Norge, Oslo og Stavanger. I alle fire studiene ble det utviklet konseptuelle modeller basert på de empiriske data som var samlet inn og tolket i de kvalitative intervjuene. De ulike modellene beskriver på hvert sitt sett ulike sider av kunders måltidsopplevelser på restauranter. Det første studiet inneholder en modell som beskriver ulike aspekter ved betalingsprosessen. Sentrale aspekter er forventinger, sensibilitet, og reaksjoner på betalingen av regningen på restaurant. I det andre studiet ble fem aspekter under måltidsopplevelsen utledet som viktige for restaurant gjestene: Kjerneproduktet, restaurantens interiør, det personlige service møtet, selskapet, og restaurantens atmosfære. Disse elementene henger tett sammen, og restaurantens atmosfære binder sammen de ulike delene til en helhetlig måltidsopplevelse. I den tredje studien var det kunders valg av restaurant som sto i fokus. Det ble avdekket at anledningen var svært viktig for kunders restaurantvalg. I den fjerde studien var det avdekningene av hvilke konsumentverdier som er sentrale for restaurantbesøk. Den femte studien foretar en gjennomgående diskusjon av den modifisert grounded theory tilnærmingen som blir benyttet i de fire andre studiene.

Når funnene i de ulike studiene blir sammenholdt, kan en avlede at de restaurant ansatte, spesielt serveringspersonale, synes å være den mest kritiske ressursen for restauranten i møte med kundene. Utdanning og trening av personalet er derfor av stor viktighet for utviklingen av restaurantnæringen.
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1.0 Background

This doctoral dissertation became a reality because of the decision from the former Stavanger University College and present University of Stavanger, Faculty of Social Science at the Norwegian School of Hotel Management, Department of Business Administration, to investigate matters regarding “The meal influence on Norwegian travel and tourism”. This formed the basis for the development of the thesis and research proposal. The work with the research proposal deduced at an early stage that the doctoral dissertation should be limited to investigating meals and questions related thereto. The meal research area appeared scattered and with few studies, especially from the customers’ points of view in relation to meal experiences. Important questions regarding customers’ meal experiences needed further investigation to illuminate research questions related to meal experiences among restaurant customers in Norway. At present in Norway, no doctoral programmes qualify for a doctoral dissertation in Culinary Arts and Meal Science. Therefore, this dissertation became possible at Örebro University’s Department of Culinary Arts and Meal Science in Grythyttan, Sweden
2.0 Introduction

The meal appears to have the effect on people that they can start talking and discussing their meal experiences everywhere about past, present, or future meal experiences, e.g. at work, on an airplane, at home, and in other places or situations. Today, there is an increased focus on food and meals in many countries, from both everyday people and professional meal producers. The information and interest around meals, food, cooking, and related themes is abundant. Therefore, almost every newspaper, magazine, TV channel, and other media channels carry some sort of information about meals, food, original use of spices, etc. that is of interest to the general public. The focus on food and meals creates awareness around meal issues in everyday life.

Researchers have found at least three different main reasons for dining out at restaurants, i.e. for pleasure, leisure, and necessity (Warde & Martens, 2000). Other researchers have focused on other ways of dividing and categorising the meal experiences. In the latter, more attention has been on the meals in various situations from different research areas and professions. (Douglas et al., 1997; Bugge & Døving, 2000; Meiselman, 2000; Oh, 2000; Mattila, 2001; Kim, 2003; Meiselman, 2003; Moschis et al., 2003; Rozin et al., 2003; Ahlgren, 2004; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Gustafsson, 2004; Hansen et al., 2004; Jonsson, 2004; Nygren, 2004). This dissertation is a result of the focus on meals from the customers’ points of view. Meals are often described in contextual settings, such as a romantic dinner or a business dinner (Auty, 1992; Warde & Martens, 2000). One intention is to connect people, while another goal for a meal can be to build and maintain relationships between people (Warde & Martens, 2000). Meal experiences occur in commercial, institutional, and domestic locations almost everywhere in the world. Throughout the day, people can combine their meal experiences with eating out and eating in, i.e. meals are either consumed inside or outside the domestic sphere. Meals can be divided into a number of categories, phases, or dimensions, and roughly divided into commercial and non-commercial meals.

This doctoral dissertation investigates customers’ experiences in connection with the restaurant meal arena. Since the research is scattered, particularly as regards customers’ meal experiences in restaurants, it is important to search for research areas with related topics and common accepted theories. Different consumer theories from marketing literature have related research areas, especially regarding consumer behaviour and service quality.
2.1 Aim of the dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is to increase the understanding of the meal experience from the customers’ points of view on commercial meals in restaurants and à la Carte restaurants in Norway, and to develop a methodological tool for evaluating their meal experiences. Each study had its specific aim.

Study I: “To study the payment as part of the meal experience”

Study II: “To study main aspects of the meal experiences from the customers’ points of view”

Study III: “To evaluate factors behind customers’ choices of restaurants”

Study IV: “To evaluate the customers’ perceived consumer values in the meal experience in á la Carte restaurants”

Study V: “To describe the method, grounded theory, which is used in all four studies”
3.0 Theory

The subject for this thesis is the restaurant meal experience from the customers' points of view. Meals are complex phenomena that mean different things to different people and professions (Meiselman, 2000). Therefore, an understanding of meals will be different between a nutritionist and a sociologist because of their dissimilar perspectives and contexts (Mäkelä, 2000). Meiselman (2000) illuminated that earlier research has largely focused on individual foods instead of understanding the individual foods as part of the entire meal.

3.1 Research on restaurants and meal experiences

The research on restaurants and meal experiences has increased in the last decade. The increased interest for research on meals is found in many research areas and disciplines and new contributions are received quickly. A complete overview of all contributions is not the intention of this dissertation, but rather to present some of them that are essential for understanding the research on meal experiences. Only some researchers have tried and carried out an overall examination of the entire meal experience (Warde & Martens, 2000; Soriano, 2001; Gustafsson, 2004). In many cases, only one topic (Meiselman, 2001; Areni, 2003; Mossberg & Hanefors, 2003) or a few aspects (Auty, 1992; Cook & Grang, 1996; Kivela, 1999a; Cronin, 2000; Edwards et al., 2003; Rozin et al., 2003; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004) were investigated and to a limited degree put into an overall frame. This can make comparisons between the different contributions difficult, but an attempt to describe any of the areas that are interesting in a meal perspective can be useful for understanding the complexity in meal research.

3.2 The commercial restaurants

The history of what we call modern restaurants can be traced back to France, where they replaced older types of different eating establishments. More modern taverns with high-class and almost luxury styling were established in the 18th century in London. The word “restaurant” has been used since the Middle Ages, and the definition used by Boulanger (1765) in France, according to Pitte (1999:474), was: “…any of a variety of rich bouillons made of chicken, beef, roots of one sort or another, onions, herbs, and, according to some recipes, spices, crystallized sugar, toasted bread, barley, butter and even exotic ingredients such as rose petals, Damascus grapes, and amber”. The word “restaurant” is said to have its origin from this time (1765), originally, “…food that restores” or “to restore or to refresh”
Before the French Revolution, many restaurants had been established and customers could eat dinner at private tables, with tablecloths on the tables. They could reserve the tables, and the dishes served were listed on paper for the convenience of the customers.

After the French Revolution, many chefs were without their former bosses because they had either been killed or fled the country, and the chefs started running the businesses on their own. Before the Revolution, there were approximately 100 restaurants in Paris; afterwards, that number rose to around 600 (Pitte, 1999). The end of the 19th century saw a rise in the number of tourists when the European middle class started to explore the world. New types of hotels, restaurants and other eating establishments were established. Today, the word “restaurant” is widely spread all over the world, and the meaning can vary according to the style of restaurant it describes. The increase in the number of customers who dine out was also described by Finkelstein (1989). An estimate for the turn of the century was that two out of three would dine out. French cuisine is found all over the world, and other countries’ cuisines have also had influence in Norway, for example, and in the types of dishes that are eaten in Norwegian restaurants.

3.3 Main research methods

In Table 1, three different methods are used. Two represent main research directions, qualitative and quantitative, and both have a number of different research techniques used in the articles. The third is literature overview, which represents contributions that have tried to present an overview of research in some research areas, e.g. Johns and Pine (2002). Books and book chapters are also included in that category (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Mitchell & Hall, 2003; Smith & Hall, 2003). The different topic columns in Table 1 are divided based on inspiration from the Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) (Gustafsson, 2004) and results from Warde and Martens (2000).
An overview of a number of contributions in the field of food, meals, restaurants, and other adjacent areas.

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¹ Core product includes research on topics such as food, menus, sensory, taste sensations, appearance, and presentation form.
² Restaurant interior includes research on topics such as location, interior, colours, décor, and furniture.
³ Meeting includes research on topics such as service, personal service, personnel, staff, and other customers.
⁴ Restaurant atmosphere includes research on topics such as music, environment, and senses.
⁵ Management systems include research on topics such as personnel handling, regulations and laws.
⁶ Company includes research on topics such as talk, conversations, business and private gatherings.
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<td>(Wirtz &amp; Mattila, 2004)</td>
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3.3.1 Main perspectives
There are two main perspectives in the research on meal topics, either a consumer/customer perspective, or a producer/restaurateur perspective. In some research contributions, both can be present within the same research (e.g. (Warde & Martens, 2000)).

3.3.2 Commercial meal science research from the customers’ points of view
The commercial meal science research from the customers’ points of view often focuses on single areas of research or clusters of meal topics that are important for the customers or for understanding of customers. Food, or composition of the food, was investigated by King et al. (2004), who reported that customers valued the food served in restaurants higher than food served in the restaurant test facilities, and that this could be connected to the customers’ experiences of meals at restaurants as important based on the facilities. This was also confirmed by Meiselman (2001), who focused on the quality of the food in addition to the physical facilities, and emphasised factors such as the role of the consumer and the contextual situation, which were often erroneously omitted from the meal experience.

Another contribution was the focus on known or unknown food and how it was accepted from the customers’ points of view (Tuorila et al., 1998). Mattila and Wirtz (2002) focused on how attitude was influenced by different information sources that could stimulate the choice of restaurant by the customer, e.g. word-of-mouth (WOM), which represents information received from family and friends. WOM was reported to be important for the customers, and they discussed mistakes made by restaurants and their ability for service recovery (Susskind, 2002). The restaurants that handled complaints or service failures to the customers’ satisfaction were positively commented and recommended. These types of reactions are known in the service literature and were representative for restaurants and other businesses (Solomon et al., 2002; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Heung (2000) investigated service quality in four different types of restaurants and discovered a pattern of increased demand for service quality. Andersson and Mossberg (2004) suggested the following five factors as satisfiers during a meal experience in the two restaurants they investigated: Cuisine, restaurant interior, service, company, and other guests. They found it possible to measure customer satisfaction through willingness to pay.

3.3.3 Commercial meal science research from the restaurateurs’ points of view
From the suppliers’ points of view, restaurant research focuses on different topics connected together within the same area of research. Use of local
brand names on the menu was one important aspect identified by Smith and Hall (2003). They also pointed out several other important criteria for restaurants, e.g. price, availability, and consistency in quality and delivery of local products throughout the year. According to Williams et al. (1997), different types of food and decoration of the restaurant room were important for older people when visiting restaurants. If a restaurant did something special, e.g. served an exceptionally good wine that together with the food heightened the entire meal experience, or if the restaurant was built up around a theme, such as a Hard Rock Café, Aune (2002) referred to these as extraordinary eating establishments. Increased customer loyalty was found in restaurants where emotional connections were established with their customers (Mattila, 2001).

3.4 Topics
The overview in Table 1 is not a complete overview of all contributions, but some samples of contributions reflecting the meal experiences from diverse perspectives and different researchers. The theory chapter will follow the main topics in Table 1. First, the main types of methods in the research contributions are presented. Second, the perspectives in the contributions are presented. Last, the theory contributions are presented in six main topics. The partitioning is inspired by Gustafsson’s (2004), Warde and Martens’ (2000), and Bitner’s (1992) ways of dividing restaurant and service experiences.

3.4.1 The core product
The core product includes research on topics such as food, menus, sensory, taste sensations, appearance, and presentation form. The research around the core product is divided into many areas within the topic. The core product is equal to the understanding of Gustafsson’s (2004) product in the Five Aspects Meal Model. The product consists of food and beverage and can be seen as the core element of the meal. The product must also be seen in interaction with all other elements in the meal experience. Some of these elements are more obvious at first glance, e.g. presentation of the food and wine, but all aspects are closely related. If one link of the chain is removed or broken, the customer’s experience of the meal can be reduced below his/her pre-expectations. Research conducted by Cook and Grang (1996) looked into how food was used to construct culture in London as a city where customers could experience the world on a plate. Meiselman (2001:67) studied quality of food in different contexts from three perspectives: The product, the consumer, and the food service environment. A main result of Meiselman’s study was that food quality was a complex
phenomenon and was dependent on whether it was illuminated from the producers’ or customers’ points of view. Lien (1995) focused her study on contemporary Norwegian food advertising, and particularly the role of food in construction of gender identity.

Pleasure, leisure, and necessity are considered reasons for eating out. There seems to be a shared understanding of eating out as including or experiencing something different from everyday life, getting a break from cooking and serving, relaxing, having a treat, socialising, celebrating, a liking for food, and preventing hunger (Warde and Martens, 2000:47). In a study conducted by Smith and Hall (2003) on use of local food in restaurants in New Zealand, the result was that the price had to be competitive, there was an increasing need for supply, high quality, freshness, and necessary availability of the products, and stability of deliveries. A study of mature customers in restaurants by Williams et al. (1997) focused on older customers’ challenges in dining out and how factors such as vision and hearing influenced their appetite during the entire meal experience. Auty (1992) reported food type and food quality as the most used factors for choosing a restaurant. Ahlgren (2004) focused on consumers’ ready-meal consumption in different eating contexts. The sample in her study included 400 consumers in Gothenburg, Sweden. The results identified sensory input and taste of ready meals as important for consumers. Jonsson (2004) studied food and meals from a cultural perspective, and used focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed the importance of culture within family meal experiences, and food, meal, and information had to be included in practical and cultural components.

3.4.2 Room (facilities)

The restaurant interior includes research on topics such as location, interior, colours, décor, and furniture. The room as reported by Gustafsson (2004) was the setting for the meal, including the use and shape of the facilities, how the room is connected to other necessary rooms, how the customers and staff use the room, and the interior of the room. Warde and Martens identified three different modes of provision: Commercial, institutional, and communal. The commercial mode was divided into different types of establishments that provide food, such as cafes, restaurants, steakhouses, diners, brasseries, bistros, pizzerias, and kebab houses (Warde and Martens, 2000:21). These establishments usually only work with food provision and represent a wide range of places where people can dine out. Warde and Martens mention several other places for food provision that are not totally devoted to food provision only, such as taverns, pubs, wine bars, and hotels. The mode of provision is that there is an offer for “every” taste in all kinds of food establishments in the research area in the UK. One of the main
differences is how the meal is paid, ranging from commercial, where every meal is fully paid by the consumer; institutional, where some or the total cost of the meal is subsidised; and communal, where there is no exchange of money in a typical trade situation.

The style of the restaurant was also found to influence the customers’ choices of restaurants (Auty, 1992). Meiselman (2003) revealed context, environment, and the food itself as important for customers’ perceptions of food quality. This research was conducted in different contexts ranging from military camps to restaurants and hotels. Troye (1999) refers in his research to structural elements such as dining halls and luxurious restaurants which the customer can only slightly affect, and which do not require any efforts from the customers or staff in order to give benefit. Soriano (2001) reported in his study that place and ambience were important for the customers, and were found in a study of expectation factors among Spanish restaurant customers. An article by Bitner (1992) illuminated the servicescape by evaluating the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees, and this was done through grounding in theoretical literature. The environmental dimension consisted of ambient conditions, space/function, signs, symbols, and artefacts, where the latter two equal the understanding of the room and facilities.

Experimental studies have revealed that there was a significantly higher difference in acceptability from customers when dinners were served in different eating locations, e.g. between dinners served in institutional food establishments compared to tablecloth dining in restaurants (Edwards et al., 2003). The same type of dinner (Chicken à la King and rice) was served in ten different eating establishments. The same researcher monitored the procedures in all locations, and no attempt was made to influence the service. Hersleth (2003) also identified that different contextual settings influenced the liking of wine and food.

### 3.4.3 Meeting (service encounter)

The meeting includes research on topics such as service, personal service, personnel, staff, and other customers. The meeting denotes the interpersonal relationship that takes place between customers, other customers, and personnel in the restaurant Gustafsson (2004). Delivery of meal experiences is the delivery of service, and includes many different values considered good service from the consumer’s perspective, and might be associated with the following: Speed, ease, advice, trust in the product, value for the money, social participation, and social honour (Warde and Martens, 2000:118-119).
Fulfilling all the above-mentioned service elements simultaneously can be challenging. Other factors will influence the experienced service level, such as types of customer and types of service offered at a given time. An extra factor that complicates eating out and service delivery is that in addition to customer and provider, there are usually different sets of companions, such as large parties, dating couples, family, and business groups (Warde and Martens, 2000:120). Delivery of service is the true moment when the customer starts to interact with the staff. The outcome is dependent on several factors, including interior, treatment, staff attitude, errors in food and service, expectations, etc.

Bitner (1992) states that the servicescape influenced the interpersonal service between customers and employees. In addition, the physical environment, e.g. in a restaurant, was also likely to influence the social interaction. In some cases, the seating arrangement among customers might encourage interaction between them even if they did not know each other before they entered the restaurant. In interpersonal responses between employee and customer, three sub-types of responses were identified: Cognitive, emotional, and physiological (Bitner, 1992). The staffs were identified as a major variable, because the food could be perfectly cooked by the chef but served badly by the staff (Pratten, 2003). The study was conducted among owners and staff in ten cafes and restaurants in London. In the research by Pratten (2003), the chefs often blamed the waiting staff for being inexperienced and lacking adequate training, and concluded that the waiting staff was an important asset in the restaurant’s performance and customers’ satisfaction.

In an article by Johnson and Mathews (1997) about the influence of experience on service expectations, it was identified that experience of the service increased the will expectations. In a study of elderly people’s consumer loyalty, Fu and Parks (2001) stated that elderly people enjoyed more interaction with restaurant personnel. This research was done in fast food restaurants and determined how consumer loyalty functions in a full service restaurant. The ability for service recovery after service failures in the restaurant was identified as a key aspect for increasing consumer loyalty (Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). Tangible types of compensation, combined with an apology, had a positive impact on the customers. When the speed of service was delayed, the customers linked it directly to the efficiency of the restaurant (Wirtz & Mattila, 2004).

3.4.4 Restaurant atmosphere
The atmosphere of a restaurant is a combination of three aspects: Room, meeting, and product. The atmosphere can be seen as the glue that holds customers in close connection with the language of the meal. This does not
mean that a “silent” meal can be filled with good atmosphere, but to have a meal experience, guests must be able to verbally express their experiences of the meal (Gustafsson, 2004). In the framework developed by Bitner (1992:60), the environmental dimensions were described and divided into three main areas: Ambient conditions, space/function, and signs, symbols, and artefacts. Mattila (2001) identified atmosphere as an important influencing factor for the restaurant experience. This study concerned one target restaurant, and was conducted using a survey of undergraduate students at a large state university in the Northeastern United States. It is not enough to provide acceptable and adequate food; the atmosphere, the presentation of food, the serving staff’s attitude towards customers, and the opening and closing of the visit (Campbell-Smith, 1967) are also important elements. Hersleth et al. (2003) found that serving food in a social atmosphere had a positive effect on the liking of food.

Areni (2003) and Wilson (2003) have recently reported music as important for the restaurant atmosphere. Areni (2003) identified that music has the potential to give customers enjoyment and heighten their meal experience with good background music in the restaurant, but that the same music should not be repeated too frequently. Classical music was associated with up-market settings. Areni conducted the study from the restaurant managers’ points of view, using unstructured telephone interviews of 100 participants. Wilson (2003) also found that different types of music, e.g. jazz, had various effects on perceived restaurant atmosphere. In Wilson’s study, the research was conducted in one Australian restaurant in Sydney using a survey with 300 participants.

3.4.5 Management control systems
The management control system consists of different regulations, rules, laws, economic aspects, and planning with which restaurants have to comply in order to stay in business. They are important for the customers’ satisfaction and experience levels. It is equally important for food producers to have good control systems (Gustafsson, 2004). In a study by Schafheitle (2000), four chefs were interviewed about menu design and the fact that it is part of the planning related to different management control systems. This also includes knowledge of how the courses on the menu would look and taste to the customers in the restaurants. Other parts of the menu planning the chefs had to be aware of were economic goals, marketing of the menu, quality, and production.
3.4.6 Company (social)
Sociologists pay a good deal of attention to the attraction of eating out, but few studies are done around what it feels like or what good and bad sensations are aroused in the final consumption stage. Consumption has been, and still is, used to mark social position, but it cannot explain the degree of experience or satisfaction combined with the meal. In Warde and Martens (1998, 2000), the search for gratification is developed into a formalised form. The company around the table in the restaurant is also a part of the enjoyment of eating, as is the participation with other persons the customer knows. The occasion for the meal could be, for example, a social gathering. In a study by Warde and Martens (2000:206), 75 per cent of their respondents answered that they did not like to eat alone. Another part of the social company was the sharing of mutual experiences and reaching gratification during the meal. They concluded that the participants in the company created much of the enjoyment by themselves. Iglesias and Guillen (2004) identified that family celebrations at restaurants generated greater levels of satisfaction than any other reasons for celebration, and the information search among the participants was more thorough.
4.0 Method

The use of grounded theory in this dissertation was modified and developed during the work with the different studies, from Study I, where an almost "traditional" grounded theory approach is used, to the last study (IV), where a modified grounded theory approach is used, including the contextual relation and the area of research in the coding process. Another area that gained a great deal of attention is development and organisation of the raw data that are gathered from five focus group interviews and seven semi-structured interviews. The system for coding and organising that was developed to get an overview of the raw data, to arrange data, and still have control of the data was of importance after the coding and categorisation. The development of the organising system and coding is described in detail in Study V.

4.1 Literature overview: Qualitative research and grounded theory

There is no common approach to qualitative research among researchers. Several researchers have criteria for qualitative research that differ slightly from each other's, such as the way in which data naturally occurs, unstructured vs. structured interviews, or in words rather than numbers (Hammersley, 1992; Silverman, 2005). The aim is often to gather an "authentic" interpretation and understanding of the peoples' experiences of the phenomena that are being researched (Silverman, 2005). There has been an increasing use of qualitative research techniques, e.g. in books, journals, and articles within several research fields such as psychology, family studies, and sociology.

Qualitative research is considered complex and time consuming for the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The production of knowledge in qualitative research methods is often based on the people as being important and explicit parts of the research area. Kvale (1997) has defined professional interviews as a way to gather descriptions of the interviewee's lifeworld with regard to the interpretation of the described phenomena. Often, subjective points of view start the research, e.g. around a certain topic, different types of interaction, or looking into different social fields and practices (Flick, 2002).

In the examination of the grounded theory (GT), there seem to be a number of approaches depending on different authors' points of view. This paper focuses particularly on different coding levels in GT. A starting point was a Glaser and Strauss book from 1967, "The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two authors, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, came from two different universities and schools of thought, Colombia and Chicago, in the...
USA. Since the development in 1967, the two authors have written several books (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1992, 1998), and a growing disagreement of the understanding of GT has developed. The conflicting points of view were expressed in 1991, for example, after the release of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) book, “Basics of Qualitative Research – Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques”, and in the introduction of Glaser’s book, “Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis”, released in 1992. The basis for the disagreement was Glaser’s claim (1992) that Strauss and Corbin (1990) did not recognise Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) contribution to GT, and Glaser claims that Strauss and Corbin were merely using new words for old methodology. In this paper, both views will be presented with regard to the coding process. The discussions between Glaser and Strauss are not essential for the papers developed (Studies I-IV), since important parts in both views on GT have been useful in the different studies.

GT is considered an inductive scientific method and when done properly, it fulfils the requirements for “good” science (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creativity is considered an important aspect in the creation of new interrelations and combinations between different conceptual categories. GT is rooted in symbolic interactionism, and the researchers will try to determine what types of symbolic meanings, e.g., words, interiors, artefacts, and gestures, have impact on others in their interactions with each other (Glaser, 1992). GT also uses constant comparative analysis of empirical data, and both data collection and analysis interact simultaneously during the sampling and coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The grounded theory represents a continuous comparative process wherein the sampling and analysis process activities to a certain degree run parallel and “interact” continuously with each other (Jensen, 1998). In the first phase, open sampling (Figure 1), a phenomenon can be studied in “all places” as long as the phenomenon occurs (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the second phase, the relational and variational sampling searches for extreme contexts of the data collection. Open coding worked effectively as a first filtering process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This leads to axial coding, which consists of a set of procedures whereby data are reassembled in new ways on a higher abstraction level, and whereby patterns are identified within the data. Connections between the different categories are formed, new categories are identified, and new patterns arise, resulting in new labels that have been found and derived from open and axial coding. The last phase includes the discriminate sampling, which is the verification of the overall story. Selective coding is based on the selection of the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating the relationships that are found, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.
Qualitative results cannot be connected to representative generalisation or statistical generalisation based on representativity in the population. Therefore, the results in the studies were connected to theoretical or analytical generalisation (Yin, 1994). This also indicates that close attention must to be paid to the empirical context.

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\begin{array}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{ACTIVITY} & \text{PHASE 1} & \text{PHASE 2} & \text{PHASE 3} \\
\hline
\text{SAMPLING} & \text{Open} & \text{Relational & variational} & \text{Discriminate} \\
\hline
\text{CODING} & \text{Open} & \text{Axial} & \text{Selective} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

**Figure 1** The phases of theoretical sampling and coding based on Strauss and Corbin, 1990 (Jensen, 1998).

### 4.2 The approaches of Glaser vs. Strauss & Corbin

Glaser (1978) divided the coding into two main parts, substantive and theoretical. Substantive coding was then divided into two parts, open coding, and selective coding. At first glance, Glaser’s scheme of open coding (1978) equalled that of Strauss and Corbin (1990). The difference was found in the description and use of open codes, where Glaser left room for the researcher to define how the codes should be developed. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) description of how the coding should be done, kind of a “rule set”, was more detailed than Glaser’s. Glaser uses selective coding corresponding to Strauss and Corbin’s axial and selective coding. What is new is the introduction of Strauss and Corbin’s axial coding, which also provides a clearer procedure the researcher can follow in GT. The phases are illustrated in Figure 2, but are not as clearly divided as Figure 2 may imply. The dividing lines are more of an illustrative concept between the different phases, and do not follow each other completely.

The steps in the research process developed by Glaser (1978) are collection of: Raw data, open coding, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin’s approach (1990) consists of: Raw data, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, as illustrated in Figure 2. Grounded theory procedures make it possible to handle the qualitative data from interviews, and can be used in various situations and adjusted to fit each researcher’s personal style. The raw data can derive from various types of interviews, such as focus group interviews.
4.2.1 Based on the approach of Strauss & Corbin

The following description is based on Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach to GT. This approach is also closest to the one used in the different studies in this doctoral dissertation. Glaser’s (1978) approach is further described and discussed in Study V.

4.2.1.1 Open coding

Open coding is described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as the part in the analysis of the collected data when labelling and naming of the different phenomena are detected or found during examination of the raw data. Within open coding, data are processed through several internal stages that do not necessarily follow each other in succession. The collected data are broken down into parts and each part is examined. At the same time, each part is focused on to find similarities and differences that can lead to new discoveries of categories that are found within the data. The naming of categories takes place during the process. At first, the name that seems most logical is chosen to describe the phenomenon, but this can change if a better description can be found through another name or label. The categories are developed according to Strauss and Corbin (1990:69) in accordance with their properties and dimensions. The properties are defined as: “Attributes or characteristics pertaining to a category”, and dimensions are defined as: “Location of properties along a continuum” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:61). Properties and dimensions are important in the work to develop relationships between categories and subcategories so that the connections are understandable. The coding process is not limited to words; both sentences or paragraphs can be coded, or even the entire interview, document, etc. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:73). The recommendation is also that code notes and/or memos should always be written in the way that best suits the researcher.
4.2.1.2 Axial coding

Axial coding consists of a set of procedures whereby data are reassembled in new ways on a higher abstraction level, and whereby patterns are identified within the data. Connections between the different categories are formed, new categories are identified, and new patterns arise (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this particular research, different words, phrases, statements, and sentences have been analysed, resulting in new labels that have been found and derived from open and axial coding, involving conditions, interaction and action strategies, and consequences into the same coding frame for execution of the axial coding.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) introduce the paradigm model and describe it as: “...linking the subcategories to a category in a set of relationships denoting causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences”. The intention of the paradigm model is that the researcher will be better able to systematically relate the collected data in complex patterns and discover characteristics of the area being researched. The phenomenon is one of the central intentions in managing a set of actions/interactions. The causal conditions are described as the incidents leading towards the occurrence of a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:100).

The continuous development of new categories will eventually result in sufficient density within the data. The intention is to reach a level of theory that will be conceptually dense and specified in such a way that it is applicable and covers different incidences of any given phenomenon that lies below this level. This work is very important, and the discovery of categories and displaying their differences and similarities among and within categories is central and the essence of grounded theory. The final theory developed needs to be supported within the empirical data that are collected.

4.2.1.3 Selective coding

Selective coding is based on the selection of the core category as explained earlier. Selective coding is not so far or different from axial coding, but is done on a higher abstraction level of analysis. Axial coding is important because it forms the foundation for selective coding. There are five different steps in selective coding; they are not necessarily sequential, but it easier to explain them when they are divided. These five steps are: The story line, relating subsidiary categories, relating categories, validating those relationships, and filling in the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:pp 117–118).

The researcher usually moves back and forth between the different steps. Selective coding is also a set of choices that have to be made. First, the researcher must move away from descriptive stories and on to stories that
are approached in a more analytical way. Next, the researcher has to make a choice, often between two or more salient problems, to achieve a close integration between categories. The choice is then between which problems should be raised in order to write a paper or monograph and which should be left for a second paper. In some cases, it can be difficult to find the storyline in the categories, and help from a colleague or more experienced researcher may be necessary. It can be challenging to display how the other categories are connected to the core category. It is not necessarily clear that the core category directly displays the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:125). Another challenge can be if the researcher in the study has difficulties when relating to categories; s/he should then rewrite or retell the story. The work continues with the search for patterns to discover the web as the categories are woven into each other. Sometimes, the patterns are discovered by chance and coincidence.

4.3 Criticism to grounded theory by other researchers

Various authors such as Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994), Christensen (1994), and Ekerwald and Jonsson (1989) have commented on and criticised the development of GT as made by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1978), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The criticism can be divided into several main areas such as induction-deduction, “openness”, the use of “tacit knowledge”, and theory development.

4.3.1 Induction-deduction

Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that they were using an inductive method. Ekerwald and Jonsson (1989) claim that GT is between an inductive and deductive method, because Glaser and Strauss move back and forth between the two types. This is described as the “next question” technique. Christensen (1994) claimed that through an entire research process, it was meaningless to identify it as only inductive or deductive because parts of the research process can be either inductive or deductive. Neuman (2003:51) also emphasises that researchers in practice use both approaches and are flexible about that in their research. Since Glaser and Strauss’ first book in 1967, there has been a development in later editions in their view on the inductive connection to grounded theory from purely inductive to a position between inductive and deductive. Therefore, the one (inductive) does not rule out the other (deductive), and they can coexist within the substantive area of the study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). In addition, Starrin (1996) concludes that it cannot only be inductive, but has to be a part of both inductive and deductive. Miles and Huberman (1984) derived that any researcher would bring with them some ideas, foci, and tools to the research
fieldwork even though they claim to be unstructured or inductive in their approach.

4.3.2 “Openness”

“Openness” as used by Glaser (1978:44) is the ability of the researcher to be receptive and emergent towards other theoretical perspectives. Later Glaser and Strauss in co-operation are more focused on approaching the empirical data with an impartial theory (Christensen, 1994:247), rather than having a prejudice towards the empirical data (Ekerwald & Johnsson, 1989). According to Christensen (1994), openness seems to have been undergoing a transition from total openness towards more conscious openness from the first basic book (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to Glaser’s (1978) edition. Openness in Glaser and Strauss is therefore in the sense of approaching empirical data without prejudice and retrieving knowledge from empirical data in an open way. This gives today’s researchers more “freedom” to compare and position from pre-existing theories (Jensen, 1997).

4.3.3 “Tacit knowledge”

The philosopher Michael Polanyi first introduced the concept of “tacit knowledge”, and includes three understandings of what it is: Knowledge that is hidden, knowledge that is still not verbalised, or knowledge that cannot be expressed (Christensen, 1994) and learned through practice or testing and failure (Benton & Craib, 2001). From Glaser and Strauss’ point of view, tacit knowledge is often considered less important than other types of knowledge. In their analysis, they suggest a strong claim on the requirements for systematics and precision.

According to Christensen (1994), tacit knowledge can be held by both researcher and respondent. In Glaser and Strauss’ opinion, the use of tacit knowledge is not recognised as a source for empirical data, and they thereby lose out on important empirical material. This can reduce the collection of empirical data and development of theory (Christensen, 1994). Hastrup and Ramløv (1988) recognised the “third culture” that is a total opening for the use of tacit knowledge (words) as empirical data. It should be remembered, however, that their view is from an ethnography. From their point of view, Hastrup and Ramløv devote themselves to ideals of subjectivity and empathy, leaving completely positivistic ideals (Christensen, 1994). On this background, it can be concluded that Glaser and Strauss do not allow tacit knowledge to be part of their empirical data. However, this position changes as time goes by, and in the later editions of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Glaser (1998), a more profound understanding of tacit knowledge used as empirical data can be found.
4.3.4 The use of theory within the research process of grounded theory

Since GT is supposed to be rooted in the data, the research process should basically not be biased by the use of existing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, later publications about GT, e.g. Strauss and Corbin (1990), allow the use of existing theories to establish pre-categories, for example. Still, theories in the form of hypotheses to be tested should be avoided. The coding process is important in theory development and to conceptualise phenomena within the empirical data. Theory development is based on the empirical data that are coded and categorised. An on-going comparative analysis technique is used to relate the different categories and phenomena to each other and thus discover special categories and theoretical patterns in the data. The categories and the comparative analysis technique should ensure that other researchers using the same data can test the results later. According to Christensen (1994), the criticism directed at the use of theory in GT is that the ability to check the results at a later time is not fulfilled, because theory development is based solely on the categories and phenomena that are the direct outcome of the coding process. Jensen (1997) pointed out that theory development in a study can be hard to penetrate by other researchers because of the extensive nature of the coding processes that go back and forth until enough density is reached for the findings.

In summary, one can say that there is a gradual openness for other types of empirical data, such as tacit knowledge, for category development in GT. This also reflects a more open attitude towards interpretation and inspiration from pre-existing theories. In the development of new theory, it is important that the researcher remains loyal to the empirical data, but able to learn from the pre-existing theories. Other researchers have pointed out that GT as used by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is located somewhere between the purely inductive and the deductive method (Ekerwald & Johnsson, 1989; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994; Christensen, 1994; Starrin, 1996; Starrin & Svensson, 1996; Jensen, 1997; Neuman, 2003).

4.4 The participants in Studies I–IV

The respondents came from the focus group interviews and the semi-structured interviews. The total number of respondents in the focus group interviews was 25, with an average of five. The ages of the participants ranged from 28–62 years; there were 13 men and 12 women. In the semi-structured interviews, the ages ranged from 28–54 years; there were three men and four women. The interviews were held at their respective places of employment. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 40–65 minutes, and the focus group interviews lasted from 30–100 minutes. The numbers of participants in the different studies are presented in Table 2, which
illustrates how many men and women were included in each study, the types of interviews and the total number of interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Duration of interviews</th>
<th>Type of interview</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30–100 m(^7)</td>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40–65 m</td>
<td>Semi-structured</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III(^a)</td>
<td>25+7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30–100 m</td>
<td>Focus group and</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40–65 m</td>
<td>Semi-structured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40–65 m</td>
<td>Semi-structured</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) m=minutes

\(^a\) The participants in the focus groups are the same as in Study I. The participants in the semi-structured interviews are the same as in Study II.

4.5 The progress in this study with regard to sampling and coding

4.5.1 Focus group interviews

The sampling procedure started with the screening of the participants and followed a certain pattern before the focus group interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Morgan, 1993; Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1998; Morgan & Krueger, 1998) were conducted. First, one person in each of the five focus groups was contacted and presented the criteria for participating in the focus group interviews. The customers in the five focus group interviews came from different lines of work in Norway: An international oil company, a national newspaper, a university college department, a county administration office, and a department in the Norwegian government. The background for asking precisely these respondents was based on assumptions that the members of the above-mentioned groups had more experience eating out in restaurants than average, that they would have a higher number of travel days, and therefore had to be eating out more frequently. They also had higher incomes and therefore would have the financial ability to eat out in restaurants in their leisure time.

By the introduction to the focus group interviews, all the groups were told that the topic would be their experiences of meals at restaurants. Four questions were asked as a starting point for discussion, and these functioned as their guide for the discussion. The first questions asked in the focus group interviews were about customers’ worst and best meal experiences, and they were asked to discuss this topic from their own perspectives. The two other questions focused on what they experienced as a good meal and whom they
were with when they dined out (Appendix A in Study V). The composition of the focus groups was determined on the basis that the respondents who had been contacted fulfilled the criteria/suppositions that had been given for the interviews beforehand. Therefore, the sexes and ages of the respondents were purely coincidental. A goal was to create focus groups that would be informative and able to communicate their meal experiences in restaurants.

4.5.2 Semi-structured interviews
The choice of participants in the semi-structured interviews was made after the analysis of the focus group interviews had revealed a number of theoretical patterns and pre-categories were developed. The first phase in the semi-structured interview sampling was also influenced by the same assumptions that were made in the focus group interviews. The introduction of the subject for the interviews was important so that the participants knew what type of interviews they joined (Appendix B in Study V). According to Figure 1, the second phase of sampling is the variational and relational sampling. The sampling of the focus group participants in this study was also influenced by the assumptions made during the first phase.

The variational part of the sampling was related to the conscious selection of focus group participants from different lines of work, but this might not fulfil the intention of variational sampling as described by Glaser (1978). The second phase of sampling in the semi-structured interviews was the most comprehensive part of the analysis, and that made the sampling in the third phase less emphasised than described in the ideal model, Figure 1.

One of the results of the coding done on the empirical data from the focus group interviews was a set of pre-categories, and these formed the structure of the interview template created for the semi-structured interviews. The interview template was tested on colleagues and adjusted according to their advice and recommendations. The pre-categories formed the questions for the interview template for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix C in Study V). All semi-structured interviews were conducted in Norwegian.

The screening of the respondents in the semi-structured interviews followed the same pattern as prior to the focus group interviews. Contact was made directly with the customers who were interviewed, or via a contact person, in the form of a letter sent by e-mail or post (Appendix B in Study V). Each person was explained the reason for the interview. All respondents who were asked, i.e. the first ones to be asked about participating, agreed to take part in the study. Additionally, for the selection of participants for the semi-structured interviews, it was decided not to use any of the same participants who had taken part in the focus group interviews. This was done to increase the dispersal among the respondents, and to assure that
the respondents were as uninfluenced as possible about the subject of the questions. The respondents had the following professions: General Manager, Department Manager, Deputy Head of Administration, Photographer, Lecturer, Assistant General Manager, and Associate Professor. The background for asking precisely these persons was based on the following assumptions: The simple criteria for the selection of respondents were limited to their adequate levels of experience of eating out in restaurants. Frequency of travelling was one of two important selection factors. Common criteria for the semi-structured interviews were based on the assumption that the members of the focus groups and the participants in the semi-structured interviews had more experience eating out in restaurants than average because they travelled more and therefore had to dine out more frequently. It was also assumed that they had higher incomes and hence would be more likely to dine out in restaurants in their leisure time as well as in business contexts.

After the participants had agreed to take part in the focus group interviews, or participate in the semi-structured interviews, times and places were discussed and agreed upon. Public tax rolls at the time of the interviews were used to verify the assumption about higher incomes among the participants. Checks were done for some of the participants and the results were positive according to the assumptions, even though these tax rolls could only be normative.

All focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews were recorded using a MiniDisc player, and the sound quality was high so that all the interviews had an excellent audible quality throughout the entire doctoral period. All interviews were then transferred onto a computer using the computer programme Steinberger 4.0. Each interview was written, word-by-word, in a word processing programme (Microsoft Word for Windows) and then copied into a spreadsheet programme (Microsoft Excel) as described in Study V.

4.5.3 Coding in the studies

In the first study, a more traditional grounded theory approach was followed, including the steps used by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Glaser (1978), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The study used open coding as a first filtering process, which resulted in the first categories after coding the statements in the focus group interviews. Axial coding consisted of a set of procedures whereby data were reassembled in new ways on a higher abstraction level. Connections between the different categories were formed, new categories were identified, and new patterns arose. In this particular research, different words, phrases, statements, and sentences have been
analysed, resulting in new labels that have been found and derived from open and axial coding. Selective coding was based on the selection of the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating the relationships that were found, and filling in categories that needed further refinement and development. This first study did not use the comment codes actively in the coding and categorisation regime.

In the last three studies, the traditional coding steps by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used in combination with levels developed by Brytting (1990) based on his study of planning in small firms. The organising technique of the coding levels was further adjusted and modified for the purpose of the studies within this research. Brytting used a concept of three level categories: A, B, and C (Brytting, 1990). An A-level category was described by Brytting as “recurrent themes on a micro level” (Brytting, 1990 pp.49), and was based on 11 semi-structured interviews. Brytting derived 25 A-level categories from the interviews. Fifteen B-level categories were derived from the A-level categories on a higher abstraction level. In the final stage, the B-level categories formed two C-level categories on an even higher abstraction level. In the three last studies, contrary to Brytting, the highest level of abstraction has been labelled as the A-level category.

4.6 An example of the coding progress

Figure 3 gives an example of how the coding was done in Study II. The figure will be described from left to right. The three curved arrows designated “Coding” reflect the integrating coding, meaning the coding from one level to another, including lower categories. The straight arrow combination reflects that there is on-going, continuous comparisons between the categories before integrating categories are found. The Comment codes worked as a memoing process and reflect the first impressions from the interviews. The next level is equal to the open codes on C-level. The categories are grouped into two main categories, the first being cutlery, glasses, plates, etc., and the second being art, doors, windows, etc. The B-level is grouped into four categories: Colour, furniture, central objects, and remote objects. The last A-level category ends up with the restaurant interior and this level is equal to selective coding. The long, straight arrow indicates the increasingly higher abstraction levels.
The raw data collected from the focus group and semi-structured interviews were treated as follows: The first step was an initial coding characterised as “comment coding.” Each sentence was read and coded whenever necessary. This procedure was carried out after each interview had been conducted relating to both series of interviews. The “comment coding” could help track the original quotation and to remember thoughts and comments that were made at the time the raw data were developed and analysed.

The second step was to conduct open coding, and this worked effectively as a first filtering process. This resulted in the first categories that surfaced after analysing several statements in the interviews. The open codes were labelled and named during the reading of the raw data, discovering the different phenomena. The list of codes was then developed and ideas were written into memos connecting them together. The codes were refined and corrected until they best fit into a certain pattern.

The next coding process, axial coding, was conducted by grouping the “open” codes into categories by relationship and variation into theoretical patterns. The coding process in the second phase was continued until the categories were stable and solid. The relational and variational sampling was followed only to a minor degree, because the actual limited number decreased the opportunities in the search for variations in the sample.

In the last stage of the coding process, selective coding, the categories from the previous phases were coded and integrated into categorisation on higher abstraction levels. The selective coding resulted in categories that generated theories that were confirmed by the empirical data. More details
of the coding procedures are found in Study V, also for each of the four studies.

### 4.7 Ethical considerations

The importance of the integrity and anonymity is at stake for the participants in the interviews. In the focus group interviews, one person in each group was contacted and presented the criteria for participating in the focus group interviews. All participants were promised anonymity, and when their statements and quotes were used from the interviews, they would be made unrecognisable in such a way that it should not be possible to backtrack them later to the participants. Therefore, only their lines of work were mentioned to indicate the industry in which they worked. The procedure was almost identical when choosing the participants for the semi-structured interviews, but the contact was made directly with each participant and their anonymity was also stated in the introduction letter they received. The names of restaurants and other recognisable places in the quotes from the participants were also made unrecognisable, and were instead given names such as, for example, “Restaurant X”. This was done so that the restaurants mentioned in the quotes, either favourably or unfavourably, would not be caused any harm by the statements made. The responsibility for third-party liability was also taken into account.

The ethical considerations are not linked to a particular part of the interview process, but should be included in all parts of the interview process. Kvale (1997) divides the ethical considerations into seven different areas based on the stage of research, i.e. topic, planning, interview situation, transcription, analysis, verification, and reporting.
5.0 Results

The results include the main findings from the different studies. In addition, some results are put together to emphasise and support certain findings. The main findings are presented in Table 3 and are organised according to main contributions to certain research areas.

**TABLE 3 A brief overview of the main findings in Studies I–IV.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important perspectives from restaurant customers’ points of view</th>
<th>I Focus on service, especially the payment process</th>
<th>II Focus on meal experience aspects</th>
<th>III Focus on choices of restaurant</th>
<th>IV Focus on consumer values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Service encounter between participants in the restaurant | *Payment* – *failure/success*  
- Expectation  
- Sensitivity  
- Reaction | *Personal Social Meeting*  
- Customer vs. Staff  
- Customer vs. Other Customer Company  
- Business  
- Private | |  
- Suitability  
- Appropriateness  
- Personal Space  
- Outstandingness  
- Efficiency  
- Casualness |
| Product | | *The Core Product*  
- Menu  
- Appearance  
- Taste | |  
- Discovery  
- Amazement |
| Restaurant Facilities | | *Restaurant Interior*  
- Colour  
- Furniture  
- Remote/close objects | |  
- Aesthetic balance  
- Personal Space |
| Restaurant Atmosphere | | *Atmosphere*  
- Environment  
- Senses | |  
- Cosiness  
- Casualness |
| Visit occasions | | | |  
- Business  
- Private |
| Needs | | | |  
- Physiological  
- Psychological  
- Social |
| Attitudes to restaurant | | | |  
- Occasion-Based Attitude |
| Situation | | | |  
- Occasion-Based Evoked Set |


5.1 Study I – Payment – An Undervalued Part of the Meal Experience?

In the first study, focus was on payment as part of customers’ meal experiences and its influence on the meal experience in à la Carte restaurants in Norway. Raw data that were collected from the focus group interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach. The purpose was to get a deeper understanding of payment in the meal experience.

The result of the study demonstrated that several aspects are important for the customers’ meal experiences. Three main aspects were found to be part of the experience of payment: Expectations, sensitivity, and reactions. The expectations were in particular connected to relationships before the payment process had started, e.g. the time it takes to pay, that the payment process should be fast regardless of the payment method the customers were using. It was important that staff understood who was the host for the party, and that they contacted the host about what to order and payment of the bill. This was especially important for business dinners where the host paid for the entire meal.

Sensitivity was the attention that customers received related to the payment process. Examples of sensitivity included being seen by the staff, and that the customers received attention and recognition when they wanted it. The reactions were in different forms of expression, mostly dissatisfaction and satisfaction as a consequence of how the customers had been treated by the restaurant and personnel. The negative reaction came when the customers were dissatisfied with the performance of the personnel, e.g. they did not get any response when they wanted to pay the bill. The positive reaction from the customers came as a result with approval when the waiter, without problems, could split the bill into separate bills for the individual guests according to their wishes.

On the background of the findings in this study, an illustrative conceptual model was developed illustrating how the aspects are connected. The overall result from Study I is that the payment process is more important for the entire meal experience for the restaurant customers than previously expected by researchers. The payment process is also part of the service meeting between customer and restaurant. Generally, payment occurs as an undervalued part of customers’ meal experiences, and this issue needs additional research in the future.
5.2 Study II
– The Meal Experiences of à la Carte Restaurant Customers

In Study II, the purpose was to reveal what aspects of the meal experiences were central for restaurant customers in à la Carte restaurants in Norway. Raw data was gathered from semi-structured interviews and then analysed with the help of a modified grounded theory approach.

Five main categories were revealed as parts of the customers’ meal experiences: The core product, the restaurant interior, the personal social meeting, the company, and the restaurant atmosphere.

The core product consisted of several sub-categories: taste sensation at consumption, presentation form, and composition. Food and beverage were central as parts of the meal experience. For example, the sight of a clear green sauce made from tea in a fish dish could be the visible experience of the meal, and was what customers remembered from the core product. The taste sensation represented the experience when consuming a product. The presentation form was the arrangement of food and beverage served to the customer. The composition of the menu was put together either by the waiter or by the customer. The core product was closely connected to the other main categories.

The restaurant interior was formed by four sub-categories where central and remote objects were particularly described, but furniture and colours were also described and identified as important by the customers. Centre objects were all items used by the customers that were related to their tables, e.g. tableware, cutlery. Remote objects were material items in the rest of the restaurant that the customers did not need to have at their tables, e.g. art, paintings. Colours were part of the customers’ visual perceptions when they were in the restaurants, and it was important that the colours were in harmony with each other. “Loud” colours were not recommended in à la Carte restaurants, but it was important that the colours were adapted to each restaurant concept.

In the personal social meeting, the focus was kept between customer and personnel, and customer and other customer(s) in the restaurant. The first relationship was particularly important in connection with the meal experience. With complaints, for instance, a common feature was that the customers did not make any verbal complaints in the restaurant, but after they had left the restaurant premises. When the customers’ complaints were handled properly and with sincerity, they became some of the most loyal guests, especially when the compensation exceeded their expectations.

In the fourth main category, the company was identified, i.e. the customer and the other participants that eat a meal together around a table. The company might be occasion related, such as an after-work meeting among
colleagues to discuss issues from work in an informal manner. Here, of course, there has to be a division between the ones sitting around a table as a group and the other customers in the restaurant. The other customers have a much looser and more remote connection to the customer.

The restaurant atmosphere was supported by the senses and environment, and they form an external and internal network that captures the different intangible and tangible impressions the customers receive in the meal experience. The restaurant atmosphere functions more like a “glue” that bonds together the other categories in the meal experience.

On the basis of the findings, an illustrative model was developed (Figure 1 in Study II) to display the connections between the different categories in the meal experience among restaurant customers.

5.3 Study III – Main Factors for Customers’ Choices of Restaurants

In the third study, the focus was kept on customers’ choices of restaurants and what customers consider as important in this type of choice. The result from this investigation came after analysis of both focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews using a modified ground theory approach.

It became clear that the occasion was an important part of the meal experience, and was a common feature in both data collections. The occasion could be roughly divided into private and business occasions, and the most prominent occasions were specified in the study. In relationship to earlier studies, it was discovered that occasion influenced many of the already known factors in the choice process, as well as other factors. The choice-specific influence factors that influenced customers’ attitudes on their choices of restaurants were word-of-mouth, eating establishment reviews, recommendations, and own pre-knowledge. The results indicate that the customers had more trust in information they personally experienced, and from discussions and conversations with family and friends they know and trust. The connection between the basic meal-oriented needs and the occasion was quickly influenced, and this influenced other parts of the customers’ choices of restaurants. Surprisingly, the eating establishment reviews had little influence on customers’ choices of restaurants even though these reviews were found in “all” types of self-respecting media.

Together, the results demonstrate that the choices of restaurants were closely connected with the occasions for the restaurant visits. On the basis of the findings, an illustrative model was developed (Figure 3 in Study III) to display the connections between the different categories.
5.4 Study IV – Consumer Values among Restaurant Customers

In the fourth study, the focus was on consumer values among restaurant customers. The basis for the findings was found in empirical data collected with the help of seven semi-structured interviews, and analysed with the use of a modified grounded theory approach.

In the analysis of customers’ values, a set of consumer values was elaborated. The five main categories of consumer values that formed the basis for comparison were: Excellence, harmony, emotional stimulation, acknowledgement, and circumstance value. These five main integrated value categories were formed by a number of sub-categories.

The harmony was based on a balanced physical appearance in the meal, such as food and wine in combination with the interior of the restaurant, composition of people who are in the restaurant during the meal, physical structure and artefacts, as well as whether the event matches the occasion for the meal. It also includes that everyone in the restaurant conducts themselves within accepted norms. Excellence was based on the staff’s ability to execute their tasks and their delivery of service in interaction with the restaurant facilities and customers, thus conveying an impression of luxury that was beyond the ordinary level in an efficient way, as well as giving the customer an impression of something new and creative. Emotional stimulation was based on positive excitement and surprise throughout the meal process, and on the fact that the mood was affected by the physical setting. Acknowledgement was based on recognition/acknowledgement of one’s own status and on confidence in one’s own choice that legitimises the choice. Circumstance value was based on the circumstances around the meal/the initiation of the meal, and on the appropriateness and spontaneity of the occasion or choice.

5.5 Overall findings for all studies

After an examination of all the findings in the four studies (I-IV), an overall picture has been formed: The overall result of those findings was the interpersonal meeting between customers, personnel and other customers in the restaurant. The interpersonal meeting has three main aspects that together were important parts of the meeting and were emphasised by the empirical data. From the customers’ points of view, these were: “Rational professionalism,” “human warmth” and enjoyment.

Professionalism in the meeting entails all parts of the meal where contact is made between customers and personnel. This meeting usually takes place during the meal, but there could be contact before the meal, such as when a customer reserved a table for a forthcoming restaurant visit. Professionalism meets its moment of truth when the service meeting takes place in the
restaurant. In addition to this are the items that are transferred between personnel and customer, e.g. the courses are served with the necessary professionalism. If the personnel, e.g. the waiters, were not professional enough in front of the customer, the chef’s professionalism would fade away. In other cases where the customer experiences the waiter as professional, other failures made by the kitchen, for example, could be smoothed down.

The expression “human warmth” as used here refers to the concern customers are met with in the restaurant, including honesty, openness, and attention. This human warmth is also about the meeting, but includes other parts of the social meeting than professionalism. Human warmth has to be part of the meal; otherwise, the customers might experience it as “cold” and impersonal. The restaurant atmosphere is also influenced by behaviour of the personnel, whether it can appear as cold or warm. The personnel therefore represent an important part of the customers’ meal experiences in restaurants, and it will soon be evident whether the personnel treated their customers in an unfriendly way. This includes the presentation form of the food and beverage and the way they are served.

Enjoyment in this case is the ability to appreciate the meal experience that is connected to the occasion for the meal. Enjoyment is a subjective self-experience that takes place in the framework of the meal in a restaurant, and is a complex phenomenon. First, there is the social meeting between the individuals in the restaurant room that meet with a common goal to enjoy a meal. Second, it is all the impressions from the meal, including all that are received with the human sensory system and other impressions received from the surroundings. Finally, there is the meeting between the customer and the restaurant, both facilities and other individuals, that creates the total experience of enjoyment from the meal.
6.0 Discussion

The discussion will reflect upon the findings in the different studies against theory contributions. First, a short overview of the main findings in the different studies will be presented. Study I demonstrated the significance of the payment process as part of the meal experience. Study II revealed the most important meal experience aspects from the customers’ points of view. Study III contributed to the discovery of occasion as an important influencing factor for customers’ choices of restaurants. Study IV identified the situational-specific values as an influencing factor through which the other consumer values among restaurant customers had to pass. Study V thoroughly described the method used in all four studies (I–IV).

6.1 The bill payment process in the restaurant

The importance of an unbiased payment process for the customers where they can pay and leave is of great value for both the customer and the restaurant. The customer’s excellent meal experience has not been ruined by, for instance, slow payment, and the restaurant has provided excellent service to their customers from the moment they entered the restaurant and until they left.

In Study I, it was found that the customers usually initiated the payment process and that the staff initiated the payment on only a few occasions, e.g. at the start of the meal by asking the customers how they wanted the bill, but this was an exception to the rule. In literature, authors (Clement, 1990; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003) use the payment of the bill as an example of service encounters. The payment of the bill is only a minor part of the entire service in the restaurant as understood by Zeithaml and Bitner (2000), and one of many services provided by the restaurant. Therefore, the payment process has not been focused on as more important than other service processes, and the customers’ needs in the payment process have been less emphasised by researchers.

Normally, the customers tried to gain the attention of the staff to get them start the payment process for the meal, thereby indicating their desire to leave the restaurant within a relatively short time. The customer wanted a quick and easy payment of the bill. In most cases, however, the customers were not satisfied with the attention they received from the staff when it came to the payment process, even though they had received a lot of attention during other parts of the meal. From the customers’ points of view, this was experienced as a downgrade of them as customers, but this could also be because of other reasons in the restaurant. The customers could find it difficult to understand why it took more time to pay and leave than to find a table. The customers seem to accept what they perceived as a
short waiting period, though how long in minutes they did not express. Marvin (1997) found that customer complaints increased when the waiting time exceeded 10 minutes, and that customers were less tolerant at the end of the meal. This could be because the routines in the restaurant regarding payment were not efficient enough, or that the attention level of the personal was directed towards other customers who arrived later and needed the staff’s attention. Clement (1990:145) emphasised that the customer is the most important part of the service organisation and has to be in focus.

The moment the customer started the payment process and the staff responded to their request, the phase of getting the bill delivered to the table started. The speed of the delivery of the bill could vary from occasion to occasion. A delay in the payment could be connected to various causes that lead to increased waiting time for the customers, for example, control of the customer’s credit card, other more urgent tasks, fewer staff at work because of illness, etc. A way to avoid complaints when the bill was delayed could be to inform the customers about the causes for the delay. Bitner (1992) identified this type of behaviour as social interaction between and among customers and employees. The individual behaviour was divided into two opposite forms of behaviour, approach and avoidance. Approach behaviour represents positive behaviour, such as attraction and spending money, while avoidance behaviour represents the opposite of approach behaviour (Bitner, 1992:60).

Normally, the final phase of the payment process did not take too long, but if it did, the restaurant could correct the delay by giving the customer a reasonable explanation and reason for the delay. If no explanation was given, this resulted in some negative consequences for the restaurant, e.g. the customers had a weaker relationship with the restaurant and fewer customers returned. The study suggests that loyalty is a complex and emotional phenomenon. True loyalty extends beyond repeat purchases to actually advocating for the restaurant (Mattila, 2001:79).

6.2 Complaints and complaint handling

In Study II (pp. 147-148), the personal social meeting was one of the main categories in the findings, and one of the sub-sub-categories was complaint handling. Complaints from the customers can be seen as a process and can take place in all phases of the meal experience, but in many cases, it will take place during the meal in the restaurant. The complaints and dissatisfaction could have two main outcomes (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003), i.e. the customers expressed their dissatisfaction either verbally or silently. Bitner (2000) describes this as service failure; the customers can either take action and complain, or do nothing. If the exit strategy was used alone, the
feedback to the staff could come in a non-verbal form. It could be body language, impolite answers, and/or little or no tipping, but common for this was that no direct complaints were raised in the restaurant. Bateson and Hoffman (1999:311) also describe the problem that not all customers complain to the service provider, e.g. a restaurant, but proposed three types of complaint outcomes: Voice, exit, and retaliation. These three types were also individually divided according to the intensity of the complaints in the form of high, medium, and low.

Customers arrive with a number of expectations and attitudes towards the forthcoming meal experience, and have a level of tolerance about what could go wrong before raising a complaint if this tolerance level is crossed. Complaints could be raised in a number of situations, such as the food served was cold, the restaurant room was draughty and cold, the staff was ignorant, etc. The dissatisfaction and complaints start when the customer’s tolerance level is crossed, and the staff and restaurant have to deal with the customer’s complaints if they were expressed. Pratten (2003) illuminated that even when there had been a failure in the service, a competent waiter could recover the failure and restore customer satisfaction by a correct and appropriate response. The complaint can be based on misunderstandings or unreasonable practice. A basic estimate made by Bateson and Hoffman (1999:311) is that a customer will need 12 positive experiences to overcome one negative one.

However, the customer has the right to complain and the personnel have to handle each complaint to which they are exposed. Personnel must respond quickly to the complaints, and the customer must be compensated in a satisfactory fashion. Bateson and Hoffman (1999) divided the dissatisfactory incidents they found into three main categories: Employee responses to service failures, employee responses to customer needs and requests, and unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. In less than half the situations, the reasons for complaining were based on service failures in the delivery systems.

The personnel and restaurant could then more easily handle the complaints because they were made aware of them, and could offer something complimentary, such as reducing the bill, an extra dessert, or other types of compensation. If the customer found the compensation acceptable, then the restaurant had recovered a complaint situation. If the customers complained silently, it was much harder for the restaurant to understand that the customer was dissatisfied with the restaurant visit. The customer could indirectly complain in the restaurant by facial expressions or comments to others in the restaurant, drawing attention from the restaurant personnel. This type of complaint could be more difficult for the restaurant to discover and sense. If the personnel did not sense it, the customer left the
restaurant dissatisfied and spoke to friends, family, and others about the restaurant in a negative way. The customers also expressed that if their complaint was not corrected in the restaurant, they were less likely to visit that restaurant again for some time. This can be illustrated in the study by Pratten that referred to a dissatisfying meal experience where the meal was experienced as being like a pea in a processing plant, and the opposite was described as the staff being efficient and non-pushy (Pratten, 2003).

In the final stage of the complaint process, after the customer expressed dissatisfaction to the restaurant and the restaurant gave them some form of satisfactory compensation, they became some of the most loyal customers. The customer was more likely to spread positive WOM to friends and family even though the restaurant had made some mistakes, but because of a satisfactory service recovery, the customer mentioned the mistake only to a minor degree (Susskind, 2002). The importance of well trained staff, good product knowledge and interpersonal skills were vital for customer satisfaction of the restaurant visit (Pratten, 2003). It has been identified that customers who receive a small compensation and an apology will consider the service provider far more “fair” than customers who are only offered an apology (Bateson & Hoffman, 1999). The big challenge for restaurants was to intercept signals from the customers who complained silently and spread their dissatisfaction after leaving the restaurant. A few customers contacted the restaurant later and expressed their complaints. According to the customers, they received some compensation from the restaurant, such as a free meal the next time they visited the restaurant.

6.3 The relationship between rational professionalism and human warmth

In Study II, the core product was one of the main categories in the findings. The core product, food and beverage, was closely connected to other sub-categories in Study II, in particular presentation form, taste sensation at consumption, and composition of the menu. Andersson and Mossberg (2004) describe the cuisine as central to the basic function of the meal. In Study II, the personal performance of the staff was found to be important in all encounters with the customers, including the delivery of the core product. This was comparable with the product assessed by Gustafsson (2004), which also involved the skills of the waiter in serving the meal. In Study IV, the consumer value efficiency was linked to the performance of the staff in serving the core product, and the customer’s experience of excellence during the meal. The degree of excellence would depend on the occasion for the meal, for example, a dinner with friend would require another type of restaurant setting than a wedding dinner.
When subsequently considering the characteristics of the whole service process, especially the service encounter between customer and staff in the restaurant based on an assessment of the overall findings from the four studies, two aspects occur as quite central, i.e. “rational professionalism” and “human warmth”. These aspects are limited to the face-to-face encounter, which can be described as the most challenging and complex part of the service process (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004).

Different customers are assumed to experience various combinations of rational professionalism and human warmth in their service encounters. In some contexts, the priority of rational professionalism would be relatively higher and the priority of human warmth would be lower, and vice-versa. However, it can be assumed that a certain minimum of rational professionalism and human warmth is needed to create an acceptable service experience (see Point a in Figure 4).

**Figure 4** A proposed relationship between service profiles of rational professionalism and human warmth in the service encounter as experienced by the customer.

The vertical and horizontal dotted lines in Figure 4 represent realistic minimums that have to be reached for customer satisfaction. From the minimum level, different orientations or profiles in the service-encounter experience area are assumed among various customers. The diagonal dotted line between b and c represents different customers’ experience combinations.
linked to the restaurants. At Point b), there is a high degree of rational professionalism and a lower degree of human warmth. This could be preferable in the occasion of a business meeting with a need for professionalism and a high degree of formality, where everything is done “by the book”.

In this situation, the need for human warmth can be of limited “use” from the customers’ points of view, illustrated by the encounter profile of a business dinner. Point c) expresses a low degree of rational professionalism and a high degree of human warmth. This position can be related to, for instance, a romantic dinner where the couple would appreciate considerable human warmth, but just a “bit” of professionalism in the meal experience. This would imply more unorganised professionalism and improvisation from the staff in the restaurant. There could also be a degree of spontaneity from the staff; this helps make the service encounters memorable occasions. The examples mentioned here can also be related to the way employees handle customer needs and requests, and this is, for example, described as the employees’ adaptability in the service encounter (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000:90-91). Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) state that even if the personnel perform technically correct, the meal can still be spoiled because of human errors such as disinterest and cold behaviour. Pratten (2003) illuminated that a perfectly cooked meal can be served badly and represent failure in the service delivery.

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The empirical data contain several underpinnings of both rational professionalism and human warmth. The latter includes sub-categories such as the waiter was amusing, the staff had a talent for service (Study I), and the staff smiled and was friendly during the entire meal. In some cases, the customer experienced human warmth through the waiters introducing themselves by name (Study II), or through the mood between staff members in the restaurant (Study IV). The service was friendly and swift, but without being pushy (Study IV). This also reflects on customers’ experience of the meal as a harmonious whole through their experience of aesthetic balance, suitability and appropriateness whereas they expect efficiency without restaurant personnel being pushy. The occasion for the meal will influence on the degree of efficiency expected by the customer e.g. a business meal for a meeting will often be limited in time and the restaurant need more swift in serving the meal.
The customers experience rational professionalism from the restaurant when they can discuss business in a quieter area of the restaurant, and the level of professionalism has to be sustained throughout the entire meal. This increases the reputation of the restaurant for that type of occasion. Rust and Oliver (1994) identified this as social support in the service encounter. Professionalism was also related to the waiter’s advice and recommendations from the menu of combinations of wine and food, and this was related to the professional knowledge of the staff. If the payment takes too long, this is an example of a low degree of professionalism, and can be seen as the waiting staff not being efficient enough. Rust and Oliver (1994:164) also state, “...it is much easier to create an ad campaign that says ‘we care’, than it is to create a genuinely caring workforce....” The professionalism is also connected to the excellence of the performance of the service delivery. This statement indicates the importance of both rational professionalism and human warmth at the service meeting, or the “moment of truth”. Pratten (2003) concluded that the waiting staff was an under-valued part of the restaurant organisation, that a substantial improvement of the staff members working lives would improve the restaurant, and that improving the skills and interpersonal knowledge of the staff would also help the restaurant in succeeding.

6.4 Restaurant atmosphere as a complex phenomena

In Study II, the restaurant atmosphere was one of the main categories in the findings, and the two sub-categories were senses and environment. Senses were the customers’ perceptions through the five senses, and the restaurant environment consisted of all items, tangible and intangible, in the restaurant. The customers used all their senses to grasp the restaurant atmosphere. The senses created a “web” that was able to hold and filter the inner atmosphere. The environment was the outer frame of the restaurant atmosphere and consisted of the interactions in the restaurant with other customers, staff, and, for example, the sounds from the kitchen, which together created the sensation of the restaurant. Music was one of the elements that could create a special atmosphere. The restaurant atmosphere was comparable to Gustafsson’s (2004) atmosphere in the Five Aspects Meal Model. The restaurant atmosphere was also supported by the two single consumer values (Study IV) cosiness and casualness. These reflected on the restaurant customers’ experiences throughout the meal that were related to atmosphere through positive excitement of the mood and the physical setting of the restaurant. The cosiness was linked to the physical environment of the restaurant room as assessed by Gustafsson (2004), and to environment as identified in Study II. Bitner (1992) has also illuminated some of the
environmental dimensions in the servicescape model. The atmosphere in the restaurant was regarded as an important influencing factor for the restaurant meal experience by Mattila (2001). The use of music in the restaurant has been identified to have the potential of increase the customers’ enjoyment in their meal experience and, for instance, classical music was associated with up-market restaurant settings (Areni, 2003). The restaurant atmosphere seems to function as a glue that connects and links the other categories together.

6.5 The social company vs. other customers in the restaurant

In Study II, different aspects of social meetings were found to be important with regard to the customers. Andersson and Mossberg’s (2004) distinction between other guests and company was almost equal to the distinction made in Figure 1 in Study II (Hansen et al., 2005:140).

The personal social meeting consists of three types of interpersonal meetings (Figure 5). The first is between the customer(s) vs. staff(s) and where the focus of attention will be the customer(s). The second meeting is between the other customer(s) vs. staff(s) and is more of secondary interest to the customer(s). This does not mean that the latter meeting is not important for the customer(s), especially in some cases where the staff treats other customers in a wrong or improper way, which can lead to a lower meal experience for the customer(s). The customer(s) can experience that other customers behave inappropriately and rudely, which can again ruin the experience. In such situations, it is important that the personnel solve the problem in the correct way.

![Figure 5](image.png)

**Figure 5** The relationship between customer(s) vs. other customer(s), and customer(s) vs. staff(s).
The company that is gathered around the table to eat a meal together will consist of two or more persons. This type of company can be found in both business and private contexts. The company will behave as a customer towards other customers and personnel in the restaurant (see Figure 6). The experience of other customers and staff in the restaurant will be individual and can be coloured by the opinion around the table, and the company agree about a common understanding of the situation. The company was also regarded as an important part of the meal experience by Warde and Martens (2000:173), and only a few of the interviews and respondents in their research indicated that they disliked their company in the restaurant setting. The meeting aspect in the FAMM (Gustafsson, 2004) can be compared to the company and the personal social meeting, and Figure 6 can be seen as an illustration of different meetings that takes place in the restaurant.

**Figure 6** The relationship between the company and the personal social meeting.

### 6.6 Discussion of the method used

A more thorough examination of grounded theory and a broader description of the different decisions have been conducted in Study V, and only a short version is presented here. Some questions can be raised on the use of the method regarding the following: How has the grounded theory been implemented in practice in this study? Should anything have been done differently? What recommendations are there regarding the GT method used? What is the possibility of generalising the findings?

The practical work with GT is, at first sight, an “easy” method to carry out, and this is a belief an inexperienced researcher can have until the real
work with GT begins. When the work with GT started, the researcher realised how time-consuming the method was, but coding in grounded theory was exciting and, simultaneously, very demanding. The exciting part reflects upon the coding and categorisation that goes on during the entire work with GT. Some of the more difficult part was to get the distance needed from the codes and categories in order to be able to see and develop new patterns and, at the same time, be adequately “grounded.”

There were several advantages of using GT in my research area. The first was the open approach towards the respondents and in the way they could freely and openly describe their meal experiences. This made it possible for the researcher to grasp the essential parts of their stories. GT stimulated the researcher towards a unique possibility to use creativity and curiosity simultaneously for development of codes and categories that could integrate the previous codes and categories into higher abstraction levels. The concern and uncertainty has been whether other research methods, e.g. storytelling, would have been “open” enough towards the research area.

The number of participants could have been higher by including other groups of participants in both types of interviews, e.g. by asking respondents with other backgrounds and experiences in addition to those that were selected. This could have given a wider sample of meal experiences, but since saturation was considered reached in the interviews, further participants were not included in the studies.

Finally, to other researchers who want to use GT in future research projects, some advice could be offered on the background of my experiences with the method. First, it is important to write notes and memos during the entire research process, because the thoughts and ideas that occur at the moment the text section is read can be kept and stored. Second, GT provides possibilities for revealing, developing, and understanding “new” unexplored research areas for exploring and investigating phenomena from different points of view than by “traditional” approaches. GT is a challenging method that demands a lot from the researcher with regard to the commitment to the research phenomena that are investigated.

6.6.1 Biases

The use of focus groups differs in the way questions were used compared to the description of questioning as proposed by Krueger (1998). This could be a cause for bias in this study. Prior to the focus group interviews conducted in this study, four “starter” questions were developed (Appendix A), equivalent to opening key questions as described by Krueger. These four starter questions were given to each member of each focus group so that, if necessary, they could look at the questions and remember them without
being disturbed by the moderator. Another reason for not overwhelming the participants with too many prepared questions was that they could have the most open approach to the topic of meal experiences and describe them to the best of their ability. This could have led the participants in a certain direction, leaving important meal experience topics untouched. On the other hand, follow-up questions were asked in all focus groups whenever necessary, of which the participants were also informed at the beginning of all focus groups. The risk of prejudicing the participants with too many questions was another reason for not preparing several questions prior to the focus group interviews. Krueger (1998:11) states that a disadvantage of a topic guide is a more difficult analysis, and questions might be asked differently in different groups. The risk of making the analysis more difficult was a major argument for not preparing additional questions beyond the four that were developed, especially because of the open approach needed in GT analysis.

Other types of methodological mistakes common in focus group research include, for instance, inadequacy of the moderator, insufficient homogeneity of the participants, or the failure of the moderator to control the group (Greenbaum, 1998). Focus group research can be used in areas of investigation where quantitative methods would have been more useful, but this was not the case in this study. The focus group research is used as a decision-making tool. Greenbaum (1998) suggested certain criteria that should be fulfilled for a focus group, e.g. the participants are not sufficiently homogeneous and have nothing to discuss, or that the age difference among the participants should not exceed 15 years. In the focus groups that were conducted, there was a difference between what Greenbaum (1998) suggests and what was done, e.g. the number of participants and the age difference. The reason for the deviation from the suggested criteria by Greenbaum (1998) was based on the purpose of gaining the broadest possible approach to the phenomena (meal experiences) from experienced restaurant customers who had knowledge of many different meals. This could have influenced the findings, but all members of the focus groups contributed in the interviews, and no one person dominated the groups. This could be the case if the moderator is inadequate and not competent to do the job, or fails to control the group dynamic and some members in the group start to dominate the others.

The age difference also deviated from the suggested criteria, but again it was more important to gain knowledge about the participants’ meal experiences than focus on the age differences in the groups. Therefore, this could have led to misunderstandings among the participants in the groups, but by having a greater range in age, the chance for covering more restaurant
experiences from a broader area was possible. In the analytical part of the focus group research, some mistakes could also have been made, e.g. the observer was biased, the results were quantified, and too much emphasis might have been placed on some participants in the groups.

The number of participants in the focus group interviews and the semi-structured interviews was a result of saturation of the findings in the studies. The number of interviews was not decided before the interviews started, even though some figures were mentioned, but those figures did not influence the total number of interviews. A critical point for the interviews would be when saturation was reached; the challenge for the researcher was to decide when this occurred. This was done by constantly comparing the different categories that emerged on the various abstraction levels until new categories were no longer discovered in the data material and saturation was reached.

Different parts of the semi-structured and focus group interviews have been used in four studies. The decision regarding which empirical data has been used has been dependent on the angle of the different discoveries. This included changing the centre of attention from study to study and discovering different aspects of the meals among the customers. In the first study, payment occurred as a central part of the entire meal experience and as part of an interpersonal meeting in the restaurant. In the second study, five main categories were discovered as part of the complete meal experience during the entire meal. In the third study, the occasion was a central part of the customers’ choices of restaurant. The fourth study identified a number of consumer values towards visiting a restaurant. The number of papers produced in comparison to the empirical data and number of participants could give the impression of exploiting too much from the data. On the other hand, the different interviews include a large amount of data that was “attacked” from different directions. The empirical data was also connected to different theories that resulted in the use of various parts of the interviews.

6.6.2 Limitations within the studies

This doctoral dissertation has some limitations that are based on the four studies of Customers’ Meal Experiences in á la Carte Restaurants. The number of participants in the focus group interviews and in the semi-structured interviews could have been greater. This may have resulted in a narrower scope than was desired and that not enough information has been collected. The number of participants in the interviews was a result of saturation, which was reached during coding and categorisation of the interviews. In the semi-structured interviews, five of the interviews were processed with coding and categorisation according to grounded theory,
and two of the five interviews were recoded. The recoding and original coding gave almost the same number of codes. A difference was found in the number of codes used in one of the interviews, which could indicate that this interview was “over-coded” the first time. To ensure that saturation was reached, two additional interviews were conducted, coded, and categorised. These two interviews were then compared with the other five semi-structured interviews; the number of new codes was few and of them, there were only subtle nuances.

A limitation in the studies was that almost all the participants came from the same level in society in that they had an academic education from college or university. Therefore, the answers to the questions may have been “identical” due to equal education and using the same “language” (Bourdieu, 1984; Gustavsson, 2000). To avoid this challenge, the focus groups were chosen from different lines of work: An international oil company, a national newspaper, a university college department, a county administration office, and a department in the Norwegian government. The questions used as “catalysts” to start the discussions in the focus group interviews could have influenced the answers and the direction of the answers, and could have more skewness than desirable in this study.

Another limitation is that all the participants came from the cities of Oslo and Stavanger. According to the assumptions made, it is not certain that this had too great an influence on the answers. It is also a limitation in the interpretation of the raw data, because the author may have been too close to the raw data so that the necessary critical attention could have been lost, or issues that were of limited importance could have been misinterpreted.

In the assumption process to find participants for the interviews, the conditions for the search may have been narrower than anticipated beforehand. The result can be that people who should not have been interviewed were interviewed, or vice versa. In the analysis of the empirical data, some interviews might have been overinterpreted, causing discrepancies. Attempts were made to avoid this problem by counting the number of each code in each interview so that no interviews would be overrepresented in the data material. However, one sentence or paragraph can contain more than one meaning, and the content must always be thoroughly examined.
6.7 Implications for the restaurants

The customers’ points of view in the restaurant meal experiences will have implications for the restaurants. Therefore, some suggestions should be made about areas that should be investigated by the restaurants and their staffs.

The studies indicated that service by the restaurants and staffs was important for the customers’ willingness to visit the restaurants on a later occasion. This was probably not a surprise, but there were certain parts of the service that the restaurants should focus more heavily on in order to comply with the customers’ wishes. Service failures in the restaurants have to be recovered on the spot in a satisfactory way for the customers. Any service failures that were not recovered could create room for dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth. Another area of the service where the restaurants could improve was in the payment process for the customers. Restaurants should be as observant in the payment process as they are when they greet their customers. The positive service meeting between staffs and customers would most likely increase the customers’ loyalty and rate of return to the restaurants, and increase the rate of restaurant visits.

Another area of attention for the restaurant business will be to focus on the entirety of the meal experiences in the restaurant so that everything is connected, from tangible to intangible experiences. This includes the training and education of the staff to an appropriate level of satisfaction of the customers, and creating memorable meal experiences that inspire customers to increase their use of restaurants.

Further attention to the restaurant personnel is needed, especially in relation to additional education and training, and not only in a few restaurants, but in all restaurants that are involved in face-to-face encounters. Increased focus on restaurant personnel will most likely increase their ability to handle customers with the delicate balance between the necessary professionalism and the amount of human warmth. This has to be accomplished without becoming affected, but by being naturally interested in the well being of the customers. In order to increase education and training, these plans need to be adapted in all parts of the restaurants such that they are implemented on all levels of the organisation.
7.0 Conclusion

The results from the studies in this doctoral dissertation have shown that customers’ meal experiences in restaurants are complex phenomena. This complexity can be limited to several main areas, i.e. the core product, the restaurant interior, the personal social meeting, the company (social setting), and the restaurant atmosphere. The customer’s meal experience has to be understood as a whole, wherein the relative importance of the different parts is influenced by situations depending on the type of occasion-based focus for which the customer visits the restaurant, such as celebrating an anniversary. The restaurants have to treat their customers in such a way that the customers enjoy their visits and experience the restaurant as professional. The restaurant employees seem to be some of the restaurant’s most important assets in the meetings with its customers. Therefore, education and training, especially of the waiting staff, seems to be of great importance for development of the restaurant field. The meal experience can be understood as a holistic and dynamic process that influences the meal before, during, and after the restaurant visit.

The open approach to the research area using different types of interviews and a grounded theory approach has been able to meet the aim of the dissertation.
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