

Linking Emotional Connections to Gastronomic Experience and Happiness

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the chef's image, the luxury restaurant's brand, and their alignment on Millennials' hedonic and novel gastronomic experiences, as well as their overall happiness and well-being. Data were collected from 277 consumers familiar with Chef José Avillez and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Results show that the chef's image enhances hedonic experiences, while the restaurant brand strengthens both hedonic and novelty experiences. Congruence between chef and restaurant images amplifies both experiential dimensions. However, only hedonic experience significantly contributes to happiness and well-being. This study contributes to the literature by integrating human brand theory and self-determination theory, highlighting how chefs as human brands fulfill emotional needs that enhance Millennials' happiness in luxury dining contexts. Managerially, the findings suggest that aligning the chef's emotional identity with the restaurant brand can elevate consumer experiences and promote long-term well-being.

Keywords: Human brand, Food luxury experience, Happiness and well-being, Millennial consumers

INTRODUCTION

Millennial consumers, also known as Generation Y, are those born between 1980 and 2000 (Dash et al., 2021). This generational cohort comprises approximately one-third of the population, surpassing the size of the baby boomer generation (Munsch, 2021). According to the generational cohort theory (Howe & Strauss, 2000), populations can be grouped into generations based on their placement in historical cycles shaped by distinctive events that influence attitudes and behaviors within each cohort.

Millennial consumers are often described as self-centered (Saeed & Azmi, 2019), technologically proficient (Muller, 2022), trend followers (Chen & Li, 2020), and socially, culturally, and environmentally conscious (Eastman & Iyer, 2021). They tend to spend more than previous generations (Melović et al., 2021), exhibit stronger consumption drives (Hwang & Griffiths, 2017), and show lower brand loyalty (Bowen & Chen McCain, 2015). Nevertheless, Millennials frequently seek activities with strong experiential and emotional dimensions (Zollo et al., 2020), including leisure, new gastronomic experiences, and social interactions. Therefore, understanding how this generation processes consumption experiences that influence happiness and well-being is an essential topic for both academia and management (Ahn et al., 2019).

Luxury consumption among Millennials reflects an evolving paradigm. Rather than emphasizing ownership and display, luxury today is increasingly defined by personalized and meaningful experiences (Shao et al., 2019). For this generation, luxury is associated with exclusivity, superior quality, and hedonism (Hasbullah et al., 2022), but it also reflects broader aspirations related to desire, authenticity, and social identity. Recent studies indicate a clear shift toward valuing innovation and authenticity in both products and experiences (Kang et al., 2022).

In this context, the self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides an appropriate framework for understanding how human brands, specifically chefs in luxury gastronomy, influence consumers' life experiences, happiness, and well-being. SDT identifies three psychological needs, autonomy, relatedness, and competence, as drivers of attachment (Thomson, 2006). Autonomy reflects consumers' perceived freedom of choice and self-expression; relatedness refers to feelings of connection and belonging; and competence captures the sense of mastery and accomplishment. Among these, autonomy and relatedness emerge as the most significant determinants of emotional attachment, while competence plays a less central role.

Complementarily, brand experience theory identifies key behavioral outcomes that stem from such emotional connections (Khan & Fatma, 2017). These outcomes include brand trust (Ha & Perks, 2005), loyalty (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014), satisfaction

(Brakus et al., 2009), word-of-mouth (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021), credibility (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020), and brand attitude (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). These constructs capture how consumers feel safe and confident when interacting with the brand, commit to revisiting it, and communicate positive evaluations to others.

The integration of self-determination theory (SDT) and brand experience theory offers a comprehensive understanding of how emotional connections with human brands influence consumer experiences. SDT explains how the fulfillment of autonomy and relatedness needs enhances emotional attachment and intrinsic motivation toward chefs as human brands. In contrast, brand experience theory clarifies how such attachments manifest in behavioral outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. Together, these frameworks elucidate how chefs can evoke meaningful, emotionally rich dining experiences that contribute to consumers' overall well-being.

When examining the impact of chefs as human brands, the evolving definition of luxury and Millennials' preference for experiential and personalized consumption are critical contextual factors. Despite extensive literature on luxury consumption behavior, a research gap remains regarding Millennials' attitudes toward chefs as human brands and the effect of luxury gastronomic experiences on happiness and well-being. Existing studies have explored experiential luxury (Atwal & Williams, 2017; von Wallpach et al., 2020), yet few have investigated the emotional and well-being outcomes of luxury dining experiences involving renowned chefs.

To address this gap, the present study examines the relationship between human brands, specifically chefs, and consumer happiness derived from luxury dining experiences. The ephemeral, exclusive, and glamorous nature of such experiences (Holmqvist et al., 2020) provides unique opportunities to generate positive affect and subjective well-being. This study examines the combined impact of the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's brand on Millennials' hedonic and novelty-driven gastronomic experiences, and how these experiences, in turn, influence happiness and well-being (Söderlund & Sagfossen, 2017).

Accordingly, this research contributes to the literature on luxury, experiential consumption, and well-being by applying these concepts to human brands in the gastronomy sector. It provides valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners by clarifying the emotional and behavioral mechanisms through which chefs, as human brands, shape Millennials' dining experiences, happiness, and overall well-being.

Accordingly, the present study aims to examine how the image of a chef as a human brand and the image of a restaurant brand jointly influence Millennials' hedonic and novelty gastronomic experiences, and how these experiences contribute to their happiness and well-being. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) and brand

experience theory, this research develops and empirically tests a structural model that links emotional attachment to behavioral and psychological outcomes in luxury dining contexts. The study contributes theoretically by integrating human brand theory with experiential and well-being frameworks, thereby explaining how emotional connections with chefs enhance consumers' intrinsic satisfaction and life evaluation. From a managerial perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for chefs and luxury restaurant managers seeking to design emotionally engaging, meaningful, and happiness-driven dining experiences for Millennials. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework and hypothesis development; this is followed by the methodology and data analysis; the subsequent section discusses key findings; and finally, the paper concludes with theoretical implications, managerial recommendations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Human Brands for Millennial Consumers

Human brands are vital to contemporary culture and the market economy (Parmentier, 2010). According to Thomson (2006, p.104), human brands are "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts." Later, Close et al. (2011) extended the definition to any persona (emerging or well-known) that affects and is affected by intrapersonal and inter-organizational communication efforts. More recently, both of these previous definitions were captured by Fournier and Eckhardt (2019), who define human brands as entities that are at once a person and a commercialized brand offering, wherein both are referenced using a unique naming convention. Advancements in this field of research suggest that human brands are a multidimensional classification and mapping of human concepts, in the sense that both individuals and community members are relevant to marketing efforts (Jenkins, 2014). Human brands, or in other words, individuals who are a brand, are powerful since they convey a level of authenticity and cultural meaning that makes them special and unique, especially when compared with non-human brands (Burgess & Green, 2009).

Consequently, human brands are also riskier (i.e., events involving illness or misconduct) than non-human brands (Holmes & Redmond, 2014). There are two significant guidelines for managing said risk in human brands: consistency and balance (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Consistency is a crucial tool for combating unpredictability and social embeddedness. The balance between the individual and the brand should be an ongoing process, not just a crisis management measure. Monitoring

press coverage, social relations, and public positions will help manage a successful human brand.

Luxury Experience for Millennial Consumers

At first, Pine and Gilmore (1998) introduced the concept of luxury experience as a two-fold construct, consisting of customer participation and connection. However, subsequent research by Brakus et al. (2009), Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and Söderlund and Sagfossen (2017) demonstrated that the luxury experience is more complex and multidimensional, encompassing sensory, affective, physical, cognitive, and social-identity experiences. This multidimensional construct is experienced by individuals when they encounter, undergo, or live through an event or series of events characterized by the aforementioned principles (Kumar et al., 2022). According to Kotler et al. (2004), dining at a luxury restaurant is a luxury activity that customers expect to be accompanied by exceptional service. Consequently, a luxury restaurant offers a range of experiences, including design, atmosphere, and service quality (Moreno et al., 2017; Saulo, 2016). Phillips (2007) found that Millennials are rational consumers who prioritize price and product features over brand names. Nevertheless, other studies have shown that young consumers are loyal to brands that align with their personality, values, motivations, behaviors, and ideals (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019; Saeed & Azmi, 2019). As a result, they are more challenging to predict due to their diverse lifestyles, cultural changes, and communication levels (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019).

During their visit to a luxury restaurant, consumers seek emotional and aesthetic content. Emotions play a crucial role in their behavior since they value pleasure more than any other rational criterion. Assessing services using rational criteria could potentially diminish the pleasure of a luxury purchase (Christodoulides et al., 2025). When comparing various restaurants, customers often consider intangible factors, such as the refinement of the store's ambiance, music, aesthetic appeal, beauty, and the possibility of encountering famous individuals (Ballantine et al., 2010; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). Therefore, the artistic dimension of a luxury service is the central element that differentiates it significantly from all other services.

Chef of Cuisine as a human brand, chef image, restaurant image, and congruence image

In the context of branding individuals, several terms have been developed, including human branding, celebrity branding, personal branding, and person branding, based on the concept that product branding can also be applied to people (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Brand image is a multi-dimensional construct that includes perceptions of quality, value, attitude, brand associations, and feelings (Kirmani & Zeithaml, 2013).

Brand image is a “subjective and perceptual phenomenon formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional” (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990, p. 116). The chef in a fine dining experience is a human brand, and a positive chef image contributes to a favorable restaurant image (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Han and Hyun (2017) observed that a positive image of the restaurant affected consumers’ behavioural intentions and impacted the perception of quality, which consequently contributed to consumer patronage of the business (restaurant). Once a restaurant can develop a positive perception among the customers towards the brand’s overall image, it can benefit from a competitive edge (Awan et al., 2018).

Congruence between the chef and the restaurant's images would result in better-perceived quality, improved customer satisfaction, and enhanced loyalty (Rodrigues et al., 2023). This congruence would result in a better-perceived quality, improved customer satisfaction (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010), and enhanced loyalty (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020), as well as commitment, all while offering a quality product and service (Neupane, 2015).

Additionally, the restaurant's image plays a crucial role in the consumer's decision-making process, based on their perceived customer experience (Alderighi et al., 2016; Schioppa et al., 2016).

Customer experience is a multidimensional construct that encompasses a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) on customer attitudes and behavior towards a restaurant is significant, especially for the millennial consumer, who is more informed through the internet, mobile devices, and social media (Llopis-Amorós et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction leads to positive e-WOM, as satisfied customers share positive experiences with other potential customers through e-WOM (Lu et al., 2014).

Still, when it comes to sharing feedback, millennials behave differently from previous generations (Taylor Jr. & DiPietro, 2018). In the case of a restaurant, while the previous generation (Generation X), when faced with unpleasant service, would send the food back until it matched the expectation and level of satisfaction, millennials would still eat the meal (that unmatched the level of satisfaction, instead of sending it back) and after would share a negative review online about the negative experience (Koufie & Kesa, 2020).

Experiences can be hedonic or eudaimonic; hedonic experiences are associated with feeling good while engaging in and with the activity (Kashdan & Breen, 2008), while the eudaimonic experience is associated with being inspired, enriched, and aware (Bhullar et al., 2013). Food-behavior research views eating as the pursuit of sensory

pleasure, and the fine-food experience can be categorized as hedonic or eudaimonic experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017; Cova et al., 2018).

The relationship between restaurant attributes and customer experiences has been a topic of interest in the marketing and hospitality literature for several decades. The chef's image as a human brand has been shown to significantly impact customer perceptions and experiences. For example, a study by Huo et al. (2022) found that the celebrity chef's image positively influenced customers' satisfaction with the food quality, service quality, and overall experience. Similarly, a study by Chen et al. (2020) found that the chef's reputation positively influences customers' perceptions of food quality and service quality.

A chef's image as a human brand positively impacts the hedonic gastronomic experience. This hypothesis is supported by the self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2019), which suggests that consumer attachment is determined by three fundamental human needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. As a human brand, the Chef's image can fulfill these needs by providing consumers with a sense of freedom in choices, behavior, and expression (autonomy), feelings of closeness and connectedness to others (relatedness), and a sense of accomplishment and effectiveness (competence). This attachment to the Chef's image as a human brand is expected to enhance the hedonic gastronomic experience by fostering emotional security and developing genuine attachments.

H1: The Chef's image (CI) as a human brand positively affects the hedonic gastronomic experience (H).

The literature also supports the hypothesis that the chef's image positively influences the novelty of a gastronomic experience. A study by Kim and Jang (2016) found that customers' perception of a restaurant's novelty positively influenced their intention to revisit, and that this perception was influenced by the chef's image. Similarly, a study by Chang et al. (2011) found that customers' perception of a restaurant's innovativeness positively influenced their satisfaction with the food quality, and the chef's image was one of the factors that influenced this perception. Therefore, the literature supports the hypothesis that the chef's image positively impacts the novelty of the gastronomic experience.

H2: The Chef's image (CI) as a human brand positively affects the novelty gastronomic experience (N).

The luxury restaurant's image has been shown to have a significant impact on customers' perceptions and experiences. For example, Chen et al. (2018) The study found that the luxury restaurant's image positively influenced customers' perceptions of food quality, service quality, and overall experience. Similarly, a study by Han et al. (2018) found that customers' perception of a restaurant's luxury positively influenced their satisfaction with the food quality and overall experience. Therefore, the literature supports the hypothesis that the image of a luxury restaurant positively influences the hedonic gastronomic experience.

H3: The luxury restaurant's image (LRI) positively affects the hedonic gastronomic experience (H).

The literature also supports the hypothesis that the luxury restaurant's image positively influences the novelty of the gastronomic experience. For example, a study by Hlee et al. (2019) found that customers' perceptions of a restaurant's innovation positively influenced their satisfaction with food quality and overall experience, and the luxury restaurant's image was one of the factors shaping these perceptions. Similarly, a study by Youn and Kim (2018) found that customers' perception of a restaurant's uniqueness positively influenced their satisfaction with the food quality, and the luxury restaurant's image was one of the factors that influenced this perception. Therefore, the literature supports the hypothesis that the image of a luxury restaurant positively affects the novelty of a gastronomic experience.

H4: The luxury restaurant's image (LRI) positively affects the novelty gastronomic experience (N).

The hypothesis that the congruence between the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's image positively affects the hedonic and novelty gastronomic experiences has been the subject of research in the field of hospitality and tourism. Several studies provide evidence for the positive relationship between congruence and gastronomic experiences. For example, a study by Oh and Kim (2022) found that customers' perception of a restaurant's congruence between the chef's image and the restaurant's image positively influenced their satisfaction with the food quality, service quality, and overall experience. Wang et al. (2017) examined the effect of congruence between the celebrity chef's image and the restaurant's image on customers' dining experience. The study found that congruence had a positive influence on customers' emotional experiences and satisfaction with the dining experience. Similarly, Huo et al. (2022)

investigated the impact of celebrity chef endorsement on restaurant image and customer behavior. The results indicated that when there is congruence between the chef's image and the restaurant's image, customers are more likely to have a positive evaluation of the restaurant and their dining experience. In addition, a study by Chen et al. (2017) examined the relationship between the celebrity chef's image, restaurant image, and customers' dining experience. The study found that congruence between the two images had a positive effect on customers' perceived quality of the restaurant, which in turn influenced their dining experience. Furthermore, a study by Shah et al. (2020) investigated the impact of chef image and restaurant image on customers' satisfaction and loyalty. The study found that when the two images are congruent, customers are more likely to have a positive evaluation of the restaurant and are more likely to return in the future. Overall, these studies provide strong support for the hypothesis that the congruence between the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's image has a positive effect on both the hedonic and novelty gastronomic experiences.

H5: The Congruence between the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's image (RCF) positively affects the hedonic gastronomic experience (H).

H6: The Congruence between the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's image (RCF) positively affects the novelty gastronomic experience (N).

Happiness with the experience

To achieve a balance between a healthy body and mind, individuals can address their psychological needs through leisure experiences, such as a visit to a luxury restaurant (Chen et al., 2020). Experience, in this sense, refers to the perception gained from engaging in a particular period or activity, as well as the process by which that experience is processed (Kelly, 1996). Experiences, according to Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014), can be defined into two classes: ordinary experiences and extraordinary experiences. Ordinary experiences encompass small, mundane, common, and frequent aspects of everyday life. In contrast, extraordinary experiences are perceived as uncommon, memorable, non-ordinary, and unique events that transcend everyday life (Hemetsberger et al., 2012).

Overall, this new conceptualization of luxury emphasizes a consumer-driven experience over a product- or service-centered one (Holmqvist et al., 2020). The symbolic meaning of luxury enables consumers to experience luxury as a 'moment of luxury' (Bauer et al., 2012). These moments of luxury are perceived as an escape and a

way to disconnect from ordinary events and worries. Following this line of thought, any ludic activity can be considered a moment of luxury.

Additionally, a leisure experience refers to the perception that follows the activity in which an individual participates or the experience itself, which varies according to the context, situation, and individual. In other words, leisure experiences can be perceived as a source of humankind's happiness (Andrews & Withey, 1976). For Ahuvia (2017), "happiness" can refer to several different things: emotions, life meaning, life satisfaction, or mental health. For Mogilner et al. (2012, p. 430), happiness is a "state of well-being and contentment; a pleasurable or satisfying experience".

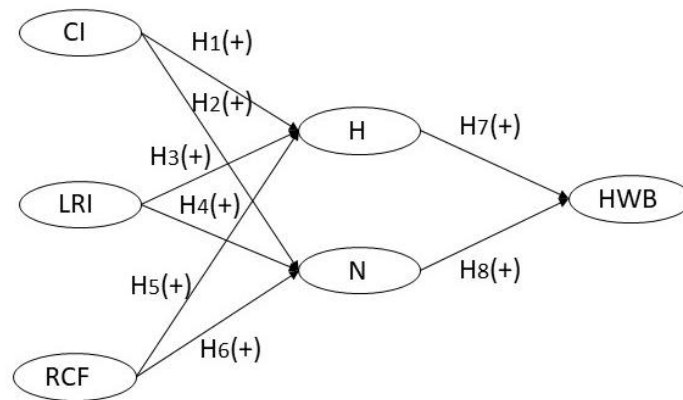
Leisure experiences can develop positive outcomes that benefit personal well-being (Andrews & Withey, 1976) and reduce negative emotions (i.e., stress and pressure from daily struggles and challenges both in the private and work-life) (Buss, 2000; Chen & Li, 2020; Fang, 2008). When people are engaged in a leisure activity, their minds tend to relax, become careless and free, and overall, they are more open and in tune with the activity in question and its surroundings. By doing so, the experience satisfies the psychological need for rest, relaxation, self-improvement, and confidence (Tinsley & Kass, 1979). Thus, enjoying a luxurious meal in a luxury restaurant can be perceived as a small and positive break from the excessive and tedious work demands (Van Wingerden et al., 2017). In this study, hedonic gastronomic experience refers to the pleasure-oriented, affective enjoyment that consumers derive from dining, including excitement and enjoyment during the meal. Novelty gastronomic experience captures the perceived uniqueness, originality, and 'once-in-a-lifetime' character of the dining encounter. Happiness and well-being are conceptualized as consumers' subjective evaluations of life satisfaction and positive affect associated with their experiences, in line with subjective well-being perspectives. Then, we can posit the following hypotheses:

H7: A Hedonic luxury gastronomy experience (H) positively affects consumer happiness and well-being (HWB)

H8: A Novelty luxury gastronomy experience (N) positively affects consumer happiness and well-being (HWB)

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model proposed.

Figure 1 *Conceptual Model*



Source: self-made

METHOD

A partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015) was used to test the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2014; Hair, Sarstedt, Pieper, & Ringle, 2012; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012). PLS-SEM was preferred to covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2017) because it overcomes “the seeming dichotomy between confirmatory and predictive research since researchers using the method expect their model to have high predictive accuracy, while also being grounded in well-developed causal explanations (Hair et al., 2017, p. 109; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2018).

The PLS method was executed in a two-step approach: (1) the reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed, and (2) the structural model was evaluated (structural relations among the latent factors) (Chin, 2010). This approach assesses scale validity and reliability before testing the main relationships.

Data Collection

A self-administered web-based survey was conducted to test the hypotheses presented in the conceptual model. Data collection was conducted over three months in Portugal in October, November, and December 2022. Data were collected from a convenience sample of master’s degree students using a snowballing procedure. Respondents were contacted via email and through social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. Several studies used university student samples for their research (Johnson & Chattaraman, 2019; Myung & Smith, 2018). Using the convenience sampling technique and snowballing procedure with master’s degree students seems relevant because the population to be studied in this research was millennials.

Chef José Avillez was selected as the focal human brand because he is one of Portugal's most recognized culinary figures, with multiple Michelin-starred restaurants and a strong media presence across television and social platforms. His brand authenticity and public visibility make him an ideal exemplar of a human brand in the luxury gastronomy sector. Only participants who replied that they knew Chef José Avillez, a well-known Portuguese chef, who visited his restaurants at least once, were considered for the data analysis. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: one with socio-demographic variables, another with questions about the chef's knowledge and consumer behavior, and the last section with items related to the constructs included in the conceptual model.

Measures

Lin and Lin's (2006) scale measured the chef's image. The Luxury restaurant's image was assessed using three items adapted from Ryu et al.'s (2012) scale, which had been previously tested in research by Chen et al. (2016). Restaurant-chef fit was measured using three items from Lin's (2013) scale. To assess consumers' experiences with meals at a chef's luxury restaurant, three items were added for the hedonic experience and three for the novelty experience, all taken from Kim et al.'s (2012) memorable tourism experience scale. Finally, five items were adopted from Diener et al.'s (1985) scale to evaluate the happiness and well-being of the surveyed customers. A Likert-type scale was used to assess the degree to which respondents agreed with the answers in the questionnaire, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree", and 5 indicated "strongly agree."

Common Method Bias

The theoretical model's relevant constructs were operationalized using measures from existing literature, as advocated by Podsakoff et al. (2003) as a procedural method to reduce common method bias. Additionally, there are no common method bias problems, as indicated by the Harman test, as recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003), which was performed for all constructs. From the result, the total variance explained must be the first component that accounts for less than 50% of all variables in the model. In this case, the results were 19.8%, which allows us to conclude that the common method bias is not a concern. Still, in line with Podsakoff et al. (2003), respondents were not informed about the study's objective, and it was assured to them that their responses would be confidential and anonymous, and that there were no right or wrong answers.

RESULTS

Sample

A total of 277 valid questionnaires were obtained. The total sample consisted of 312, but some responses had to be excluded because they didn't meet two important criteria: the respondents didn't know Chef Avillez, and they had never eaten in a Chef Avillez restaurant. The sample was predominantly composed of women (62.5%), with only 37.5% being male. Regarding age, 45.5% were between 18 and 24 years old, 29.6% were between 25 and 35 years old, and 22.0% were over 35 years old. This is appropriate because the target of this research is millennial consumers. 55.6% of the respondents have higher education levels, 42.6% have secondary education, and only 1.8% have basic education (Table 1).

Table 1 *Sample Profile*

N = 277		Percent
Age	Less than 18 years	2.9
	18 to 25	45.5
	26 to 35	29.6
	More than 35 years	22.0
Gender	Male	37.5
	Female	62.5
Education	Basic	1.8
	Secondary	42.6
	Superior	55.6

Source: self-made

Measurement Model

The software used to estimate the proposed conceptual model was the PLS-SEM. However, before starting the structural equations process, we analyzed the kurtosis and skewness to check if the data could present serious normality problems. As all skewness and kurtosis values fall between -3.5 and 3.5, the variables are assumed to be reliable within the constraints of univariate normality (Hair et al., 2010) (Table 2).

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Excess Kurtosis	Skewness
The Chef....				
CI1: Makes delicious dishes	3.715	0.829	0.116	-0.074
CI2: Is professional at preparing the dishes	3.982	0.847	0.555	-0.610
CI3: Is innovative	3.971	0.819	-0.196	-0.343
CI4: Has a good aesthetic sense	3.917	0.804	0.810	-0.518
CI5: Explains his/her food preparation method and the uniqueness of each dish	3.697	0.821	-0.209	-0.056
H1: Exciting	3.484	0.795	0.455	0.162
H2: Enjoyed myself	3.495	0.729	0.370	0.553
HWB1: In most ways, my life is close to my ideal	3.556	0.871	0.588	-0.781
HWB2: The conditions of my life are excellent	3.588	0.839	0.744	-0.650
HWB3: I am satisfied with my life	3.690	0.813	0.386	-0.425
HWB4: So far, I have got the important things I want in life	3.708	0.818	0.433	-0.488
LRI1: The restaurant is sophisticated	3.888	0.810	-0.242	-0.203
LRI2: It has a luxurious atmosphere	3.773	0.864	0.114	-0.320
LRI3: The restaurant has an authentic cuisine	3.765	0.823	0.305	-0.242
N1: Once-in-a lifetime experience	3.354	0.853	0.921	-0.082
N2: Different from previous experiences	3.412	0.758	0.586	0.303
N3: Unique experience	3.455	0.738	0.375	0.292
The image of a chef and a restaurant....				
RCF1: Is consistent with one another	3.668	0.715	0.376	-0.009
RCF2: Are complementary to one another	3.606	0.701	0.429	0.090
RCF3: Fits one another	3.603	0.707	0.417	0.063

Source: self-made

Furthermore, we have verified the multicollinearity between the constructs by applying the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The findings show that the VIF of all items ranged between 1.561 and 4.010, which is lower than the usual cut-off of 5. This allowed us to conclude that minimal collinearity among constructs and confirm that multicollinearity was not violated (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 3 presents the results of the measurement model. The Cronbach's alphas exceeded the cut-off value of 0.70. To evaluate the individual reliability of the constructs, composite reliability (CR) and Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (ρ_A) were calculated

(Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). For all constructs, CR was greater than 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), and ρ_A exceeded 0.7, confirming the reliability of the scales (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE); all values were exceeded 0.50, indicating that, on average, each construct explains more than half of the variance in its own indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2017). Next, the significance of the loadings was established using a bootstrapping resampling method (5,000 subsamples of the original sample size) to obtain the values of the t -statistic (Hair et al., 2017). All the factor loadings were significant at a confidence level of 99.9%.

Table 3 *Measurement Model Indicators*

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A (ρ_A)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CI (Chef Image)	CI1	0.851	0.903	0.916	0.928	0.721
	CI2	0.854				
	CI3	0.889				
	CI4	0.881				
	CI5	0.764				
LRI (Luxury Restaurant Image)	LRI1	0.931	0.874	0.883	0.922	0.799
	LRI2	0.859				
	LRI3	0.890				
RCF (Restaurant Chef Fit)	RCF1	0.919	0.921	0.925	0.950	0.864
	RCF2	0.933				
	RCF3	0.936				
H (Hedonic Experience)	H1	0.922	0.838	0.841	0.925	0.860
	H2	0.933				
N (Novelty Experience)	N1	0.892	0.913	0.929	0.945	0.851
	N2	0.943				
	N3	0.932				
HWB (Happiness and Well-Being)	HWB1	0.778	0.831	0.838	0.887	0.663
	HWB2	0.817				
	HWB3	0.819				
	HWB4	0.842				

Source: self-made

Tables 4 and 5 show the discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was assessed by investigating the latent constructs' correlations and the square roots of their AVEs. The square roots of the seven constructs' AVEs (in bold) were higher than the inter-construct correlations (Henseler et al., 2009). The heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

technique was used to assess discriminant validity; the constructs' correlation values were all below 0.90 (Hair, et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015), providing support for discriminant validity.

Table 4 *Discriminant Validity by Fornell-Larcker Criterion*

	CI	H	HWB	LRI	N	RCF
CI	0.849					
H	0.549	0.927				
HWB	0.256	0.396	0.814			
LRI	0.713	0.542	0.212	0.894		
N	0.411	0.676	0.318	0.495	0.923	
RCF	0.613	0.556	0.259	0.623	0.496	0.929

Note. The diagonal elements (bold text) are the square roots of the average variances extracted; the inter-construct correlations are shown below the diagonal.

Source: self-made

Table 5 *Discriminant Validity by Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

	CI	H	HWB	LRI	N	RCF
CI						
H	0.620					
HWB	0.281	0.467				
LRI	0.788	0.627	0.249			
N	0.439	0.770	0.351	0.547		
RCF	0.677	0.631	0.295	0.692	0.537	

Source: self-made

Hypotheses Test Results

To measure the goodness-of-fit of the model (Henseler, 2017; Henseler et al., 2016), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) (Hu & Bentler, 1998; Hu & Bentler, 1999) was analyzed to evaluate the Euclidean distance between the two matrices; the lower the SRMR, the better the fit. The SRMR was 0.059, which meets the cut-off value of 0.08 proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999).

A bootstrap resampling technique was used to determine the path significance of the structural model (Bootstrapping = 1000). The explanatory capacity of the structural model was evaluated using its R^2 values, which reflect the explained variance of the dependent constructs (Hair et al., 2019). The results show that the variance explained

for the hedonic experience was 39.6%, and the variance extracted for the novelty experience was 30.3%. Finally, the variance extracted for happiness and well-being was 16.2%.

Table 6 *Hypotheses Test*

Hypotheses	Beta	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P-Values	Supported
H1: CI → H	0.230**	0.076	3.020	0.003	Yes
H2: CI → N	0.013	0.077	0.173	0.863	No
H3: LRI → H	0.196**	0.073	2.687	0.007	Yes
H4: LRI → N	0.297***	0.068	4.365	0.000	Yes
H5: RCF → H	0.294**	0.092	3.179	0.002	Yes
H6: RCF → N	0.303***	0.081	3.742	0.000	Yes
H7: H → HWB	0.333***	0.075	4.450	0.000	Yes
H8: N → HWB	0.093	0.082	1.139	0.255	No

Note. *** ≤ 0.001 ; ** ≤ 0.01

Source: self-made

The results of the hypothesis test are presented in Table 6. At a significant level of 0.05, the estimated values of the path coefficients support all the direct effects that are part of the theoretical model, except the direct effect of chef image (CI) on novelty luxury experience (N) ($\beta = 0.013$; $p = 0.863$), therefore hypothesis H2 is not supported and the direct effect of novelty luxury experience on happiness and well-being ($\beta = 0.093$; $p = 0.255$), doesn't support H8. The chef image has a direct and positive effect on the hedonic luxury experience ($\beta = 0.230^{**}$; $p = 0.003$), supporting H1 (Gorbatov et al., 2018), luxury restaurant image has a direct and positive image on the hedonic luxury experience ($\beta = 0.196^{**}$; $p = 0.007$) and on novelty luxury experience ($\beta = 0.297^{***}$; $p = 0.000$), supporting H3 and H4 (Thorbjørnsen et al., 2002). The Restaurant chef's fit positively and directly affects hedonic ($\beta = 0.294^{**}$; $p = 0.002$) and novelty luxury experience ($\beta = 0.303^{***}$; $p = 0.000$), supporting H5 and H6. This result aligns with Rodrigues et al. (2023)'s consideration that both chef and restaurant images should be congruent, which in turn guarantees a positive consumer experience (Thorbjørnsen et al., 2002). And finally, the hedonic luxury experience has a positive and direct effect on happiness and well-being ($\beta = 0.333^{***}$; $p = 0.000$), supporting H7 (Van Wingerden et al., 2017).

DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Chef and Restaurant Images in Hedonic Experience

In this study, we present a model that fills a gap in the literature by examining the happiness and well-being of Millennial consumers in the context of luxury gastronomy. The findings highlight the influence of hedonic and novelty gastronomic experiences on the chef's image, the luxury restaurant's image, and the congruence between them. Our study is novel in its focus on human brands, specifically chefs, and their capacity to shape consumers' emotional and experiential responses.

The results confirm several direct effects proposed in the theoretical model. The chef's image has a positive influence on the hedonic luxury experience, while the luxury restaurant image influences both the hedonic and novelty aspects of the luxury experience. The congruence between the chef and restaurant images has a positive impact on both types of experiences. Additionally, the hedonic luxury experience significantly contributes to consumers' happiness and well-being. These findings reinforce the central role of emotional and sensory pleasure in luxury consumption, underscoring how alignment between chef and restaurant images enhances consumers' overall dining satisfaction.

2. The Limited Role of Novelty in Consumer Happiness

Some results in our model were unexpected. The chef's image did not significantly influence the novelty experience, and novelty, in turn, did not predict happiness and well-being. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of the hedonic adaptation principle, which posits that novelty provides short-term arousal and excitement but does not necessarily yield enduring satisfaction. Moreover, because Chef José Avillez operates across both haute cuisine and "luxury masstige" restaurant segments, Millennials, who are more strongly connected to the latte, may perceive his image as familiar rather than innovative or exclusive. Consequently, the perception of novelty may be stronger in his highest-end establishments than in the more accessible luxury concepts preferred by Millennials. This reasoning helps explain the absence of a significant link between novelty experience and happiness and well-being.

Interestingly, and contrary to what is proposed in the literature (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003), Millennial consumers appear to derive greater happiness and well-being from hedonic experiences than from novelty-driven ones. This suggests that, within the context of gastronomic luxury, emotionally pleasurable and familiar experiences may provide a more sustainable source of consumer happiness than fleeting sensations of newness.

3. Implications for Millennial Consumers and Luxury Gastronomy

These findings provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics between Millennial consumers, luxury experiences, and the influence of chef and restaurant images. They reveal that Millennials' pursuit of happiness in luxury gastronomy is primarily driven by emotional enjoyment rather than novelty, aligning with the experiential and authenticity-oriented nature of this generation. From a managerial perspective, chefs and restaurant managers should focus on creating emotionally engaging and sensorially rich dining experiences that emphasize connection, comfort, and pleasure over constant innovation. Strengthening the coherence between the chef's image and the restaurant's brand identity can foster stronger hedonic experiences and, consequently, enhance consumer well-being and loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Implications

This study addresses a literature gap by examining the relationship between Millennial consumers' happiness and well-being and their hedonic and novelty gastronomy experiences, considering the influence of the chef's image, luxury restaurant image, and their congruence. As defended by Ahn et al. (2019), the behavior of these consumers requires further study by both academia and business management. That research will undoubtedly contribute to this gap. The happiness and well-being of the Millennial consumers depend on the type of experience they have. In this study, it is worth noting that the emotional relationships of Millennials with experiential consumption exhibit some differences, rather than their consumption behavior.

The theoretical implications of this study are significant, as it addresses a gap in the literature by examining the impact of hedonic and novelty gastronomy experiences on the happiness and well-being of millennial consumers, as well as the influence of the chef's image, the luxury restaurant's image, and the congruence between them.

The findings challenge some preconceived notions in the literature, particularly the assumption that novel experiences invariably lead to greater happiness and well-being among millennials. Instead, the study reveals that the emotional relationships millennials form with experiential consumption exhibit nuanced differences, indicating that their behavior in relation to consumption may not be solely driven by novelty-seeking tendencies. This insight highlights the need for further exploration into the intricate dynamics of millennial consumer experiences and sheds light on the complexities of their relationship with gastronomic offerings. Instead, the study suggests that the emotional relationships that millennials have with experiential consumption are complex and require further investigation.

By examining the distinct context of gastronomic experiences and incorporating the perspectives of millennial consumers, this study expands our understanding of how experiential factors influence their well-being and happiness. These theoretical implications highlight the importance of considering emotional connections, such as those formed with the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's brand, when examining the millennial consumer experience.

Managerial Implication

Regarding the managerial implications, we observe that to provide happiness and well-being to consumers, the gastronomic experience must be hedonic. More specifically, the experience must be exciting and enjoyable. In this sense, within the scope of a hedonic gastronomic experience, the chef plays an essential role since he must be prepared to cook delicious, innovative, and professional meals while conveying a didactic approach in the explanation of the whole process, ending with an appropriate visual presentation of the meal (Lin & Lin, 2006). Furthermore, gastronomers' hedonic and novelty experiences are positively influenced by a luxurious and sophisticated image of the restaurant, as well as authentic cuisine (Ryu et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2016). And finally, they are also influenced by the consistency between the chef's image and the luxury restaurant's image (Lin, 2013). Indeed, a happy and satisfied consumer is more likely to share their experience, which in turn enhances the reputation of both the chef and the restaurant.

Then, the study's managerial implications are also noteworthy, as they suggest that to provide consumers with happiness and well-being, gastronomy experiences must be hedonic, exciting, and enjoyable. The role of the chef is crucial in this regard, as they must be skilled in cooking delicious and innovative meals while also presenting them in an appealing way. Moreover, luxury and sophistication are positively linked to gastronomic experiences, as is the consistency between the chef's image and the restaurant's image. A satisfied consumer is more likely to share their experience and contribute to the reputation of both the chef and the restaurant.

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents some limitations that could be overcome in future research. Firstly, the use of a convenience sample, although suitable for the applied methodology, may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of interest. It would be valuable for future studies to employ more representative samples that better reflect the target population.

Furthermore, extending the analysis to include other human brands within the gastronomy sector and exploring their influence on consumer experiences would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, investigating the applicability of the conceptual model to other domains where human brands, such as digital influencers, hold significant sway would contribute to a broader understanding of the subject.

To enhance the depth and breadth of the investigation, future research could consider incorporating additional constructs related to consumer happiness and well-being. For example, exploring variables such as brand loyalty, consumer perception of brand equity, brand authenticity, and other relevant factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying millennial consumer experiences and their impact on happiness and well-being.

By addressing these limitations and incorporating the suggested improvements, future studies can further advance the field's understanding of the complex dynamics between human brands, consumer experiences, and happiness and well-being, contributing to a more comprehensive body of knowledge in this domain.

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