

Human Capital as Experience Designers: Reframing Service Management in the F&B Industry (Lake Toba Tourism Ecosystem)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformation of human capital in the food and beverage (F&B) sector within Lake Toba's cultural tourism ecosystem. The research addresses a core issue: the limited role of F&B workers who are still viewed as mere service executors rather than experience designers. The study aims to reposition human resources as integral actors in delivering emotional and cultural value through tourism services. A qualitative approach was applied using thematic analysis, involving interviews, field observations, and document reviews across key destinations. Findings reveal five dominant themes: technical rigidity, lack of storytelling ability, absence of emotional labor, weak strategic awareness, and institutional training gaps. These insights led to the development of a six-stage conceptual model titled "Journey of Experience Design by F&B Human Capital," outlining the path from role awareness to reflective service delivery. The study concludes that transforming service roles in cultural destinations requires more than skill development; it necessitates cultural narrative training and emotional intelligence. Recommendations include localized training frameworks, stakeholder collaboration, and storytelling integration into F&B operations. This study contributes both theoretically and practically to the advancement of human-centered service innovation in heritage-based tourism.

Keywords: experience design; human capital; storytelling; emotional labor; cultural tourism

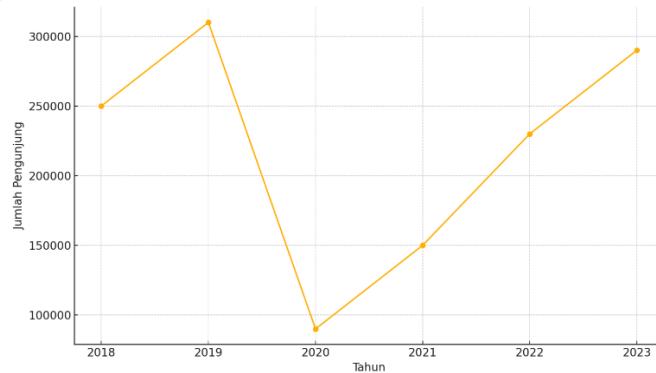
INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the tourism industry has undergone a fundamental shift from simply providing services to being an experience generator. Modern tourists are no longer satisfied with the beauty of the landscape or the luxurious infrastructure alone. They now want emotional engagement, cultural authenticity, and human interaction that leaves a deep impression. This phenomenon is known as experiential tourism, a new paradigm in which experience is the main currency that determines the competitiveness of a destination. One of the most strategic sectors in creating such experiences is the food and beverage industry or Food and Beverage (F&B). This sector not only functions as a logistical support for tourist trips, but also as a medium of cultural interaction between tourists and local communities. Every dish, way it is served, and the interaction between staff and customers reflects the identity, values, and character of a place. According to the UNWTO report (2022), an average of 35 to 45 percent of tourist spending is spent on food and beverage consumption. This means that the F&B sector plays an important role as one of the key touchpoints in the travel experience chain.

In Indonesia, Lake Toba occupies a special position in the national tourism development landscape. Designated as one of the five National Super Priority Destinations (DSPN), the

region received significant investments in infrastructure development, digitalization, and destination promotion. The geographical beauty of Lake Toba as the largest volcanic lake in the world, coupled with the rich Batak culture, provides a strong basic capital to become a world-class flagship destination. However, massive physical development has not been fully accompanied by the readiness of human resources (HR), especially in the F&B sector, which is still a weak point in the tourism value chain. Until now, many F&B actors in the Lake Toba area carry out their duties operationally and mechanistically. Services are limited to meeting the basic needs of consumers, without any elements of narrative, empathy, or deeper cultural involvement. In fact, typical foods such as *arsik*, *saksang*, or *dali ni horbo* are not only culinary commodities, but also a mirror of the history, traditions, and life values of the Batak people. This great potential has not been utilized optimally due to the lack of training and awareness of business actors in their role as "experience designers" and not just "service providers".

Figure 1. Number of Tourist Visit to Danau Toba (2018-2023)



Data from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy shows that although the number of tourist visits to Lake Toba continues to increase to nearly 290,000 visitors in 2023, the satisfaction rate with F&B services is still at 68.4%, far below Bali's which reaches more than 90%. A study conducted by Silalahi & Agustina (2024) also noted that only 26% of F&B actors in this region have participated in cultural and tourism-based service training. This inequality shows that there is a wide gap between the potential possessed and the available service capacity.

On the other hand, the world has entered an era where human-centered service management is the key to innovation. Within this framework, human resources are no longer positioned as technical implementers, but rather as creative actors who are able to design meaningful experiences for tourists. This concept is known as "human capital as experience designers", which is a service management approach that places individuals as value creators through a combination of technical, emotional, and cultural skills. F&B workers in this context are not just serving food, but also being cultural mediators, local storytellers, and faces of a destination. This approach has been widely applied in developed countries such as Japan and Thailand, where culinary services not only touch the senses, but also touch historical and social values. A similar model is very likely to be applied in Lake Toba, given the rich culture and culinary diversity it has. Unfortunately, until now there is no service management framework that specifically facilitates the development of F&B human resources as travel experience designers. Therefore, this study departs from the urgency to reposition the role of F&B human resources in the Lake Toba area in the framework of experience-based services. By exploring the current reality, identifying obstacles and potentials, and offering human resource development strategies based on local cultural competencies and narratives, this study is

expected to make a conceptual and practical contribution in strengthening an inclusive, sustainable, and globally competitive tourism ecosystem.

Human Capital in the Tourism and Service Industry

The concept of human capital is no longer seen as limited to the accumulation of labor and technical skills, but also includes emotional, social, and cultural aspects that are integrated in service performance. In the tourism sector, which fully operates in an experience-based ecosystem, human resources are the main actors in creating value that is directly felt by tourists. According to Lun et al. (2016), the success of rural tourism in Europe is greatly influenced by the capacity of local human resources to manage and convey cultural narratives authentically. The same thing is also affirmed by Taufik et al. (2023) who stated that in the context of non-urban destinations, the professionalism of human resources must be in line with local knowledge, cultural values, and emotional communication skills. A study by Lombardi et al. (2021) also confirms that improving the quality of human capital contributes significantly to the tourism value chain, especially in encouraging tourists to spend more time and money in destinations. In areas such as Lake Toba, which has a strong character as a culturally based rural destination, the transformation of local human resources is the main subject of creating tourism experiences to be very relevant and strategic. But unfortunately, many HR in this sector are still placed as technical implementers (waiters, cooks, restaurant staff), not as the main subject in the development of destination service strategies.

Service Management and the Evolution Towards a Human-Centered Service

Service management has undergone a major transformation since the era of the service industry has developed into an experience-based economy. In the classical paradigm, services are positioned as a set of standard processes to functionally meet customer needs. However, in the new era, services are understood as a co-creation process, where value is created through interaction, emotional engagement, and cultural context between customers and service providers (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). The human-centered service model places humans not only as service implementers, but as creators of narratives and atmospheres. In the tourism industry, this becomes more significant because the services are high-touch and highly personalized. Pine & Gilmore (1999) through the concept of The Experience Economy emphasizes that any form of service can be an "experiential stage", if managed with an emotional touch and the right narrative design. Research by Bacsi et al. (2022) in the Lake Balaton region, Hungary, shows that human resources trained in a human-centered approach are more successful in creating tourist loyalty, compared to human resources trained only in technical skills. This is an important reflection for the Lake Toba area, which currently still does not have human resource training standards based on cultural values and tourism experiences.

F&B Industry as a Medium of Cultural Storytelling Quotations

The food and beverage industry is not only a consumer business, but also a means of cultural communication. Food carries a story, history, social value, and even a spiritual symbol of a community. In the context of tourism, food becomes a very powerful entry point to introduce local culture. Therefore, the F&B industry in tourist destinations has a dual role: economic and cultural. According to Cuc et al. (2024), culinary services packed with cultural narratives tend to result in higher levels of satisfaction and form a tourist experience that is inherent in tourists' long-term memories. However, the challenge in many destinations including Lake Toba is the absence of training and orientation for F&B HR to understand food as a "cultural

medium". A study by Nabhan et al. (2023) in Indonesia shows that only 1 in 5 F&B actors in tourist destinations have basic *culinary storytelling skills*, such as explaining the origin of foodstuffs, the cultural meaning behind the dishes, or the symbolic value in traditional food serving rituals.

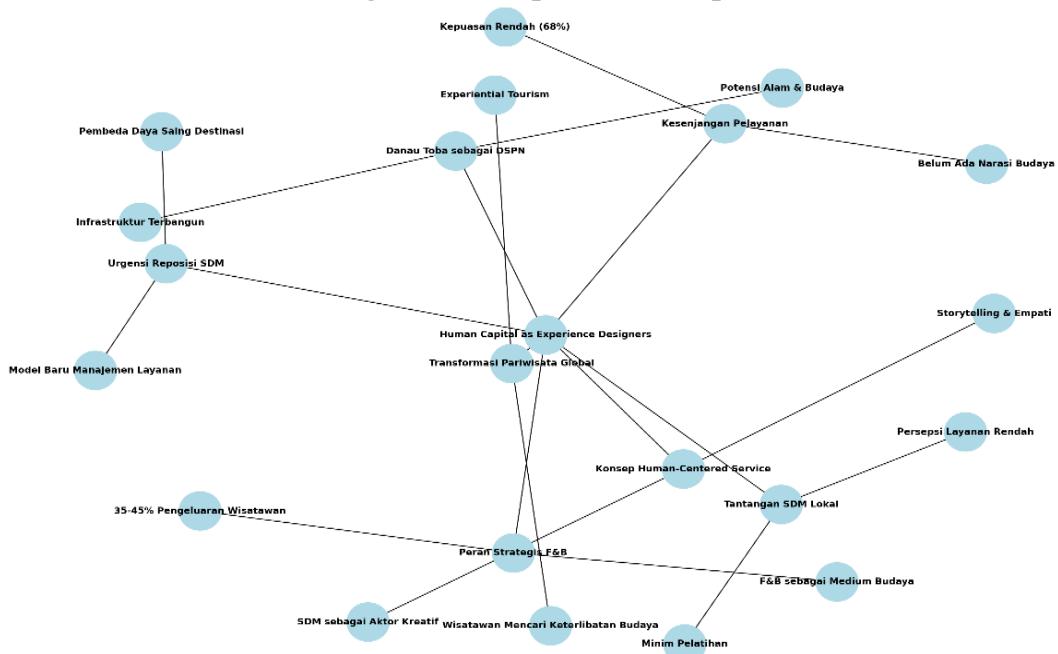
Experience Economy and the Emotional Role of HR

In the context of the experience economy, products are no longer the center of value, but rather experiences that are transformed through interaction. Therefore, human resources who are at the forefront of services have a great responsibility in shaping the perception and emotions of tourists. They become the main actors in emotional labor—the ability to manage personal emotions in order to create emotional comfort for customers (Hochschild, 1983). Pine & Gilmore (1999) emphasized that human resources in the service sector such as F&B have the potential to be "stage actors", who with their service style, stories, and body language are able to convey the cultural identity of a community. In the context of Lake Toba, F&B workers have the potential to become "cultural guardians" who introduce Batak values through the way they welcome, serve, and explain special foods such as arsik, saksang, or dali ni horbo. However, in reality, as reported by Silalahi & Agustina (2024), the majority of F&B workers in Lake Toba do not understand this potential, nor do they even have a guide to cultural value-based services.

Relevance of Local Context: Lake Toba as a Super Priority Destination

Lake Toba, with its status as a National Super Priority Destination, has great support in the form of infrastructure and promotion. However, hard infrastructure such as roads, hotels, and airports will not create a satisfactory tourist experience without soft infrastructure, namely human resources and services. A study by Marbun & Simarmata (2024) shows that 72% of tourists who visit Lake Toba feel attracted to Batak culture, but only 34% of them feel they get a "cultural experience" while in the destination. This reinforces the argument that local HR has not been empowered as a facilitator of cultural experiences, including in the F&B sector.

Figure 2. Conceptual mind map



To understand the strategic role of HR in the food and beverage (F&B) industry in the Lake Toba region, it is important to place it within a broader framework that links between global dynamics, local conditions, and the urgency of service transformation. At the core of this idea is the idea that human capital not only functions as an implementer of technical services, but also as "experience designers", namely creators of authentic, memorable, and culturally valuable tourist experiences. Major changes in the global tourism industry have driven a shift from the old product-oriented paradigm to a new one centered on experiences. In the framework of experiential tourism, tourists are no longer adequately served practically, but rather want an experience that connects them emotionally with the places they visit. This is where the F&B sector plays a crucial role as a cultural medium that allows tourists to not only taste the food, but also "feel" the local identity through the presentation, interaction, and story behind each dish.

Lake Toba, as a national super priority destination, has all the capital needed to enter the experience-based tourism arena. Natural beauty, strong Batak traditions, and infrastructure support from the central government are very potential foundations. However, there is still a gap between this potential and the quality of the experience provided, especially in F&B services. This shows that there are structural problems in the aspect of human resource quality, especially in terms of service competencies based on culture, empathy, and communication. The main challenge on the ground is the lack of awareness among F&B players of their strategic role in creating travel experiences. Many service workers still view their profession functionally and technically, rather than as part of the cultural and economic ecosystem of tourism. On the other hand, there is no comprehensive and sustainable training system that can equip human resources with skills as "experience designers" from culinary storytelling, intercultural communication, to empathy-based services and local warmth.

The concept of human-centered service management is present as an alternative approach that is relevant to these challenges. This approach places HR as creative actors, not just executors. They play a role in creating added value through narratives, interactions, and emotional services that are able to touch the personal dimension of tourists. With this approach, restaurants become not only places to eat, but also cultural meeting spaces. The waiter not only delivers the food, but also explains the story behind the dish. And the food itself became a symbol of the local cultural heritage that was alive. The repositioning of human resources in this role is becoming increasingly important because it offers a way to build destination competitiveness differentiation that does not depend solely on infrastructure. With the right training and a supportive framework, local HR can become cultural ambassadors, creating experiences that strengthen the identity of destinations and increase economic value through increased tourist satisfaction and loyalty. In the context of Lake Toba, this repositioning is not only functionally important, but also strategic in encouraging sustainable, inclusive, and community-based tourism.

Thus, this conceptual mind map illustrates the close link between the need to reform approaches to F&B HR management and the great opportunities that can be achieved if such an approach is implemented in an integrated manner. It's not just about practicing how to serve food, it's about building a vibrant cultural experience, and putting local HR at the center of the process. The emergence of an inequality between tourists' expectations of meaningful F&B services and the readiness of local human resources to provide them is a gap that is the main focus of this study. HR who lack cultural narratives, soft skills, and awareness of the role

as "experience builders" tend to fail to create service differentiation, which ultimately impacts tourist satisfaction and retention.

Research Objectives

This research aims to: (1) analyzing the role of F&B HR as experience designers in the context of the Lake Toba tourism ecosystem; (2) identify service management models currently used by F&B players and evaluate their suitability for experiential service trends; and (3) propose a strategy for developing F&B human resources based on cultural competence, service empathy, and local values, with an orientation on creative services that enrich the narrative of tourists. The novelty of this research lies in the "human capital as experience designers" approach, which places F&B workers as strategic actors in experience creation, not just technical implementers. There have not been many studies that: (1) integrate service management models, local culture approaches, and human resource development in a single framework; (2) focus specifically on the F&B sector in super priority destinations in Indonesia, such as Lake Toba; and (3) using a mixed methods approach to synergize quantitative data on tourist satisfaction with qualitative narratives of industry players. Thus, this research can make a real contribution to development of tourism vocational training policies; empowerment of local communities as the main actors in tourism services; and the transformation of F&B services from just consumption to a form of cultural storytelling.

METHOD

This research uses an exploratory qualitative approach with the paradigm of interpretive constructivism, where social reality is considered as something shaped by perceptions, values, and interactions between actors in a given context. This paradigm is appropriate to delve deeply into how HR in the F&B industry in Lake Toba understand, interpret, and practice services as part of cultural narratives and tourism experiences. The goal of this approach is not to generalize the findings statistically, but to build a deep contextual understanding of the social, cultural, and professional dynamics in the management of experience-based services in the local tourism sector. In this context, reality is seen as the result of an ever-changing social construct, depending on the interaction between tourists, F&B workers, and the cultural context in which the service takes place.

Research Strategy: Intrinsic Case Studies

The research strategy used is an intrinsic case study, where the case studied (i.e. F&B HR in Lake Toba) has a special and important value in itself. This case study does not aim to prove a general theory, but rather to understand the complexity of phenomena in local and specific contexts. This approach allows researchers to capture unique local realities, which are often overlooked within generic conceptual frameworks. In this case, how F&B workers in Lake Toba interpret their role in the context of Batak culture and tourist expectations is the main focus.

Research Location

The research location is centered on four main areas of tourist destinations around Lake Toba, namely Balige (Toba); The Fourth Circuit (SmackDown); Tomok; Tuktuk (Samosir). These four regions were chosen because they represent a combination of tourist-dense areas (Parapat, Tuktuk) and more cultural-local areas (Balige, Tomok), allowing for comparisons between service contexts and varied work cultures. Each region has unique demographic

characteristics, tourism infrastructure, and tourist segmentation, which will provide a contrasting dimension in the study's findings.

This study uses purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques to select informants who have relevance and in-depth knowledge of the research topic. Inclusion criteria are: having a minimum of 2 years of work experience in the tourism-based F&B industry; having interacted directly with domestic and foreign tourists; and understanding the elements of local culture that are integrated in the ministry. The composition of the informants is as follows:

Table 1. The composition of the informants

Informant Categories	Sum	Information
F&B actors (owners, staff, chefs)	12	From local stalls, mid-sized restaurants, hotels
Tourists (foreign & domestic)	8	For a service experience perspective
Tourism and Local Government	4	Representatives of HR policy & training
Total Informant	24	

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth Interviews

The interview is conducted in a semi-structured manner with open-ended question guidelines. Key focuses include: F&B workers' perception of their role in tourism; their understanding of the local culture and how to integrate it in ministry; and the dynamics of interaction with tourists and service experiences. Interviews are conducted in Indonesian and, if necessary, Batak with the help of a local translator. All sessions are recorded and transcribed.

Participatory Observation

Researchers spent 3-6 hours at 7 F&B points per location to observe the following: body language, non-verbal communication, and gestures of service; restaurant atmosphere, which includes spatial arrangement, cultural symbols, welcome; and tourist's reaction to the service. Observational data were recorded in field journals and analyzed to detect patterns of cultural behavior and practices.

Cultural Documentation and Artefacts

Supporting documents are analyzed. The supporting documents include HR training materials from local governments; menu design and narrative of local food products; reviews from travellers on digital platforms (TripAdvisor, Google Maps).

Data Analysis Technique

The data was analyzed using a reflective thematic analysis method, with an iterative approach and open coding through NVivo 12 Plus software. The analysis process follows the following stages: (1) open coding, which includes marking meaningful excerpts from transcripts; (2) axial coding, which includes grouping code into initial themes such as "narrative skills," "service emotionality," "cultural barriers," etc.; (3) selective coding, which includes constructing a large narrative of the main theme, such as "HR as an experience designer" and "cultural disconnection in services"; and (4) critical interpretation to analyze data based on a theoretical framework (service-dominant logic, experience economy). Cross-site data were analytically compared to assess whether there was a pattern of homogeneity or contextual variation in F&B service practices at different points of Lake Toba.

Validity, Validity, and Researcher Reflection

To ensure scientific quality and integrity, a qualitative validity approach from Creswell & Poth (2018) is used. The approach includes steps such as: triangulation of sources and methods

which is a combination of interviews, observations, and documentation; member checking where initial findings are reconfirmed with the main informant; peer debriefing which includes cross-researcher discussions to avoid interpretation bias; and trail audit where the entire documentation process (field notes, analysis memos) is systematically recorded. The researcher also conducted self-reflection (reflexivity) to be aware of social positions, backgrounds, and potential biases during the interaction process in the field, especially in understanding the context of the Batak local culture.

This research is committed to the principles of participatory and non-exploitative ethics. Each informant receives a full explanation of the purpose of the research, their rights, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. There is no coercion or pressure to participate. Researchers do not provide financial compensation but value the time and contribution of informants by providing documentation of the final results of the research as a form of research reciprocity.

Table 2. Operational Variable

Conceptual Variables	Operational Definition	Indicators	Data Source	Data Collection Technique
1. F&B HR Technical Competence	The ability of F&B actors to carry out basic service functions in accordance with industry operational standards	- Knowledge of the menu - Food & beverage serving skills - Hygiene & sanitation - Accuracy of service	F&B Actor, Restaurant Manager	Interviews, Observations
2. Emotional & Social Competence	Human resources' ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and bring comfort to customers	- Empathy & friendliness - Interpersonal communication - Response to complaints - Readiness to deal with foreign customers	F&B Actors, Tourists	In-depth interviews, Interaction observations
3. Local Cultural & Narrative Competence	The capacity of human resources to convey elements of Batak culture through food and service interaction	- Knowledge of local food culture - Storytelling in presentation - Cultural symbols in service- Use of local language	F&B Actors, Observations, Menu Documentation	Interviews, Document analysis
4. Repositioning the Role of HR as	The shift in the function of human	- Awareness of strategic roles	F&B Actors, Managers,	Interviews, Observations, Case studies

Experience Designer	resources from technical implementers to creators of culture-based tourism experiences	- Initiatives in creating experiences - Cultural narrative-based interactions - Workers' self-reflection on service roles	Tourism Offices	
5. Tourists' Perception of F&B Services	Travelers' experiences and ratings of the quality of F&B services and the cultural content of the services	- Satisfaction with service - Assessment of cultural narratives - Impression of staff friendliness - Return preference (loyalty)	Tourist	Interviews, Online review analysis
6. Institutional Support and Training	Availability of training systems, HR development programs, and policy support	- Number & type of training - Government /community engagement - Training impact evaluation - Training accessibility	Tourism Office, Training Documents	Interviews, Documentation

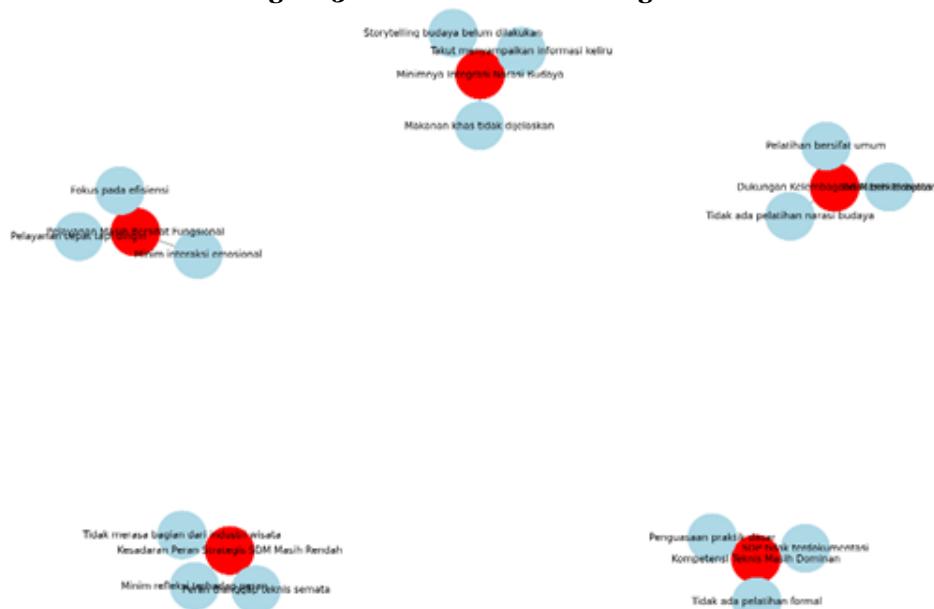
RESULT

There are a total of 24 informants were involved in this study, consisting of 12 F&B industry players (business owners, chefs, and service staff), 8 tourists (4 domestic, 4 foreign), 4 institutional parties (tourism office, hotel manager, HR trainer). Most of the F&B actors come from the local Batak community, with diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from junior high school to college. The informant's business locations are spread across Balige, Tomok, Tuktuk, and Parapat. Based on a reflective thematic analysis technique using NVivo, this study finds five main themes that represent the dynamics of the repositioning of F&B HR as experience designers:

Table 3. Thematic Analysis

Main Themes	Subthemes/ Thematic Codes	Representative Quotes	Data Source
Technical Competence is Still Dominant	- Mastery of basic practice - No formal training	"We learn from experience. I've never participated in training,	F&B Interviews, Observations

	- Undocumented SOPs	only taught by my parents."	
Services Are Still Functional	- Fast but cold service - Lack of emotional interaction - Focus on efficiency	"We serve quickly so that guests are happy. But if you talk for a long time, you're afraid of disturbing."	Interviews, Travelers, Observations
Lack of Integration of Cultural Narratives	- Special foods are not explained - Cultural storytelling has not been done yet - Fear of misinformation	"Many tourists ask, but I am confused about the answer. Afraid of the wrong story."	Chef interviews, Menu documentation
Awareness of the Strategic Role of HR Is Still Low	- Roles are considered purely technical - HR does not see themselves as part of the tourism industry - Lack of reflection on the role	"We only sell food, not tour guides. The important thing is to be full."	Business owner interviews, Observations
Institutional Support Still Limited	- No cultural narrative training - Training is general - Not sustainable	"So far, we have only provided training on service ethics in general. It has not reached the cultural narrative."	An Interview with the Tourism Department

Figure 3. Thematic Network Diagram

The thematic network presented illustrates the close interconnectedness between the five main themes and subthemes that emerge from the results of interviews, observations, and

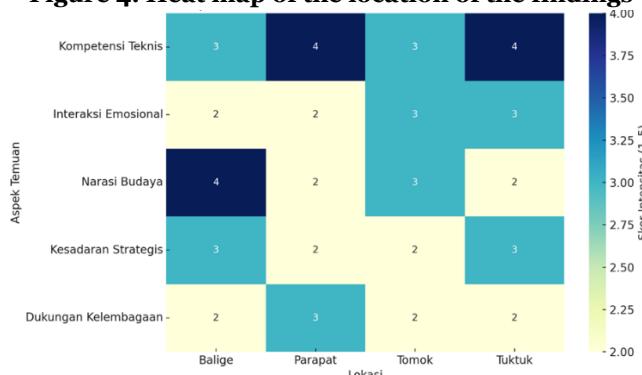
documentation. Each major theme acts as a central node that connects the various dimensions of F&B HR experience and perception in the Lake Toba area.

The first theme, "Technical Competence Still Dominant", emphasized that F&B workers in general already have mastery of basic service practices such as food serving and hygiene, but have not been equipped with formal training or written SOPs. This indicates that there is a gap in the structure of human resource professionalization, which results in work practices based on hereditary experience, not industry standards. Furthermore, the theme "Service Is Still Functional" shows that even though the service runs efficiently, the interaction with customers has not touched the emotional aspect. The lack of depth of communication, mechanical friendliness, and lack of effort to build emotional closeness indicate that the concept of emotional labor is not present in the consciousness of service workers.

The third theme, "Lack of Cultural Narrative Integration", is a critical point in the context of experience-based tourism. Traditional Batak foods such as arsik or saksang are served without accompanying cultural narratives. The fear of conveying misinformation, as well as the absence of narrative training, makes the potential of local culture not manifest in the service. Meanwhile, the theme "Awareness of the Strategic Role of HR Is Still Low" shows that the majority of F&B players do not see themselves as an important part of the tourism ecosystem. They see work more as a daily economic activity, not as an experience creation process that shapes the perception of tourist destinations.

Finally, the theme "Institutional Support Is Still Limited" emphasizes that the inability of actors to reposition themselves as experience designers is largely due to the absence of supportive thematic training programs. Existing training activities are general, sporadic, and have not yet touched on the substance of local cultural values or storytelling techniques in F&B services. The interconnectedness between these themes reveals a mutually reinforcing systemic pattern: the technical and narrative limitations of workers are exacerbated by weak institutional structures, which ultimately form services that are functional but have no emotional or cultural value. This network strengthens the argument that strengthening human resources is not enough to be done through technical skills alone, but needs to be equipped with a strategy to develop cultural competence and emotional experience, so that the F&B sector is truly able to support the tourism narrative of Lake Toba as a cultural heritage-based destination.

Figure 4. Heat map of the location of the findings



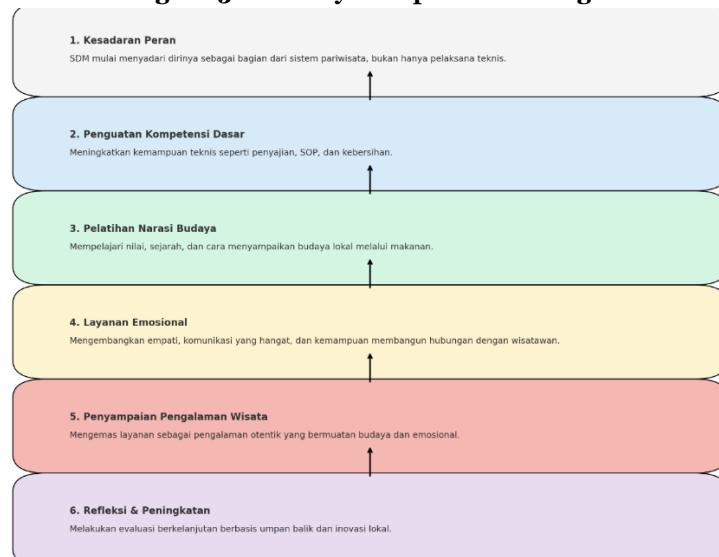
The heat map presented provides a comparative overview of the intensity of various aspects of the findings at four main research sites: Balige, Parapat, Tomok, and Tuktuk. Each location presents different characteristics and challenges in terms of HR management of F&B services, which is influenced by the social context, level of interaction with tourists, and the presence of

institutional support. In general, Parapat stands out in terms of technical competence, with the highest score (4), which reflects the long experience of F&B players in dealing with a high flow of tourists. However, this is not offset by cultural narrative ability or emotional approaches to service, which can be seen from the lower scores in both aspects. This suggests that technical dominance does not necessarily result in culturally or emotionally memorable travel experiences.

On the other hand, Balige shows a different tendency. Although the level of technical competence is at a moderate level (3), the cultural narrative aspect obtains the highest score (4). This indicates that F&B players in Balige have a stronger understanding of the local cultural context, and seek to integrate it into products and services, although it is still limited to the informal level. However, the lack of formal training support also limits the optimization of this potential. Tomok shows a fairly balanced level of maturity in almost all aspects, with moderate scores (3) for technical competence, emotional interaction, and cultural narrative. This can be explained by the character of Tomok as a cultural and historical tourism node, where F&B actors are quite exposed to tourists' expectations of local uniqueness. However, awareness of the strategic role of human resources and institutional support is still not optimal, showing the need for more targeted training interventions. Meanwhile, Tuktuk shows a combination of high technical level (4) and good emotional interaction (3), indicating that the region is beginning to move towards a more experience-oriented approach to services. However, the institutional support aspect is still low across locations (average score of 2), which shows systemic gaps in the provision of training and human resource development based on local culture and emotional skills.

Overall, this heat map reveals that while there are potential and individual initiatives in several locations. There has not been a systematic approach that makes F&B HR part of the strategy to strengthen the tourism experience in Lake Toba. Differentiation between regions can be used to develop localized training strategies, so that human resource development can run more effectively, contextually, and sustainably. The Journey of Experience Design by HR F&B" represents six stages of strategic transformation that human resources in the food and beverage service (F&B) sector need to go through to play the role of experience designers in the context of cultural tourism. This model not only describes the training or technical improvement process, but builds a deep and holistic role change flow.

Figure 5. Journey of experience design



The first stage starts with Role Awareness, where F&B actors realize that their work is not just about performing basic service functions, but also being an integral part of the image and experience of the tourist destination. Without this awareness, the strategic role of HR will remain trapped in a mechanistic work pattern that focuses on efficiency, not experience. Once awareness is formed, Strengthening Basic Competencies is needed. It includes technical skills such as food serving procedures, understanding SOPs, hygiene, and basic communication. This stage is important as a foundation of professionalism and credibility, so that the service is not only friendly but also structured and consistent. The next stage is Cultural Narrative Training, a process that connects local culinary knowledge with storytelling skills. This is where human resources begin to be taught about the history, symbols, and meaning of the typical foods they serve. Without this stage, it will be difficult to convey the local cultural heritage in its entirety to tourists.

After the narrative is mastered, HR is directed to develop Emotional Services. It involves the ability to build empathy, welcome warmly, and create a memorable atmosphere of connection. In the context of experiential tourism, heartfelt service has an equivalent value even higher than just speed or efficiency. In the fifth stage, human resources are at the peak of their role as Travel Experience Presenters. Here, food is no longer just a consumer product, but a medium to present cultural values, collective memory, and emotional engagement. Human resources play an active role in forming a deep impression of the destination through authentic, personalized, and meaningful services. Lastly, this entire journey does not stop at the peak of achievement, but continues to the stage of Reflection and Continuous Improvement. HR is encouraged to self-evaluate, receive feedback from tourists, and innovate contextually. This process ensures that the quality of the travel experience is constantly updated, relevant to the changing tastes and expectations of global visitors. This model as a whole illustrates that forming human resources capable of becoming travel experience designers is not an instant process, but rather requires a layered journey that involves mindset changes, technical and emotional skills improvement, and contextual and ongoing training support. In the context of regions such as Lake Toba, this model is an important reference to build a competitive advantage in culture-based tourism through F&B services with character and added value.

DISCUSSION

Aligning the Role of F&B HR with the Experience Economy

The transformation of the role of human resources (HR) in the F&B sector from technical implementers to experience designers is the main challenge revealed in this study. These findings strengthen the argument that cultural tourism service ecosystems such as Lake Toba are not sufficiently supported by efficiency and technical competence alone. In the Experience Economy paradigm proposed by Pine & Gilmore (1999) and expanded in tourism studies, modern tourism services are required to be able to create emotional engagement and meaningful narratives for tourists (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2019). However, as seen in the results of the study, the majority of F&B human resources in the Lake Toba area still operate within the function-oriented service framework, namely services that prioritize speed, transactions, and service mechanization. This is in contrast to the findings of Lusch & Vargo (2014) about

service-dominant logic, which emphasizes that service value is built from interaction and co-creation between actors and service users. The absence of narratives, the shallowness of interaction, and the hesitation in conveying cultural information show that F&B HR is still far from the capacity to create value through experience.

Emotional and Narrative Competency Gaps in Service

This study also found that there is an imbalance between technical competence and the emotional and narrative abilities of F&B HR. Emotional labor, as posited by Hochschild (1983) and contextualized in tourism by Grandey & Gabriel (2022) and Kim et al. (2025), is the ability to display authentic emotions in the context of services. These emotions are not just a formality of hospitality, but an interpersonal communication strategy that is able to create comfort and closeness. However, the interaction that occurs between F&B HR and tourists in Lake Toba is still limited to the mechanistic dimension: greeting, taking orders, delivering food. There is almost no use of affective communication, light storytelling, or approaches that build emotional connection. In fact, a study by Chaniago et al. (2025) shows that emotional communication in service plays a significant role in shaping a positive perception of a destination's cultural identity.

Culinary Narrative: A Neglected Medium

The narrative of local food is a form of "living story" of Batak culture that can be directly accessed by tourists through the senses, visuals, and dialogue. However, this study found that typical foods such as arsik, saksang, and dali ni horbo are often served without historical explanation, ritual value, or the origin of local ingredients. F&B actors feel insecure to tell stories because they are afraid of being wrong or not knowing the history. This is contrary to the results of the study of Nurwitasari et al. (2022) which emphasized that culinary storytelling is not just a promotional technique, but a method of interpersonal transfer of cultural values. Culinary narratives can be an intercultural bridge that brings together local identities with global experiences. Therefore, the absence of the narrative dimension in F&B services is a great loss in the context of the differentiation of Lake Toba tourist experiences.

Validation of the Journey of Experience Design Model by F&B HR

Based on empirical results, this study designs and proposes a six-stage conceptual model that explains the transformative journey of F&B HR to become experience designers: from role awareness, technical reinforcement, narrative training, emotional skills, experience delivery, to continuous reflection. These models enrich existing frameworks, such as the Human-Centered Service Innovation (Heinonen, 2025) and the Cultural Co-Creation Model (Pasandideh et al., 2024). The main contribution of this model is the emphasis on a combination of technical, emotional, and narrative competencies as the foundation of culture-based tourism human resources. This answers criticism of conventional tourism training that tends to emphasize procedures without preparing the performer for the expectations of contemporary travelers who want a personal and authentic experience (Maurer, 2018).

Local Institutional and Cultural Context as Determinants

This research also emphasizes that tourism human resource development cannot be separated from institutional support and sensitivity to the local cultural context. Training that is generic, sporadic, and not based on actual needs has proven to be ineffective in encouraging the transformation of HR roles. These findings are in line with the studies of Pandey (2013) and Zambrano (2023) which stated that training initiatives are effective when they combine three

elements: local content, culturally insightful facilitators, and integration of community practices. In the context of Lake Toba, the design of F&B HR training should be based on a Batak narrative, not on the standard of a star-rated hotel that often ignores local identity. Local institutions should play the role of curators, not just training facilitators. If this is realized, then human resource transformation will be part of the grand strategy of inclusive sustainable tourism development.

This research makes a significant contribution to the academic and practical realms by offering three main points. First, empirical contribution as a point to systematically describe the actual state of F&B HR in culture-based super priority destinations. Second, theoretical contribution as a point to develop a conceptual model of HR transformation that integrates technical, emotional, and narrative dimensions. Third, practical contribution provides concrete reference for tourism policy designers in developing contextual and experience-based training programs.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This research reveals that the role of human resources in the food and beverage (F&B) industry in the Lake Toba tourist area is still trapped in the framework of functional services that are technical and transactional. Although F&B players demonstrate mastery of basic service practices, they do not yet have sufficient awareness to position themselves as an important part of the experience-based tourism ecosystem. The services provided tend to be fast, efficient, but poor in narrative and affection, thus missing great potential in creating cultural and emotional added value for tourists. This research also highlights the lack of integration of emotional labor and cultural storytelling dimensions in the service process. Local culinary narratives are not documented or confidently conveyed by human resources, most of whom have never received formal training on how to convey cultural stories in a contextual and engaging way. The absence of this dimension makes local food only as an object of consumption, not as an experience that conveys the meaning and identity of Batak culture.

Through thematic analysis, this study formulated a conceptual model "Journey of Experience Design by HR F&B" which describes six stages of transformation of the role of human resources: starting from role awareness, technical reinforcement, narrative training, emotional competency development, creation of travel experiences, to sustainable reflection. This model is a significant conceptual contribution to the development of cultural-based service theory in the context of tourism. In addition, structural factors such as the absence of contextual training, generic training institutions, and weak local culture-based curricula are also the root of the problems that hinder human resource transformation. Therefore, the strategy to increase human resource capacity in the F&B sector must be designed holistically, integrative, and based on the values of local wisdom that live in the Lake Toba community. Thus, the main conclusion of this study is that F&B human resources in cultural tourism areas such as Lake Toba are not sufficiently trained as service personnel, but must be formed into designers of cultural experiences who are able to convey local identity through emotional interactions, culinary stories, and reflective service. This transformation requires a training design that is collaborative, local, narrative-based, and long-term-oriented.

Recommendations

Repositioning of Narrative and Emotional Based F&B HR Training Strategy

HR training programs organized by tourism agencies, NGOs, and industry players must be redesigned with a focus on two main aspects: culinary cultural narrative training and emotional communication skill development. The training module needs to involve indigenous leaders, cultural experts, and cross-cultural communication practitioners so that the training approach is contextual and applicative.

Establishment of Community-Based Micro Tourism Academies

Local governments together with communities and academics can form the "Cultural Tourism F&B Micro Academy", an informal but structured training initiative that focuses on local wisdom and culture-based service practices. The academy can also be a place for recipe documentation, food narration, and storytelling training for F&B actors.

Integration of Culinary Storytelling in F&B Business SOPs

F&B owners in Lake Toba should start integrating narrative elements into their service operational standards, such as providing "short stories" on the menu, weekly in-house training on food history, or daily storytelling to visitors. This will increase the perception of the value of each local dish.

Mapping the Competency of Destination-Based F&B Services

Each destination on Lake Toba (Balige, Parapat, Tomok, Tuktuk, etc.) has different characteristics of tourists and local culture. Therefore, HR training and development needs to be personalized per region based on a map of service competencies, tourist needs, and the strength of a typical local narrative.

Multi-sector Collaboration for Sustainable Institutions

Institutional support does not only come from the government, but it also needs to involve campuses, the private sector, the media, and the cultural community. The quadruple helix model must be applied so that human resource development is not sporadic, but rather part of the creative economy strategy and long-term destination development.

Implementation of HR Performance Monitoring & Reflection System

Tourism agencies and industry players can develop simple but reflective measurement tools (e.g., experience impact scorecards) to assess the quality of F&B services on a regular basis, both technically, narratively, and emotionally. The system can also encourage a culture of continuous learning and innovation among F&B players.

This research not only sheds light on the actual state of F&B HR in cultural tourism areas, but also offers a theoretical framework and practical model for the transformation of experience-based services. The "Journey of Experience Design" model can be replicated and adapted by various other culture-based tourist destinations, both in Indonesia and globally. With human resources that not only serve but tell, connect, and inspire, cultural tourism can grow not just as an industry, but as a living bridge that connects history, people, and the future.

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