

GASTRONOMY AS DESTINATION ATTRACTION FACTOR: A DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

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Purpose – In a competitive environment tourist destination are challenged to meet the changing consumer needs. Tourism demand has experienced significant changes in the value system, with an emphasis on individualization in the approach to travel, highlighting individual needs that manifest the individual's lifestyle and the desire for new and authentic experiences. Diversification of the destination product through activation of various destination resources is required. Whereby destination management organizations, as crucial driver of the destination product, are essential stakeholders in the development process. Tourists desire to seek for new authentic experience is contributing to the usage of gastronomy as destination resource within the development of gastronomic tourism. The aim of this paper is to summarize present findings about the relationship between gastronomy as destination resource and tourism demand travel behavior with the purpose to analyze the destination management perspective towards the observed relationship.

Design – An introductory section is followed by a literature review to tourist attractions and gastronomy in tourism demand travel behavior. Insights into the research methodology are provided before results presentation and discussion. The paper ends with conclusion remarks.

Methodology and approach – A thorough review of existing literature was conducted to identify relevant constructs, theories, and previous research findings pertinent to the research topic. Based on the literature review, key gastronomy and destination attractiveness relationship constructs were identified. A qualitative analysis with a questionnaire-based approach was performed on a focus group for the purpose to investigate the expert attitudes towards observed gastronomy and destination attractiveness relationship constructs. Purposive sampling technic was used, based on the population of interest. The research was conducted on a focus group, selected group of tourism experts, directors of tourist destination management organizations in the area of Split-Dalmatia County. Collected surveys were summarized, presented and interpreted.

Findings – From a destination management perspective gastronomy has an increasing role in tourist motivation to travel. In order attract tourists with the gastronomic offer, gastronomic resources have to be existing, valorized and as such perceived by tourism demand. Gastronomy is acting as an attraction factor. Quality of gastronomy contribute to guest satisfaction, intention for repeated visit, loyalty and increased revenues.

Originality of the research – The paper provides a destination management perspective to present knowledge about the relationship between gastronomy and destination attractiveness. The research fills the literature gap of a destination management perspective on an intensively growing form of tourism, namely gastronomic tourism, in a tourist region focused on beach tourism. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the research topic and offer implications for destination management decision making.

Keywords gastronomy, tourist destination, attraction factor, destination management organization

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INTRODUCTION

Tourist destinations strive to expand their market share, at the same time they are in a constant struggle to preserve the existing market share in an increasingly competitive environment (Dozier, 2012). The tourist market is experiencing expansion and dispersion of tourist activities, in parallel tourists are looking for experiences based on identity and local culture (Pavlidis and Markantonatou, 2020). In the past, mass tourism was the main way of manifesting tourism, while today tourism is practiced in small groups with travel based on new experiences with high environment awareness. One of demand asked experiences is called gastronomy. Gastronomy has recently become an indispensable element in getting to know the culture and lifestyle of a certain destination. The term gastronomic tourism is applicable to tourists and visitors who plan a trip in whole or in part aimed to taste local products or participate in activities related to the destination's gastronomy. Even if gastronomy is not the main motive for choosing a destination, but is the second or third factor in the selection of a tourist destination, its importance is continuously growing (Bârleanu, 2013). Gastronomy embodies all the traditional values associated with new trends in tourism: respect for culture and tradition, a healthy lifestyle, authenticity, sustainability and the feelings associated with the aforementioned. Gastronomy appears as means of approaching the cultural heritage of the visited place (Huang, 2017). Also, gastronomy represents an opportunity for revitalizing and diversifying tourism, promoting local economic development with the inclusion of various professional sectors. The positioning of the role of gastronomy in the choice of destination and tourist consumption contributed to the increase in gastronomic demand and the growth of the market segment of gastronomic tourism (Gaztelumendi, 2012). In tourism literature, two meanings and two faces of gastronomy stand out, i.e. gastronomy as a basic need of tourists on during their travel itself, as a key prerequisite for other tourist activities, and gastronomy as an attraction such as fresh and juicy seafood in summer resorts, distinctive ethnic cuisines of exotic people, renowned restaurants in luxury hotels, on cruise ships and in world metropolises (Dann 1996; Noguchi 1992). While tourists travel, they can always give up

some pleasure that is less attractive to them, such as sightseeing, while they cannot give up food, even if the available food is of unknown character and content, tasteless and in some situations unappealing in appearance. On the other hand, an increasing number of tourist destinations are being promoted mostly on the basis of their own gastronomic attractions. These two faces of food in tourism, one as an obstacle, the other as an attraction, are of significant social and professional research interest. This paper deals with gastronomy as an attraction, more specifically as a tourist factor in the decision and choice process of a destination, furthermore the role of gastronomy in tourist motivation and tourist satisfaction with their stay in a destination from the destination management organization perspective. This study is aimed to provide an overview of the relationship between gastronomy and tourist travel behavior through a review of present research with the purpose to investigate the destination management attitude on the relationship constructs. The paper contribution arises from the destination management perspective on gastronomy as destination resource in attracting and meeting tourism demand needs. The destination management perspective is of significant value due to their essential role in the development of destination products and overall destination development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. The tourist attraction

In tourism terminology, the concept of attractiveness is used to describe the features of certain destinations that are interesting to tourist demand, and that have the potential to attract tourists to a certain destination and satisfy their needs (Lew, 1987). Tourist attractions are identified as the decisive reason for travel, and according to Gunn (1972), there would be no tourism without tourist attractions. Moreover, Lew (1987) reveals that tourist attractions are fundamental to the very existence of tourism. Tourist attractions are marked as a vital sub-element in the tourist system (Vanhove, 2005). Tourist attractions are one of the indispensable parts of the tourist destination system (Weaver & Lawton, 2006; Liu et al., 2017). Attractions are a central place in the tourist decision making process and a decisive factor in choosing a destination. (Richards, 2002). Kirilenko et al. (2019) describe attractions as those things that a destination can boast of. Tourist attractions are considered a fundamental component of the tourism industry and the key to today's tourism success. They are the center of tourist activities and have the power to generate demand and encourage travel. Moreover, tourist attractions are a prerequisite for destination valorization (Ferrario, 1979). Matiza (2014) highlights tourist attraction as a factor in the competitiveness of destinations, while Mehmetoglu and Abelsen (2005) see attractions as indicators of the potential of tourism development in tourist regions. Destination image is derived from the mosaic of available attractions, accordingly, the number of visitors will be determined by the available attractions (Mill & Morrison, 1985). Today, tourist attractions are highly stimulated to adopt smart technologies in their development and become technologically competent, ecologically efficient and ecologically innovative in their operations (Jopp et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016). Along with the mere existence of tourist attractions, there is a need for their perception by the demand side. Ritchie and Crouch (2000) emphasize the pull factor of attractions in the perception of demand, while Hu and Ritchie (1993) believe that the attractiveness of a place reflects the feelings, beliefs and attitudes that an individual has about the destination's ability to meet his tourist needs. Kozak and Remington (1998) emphasize the importance of tourist attractions in the perception of a tourist destination in terms of satisfying tourist needs. Their views were also represented by Vangesayi (2003), who emphasizes the importance of the consumer's perception of the destination's attractiveness. The overall attractiveness of tourist destinations increases due to their ability to provide tourists with attractive content during their stay (Vangesayi, 2003). Thus, tourist attractions are the driver of tourist flows, but the valorization of tourist resources into tourist attractions requires the awakening of tourists' awareness of the existence of attractions. Therefore, Lew (1994) believes that no place, landmark or event is an attraction in itself and that they are shaped and marked by the tourist system as such. The overall tourist attractiveness of a certain destination depends on the relationship between existing resources and the perceived value of such resources by tourist demand (Uysal, 1998). In tourism literature and practice, a "tourist attraction" is a powerful term and frequently used one, but sometimes without being researched per se (Ćorluka, Vitezić and Peronja, 2021).

1.2. Gastronomy in tourism demand travel behavior

One of the aspects that is increasingly considered in tourism is the importance of local gastronomy in the choice of a tourist destination (Widjaja et al., 2020; Gonzales Santa Cruz et al., 2019; López-Guzmán et al., 2017). There is an increasing number of studies dealing with cuisine, wines and gastronomy in general as determinants of tourist experience (Kim and Jang, 2016; Okumbus and Cetin, 2018; Harrington and Ottenbacher, 2010). Local gastronomy has become an important tourist resource, and represents part of the cultural heritage of geographical areas visited by tourists (Gonzales Santa Cruz et al., 2019; Morais and Gimenes, 2007). Gastronomy has become a fundamental tourism development instrument in a destination (Nicoletti et al., 2019). Gastronomy and tourism have a very close relationship, which is manifested in the forms of gastronomy as a tourist product, gastronomy as a tourist experience, gastronomy as part of local culture and gastronomy as a tourist attraction (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). The majority of research on the interaction of gastronomy and tourism has studied gastronomy as a factor of attractiveness (Perez-Galvez et al., 2017; Hjalager and Richards, 2002). When tourists anticipate their trip to an unknown destination, they are excited about new and pleasant experiences, but at the same time worried about their adaptability to certain elements of the trip, especially about the availability of safe, edible and tasty food and drink. From which arises the need for a diverse and qualitative offer that will satisfy the needs of tourists to experience the authentic local life, which includes curiosity for authentic culinary specialties and dietary habits, specific to the region, namely they will try local food even more out of

curiosity than pleasure (MacCanells, 1973). On the contrary, food appears as an obstacle in tourism (Cohen and Avieli, 2004) for tourist that do not like or doubts the new gastronomic experience, which indicates to diversity among individuals. Thus, for some, the attraction of food and local gastronomy as a whole becomes an obstacle. Accordingly, in various destinations, local food has been transformed and reshaped in various ways with customized flavors to satisfy tourists. From the aforementioned meeting of foreign tourists and local gastronomy, new meals and even cuisines emerge (Cohen and Avieli, 2004), all in an effort to attract tourist demand to the respective destination and satisfy their needs, with the intention of creating tourist consumption.

The gastronomic offer has evolved, and the demand has experienced significant changes in the value system, with an emphasis on individualization in the approach to travel with emphasized individual needs that manifest the individual's lifestyle and the desire for new and authentic experiences. Nowadays, gastronomy is considered as tourist motivation (Kim et al., 2019). Tourists motivated by gastronomy are looking for a gastronomic experience and are attracted to a certain destination by the gastronomic offer such as regional cuisine, gastronomic events and the restaurant's offer of differentiated food and beverage (Gandara, 2008). Visitors are increasingly traveling to destinations in search of culinary experiences (Wijaya, 2013). Although a few years ago gastronomy was considered a secondary activity, currently it is identified as a primary activity, furthermore as an element to attract tourists to the destination (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Market changes have led to the emergence of a new form of tourism called gastronomic tourism, which can be defined as a type of tourism that includes gastronomy as the main or secondary motivation, such as visiting local producers, gastronomic festivals, restaurants or other places where food is tasted and/or experience related to gastronomy (Hall, 2003). Gastronomic tourism positioned as the engine of the tourism sector over the last years (Omar et al., 2019). Apart from the fact that gastronomy itself is the motivation of tourists, there are a number of sub motives, subjective for each tourist, which lead to the desire to experience the gastronomy of a certain destination in a special and individual way (Kim et al., 2010). Driven by the growing interest in the demand for gastronomy, many destinations have put their focus on gastronomy as destination product (Karim and Chi, 2010). Furthermore, in recent years, gastronomy has been supported as a reflection of the cultural identity of the geographical area. Gastronomy and tourism create a perfect symbiosis for getting to know the destination, since food reflects the social, cultural and ecological heritage of the population (Huang, 2017; Mascarenhasu and Gândari, 2010, Brunori and Rossi, 2000). Gastronomic experiences are gaining on importance within motivation that the travelers have (Gonzales Santa Cruz et al., 2019). Tourists have different levels of gastronomic motivation (Perez Galvez et al., 2017) and interest (Gonzales Santa Cruz et al., 2019) depending on market segments (Perez-Priego et al., 2023). Gastronomy as a primary or secondary motivation of tourist demand is considered an essential aspect of tourist satisfaction, combining the concepts of motivation, experience and satisfaction (Pérez Gálvez et al., 2017). In addition to the motivation to travel, gastronomy affects the satisfaction with the stay in the destination (Perez-Priego et al., 2023; Babolian, 2016; Guzel and Apaydin., 2016, Pertile and Gastal, 2013). Gastronomic experience is one of the decisive factors in the evaluation of tourist destination (Leong and Karim, 2015; Kivela and Crotts, 2006). Bad experiences related to food have negative impact on tourist experiences, which in turn affect the image of tourism companies and the destinations themselves (Yozukmaz, 2017). Empirical research indicates a positive connection between satisfaction with the gastronomic offer and an increase in the number of tourists, a longer stay and an increase in revenues (Diaconescu et al., 2016). Gastronomy has become an important attraction factor that profiles the destination itself, contributes to the image and influences the perception, satisfaction and behavioral intentions of tourists towards the destination itself (Leong et al., 2017). Gastronomy is a determinant of travel satisfaction (Gonzales Santa Cruz et al., 2019; Lopez-Guzman et al., 2017; Remington and Yüksel, 1998). The quality of gastronomy affects the intentions of a repeat visit, and thus the loyalty to a certain tourist destination (Yasami et al., 2021; Vesci and Botti, 2019; DiePietro and Levitt, 2017). Tourists who are satisfied with local gastronomy show a high predisposition to visit the same destination again (Alderighi et al., 2016; Correa et al., 2015). The gastronomic experience has a positive effect on loyalty to the destination (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017, Kim et al., 2010). Loyalty is a key element in destination management as some of the benefits that arise from loyal tourists is the willingness to extend their stay (Oppermann, 2000) and to do recommendation to others, all contributing to higher and more stable destination revenues (Huang et al., 2010).

2. METHODOLOGY

A thorough review of existing literature was conducted to identify relevant constructs, theories, and previous research findings pertinent to the research topic with the purpose to perform a qualitative evaluation of these relations on a focus group, namely, destination management organization directors. Based on the literature review, key gastronomy and destination attractiveness relationship constructs were identified, namely:

- The role of gastronomy in the choice of tourist destination varies between demand;
- Visitors are increasingly traveling motivated by gastronomy;
- Visitors are increasingly attracted to a certain destination by gastronomy;
- The quality of gastronomic offer acts as destination attraction factor;
- Destination gastronomic attractiveness derives from the availability of resources and their valorization;
- Destination gastronomic attractiveness depends on the relationship between existing resources and perceived values by tourist demand;
- Positive gastronomic experience positively affects tourist overall destination satisfaction;
- The quality of gastronomy positively affects the intention of repeat visit, and thus the loyalty to a certain destination;
- The quality of gastronomy positively affects destination revenues;

- The quality of gastronomy positively affects the visitor's length of stay.

A qualitative analysis with a questionnaire-based approach was performed on a focus group, destination management organization directors, for the purpose to investigate the expert attitudes towards the observed gastronomy and destination attractiveness relationship constructs. The questionnaire was constructed with meticulous attention to detail to ensure its validity and reliability in capturing pertinent information related to the research objectives. Questions were formulated to measure these constructs effectively. The questionnaire was structured into sections to facilitate clarity and coherence, going from questions of a socio-demographic nature and questions related to attitudes about gastronomy as a destination attractiveness factor. Sections were organized logically to guide respondents through the survey smoothly. Careful attention was paid to the wording of questions to ensure clarity, simplicity, and neutrality. Ambiguity and bias were minimized to enhance the reliability of responses. A pilot study was conducted with a small sample of participants to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the questionnaire further.

The sampling frame was determined based on the population of interest. Purposive sampling technic was used. The research was conducted on a focus group, selected group of tourism experts, directors of tourist destination management organizations in the area of Split-Dalmatia County, Croatia. Tourist destination management organizations in the Republic of Croatia are organized territorially, in addition to the national level, there are regional and local level. Local tourist destination management organization operate at the city, municipality and area level. Directors of tourist destination management organizations on a local level were chosen target population of the research, considering their role in the organization and management of the destination tourist offer. They are an essential stakeholder in the destination development process and the driver of the change. In addition, the research emphasizes the specificity of the spatial scope of the research. Split-Dalmatia County is part of the coastal area of the Republic of Croatia, which is characterized by leisure beach tourism as an extremely dominant tourist product. Namely, over 85,86% of tourist overnight stays were realized in the four summer months from June to September (Tourist Board of Split Dalmatia County, 2023). The primary motive of tourist arrivals in 2023 was the sea 83.2%, while gastronomy was in fourth place with 18.5% (Institute for Tourism, 2023), which is a significant step forward in motivation compared to 2019. the year when gastronomy was the seventh reason for arrival with a share of demand motivated by gastronomy of 6.6% (Institute for Tourism, 2019). Therefore, it is an area with a dominant beach tourism product that strives and manage to different the motives of tourist arrivals.

The questionnaire was distributed to the focus group through e-mail. Clear instructions were provided to respondents to ensure consistent completion of the questionnaire. The research was conducted from July to September 2023. Efforts were made to maximize the response rate through reminders and assurances of confidentiality. The total number of correctly completed returned surveys is 21 out of the total sample size of 35. Collected surveys were summarized, presented and interpreted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus group included 21 profession experts, destination management organization directors, 18 of them are women and 3 are men. 12 focus group members are aged between 41 and 50 years, 5 between 31 to 40 years, 3 are aged 51+ and 1 respondent is up to 30 years old. 11 of the focus group members are directors of city level destination management organization, 9 are directors of municipality level destination management organization, while 1 member is director of area level destination management organization. 7 of the focus group members perform their duties between 7 and 10 years, 6 of them up to 3 years, 6 more then 11 years, while 2 focus group members perform their function for 4 to 6 years.

Tables 1: **Research results**

STATEMENT	FOCUS GROUP MEMBER RESPONDS				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Fully disagree
The role of gastronomy in the choice of tourist destination varies between demand	11	7	3	0	0
Visitors are increasingly traveling motivated by gastronomy	14	3	2	2	0
Visitors are increasingly attracted to a certain destination by gastronomy	10	5	5	1	0
The quality of gastronomic offer acts as destination attraction factor	14	7	0	0	0
Destination gastronomic attractiveness derives from the availability of resources and their valorisation	12	4	3	2	0
Destination gastronomic attractiveness depends on the relationship between existing resources and perceived values by tourist demand	13	7	1	0	0

STATEMENT	FOCUS GROUP MEMBER RESPONDS				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Fully disagree
Positive gastronomic experience positively affects tourist overall destination satisfaction	12	7	2	0	0
The quality of gastronomy positively affects the intention of repeat visit, and thus the loyalty to a certain destination	11	5	4	1	0
The quality of gastronomy positively affects destination revenues	7	13	1	0	0
The quality of gastronomy positively affects the visitor's length of stay	9	7	3	2	0

Source: Authors

18 out of 21 focus group experts, tourism destination management organization directors, strongly agree or agree that the role of gastronomy varies between demand, implying that different tourists have different needs, although the consensus between experts is not clear as in other statements, coming from the thought that gastronomy is a basic need of tourists on during their travel itself. 17 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that visitors are increasingly traveling motivated by gastronomy, while 15 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that visitors are increasingly attracted to a certain destination by gastronomy. With regard to the attitudes of tourism destination management organization directors the quality of gastronomic offer is perceived as destination attraction factor, namely all 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree on that. 16 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that destination gastronomic attractiveness derives from the availability of resources and their valorisation, while 20 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that destination gastronomic attractiveness depends on the relationship between existing resources and perceived values by tourist demand, meaning that ~~but~~ in order to act as an attraction factor gastronomic resources have to be existent, valorized and perceived as attractions by tourism demand. 19 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree on a positive relation between gastronomic experience and overall destination satisfaction. 16 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that the quality of gastronomy positively affects the intention of repeat visit, contributes to loyalty to a certain destination. 20 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that the quality of gastronomy positively affects destination revenues. 16 out of 21 focus group experts strongly agree or agree that quality of gastronomy is positively affecting tourist's length of stay in certain destination, although this attitude is not under a clear consensus the others. Coming from the thought that tourist being satisfied with their stay will become repeated visitors and develop loyalty but not necessary have extended stays.

The focus group research results support present research findings about gastronomy as destination attraction factor. The paper contributes with the destination management perspective to present knowledge about the relationship of gastronomy and destination attractiveness. From a destination management point of view different tourists have different needs but the amount of people traveling with the motivation to experience gastronomy is constantly increasing. The term gastronomic tourism is more spread and tourist start choosing their travel destination by gastronomic offer. Gastronomy becomes a more essential aspect of destination attractiveness. Destinations with gastronomic resources, valorized quality gastronomic products and thus as so perceived by tourism demand as such benefit with tourist overall destination satisfaction, the intention of repeat visit, loyalty to a certain destination and increased destination revenues. As a crucial stakeholder of destination development, directors of destination management organizations have an essential role in the destination product development and are the driver of the change. Their visioning of destination development is a guideline for all destination representatives in order to achieve destination competitiveness. The paper contribution arises additionally from the research area, a typical beach destination, with beach tourism as dominant destination product and high degree of seasonal concentration of tourism demand. Therefor research results are of vital importance in further tourism destination decision making and development process.

CONCLUSION

The paper contributes to answer the question can gastronomy act as a key factor in the decision making and choice process of a tourist destination from a destination management perspective. Research findings represent an addition to present the knowledge about gastronomy and destination attractiveness by providing destination management attitudes on the gastronomy and destination attractiveness relationship constructs. Gastronomy is gaining on importance in consumer travel behaviour. Gastronomic tourism gives destinations the ability to valorize their gastronomic resources and develop products. In a competitive environment, marked with issues as seasonality and overtourism, this presents an opportunity for destination management to diversify destination offer targeting specific market segments. Especially in tourist destinations marked with high concentration of tourism demand in the peak summer months due to the domination of beach tourism as supreme destination product, gastronomy offers the possibility to valorise destination resources and diversify the destination product.

The qualitative questionnaire-based methodology employed on a focus group provides valuable insights into destination management attitudes towards gastronomy as destination attraction factor. Despite certain limitations, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the research topic and offer implications for destination management decision making. The research represents a preliminary communication to the research topic with the authors suggestion for future research to conduct an in-depth interviewing qualitative research in order to explore deeper destination management perspectives on the potential and ability to develop gastronomy as destination product and attraction factor in a beach tourism profiled destination.

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