

Enhancing Customer Experience in Iranian Food Festivals: Key Factors and Impact

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Abstract: Festivals have emerged as a rapidly growing segment of the global tourism industry, and gastronomy and culinary experiences are integral to their success. Food festivals, as an intangible cultural heritage, can significantly contribute to the development of sustainable tourism in countries. Understanding the trends of food festivals is critical for policymakers and event planners to improve the competitiveness of their destinations and target appropriate market segments. Each country has its unique cultural and gastronomic potential, and Iran, with its rich culinary heritage, can leverage this potential. This study investigates the experiences of visitors who attend food festivals in Iran. The research model was developed based on a systematic literature review, and a questionnaire was designed to test the model. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine the main aspects of the food festival experience, including sensory, culture, learning, and entertainment. The resulting "food festival experience model" can guide policymakers and event planners in developing and promoting food festivals in Iran and beyond.

Keywords: Food festival, Food event, culinary tourism, tourist experience, food tourism experience

1. INTRODUCTION

Experience has become a key component of life for postmodern consumers today (Hosany, Prayag, & Deesilatham, 2022). The experience economy, which is the latest stage of economic development, follows the commodity, product, and service stages (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). As the experience economy takes off, the importance of creating memorable experiences for customers is growing. Studies show that travelers' vacation memories of their meals rank among the top travel experiences (Ston & Sthapit, 2022). Culinary experiences can also reflect the cultural identity of a place, which is crucial for sustainable tourism development (Khoshkam, Hassani, & Pappas, 2022).

To differentiate themselves from the competition and gain a competitive advantage, destinations must produce exceptional food event experiences (Niekerk, 2017). The tourism sector has responded to the increasing desire for travel by developing unique and intriguing ideas for food events and festivals (Yoo, Lee, & Bai, 2022). To ensure destination sustainability, it is essential to consider the latest thematic trends in event management while developing food events and festivals (Niekerk, 2017).

While most event management studies currently focus on the supplier's perspective, examining event tourism from a consumer demand perspective can open up new possibilities. By understanding who attends events, why, and what their demographic and behavioral characteristics are, policymakers can identify new trends for upcoming food events and enhance their policymaking (Getz, 2008).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors that influence visitors' experiences during food festivals in Iran and explore group differences based on demographic characteristics. By providing empirical evidence, this study will help event planners and marketing managers make culinary events more successful, benefiting both food event visitors and destination management organizations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a review of literature on tourism experience, event tourism, and food tourism, as well as the participant's motivation in food events.

2.1. Tourism Experience

Abrahams (1986) divides experience into two categories of ordinary and extraordinary. Cohen (1979) classifies tourist experience modes into five categories: recreational, diversionary, experimental, experiential, and existential. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) model defines the four dimensions of entertainment, educational, aesthetic, and Escapist based on the two aspects of participation (active and inactive) and the extent to which the guest communicates with the environment (absorption and immersion). Jurowski (2009) showed in "Four Realms of Tourist Experiences" that the fundamental components of visitor engagement in particular activities can be categorized as entertainment, education, escapism, and esthetics. Based on an experimental study of 339 tourists, Otto and Ritchie (1996) identified six main constructive dimensions of the tourism experience and believed that these six dimensions should be considered to provide a quality experience to tourists. These dimensions include hedonic, interactive, novelty, comfort, safety, and stimulation (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Cohen, 1979; Abrahams, 1986; Jurowski, 2009).

2.2. Event Tourism

Event tourism research has advanced over the past thirty years. There is no question that events and festivals, where food is featured at the bulk of events, have a substantial impact on destination development (Londono et.al, 2022). Getz provided a comprehensive overview of the historical and thematic trends in tourism. Kim, Boo, and Kim also conducted a comprehensive study on the patterns and trends of event tourism over a period of 30 years (1980 to 2010) (Getz, 2008; Kim et al., 2013). Event tourism studies began prominently in the 1980s. In the first decade of 2000, special events received a great deal of attention, and different methodologies were devised to evaluate the effects of events, which was an effective step in understanding how events were organized. Because a number of previous studies have with the economical aspect of events, an attempt has been made to strike a balance between social and cultural studies (Getz, 2008; Kim et al., 2013). Event tourism has grown significantly since 2008. An overview of searches conducted in Scopus between 2008 and October 2014 shows that more than 1,000 articles were searched by users and researchers using the keywords of "tourism" + "event", indicating the growth of this interdisciplinary concept (Getz & Page, 2016). Getz and Page (2016) divided events into four categories: commercial, entertainment, sports, and cultural events and festivals, in which food events are classified as cultural events and festivals (Getz & Page, 2016).

2.3. Food Tourism

Many models have been proposed in the field of food tourism. The Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) is an idea adapted from hotel and restaurant evaluation guidelines. This model describes the five main aspects of food and attempts to provide the best possible experience for guests by combining these factors. The FAMM model includes room, meeting, product, management control system, and atmosphere (Gustafsson, Öström, Johansson, & Mossberg, 2006; Sporre, Jonsson, & Ekström, 2013). The 4M model (Moment, Mood, Meal, Money), introduced by Kivits et al. (2011), highlights the dining experience in restaurants. In this model, experiences are influenced by producers and consumers based on four experimental factors, namely consumers' moment, mood, food, and money (Hartwell, Lugosi, & Edwards, 2011). Quan and Wang's (2004) research showed that eating while traveling can either be the tourist's peak experience or a supporting consumer experience, depending on the situation (Quan & Wang, 2004). Kim, Eves, and Scarles (2009) provided a model for local food consumption on trips and holidays using a grounded theory approach to understanding the consumption of local food at the destination. These factors are introduced as motivational factors (exciting experience, escape from routine, health concern, learning knowledge, authentic experience, togetherness, prestige, sensory appeal, and physical environment), demographic factors (gender, age, and education), and physiological factors (food neophilia and food neophobia) (Kim et al., 2009).

2.4. Visitor's Motivations in Food Events

Reviewing studies that have investigated the causes and motivations of people attending food festivals can help us identify the experiences that people are seeking. Most research studies in this area focus on examining the reasons or motivations of visitors for participating in festivals. It is important to note that tourists are usually trying to fulfill multiple needs simultaneously.

Tikkanen (2007) proposed Maslow's hierarchy in food tourism, while Smith (2001) examined the motivational reasons for food tourism and argued that food tourism occurs when food and drink are the main motivating factors in a region or the main activity during a trip to that region. Uysal et al. (1993) summarized 22 motivational factors for taking part in festivals in five categories: Escape, excitement/thrills, event novelty, socialization, and family togetherness.

Getz et al. (2015) divided food event visitors into different market segments based on the attendees' motivation and preference for enjoyment or learning. They identified a small segment that travels more to gain food experience and prefers learning, called dynamic foodies, and another segment that is looking for more entertainment, called active foodies, while those who just want a good food experience on their trips are called passive foodies. Although food lovers tend to participate in food events, the type of event and the expected experiences vary among the segments (Getz et al., 2015).

In a study on wine, Rethleth et al. (2003) found that the highest level of acceptance could be observed in a place where the participants experienced more social interactions. However, testing different cheese types is more effective in accepting the drinking experience, and the same testing conditions are acceptable for apple juice and fish. Therefore, environmental circumstances are influential factors that affect the level of acceptance of one's experience (Edwards & Gustafsson, 2008).

Nicholson and Pearce (2001) investigated the reasons for attending four events in New Zealand, including two food and beverage festivals, an air show, and a country and music festival, using factor analysis. They found that the main motivations for attending the Marlborough wine, food, and music festival were external interaction/socialization, novelty/uniqueness, escape, and family. The main motivations for attending the Hokitika wild foods festival were socialization, novelty/uniqueness, entertainment/excitement, escape, and family.

Park et al. (2008) identified the main factors of visitors' motivation to attend the South Beach wine and food festival in Miami, Florida, using factor analysis. They found that the main driving forces behind people's decisions to attend the festival were the desire to taste new wine and food, enjoy the event, enhance social status, escape from routine life, meet new people, spend time with family, and get to know celebrity chefs and wine experts. They also found that these driving forces differed for visitors from the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, and Asia.

In a study on visitors' motivations for attending the 2009 ethnic minority cultural festival of food and drink in Australia, Kim (2009) identified eight motivational dimensions. This study also showed that there was no significant difference between local and non-local visitors regarding the motivators (Kim et al., 2013). Kim (2017) used factor analysis and analytical hierarchy process (FAAHP) to examine food festivals based on visitors' motivations from two perspectives: push (Knowledge and learning, fun and new experience, relaxation with family) and pull or intrinsic motivator (area quality and value, quality of event, food variety). Chang and Yuan (2011) with factor analysis identified main motivational dimensions of food festival participants in Texas. Travelers attended the food event for generic leisure and travel needs, event-specific experiences, and extrinsic motives. They investigated the main variables of: wine, food, art, Escape/event novelty, Known group socialization, and external socialization (Chang & Yuan, 2011).

2.5. The Conceptual Model of the Iranian Food Festival Experiences

According to the classification presented in Figure 1, food-related experiences can be grouped into four categories. The first category is centered on sensory attractions and direct engagement with food. Individuals who value food diversity and pay attention to flavors, taste, color, and smell are drawn to this type of experience, which involves tasting and testing food.

The second category is characterized by a strong desire to learn about food, nutrition, cooking, and innovation. Participants in this type of experience are interested in discovering new food styles, learning how to prepare and cook food, and exploring food concepts. Creativity and innovation in cooking and food presentation are highly valued.

The third category is focused on identity and cultural heritage. Participants seek authentic food experiences that allow them to connect with local cultures, revisit childhood memories, and interact with local people. The authenticity and identity of the food is a key aspect of this type of experience.

Finally, the fourth category is about socialization and entertainment. Participants in this type of experience seek enjoyment, fun, and relaxation in food-related activities. Positive emotions, spending time with family and friends, and having social relationships are important aspects of this type of experience.

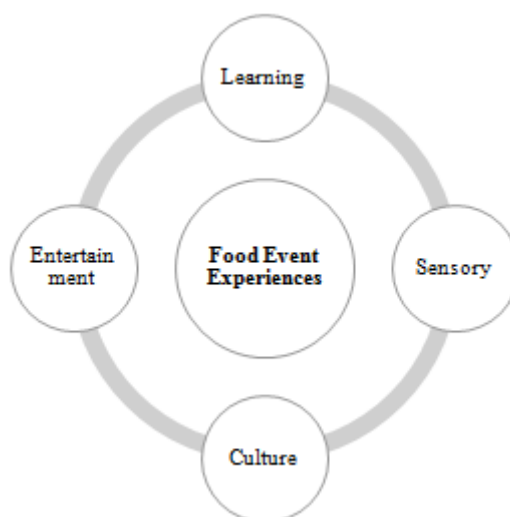


Fig1. *The conceptual model of the Iranian food festival experiences*

3. METHODOLOGY

The initial research model and related indicators were formed based on a thorough literature review. Following that, a 27-item questionnaire was used to gather data from individuals who had attended a food festival at least once in the previous year and were between the ages of 25 and 55. After evaluating the questionnaire's validity and reliability and conducting a pilot study, convenience sampling was used to distribute 150 questionnaires to attendees of food festivals hosted in Tehran, Iran. A total of 117 final questionnaires were selected for analysis.

The questionnaire included questions about participants' demographic information, such as age, gender, marital status, income, education, and occupation. Then, the four main dimensions of the model (sensory attraction, entertainment, learning, and identity) were measured using related defined indicators. The indicators, which were collected and summarized after the literature review, were examined through a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The questionnaire's validity was measured with Cronbach's alpha (0.73), and its reliability was assessed through expert opinion and piloting.

Factor analysis is widely used in tourism studies because, as a social science, it is necessary to measure unstructured concepts such as values, attitudes, motivations, risks, satisfaction, and beliefs (Hall & Sharples, 2008). After collecting the data, the final indicators were formed by confirmatory factor analysis. The results were analyzed, and the final model structure was formed using Amos and SPSS software.

4. DISCUSSION

This study employed three types of analyses: factor analysis, variance and mean analyses, and correlation analysis. The normal distribution of all research variables was confirmed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test and the skewness and kurtosis of the variables.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents who attended the Iranian food festival. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 117 were completed. Among the respondents, approximately 58% were women and 42% were men, with 56.4% being single and 43.6% married. The majority of the respondents (93%) were between 25 and 55 years old, with 44.4% between 25 and 40 years old and 48.7% between 41 and 55 years old. In terms of income status, 31% earned less than 15 million Tomans per year, 23% earned between 15 to 30 million Tomans per year, 20.5% earned between 31 million to 60 million Tomans per year, and 25.5% earned more than 60 million Tomans per year. In terms of education, 13.7% of the respondents had a diploma or associate degree, 44.4% had a bachelor's degree, 32.5% had a master's degree, and 9.4% held a doctorate (Ph.D.). In terms of

occupation, 53% of the respondents were private sector employees, 16.2% were employed in the public sector, 12% were university students, 6.8% were self-employed or freelancers, and 12% were employed in other occupations. Of the total sample, 59% were participating in the food festival for the first time, and only 13.7% had participated in such a festival more than three times.

Table1. Descriptive profile of respondents (N=117)

Demographic Variables		Frequency (%)
Gender		
	Male	49 (41.9)
	Female	68 (58.1)
Marital Status		
	Single	66 (56.4)
	Married	51 (43.6)
Age		
	Under 25	8 (6.8)
	25-40	52 (44.4)
	41-55	57 (48.7)
	55 years and above	0
Income (yearly)		
	Less than 1500\$	36 (30.8)
	1501\$ - 3000\$	27 (23.1)
	3001\$ - 6000\$	24 (20.5)
	Above 6000\$	30 (25.6)
Education		
	High school and associate degree	16 (13.7)
	Undergrad	52 (44.4)
	Master	38 (32.5)
	Ph.D.	11 (9.4)
Occupation		
	Public Sector	19 (16.2)
	Privet Sector	62 (53)
	Self-employed	8 (6.8)
	University Student	14 (12)
	Other	14 (12)

The number of cases under frequency does not include missing observations

Table 2 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA analysis, which showed a significant difference between the under 25 age group and the other age groups in terms of sensory and entertainment factors. The post-hoc test revealed that individuals under the age of 25 were more likely to engage in sensory and entertainment factors at food festivals. There was also a significant difference in terms of entertainment and cultural factors between different job status classes. University students had the lowest average in culture and were significantly different from other groups, while freelance job groups had the lowest average in the entertainment factor.

Table2. ANOVA test for age

Age		Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F value	Sig.
Sensory	Between Groups	2.951	2	1.475	4.682	.011
	Within Groups	35.924	114	.315		
	Total	38.875	116			
Learning	Between Groups	.793	2	.397	.547	.580
	Within Groups	82.644	114	.725		
	Total	83.437	116			
Culture	Between Groups	.749	2	.374	.567	.569
	Within Groups	75.217	114	.660		
	Total	75.966	116			
Entertainment	Between Groups	10.306	2	5.153	10.031	.000
	Within Groups	58.563	114	.514		
	Total	68.870	116			

After analyzing the significance of each factor based on the number of participants in the food festival, a significant difference was found in the sensory experience factor between the groups of participants who had visited the festival only once and those who had taken part more than three times. The group who had visited more than three times had the highest average score in the sensory experience factor, while the group who had visited only once had the lowest average score. However, there was no significant relationship found between gender, marital status, education, and income among the four groups of experiences.

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed on 27 variables, and 15 items were accepted. The factor analysis results are presented in Figure 2 and Table 3. The reliability coefficient was computed for all four factors and for the total scales (0.728), as shown in Table 3. The validity of the confirmatory factor analysis was deemed acceptable based on the results obtained from Amos.

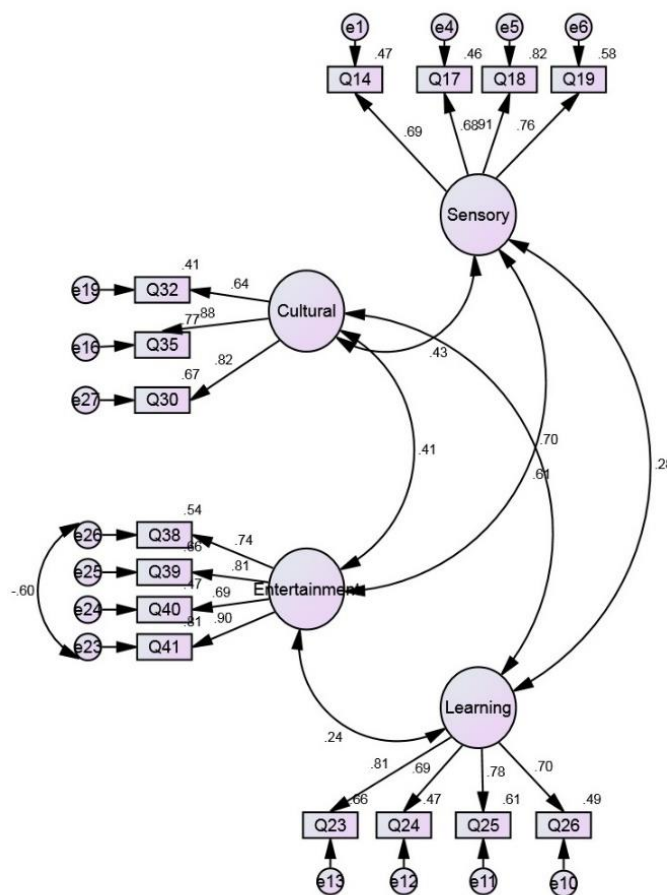


Figure 2. The result of the confirmatory factor analysis of the experiences in the Iranian Food Festival

Table 3. The factors analysis results of food event experiences (n=117)

Factors		Factor loading	Reliability Coefficient
Culture			0.728
	Search among cultures	0.880	
	Food styles of different cultures	0.820	
	Nostalgia	0.641	
Entertainment			0.840
	Purchasing handicrafts and food	0.900	
	Entertainment	0.811	
	The atmosphere happy atmosphere	0.736	
	Being with friends and family	0.687	

Sensory Attractions			0.840
	Having different flavors of food	0.906	
	Tasting and testing food	0.759	
	The appearance of the served food	0.686	
	How to serve food	0.678	
Learning			0.840
	How to cook different local foods	0.814	
	How to use different utensils in cooking	0.780	
	Curiosity about the food in different regions of Iran	0.701	
	The nature of food ingredients	0.688	

The main reason for attending food events, according to respondents, was the sensory attraction of food (Mean = 3.43), followed by cultural experiences (Mean = 2.31). The other two significant experiences were entertainment (Mean = 2.15) and education (Mean = 2.11).

Based on the results presented in Table 3, the experiences during the Iranian food festival were evaluated, classified, and associated indicators were identified. The significant experiences were then categorized into four main dimensions, which are displayed in Figure 3.

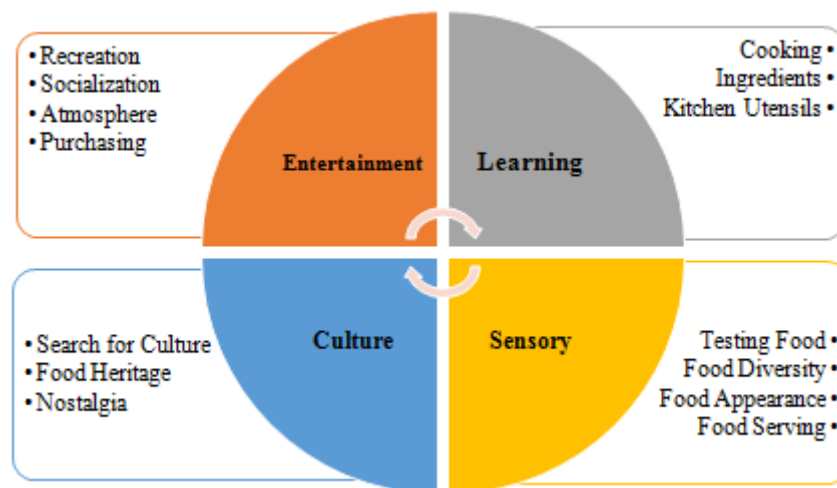


Fig3. Iranian food festival experience model

5. CONCLUSION

In the tourism industry, creating memorable experiences has become increasingly important for businesses. Festivals are seen as unique, irregular events that can provide such experiences. This study aimed to identify the key experiences of attendees at Iranian food festivals. The results revealed that sensory attraction, learning, cultural, and entertainment experiences were the four main dimensions that classified visitors' experiences. A 27-item questionnaire was used to measure the components of each dimension. Through confirmatory factor analysis, visitors' experiences were categorized into 15 main variables. The mean values showed that sensory experience had the highest score, while learning experience had the lowest score. Identity and entertainment were the second and third factors, respectively. The study also found a significant difference in the experiences of different age groups, suggesting that the young generation will need different kinds of experiences, particularly in sensory and entertainment experiences. Furthermore, the research suggested that there is an opportunity for freelancers and those in hybrid jobs to find new concepts for their entertainment. This study contributes to the event literature by identifying essential consumer experiences in Iranian culinary events. It also has practical implications for the planning and policy-making of Iranian food festivals, as well as for improving destination competitiveness and targeting appropriate segments in the market.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the event literature by identifying the crucial consumer experiences in Iranian culinary events, making it the first of its kind. The theory and data obtained in this research have significant managerial implications.

The findings of this study can be applied to the planning and policymaking of Iranian food festivals, as well as the appropriate strategies for planning a festival in destinations and marketing them according to the four experience areas suggested in this study. As a result, it will increase the number of visitors interested in attending food festivals. The analysis of the age section in the demographics revealed that the young generation will require different experiences in the future. Food festivals can attract them by incorporating innovative concepts such as co-creation, novelty seeking, and digital entertainment.

Food and drink play a significant role in the economy, culture, and sustainability of tourism destinations. Food festivals can be extended to other parts of the supply chain, such as farms and producers, chefs, and providers. It is recommended that festival organizers integrate innovative ideas into their schedules to attract more visitors. Identifying new and future trends in food festivals will assist event business strategists in improving destination competitiveness, and event planners and marketing managers in focusing on appropriate segments in the targeted market while optimizing the use of the marketing budget.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The current study focuses on exploring the internal motivations that drive people to attend food festivals. It is important to note that people's food festival experiences can also be shaped by various external factors such as macropolitical, economic, social, and cultural factors. Thus, it is recommended that future research examines the impact of these macro components on individuals' food festival experiences. Additionally, further investigation into the experiences of younger generations in attending food festivals is suggested for future studies.

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