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Research Article

## Understanding of Tourists' Memorable Local Food Experiences: A Netnography Study

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**ABSTRACT**

Memorable food experiences are an important factor in both the tourism business and destination marketers and managers attracting not only current tourists but also potential tourists. Recently, several studies have been performed to explore or understand memorable food experiences, as food experiences are a crucial indicator of tourist behavioural intentions and satisfaction. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to understand tourists' memorable local food experiences, food experience satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. Accordingly, data was collected through online reviews (424) posted about tourists' memorable local food experiences in Gaziantep between 9 April 2021 and 29 May 2021. A phenomenological approach and content analysis technique were used to analyse the data. In the results of the present study, a theoretical model of memorable local food experiences (MLFEs) was developed with six key components: novelty, hospitality and services, taste and food attributes, togetherness and local interactions, ambience and setting, and local culture. In addition, tourists' food experience satisfaction and behavioural intentions were found to be positive while experiencing regional local food. Based on the results of this study, practical and managerial implications are discussed, and future research recommendations are proposed.

**Keywords:** Memorable local food experience, netnography, food satisfaction, behavioural intentions, Gaziantep



## 1. Introduction

Local food experience has been widely investigated in the tourism and gastronomy literature. Local food has been an important marketing tool for tourism destinations because it provides an experience that is memorable, unique, and authentic, and therefore helps destinations gain a competitive advantage over rival destinations. Tourism provides a great opportunity for food producers, as it enhances the value of the products by generating a tourist experience, and in a similar way, gastronomic experiences enrich tourism by enabling tourists to have an experience of local food and culture (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Gastronomic tourism or food tourism is becoming more popular every day, and more and more tourists are inclined to become travellers due to food-related events and activities (Lacap, 2019). According to Kivela and Crofts (2006), there is a symbiotic relationship between a destination and gastronomy, because gastronomy becomes a consumption product for tourists through the destination supplying all of the ingredients required for gastronomy. Gastronomy is both a substantial constituent of the tourism experience (Kivela & Crofts, 2006) and very essential for small touristic destinations due to its contributions to the advancement of small and rural areas (Zengin & Işkın, 2017). Furthermore, countries use gastrodiplomacy to advance progressive international relations by promoting their local cuisine (White, Barreda, & Hein, 2019).

Reviewing the existing literature for food experience shows that there is a rich body of food experience studies conducted with both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Although food experience has been widely investigated, there are limited studies exploring memorable (local) food experience (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour, 2015; Sthapit, 2017; Stone, Soulard, Migacz, & Wolf, 2018; Sthapit, Piramanayagam, & Björk, 2020a). One of these studies was conducted by Sthapit et al. (2020a) using qualitative research methods. The authors aimed to explore dimensions of memorable local food experiences, which was one of purposes of their study. They collected data using an open-ended questionnaire and revealed that memorable local food experiences are classified as taste, socializing with friends and family members, novelty, authenticity, ambience, affordable price, and interacting with locals.

Despite the considerable number of studies focusing on food/gastronomy/dining experiences in tourism and gastronomy literature, few researchers have focused on memorable local food experiences. Further studies need to be performed to provide a broader understanding of tourist memorable local food experiences (MLFEs) and to advance understanding of MLFEs in a gastronomy tourism context. In this context, this study was designed to explore underlying dimensions of memorable local food experiences (MLFEs) using a netnography technique, which offers rich data. Thus, the main purpose of the current study is to determine the components which constitute a MLFE. Additional purposes of this study are understanding the visitor's food experience satisfaction and tourists' behaviour intentions, such as their revisit intention and recommending the destination to others due to their experience of local food. To augment the literature, this current study contributes to the literature by exploring dimensions of memorable local food experience in depth and presents the managerial and practical implications for service providers to develop strategies regarding experience design.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Tourism Experience

Experience has become a significant component of the tourism industry. Experience is a result of an encounter with an object of interest, and it may include the results of services/events at

the destination whose consumption is occasioned by customers of the actual object (Adongo, et al., 2015). In tourism and hospitality, experience is a crucial issue for both business and tourist. From a consumer standpoint, consumers are prone to perceiving experiences as credible and rewarding sources of information (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013).

Tourism experience has grown into a popular subject lately, and a considerable number of researchers have studied it (Quan & Wang, 2004; Tung & Ritchie 2011; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2013; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Stone, Soulard, Migacz, & Wolf, 2018; Sthapit, Coudounaris, & Björk, 2019; Sthapit, et al., 2020a; Sthapit, Björk, & Barreto, 2020b). Although there are a lot of studies on tourism experience, there have been a few confusing issues, such as what components form the tourism experience, and whether the tourist experience is multi-dimensional or not (Quan & Wang, 2004). Marketing and social science approaches handle the subject of tourism experience from different point of views (Quan & Wang, 2004; Kodaş & Özel, 2019; Aksoy & Kodaş, 2021). Tourism experience can be defined as an individual interactive connection with the outside world. Though different approaches consider tourism experience from different angles, tourism experience is becoming a very important element of the tourism sector (Ding & Lee, 2017).

## **2.2. Memorable Tourism Experience**

Tourists have diverse explications of a single tourist product due to the fact that each tourist has different backgrounds and interests (Kim, et al., 2012). Tourists gain different experiences even though they practice the same thing in the same destination, since their perceptions of the experiences are influenced by their individual feelings and moods (Kim, et al., 2012). Tourists are supposed to attribute their memories if they need to write about their vacations (Sthapit, et al., 2019). Thus, building up a memorable experience is crucial for tourism businesses and destination managers because a memorable destination providing exceptional and remarkable experiences will have certain competitive advantages (Stone, et al., 2018). Kim et al. (2012) described memorable tourism experience (MTE) *as a tourism experience that is favourably remembered and recalled after the event has occurred*. Furthermore, some experiences might become memorable while others might not, and the experiences stored in the memory can affect existing and future behaviour (Björk, & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2014). On the other hand, the memorability of an event can be enhanced by several factors, such as authentic events, cognitive assessments, and affective feelings, and the recalling of a memory can be increased by an individual's cognitive assessments, such as challenge and meaningfulness (Kim, et al., 2012).

Offering MTEs to tourists is an important factor in being competitive in the tourism industry (Sthapit, et al., 2019). Memorable experiences exemplify a new criterion, which tourism businesses and destination managers are supposed to seek to present, and these experiences are crucial to be competitive and maintaining it in the marketplace (Sthapit, 2017). Though tourists seek satisfying, unique, and different experiences on their vacations, destination marketing neglects the growing demand for distinctive and memorable experiences and is still driven mainly by the presentation of quality services (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015). On the other hand, researchers are paying considerable attention to exploring the main dimensions and elements enabling the formation of MTE (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Tung and Ritchie (2011) tried to investigate the essence of memorable experiences based on research from the field of psychology, with the goal of perceiving the cognitive processes preventing individuals from noticing their experiences. Four key elements of memorable experiences were found: expectations, recall, consequentiality, and effect.

Sthapit et al. (2020b) aimed to analyse the components of a negative memorable Airbnb experience. Aydın and Omuris (2020) investigated the predictive relationship between meaning in life, MTE, and subjective well-being. Coelho and Gosling (2018) aimed to develop and test a scale to evaluate MTEs, and they developed an MTE scale consisting of 10 dimensions and 35 items. It is clear that making tourists' experiences memorable is a very important issue in destination management, as a memorable destination will be advantageous in attracting other tourists.

### ***2.3. Memorability and Local Food Experience***

Food consumption during travel is considered both an important driver of travel motivation and an integral part of visitor experiences, and these experiences are related to memory (Quan and Wang, 2004; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007; Sthapit, et al., 2020a). Perception of memories of tourists' food experiences is very important, since food may have a key role in destination choice and can assist in shaping tourists' entire impression of a destination (Sthapit, 2017). Memorability is defined as *the quality or state of being easy to remember or worth remembering* (Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021). Memorability is related to novelty, exceptionality, spontaneity, and unexpectedness, and it can be increased by attention, interaction, and active attendance (Campos, Mendes, Valle, & Scott, 2016). Local food is an inseparable element of tourism because it is perceived as a source evaluated by destinations in the marketing (Lacap, 2019). The memorability of tourists' local food experiences is influenced by what food is served, how the food is served, with whom the food is served, and where the food is consumed (Sthapit, 2017).

As a very significant element of tourism, food has a substantial part in tourism activities (Ding & Lee, 2017), and plays several roles during a trip (Hendijani, 2016). Local food can be one of the main travel motivations for tourists (Quan & Wang, 2004), and it is perceived as one of the basic attractions for a destination (Sims, 2009). Some tourists see local food as a point of access into the intangible heritage of a destination, and they tend to perceive places where they eat as a pleasant part of their travel experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). According to Tsai (2016), local foods and cuisines can carry local histories and cultures and conjure up memories of pleasure, as they can largely mirror local features. Thus, local foods and cuisines can be an irreplaceable factor of a memorable tourism experience (Tsai, 2016). Tourists can become sentimentally connected to the destination by the memories related to the food and ultimately the revisit intentions of the tourists can be affected by these memories (Sthapit, 2017). Local foods have been included in tourism products by destinations with the purpose of attracting more tourists and boosting local welfare (Robinson & Getz, 2014). Local foods have psychological, social, cultural, and experiential meanings, and by experiencing local foods, visitors can gratify their needs, such as escape, relaxation, status, excitement, and lifestyle (Okumus & Cetin, 2018). In addition to this, tourists taking part in events involving local cuisines experience delicious local foods to gratify their physiological functions while gaining a large amount of information about local cultures and a sense of belonging at the destination (Tsai, 2016). A destination's food culture and culinary products are perceived as main strategic resources that cannot be imitated by other destinations, and as a defining social marker, food often represents the region and its local citizens (Okumus & Cetin, 2018).

Memorable food experience has been studied extensively by researchers due to its strong impact on destination choice. Adongo et al. (2015) studied international tourists' experiences relating to local foods in Ghana, and they found that local food experience has various dimensions, such as educational, hedonism–meaningfulness, cultural, novelty, and adverse experience, and

tourists' local food experiences have an important impact on their willingness to recommend. Stone et al. (2018) determined the factors leading to memorable food, drink, or culinary experiences and they found that there are five general factors leading to memorable food travel experiences: location/setting, companions, food or drink consumed, touristic factors, and occasion. Sthapit et al. (2020a) intended to investigate tourists' general local food preferences, the feelings they linked with the experience, whether experiencing local food was one of their main motivations, and what generated a memorable local food experience. The relevant literature shows that the studies conducted on memorable food experience are mainly about issues such as the dimensions of food experience, the components leading to memorable food experience, and tourists' local food preferences.

#### **2.4. Food Experience Satisfaction**

Satisfaction is constituted when consumers make a comparison between their former anticipations and their perceptions (Widjaja, Wijaya, Jokom, & Kristanti, 2018). Satisfaction is a somewhat sentimental state conveying the customers' assessment of the interaction (Westbrook, 1980), and customer satisfaction is an important indication of the quality transmitted to customers (Vavra, 1997). Researchers describe satisfaction as customers' fulfilment reaction (Kim, 2017). Satisfaction influences intentional behaviour, where the tourist would predicate a positive attitude towards the destination visited. Indeed, it is anticipated that a satisfied tourist would indicate a tendency to come back to the visited destination repeatedly (Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019).

Food has an apparent existence on the tourist travel programme even if there are no explicit intentions (Agyeiwaah, Otoo, Suntikul, & Huang, 2018). Food experiences supply tourists with uniterable and unique experiences, and in this context, food experiences grow into key and illustrative variables of tourist satisfaction (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez, González Santa Cruz, Pemberthy Gallo, & López-Guzmán, 2020). Food experience satisfaction has been studied by numerous researchers recently. Vad Andersen and Hyldig (2015) aimed to find out the differences in sensory satisfaction in a case study, and the factors related to food satisfaction. Agyeiwaah et al. (2018) investigated the relationships between antecedents and results of culinary tourist attendance in cooking classes, and they found that the culinary tourist experience is positively associated with both culinary tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al. (2020) tried to investigate the role of tourist attitudes towards culinary experience in gastronomy satisfaction, and how food experiences can be a crucial factor in making decisions regarding visiting a particular destination.

#### **2.5. Behavioural Intentions**

Behaviour intention is the involvement of a consumer in certain behaviours that are based on the outcome of individual attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), and consists of sentimental, conative, and cognitive elements (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). People's behavioural intentions are considerably connected with behaviour, and tourists' intentions to visit a destination uncover their decision-making process (Tsai, 2016).

Consumer behaviour has been formed by consuming processes, in which the consumers prefer products or services based on former experiences or ideas, and it is also constituted together with intention (Hua, 2015). It has been emphasised that modern consumers are characterised by seeking nostalgic experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). Customer satisfaction is one of the most important antecedents of revisit customer intentions, and it has gained a considerable amount of attention (Bae, Slevitch, & Tomas, 2018). Customer satisfaction and revisit intention

are highly associated with each other, and accordingly, restaurant managers seek to perceive the elements of consumer revisit intention, as maintaining current customers is more convenient than attracting new customers in terms of cost effectiveness (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). In addition, loyal customers are very important, as they tend to behave like word-of-mouth advertising agents by suggesting a service or product to others (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999).

Scientists and marketing practitioners have begun to notice the main impact of the comprehended value on consumer behaviour (Lu & Shiu, 2009), and there have been some studies related to tourist or consumers' behavioural intentions. Song, You, Reisinger, Lee, and Lee (2014) investigated tourists' behavioural intention at a Korean Oriental medicine festival. Hua (2015) examined the impact of irritation, informativeness, entertainment, and content credibility on consumers' behavioural intention to buy mobile content services in Malaysia.

### 3. Methodology

A phenomenological approach was applied to explore the dimensions of memorable local food experiences and to examine visitors' food experience satisfaction and behavioural intentions of food experience using a netnography method. Phenomenology as a methodological approach aims to gain deep understanding of direct experiences that are based on conscious actions (Ziakas & Boukas, 2013; 97), and it is widely used in hospitality and tourism research (Ziakas & Boukas, 2013; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Yilmaz, Sezerel & Uzuner, 2020). More specifically, content analysis is one of the most applied data analysis techniques in the netnography method (Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019) and user-generated content based on tourists' reviews on TripAdvisor.com were used for data analysis. The TripAdvisor.com website was chosen for data collection, as it has met five criteria which were suggested by Kozinet (2002:63) to identify suitable online communities in netnography research: (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher "traffic" of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. TripAdvisor is a website where users post comments, reviews, and ratings on a destination (Miguéns, et al., 2008). Using these comments and reviews in research is not considered human-related research, as TripAdvisor is open to the public. Therefore, neither ethical approval nor consent from subjects is required for this research (Kozinets, 2010). The user generated content (UGC) is used very often in social media, and the information that UGC provides is perceived as supporting information for tourists due to the fact that it is seen as a trustworthy method in searching for credible information (Kao-siri, Callarisa Fiol, Tena, Artola, & Garcia, 2017). Tourists who experienced a tourism product can post reviews about their experience on social media applications not only after short time but also later. Hence, tourists may talk about their memorable local food experience after a long time through social media if they have a memory of local food. Therefore, netnography approach also can be utilised to determine memorable local food experiences. The top 15 restaurants that serve local foods in Gaziantep and are featured on one of travel websites where tourists post reviews were chosen as the sample of the study. In this study, a purposive sampling method was used, and the city of Gaziantep was used in the sampling selection since it was awarded the title of World City of Gastronomy by UNESCO in 2015. In netnography, three types of data are suggested by Kozinet (2010): archival data, elicited data, fieldnotes. In this study, archival data were selected to analyse online reviews, as it comprises anything the researcher can collect from the Web that is not a product of his or her involvement to create or prompt the creation of data (Kozinet, Dolbec

& Earley, 2014: 266). In this context, the data were collected from English-language reviews posted on TripAdvisor (n = 424), and the dates of the reviews were between 9 April 2011 and 29 May 2021. 424 reviews were available at the end of this process.

**Table 1. Open coding (line-by-line coding) example**

Participants views (extracted from transcripts)	Open coding (line-by-line coding)
<i>“They have the best food along with the best customer service in Antep. The food is extremely delicious, we tried everything on the menu during our 3 days stay (we came here about 4 times). This was by far the most tourist friendly restaurant I have ever seen in Anatolia, they were absolutely lovely and made great recommendations about the area. The staff is very well trained and the quality of both the service and the food is very high standard, especially for the about of money you pay. I would say this place is a MUST in Antep.”</i>	Best customer service, the most tourist friendly restaurant, absolutely lovely, the staff is very well trained, the quality of service,

All of the reviews collected were conveyed to a Microsoft Word document to be analysed. During the process of analysing the collected data, three steps were conducted. In the first step, the collected data were scanned to get an in-depth understanding of them. The second step included reading the interviews and listing categories of MLFEs. In the third step, the coding work was done. Finally, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), three types of coding were conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

**Table 2. Example of the coding process in practice**

Open coding (line-by-line coding)	Subthemes (axial coding)	Main themes (selective coding)
Waiters are kind people; the employees were really nice; you have very helpful staff there; The waiter was also very friendly; service was good; very friendly atmosphere; Service was fast and excellent; generosity and kindness; staff were super friendly; The staff were welcoming and helpful; such a polite owner; kind workers; the staffs is very courteous; staff were nice; Service was efficient and friendly; Great service; the owner Halil Usta is just too friendly!; so friendly to foreigners; we were served speedily; a sign of the traditional hospitality,	Hospitality, services	Hospitality and services as a component of MLFEs

Every line of each transcript of the reviews was elaborately analysed to extract specific information. 254 codes that summarised the data were identified by the researchers. This process of data analysis led to axial coding of the data. The axial coding process limited the database to a small set of themes. Via axial coding, defining the components of MLFEs became possible. The axial phase of coding was followed by selective coding. This coding process included integrating the categories which were derived from the open and axial coding processes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Memorable local food experience components

As a result of the netnographic examination of tourists' memorable local food experiences, six sub-themes were revealed: (1) novelty, (2) hospitality and services, (3) taste and food attributes, (4) togetherness and local interactions, (5) ambience and setting, and (6) local culture. In addition, short quotations from the data were presented to support sub-themes (Figure 1).

#### *Novelty*

The findings demonstrate that novelty is a very important component of MLFEs. In most of the reviews, tourists' culinary–gastronomic experiences of novelty were linked to quality. Interpretive codes such as “I never tasted this before!”, “different alternatives”, “different taste”, “different dishes”, and “really different” are all indicative of the significance of novelty. Tourists' search for novelty is highlighted by the given reviews:

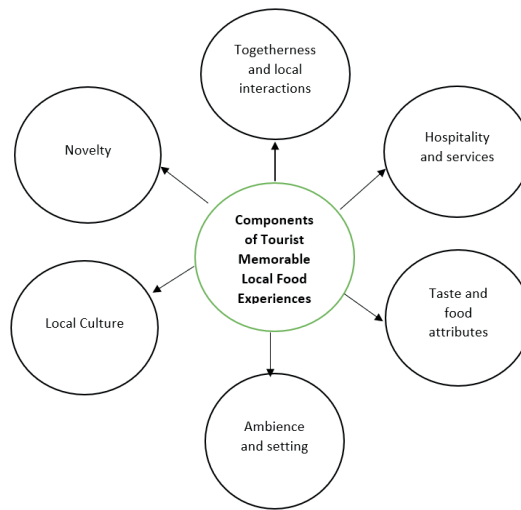
*“You will find delicious local food, different alternatives of lamb and cow meat. Küşleme is very good a special part of the lamb. Also advise local dessert ‘katmer’”.*

*“Salad is the best with unique taste. Different kind of meats coming with small portions. Each has different taste and flavour. If you are in Gaziantep do not miss.”*

*“Visited this restaurant with 5 friends on a business trip to Gaziantep in February 2019. We wanted to try a very ‘traditional’ restaurant and found this one in the old town. It was a fascinating experience, with a host of different dishes all being brought in short succession. We started off with a white onion soup with pearl barley and tiny morsels of lamb...very tasty. Then lots of dishes in which the region specialises...mostly lamb or chicken kebabs, meatballs, veg, fairly potent chilli peppers and rice, and of course, the ubiquitous flatbread which most Turks here use instead of cutlery...We didn't get any knives in any case, just forks and spoons.”*

Food memory is tuned to perceiving change and novelty, rather than to noticing a food previously tasted (Morin-Audebrand et al., 2011). Eating novel foods during a trip is a sign of an authentic experience, and it is something most tourists want to do (Wijaya, King, Nguyen, & Morrison, 2013). Although tourists' food choices might vary during a destination visit, tasting authentic foods is generally ranked as one of the most coveted activities for tourists (Okumus & Cetin, 2018). In some studies, it is pointed out that unusual, distinctive, or untypical events are better remembered than “typical” events (Sthapit, 2017).





**Figure 1: The theoretical framework of tourists’ memorable local food experiences.**

### ***Hospitality and services***

A great number of reviews demonstrate that hospitality and services are very significant elements of tourists’ MLFEs. In most reviews, restaurant owners, waiters, and chefs were seen as hospitable and helpful people. Codes such as “waiters are kind people”, “helpful staff”, “service was good”, “hospitality was amazing”, and “great, friendly service” are indicative of the significance of hospitality and services when it comes to visitors’ local food experiences. This is demonstrated by the given reviews:

*“They have the best food along with the best customer service in Antep. The food is extremely delicious, we tried everything on the menu during our 3 days stay (we came here about 4 times). This was by far the most tourist friendly restaurant I have ever seen in Anatolia, they were absolutely lovely and made great recommendations about the area. The staff is very well trained and the quality of both the service and the food is very high standard, especially for the about of money you pay. I would say this place is a MUST in Antep.”*

*“We heard about this kebab place in other Turkish cities, and as it is close to the Zeugma Museum it seemed perfect for lunch. What to say? It was full of hungry people who were clearly enjoying both the food and the ambience. The staff were welcoming and helpful. The food was great. We urge you to check it out.”*

Hospitality is described as hosting acts motivated by the ambition to please and genuine regard for the guest as an individual to have a memorable experience (Ariffin, 2013). In recent studies, it is pointed out that perceived hospitality during a holiday makes contributions to the tourists’ memorable experiences (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013). Having quality services is a required strategy for the success of any company, so more staff training in efficiency, complaints management, and customer service are necessary to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction (Kuhn, Benetti, Dos Anjos, & Limberger, 2018).

### ***Taste and food attributes***

A majority of reviews show that tourists' local food experiences were linked to qualities like taste and food attributes. Most visitors mentioned issues such as the taste of the food, the freshness and quality of the ingredients, and the cooking methods of the food in the reviews they posted. This is illustrated by the following reviews.

*"The most delicious activity should be done is taste a portion of Beyran soup in breakfast, in Gaziantep. Probably the best place for this activity is Metanet Restaurant. The harmony of meat, rice, garlic and hot is wonderful and the common taste of these leaving a trace on palate and makes you feel happy. We have decided to try the hot kind and we have satisfied. There is no decline in their quality level although it has a great popularity. Congratulations."*

*"This place offers outstanding taste for such a reasonable price. I am glad I don't live near here or I would gain 10 pounds each week. I have never eaten such a good eggplant kebab in my life, oh my. It was beautifully made."*

Kauppinen-Räisänen, Gummerus, and Lehtola (2013) found that the features of the food influenced how a particular experience was comprehended as memorable, and the food had an influence on the recalled experiences when it was food that the visitor had not tasted before. Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) pointed out that visitors' memories were linked with culinary experiences and local food at foreign destinations, and visitors' memories were strongly related with the deliciousness of local foods. These findings are parallel to the findings of previous studies (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Kauppinen-Räisänen, et al., 2013; Sthapit, 2017).

### ***Togetherness and local interactions***

Family togetherness and socialisation were highlighted in some of the reviews, and the codes elicited from these reviews, such as "family diner", "join people at a table", "sit next to strangers", "a fine opportunity to mingle with locals", and "a place to meet new people", emphasise the significance of togetherness and local interactions. This is demonstrated by the reviews below:

*"We went with family (and kids!) and had an awesome dinner. The "spoon salad" was excellent-like a mix of salsa and thinly sliced salad with spices. Then the mini-Turkish pizzas....and the tender, flavorful lamb.... Wish I could go back again soon. If you're in Gaziantep, stop by and treat yourself!"*

*"Me and my family had a great meal in this restaurant and the meal was excellent we loved it so much we find the location easily."*

*"What about having a traditional Gaziantep specialty for breakfast? let's skip the breakfast in your hotel and do what locals do: have beyran for breakfast! It is a lamb-based broth with garlic. Locals eat this soup in the morning as breakfast. The meat is so nice you barely have to chew! if you can't eat spicy tell the waiter when you give your order, they'll serve you a plain beyran but I personally like the red color the spice and it's great taste. It's up to you to add lemon juice, I did and loved the whole thing. It is not a fancy place and really what counts more? I say the taste:) you can watch how the cook prepares it, all the flame and smoke is just nice to watch and a fine opportunity to mingle with locals and the price is affordable too. So go for it:)"*

The significance of "togetherness" in tourists' culinary experiences has been acknowledged in many studies (Tung & Ritchie 2011; Mynttinen, Logren, Särkkä-Tirkkonen, & Rautiainen, 2015; Sthapit 2017). Experiences which have a social origin are likely to be more influential, and

the influence of the social origin of experiences is related with social pleasure and supports social functions (Björk, & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014).

### ***Ambience and setting***

In this study, the key elements linked with the physical environment of the restaurants that contributed to the memorability of food experiences consist of the ambience and setting. Interpretive codes such as “very elegant ambience”, “authentic experience”, “tastefully decorated restaurant”, “perfect atmosphere”, “authentic architecture”, and “the setting makes the visit worth it” are all indicative of the significance of ambience and setting. Tourists’ search for ambience and setting is highlighted by the following reviews:

*“It is one of the must go to places ... Beautiful setting in heart of the city Service okay ... Waiters do not speak English and often confuse the order. Food also good but fairly Standard but the setting makes the visit worth it”*

*“Great meat. I strongly recommend küşleme and antep lahmacun but be careful it’s spicy. Me and my wife visited their new place 200m before the old one. It’s very classy and the ambience is relaxing.”*

Physical features, employees’ characteristics, level of service quality, and ambience of restaurant predominantly affect guest satisfaction (Kala & Barthwal, 2020). Introducing tourists to a variety of authentic local experiences will increase the memorability of a particular destination or tour (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013). Liu and Jang (2009), in the study they conducted, pointed out that interior design, service reliability, cleanliness in surroundings, and employees with pleasant appearance influenced guest satisfaction.

### ***Local culture***

The findings demonstrate that local culture is an important element of MLFEs. In some of the reviews, tourists’ culinary–gastronomic experiences were linked to quality, like local culture. Interpretive codes such as “local ingredients”, “local gem”, “local dish”, “local recipes”, “local fabrics”, and “local atmosphere” are all indicative of the significance of local culture. Tourists’ search for local culture is highlighted by the given reviews:

*“If you want to eat and something to drink in authentic place definitely need to see. An old caravan palace renovated nicely. You can find Restaurant, pub and small shops. You can buy local fabrics and silver jewellery.”*

*“Bayazhan is a large restaurant with some shops (tobacco, local handicraft) with a lovely inner yard and a terrace on the roof. I came to Bayazhan on Thursday evening and it was almost full with local people and tourists. The food is fantastic: I should admit that the Antep styled shish kebab was the best one I have ever had in Turkey including the best restaurants in Istanbul or Izmir. This shashlik is made with tenderloin lamb meat slightly marinated in local herbs: I still remember that taste :) Even Bayazhan is one of the most expensive places in Antep, it is still very affordable: my dinner with one starter (aubergine sote), that fantastic shashlik, a big glass of shalgam drink, two pieces of their world famous baklava and a cup of local coffee was around USD 12.”*

Local culture is a significant component of tourists’ experience, especially cultural tourist experiences (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). Tsai (2016) pointed out that visitors experiencing local food

showed a much higher level of attachment to the destination, because food unites travellers with a local culture. Kim (2013) emphasised that being in contact with the local culture was a significant factor to create memories. Drinking and eating a particular local food and beverage in the course of vacations implies participating in the local culture of the people (Wijaya et al., 2013).

#### **4.2. Food experience satisfaction**

Some of the reviews show that food experience satisfaction plays an important role in tourists' MLFEs. This is illustrated by the codes elicited from the reviews, such as "meat lovers' paradise", "soup was great", "excellent", "irresistible", "meat heaven", and "unbelievable". Tourists' food experience satisfaction is emphasised by the following reviews:

*"This is probably the most original kebab place in Gaziantep, and some would say in the whole of Turkey, whether this is true or not, the quality of the ingredients they use speaks volumes. A meat lovers paradise, do your taste buds a favour. Great service and delicious ayran."*

*"I can hear you say, what is this salad comment when there is meat. I have to say that the 'küsleme' was good, but I liked it much better in Imam Cagdas. But the salad was absolutely legendary. They have their own mix with tomato and a local 'nar eksisi' and its very liquidish. charming & elegant"*

Tourist satisfaction can be affected by culinary experiences. (Kala & Barthwal, 2020). Culinary aspects contribute to an exciting travel experience, and food experiences can increase tourist satisfaction (Gross & Brown, 2008). Food-related experiences are the main factors that affect tourists' satisfaction. (Kala & Barthwal, 2020). Hendijani (2016) pointed out that healthy and fresh ingredients and the cultural heritage of the cuisine were important elements in overall tourist satisfaction.

#### **4.3. Behavioural intentions**

In several reviews, behavioural intentions of the tourists were highlighted via interpretive codes such as "this is my second visit", "I'll definitely visit again", "my 10th visit to this restaurant", "visited many times", and "my third visit". Visitors' behavioural intentions regarding a particular destination or restaurant are illustrated in the reviews below:

*"We went there with some friends and have a very nice light dinner. One of my friends is a local so she knows what to order and we order selection of appetisers, and it was amazing... For sure, if I have a chance to go to Gaziantep next time, I will visit this restaurant again."*

*"I didn't ask for menu and let the waiter to bring his recommendations. It started with salad which might be the best salad I have ever had. Even, I started to use some garlic and "sumak" in my salads at home. After the salad, they served small lahmacun than the meat plate which was a mix of küşleme and other kebabs. All of them was wonderful. I'll definitely visit again in my next trip."*

Food-related experiences are the main elements influencing tourists' revisit intention to a destination. (Kala & Barthwal, 2020). Heung, Wong, and Qu (2002) emphasised that physical features, employee attributes, and reliability contributed to visitors' revisit and recommendation intentions. Acting as a distinguishing element for destinations, memorable food experiences expand the tourist yield, make contributions to the image of the destination, and prompt potential visits (Kala & Barthwal, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion and implications

Exploring and understanding the components of tourism experiences is crucial for destination promotion and provides opportunities to the destination manager and marketer to develop differential strategies between rival destination. In addition, experiences are widely investigated in the gastronomy tourism context because they are a basic component of the tourism experience. Despite numerous studies on food experiences in the tourism literature (Sthapit, 2017; Sthapit, et al., 2020a; Atsız, Cifci & Low, 2022; Atsız, Cifci & Rasoolimanesh 2022), the relevant literature on tourists' memorable food experiences in the context of locality is still largely in its infancy. Because of limited number of studies exploring memorable local food experiences, the fundamental aim of the present study is to understand the unexplored dimensions of memorable local food experience using netnography analyses. Thus, findings of this study contribute to an advanced understanding of MLFEs and extend gastronomic tourism literature by MLFEs through online reviews. Another contribution of this study is providing new insights into the understanding of memorable local food experience via the netnography approach, since the netnography method has not yet been utilised to examine the MLFEs. Thus, the findings of this study in the current literature are original in terms of contributions.

The findings of this study comply with the relevant literature, and they demonstrate that local food experiences contribute to the memorability of tourists' experiences and their total holiday experience (Quan & Wang, 2004; Henderson, 2009; Sthapit, 2017; Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020). Although previous studies described the relations between food and memorable experience, this study identifies the different aspects of MLFEs, which provide in-depth knowledge of tourists' local food experience. In other words, the current study determines the components of MLFEs: novelty, hospitality, and services, taste and food attributes, togetherness and local interactions, ambience and setting, and local culture. The identified components of MLFEs contribute to existing studies that have provided similar results (Kauppinen-Räsänen, et al., 2013; Sthapit, 2017). This study also focused on tourists' experience satisfaction and behavioural intentions after local food experiences. The results indicated that experience satisfaction was found mostly positive and influences tourist behavioural intentions, such as recommendation behaviour and revisit intention. These results are parallel to the findings of Seyitoğlu's study (2021).

In terms of theoretical implications, the current study used a netnography technique to reveal the components of memorable local food experiences. This is the first attempt to understand MLFEs using netnography technique. Additionally, this study adds some dimensions to the existing literature on dimension of MLFEs. In the study by Sthapit et al. (2020a) memorable local food experiences were explored using a self-administered open-ended questionnaire, but this study used a netnography technique to understand key dimensions of MLFEs and some dimensions were found to be different, such as local culture.

From a practical perspective, the current study contributes to a better understanding of the role of local food experience in memorable tourism experience and has managerial implications for destination marketers and managers and food service providers. The results of this study are important to destination marketers and managers in order to sustain destinations' local food attractions. The results of the study suggest that information about the tourists' memorable local food experience is crucial to design an experience to satisfy visitors and influence their intentions regarding local food consumption. Specifically, according to results of this study, service providers should be more traditional and authentic when they prepare local foods to serve tourists, as many people seek

new and different food tastes (Richards, 2002; Sthapit, et al., 2019). As tourists' food consumption integrates an important aspect of the holiday experience, the result of this study emphasises the value of local food experiences gained at destinations for food service providers. Local food consumption has very significant influences on the memorability of the local food experience. Furthermore, these influences get stronger when the local food is authentic, novel, traditional, delicious, and has not been tasted before, and the service personnel, chefs and restaurant owners are helpful and hospitable. In general, the findings of the study emphasise the importance of novelty, authenticity, social interaction, being traditional, the quality of the service, and hospitality of the personnel. Thus, this study indicates that restaurants should offer more traditional foods to provide distinctive flavour, novelty and authenticity, and they should constitute a family ambience by increasing the social interaction between visitors and service providers. In addition to this, all staff should be kind and hospitable in the service setting and focus on service quality.

In terms of the limitations of the study, as this study was performed using online reviews about memorable local food experiences in Gaziantep, the findings cannot be generalised in other destinations. Thus, further research can be conducted in the context of other gastronomy cities in Turkey with a similar approach. The other limitation is the method of the study; future studies should utilise a quantitative research method to examine the relationship between MLFEs, food experience satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. Finally, reviews posted regarding tourists' memorable local food experiences on Tripadvisor.com were investigated, so other travel websites such as Eatwith and Withlocals.com could be utilised to understand MLFEs to make further important contributions to the relevant literature.

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