

Developing a sustainable gastronomy route model: A grounded theory approach on cheese tourism

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Abstract

In recent years, regions with gastronomic tourism potential have entered into various quests to evaluate this existence. Gastronomy tourism resources should be used effectively in order to evaluate the gastronomic tourism potential of the regions that stand out with their gastronomic richness and to market them as a gastronomic tourism destination. Theoretical approaches are needed, especially to understand the scientific infrastructure of gastronomy routes. Therefore, the research focuses on creating a new source of gastronomic tourism in the region through the development of a cheese route in Kars. In the study, it is aimed to develop a substantive theoretical model in order to establish the theoretical infrastructure necessary to develop a cheese route in the context of gastronomy routes. The grounded theory approach was adopted as the research design in the study. Within the scope of the findings of the research, 10 categories were created. After the categories developed, a substantive theoretical model named "Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model" was created. Finally, the Kars Cheese Route project, which was carried out simultaneously with the research, and the harmonization of the developed substantive theory were carried out. According to the results obtained, it was seen that the research was supported by field applications. Within the scope of the research, it was found that a strategic approach that starts with planning and research, continues with the evaluation of various touristic resources and finally ends with promotion and marketing is required for the preparation of gastronomy routes with a sustainable approach. In addition, in the context of the research findings, it was understood that this strategic perspective can be gained through a collective and cumulative process.

Keywords

Keywords: Tourism, Gastronomy Tourism, Gastronomy Routes, Kars Cheese Route, Grounded Theory

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1. Introduction

Particularly in recent years, destinations that have come to the fore with their unique food products and resources have begun to attract more visitors. In this context, gastronomic tourism destinations can use various touristic activities (such as festivals, workshops) or formations (such as routes) that are themed with original or local products (Bortoló & Forné, 2016). Gastronomy routes are considered a source of gastronomic tourism, where culture, heritage, and tourism intersect, contributing significantly to destination marketing and tourist satisfaction. Various studies address the dynamic aspects of gastronomy routes, as well as reveal their potential to influence tourist preferences and regional branding. In most of the studies, gastronomy routes are discussed in the context of destination and experience studies (Song & Kim, 2022; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023; Yıldırım & Tekeli Kırıcı, 2022), and there seems to be a literature gap in terms of the conceptualization of these routes. In some studies, gastronomy routes are addressed through approaches of inventorying and marking local products (Çakır, Çiftçi, & Çakır, 2017; Erşen, 2017; Kösel, Koçhan, Atsız, & Sünnetçioğlu, 2019). The need to explain the theoretical background of how gastronomic routes should be created can be expressed as the justification for this research. Furthermore, the effort to address this need is considered the most important factor distinguishing this research from other approaches.

Although wine routes are seen as the most important representative of food routes, routes created with other products have started to attract more and more visitors. These routes can offer visitors a range of activities, resources and products that contain cultural and geographical richness (Lignon-Darmaillac, 2009). Cheese routes, on the other hand, have started to come to an important position in gastronomy routes, especially with the studies carried out in recent years, with the traditional and artisanal cheese types it offers. Cheese routes are seen as a new phenomenon that has been started to be studied in the literature, especially in the last few years. Despite this situation, it is thought that cheese routes will be open to more research and development in the coming years as one of the important sources and activity types of food tourism. In this direction, it is aimed to develop a theoretical model for the sustainable gastronomy route development process within the scope of the research.

2. Conceptual Framework

The relationship between the food and the area where it is produced gives the visitor a unique experience and aids in the environmentally and economically sustainable growth of the area (Sims, 2009). According to Millán Vázquez de la Torre, Morales Fernández and Agudo Gutiérrez (2010), interest in destination food and beverage-related activities and routes that can boost tourism and economic development in rural areas is growing daily.

Timothy and Boyd (2015) evaluated the contributions of gastronomy routes and wine routes to the destination in their study. Everett (2016) conducted a conceptual study to explain the types and characteristics of gastronomy routes. Roy, Gretzel, Waite and Yanamandram (2019) evaluated the creation of gastronomy routes based on three elements. According to this study, gastronomy routes are created by combining tourists, businesses, regional gastronomy, and the region's geographical presence. In another study, gastronomy routes were considered as a complex tourist product that involves the interaction between various material and non-material components such as facilities, services, the environment, and local communities (Corigliano, 2003). According to Beer, Edwards, Fernandes and Sampaio (2003) gastronomic routes generally integrate rural and urban spaces and connect various sources related to the regional cuisine culture as a whole

or to a single cuisine product. As can be seen from these studies, most studies in the literature address what gastronomic routes are, what components they comprise, and their impact on regional gastronomy. No studies have been found that focus on how or through what methods gastronomic routes are created. From this perspective, it is clear that the need for research on route creation processes is felt in the literature, especially for making practical decisions.

A core product that defines a food route is developed around it. To investigate the production environment, it is possible to emphasize and reinforce all food-related events in a number of different ways. (Blanco & Riveros, 2005). Figure 1. illustrates the relationship between routes/roads associated to food or drink and cheese tourism.

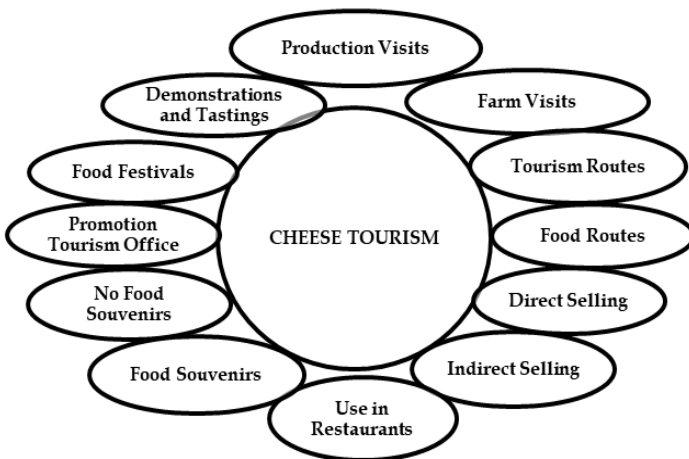


Figure 1. The cheese tourism wheel

Source: Fusté Forné (2015)

In this study, modeled as The Cheese Tourism Wheel, food and beverage routes were evaluated as one of the other gastronomic activities or attractions considered within the framework of cheese tourism. Cheese routes are also seen as one of the sources of cheese tourism and evaluated in this context (Fusté Forné, 2015).

Cheese tasting events attract visitors in various regions, especially in countries such as France, Italy, Spain and New Zealand, and distinguish cheese tourism as a different tourism resource within the concepts of gastronomy, cuisine and food tourism. Internationally recognized but local, special and artisanal cheeses are thought to be the source of this type of tourism. The use of cheese for the tourism sector contributes to sustainability and supports rural life. In addition, cheese tourism and rural traditions, cultural and gastronomic heritage and natural geography can be blended together and turned into an integrated product (Ermolaev, Yashalova, & Ruban, 2019). According to Folgado-Fernández, Di-Clemente and Hernández-Mogollón (2019), one of the recently emerging typologies of food tourism is to attend cheese tastings and production or to visit milk and cheese production regions, festivals, special cheese types in order to gain various touristic experiences about cheese. It is seen as cheese tourism that requires a visit to the areas where it is served.

Natural and cultural elements are inextricably incorporated into the cuisine's distinctiveness. The natural component gives each region's gastronomy a distinctive physical environment, while the cultural component showcases the shared norms and culture of the neighborhood residents. Both elements help food and drink become a palpable part of cultural identity, preserving it and demonstrating the product's long-standing ties to the area. Because of this, it is said that successful cheese destinations are those that can provide visitors with services and opportunities that demonstrate the intimate connection between food, geography, and society while also satiating their thirst for novelty (Hillel, Belhassen, & Shani, 2013). In this context, the conceptual framework of cheese tourism can be expressed as in Figure 2. (Fusté Forné, 2015).

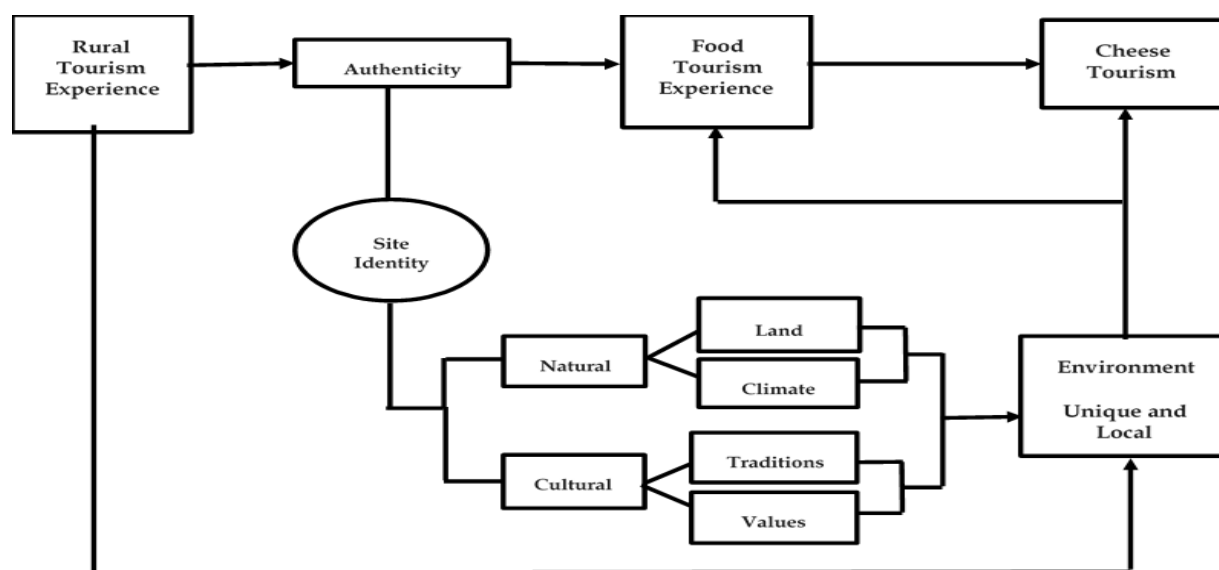


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of cheese tourism

Source: Fusté Forné (2015)

Fusté Forné (2015) evaluates the concept of cheese tourism shaped within the scope of rural tourism experience, authenticity and food tourism experience in his study on the theoretical framework of cheese tourism. In addition, according to this model, the unique local environment, which has emerged with the identity of the area nourished by authenticity and natural-cultural resources, affects or creates the experience of food tourism and therefore cheese tourism. Visits to locations connected to the production of milk and the manufacture of cheese are referred to as cheese tourism. As a result, this cheese-related special interest tourism is most prevalent in rural and natural locations and can be promoted in communities with a long history of raising animals. Cheese-based tourism practices and experiences encompass a variety of concepts and activities focused on food consumption, including cheese-related gourmet routes and tours, festivals, and trips to local markets. These experiences go beyond simple cheese tastes. As a result, it can be claimed that cheese-oriented tourism is founded on a desire to see a cheese variety that is closely associated with the area emerge (Fusté Forné, 2015). Although cheese tourism is regarded as a particularly unique field, some parts of it have only begun to be studied. Various academics have undertaken numerous studies with a focus on the use of

cheese as a tourist product, the sustainability of cheese tourism, and the resources of this sort of tourism. Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban (2019) have developed a model for cheese tourism based on this research. In Figure 3, this model is displayed.

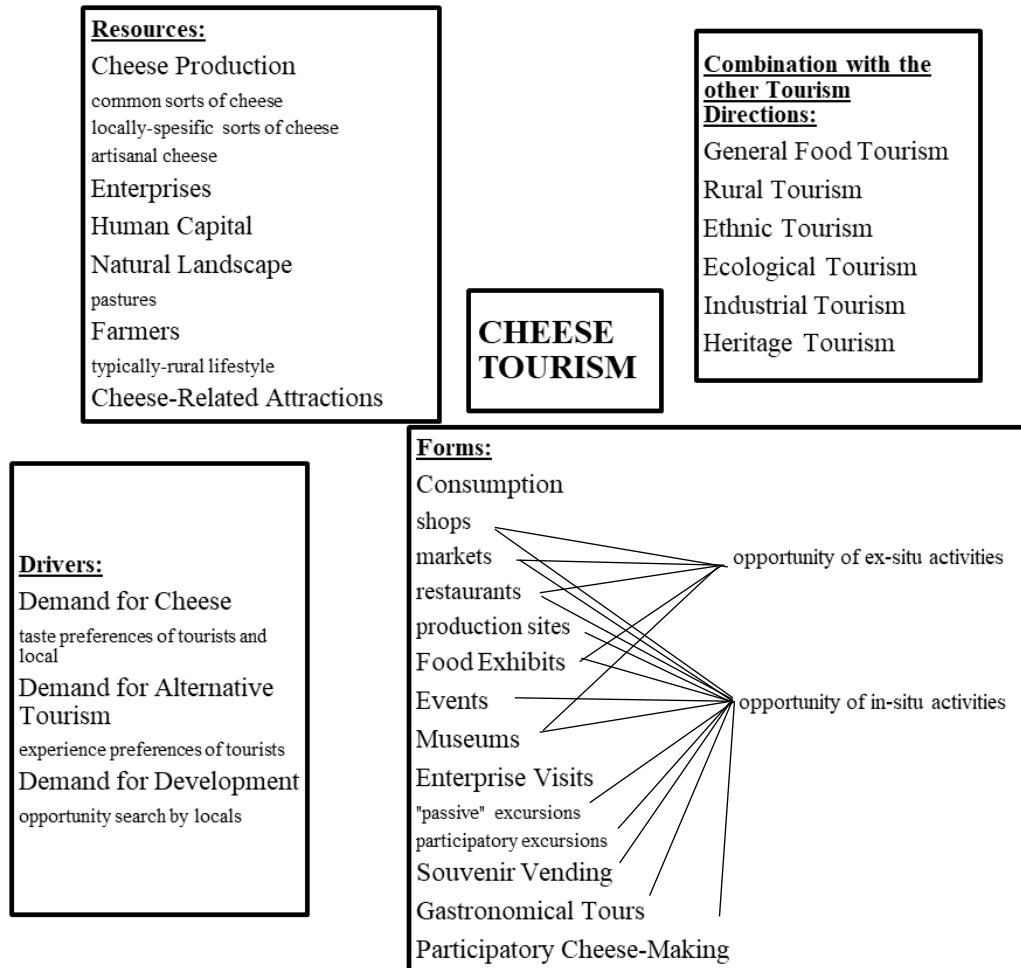


Figure 3. The general essence of cheese tourism

Source: Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban (2019)

The notion of cheese tourism was assessed in the context of its sources, the manner it originated, the guiding characteristics of this type of tourism, and its integration with other types of tourism in the study by (Ermolaev, Yashalova, & Ruban, 2019) on the principles of cheese tourism. Cheese production, enterprises, human resources, natural areas, farmers, and other cheese-related attractions are some of the sources of cheese tourism. There are several aspects to consider while examining the rise of cheese tourism, including consumption, various cheese-themed activities, museums, tours, and interactive cheese-making activities. One of the most important niche markets is anticipated to be cheese tourism, which is supported by demand for cheese, alternative tourism, and development and assessed using a multidimensional criterion. It is thought that cheese tourism, which is supported by cheese demand, alternative tourism demand and development demand and evaluated with a multidimensional modality, will be one of the leading niche markets of food tourism in the near future.

3. Method

In this study, which was carried out to create a theory in the context of sustainable gastronomy route development, qualitative research method was used and grounded theory approach, one of the qualitative research designs, was applied. Grounded theory is seen as a suitable design that can be used in conditions

where there is no theory to explain or understand a process (Creswell, 2016). In the theory-building process of the research, substantive theory (Creswell, 2016), which is more specific than being a generally accepted approach, was adopted.

Continuous comparison analysis consisting of open coding, axis coding and selective coding stages was used in the theory creation process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In the process of transforming the research data, which were analyzed with the continuous comparison technique, into theory, the three-stage coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) as well as the code-to-theory model developed by Saldaña (2021) were taken as a basis. After the application phase of each of the methods used in the data collection process, open coding was done. The open codes that emerged after this process were converted into categories by means of axis coding after the end of the data collection processes. The categories that emerged with the axis coding phase were compiled and brought together with selective coding. The data obtained within the scope of the research were coded using the NVIVO 12 program.

Theoretical sampling technique, which is frequently used in the grounded theory approach in the research, was preferred and data saturation was observed (Ilgar & Ilgar, 2013). In this direction, the study groups of the research were formed from various stakeholders working in the region. These stakeholders are as follows:

- Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism officials,
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) officials,
- Officials of Anadolu Efes,
- Officials of Gelecek Turizmde
- Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route officials,
- Tourism actors in Kars,
- Academics working on the subject in the region,
- Women entrepreneurs,
- Local public institutions and organizations,
- Non-governmental organizations in the region,
- Travelers and visitors of the Eastern Express,
- Cheese producers.

The grounded theory methodology allows for the use of a variety of data collection methods. In grounded theory investigations, interviews and observations are seen to be the most often employed data collection techniques. Document analysis may also be employed often in specific circumstances (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). As part of the data collection approaches for this study, interviewing, workshops, and document reviews were used. Table 1. displays the procedures used to obtain the data needed for the study.

Table 1. Data collection processes of the research

Process	Data Collection Method	Research Question
1 st process	Qualitative Interview Process with Working Groups (Open Coding)	How do the actors in the working group evaluate the Kars Cheese Route Draft Project?
2 nd process	Workshop with Working Groups (Open Coding)	How do the actors in the working group evaluate the Kars Cheese Route Draft Project and the touristic resources of Kars?
3 rd process	Document Analysis (Open Coding)	How do the documents (e-resources, written and visual resources) on the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route represent the route?
4 th process	Creation of Theoretical Model (Axis Coding- Selective Coding)	How can the sustainable gastronomy route development process be explained with a theoretical model?
5 th process	Harmonization of Kars Cheese Route with Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model	How can the Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model be harmonized with the Kars Cheese Route?

Source: Authors elaboration

The data collection process of the research was carried out between November 2020 and May 2021. First, qualitative interviews were conducted with gastronomy tourism stakeholders in the region in November 2020. Subsequently, a workshop was held later that month with a group including these actors and external stakeholders. Following this process, qualitative interviews were also conducted with cheese producers and

entrepreneurs in the region. Finally, in May 2021, the data collection process was completed by compiling data obtained through document review.

The first stage of the research consists of qualitative interviews with the study group. While the workshop held with the working group constituted the second stage of the research, the content analysis of the documents related to the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route was the last data collection stage of the research. The data obtained in the research were summarized with the open coding process, and a theoretical model was created with axis and selective coding applications. The resulting Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model was aligned with the Kars Cheese Route project with the final stage of the research.

In quantitative research, validity and reliability studies are conducted to increase the quality of the research, while qualitative research focuses on the concept of trustworthiness. The criteria that determine the level of trustworthiness in qualitative research methods are shaped in line with the paradigms emphasized in the research (Arastaman, Fidan, & Fidan, 2018). The concept of trustworthiness has been handled in different ways by many researchers in the literature (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Guba, 1981; LeCompte, Millroy, & Goetz, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) When the literature is examined, it is stated that the trustworthiness approach developed by Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1986) is generally used more by researchers (Arastaman, Fidan, & Fidan, 2018). According these studies, the level of trustworthiness in a qualitative research;

- *Credibility,*
- *Transferability,*
- *Dependability,*
- *Confirmability criteria determine the confirmability. In this context, the credibility level of the research was determined by the studies conducted by considering these 4 criteria.*

Credibility is defined as the level of congruence between the findings obtained in the research and the information in the literature (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In this context, the research was evaluated in terms of plausibility criterion and the findings were compared with the literature. In the open coding phase, the codes emerging from the data were matched with their definitions in the literature. In the axis coding phase, the categories that emerged by bringing together the open codes were named with the support of the literature. In addition, the theoretical model of cheese route development developed after the selective coding phase was evaluated in terms of the interrelationships among its dimensions. Another factor that increases the credibility of the research is the use of research methods with proven reliability (Yin, 2009). In this context, it is thought that the grounded theory design used in the research increases the credibility level of the research since it is a technique frequently used in qualitative research and its reliability level is considered high by many researchers. One of the factors that increase the level of credibility in qualitative research is the variety of data collection techniques used in the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In this context, multiple data collection techniques (interviews, workshops and document analysis) were utilized in line with the purpose of the research and the level of credibility was increased. One of the most important factors that increase the level of credibility is the presentation of the data collected within the scope of the research to the views of an independent external evaluator. In this context, the data collected in the study were shared with 3 field experts other than the researcher and they were asked to analyze the data in line with the three-stage coding method and the coding-to-theory model. The feedback received from the external evaluators and the coding made by the researcher were compared, and similar and different codes were re-examined. In this context, it was determined that the coding results of the researcher and external evaluators were largely similar. In addition, the data were re-examined on the differences that emerged during the coding process and literature support was sought.

Transferability is related to the extent to which the findings obtained in the research are compatible with the information in the literature (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In this context, the findings obtained as a result of the research were associated with the literature and the data set collected and were largely harmonized. In addition, the participation of large masses and many stakeholders in the data collection processes of the research is another factor that ensures transferability. In this respect, the fact that the research was conducted with the support of a project, the project team was established with regional partnerships, and

the stakeholders contributing to the research consisted of many actors from local governments to international partners are factors that increase the transferability level of the research.

Reliability emphasizes that the data collection processes carried out within the scope of the research should be clearly stated (Guba, 1981). In this context, the data collection steps of the research are clearly stated in Table 1. together with the research questions as five processes. In addition, the level of reliability in qualitative research can be revealed by using the “audit trail” technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The audit trail technique is a detailed and chronological description of the processes followed within the scope of the research, the procedures used in the analysis, and the model that emerged as a result of the research (Morrow, 2005). In addition, the detailed and chronological description is submitted to the external evaluators and they are asked to draw conclusions on reliability. As a result of the inferences made by external evaluators, the reliability judgment of the research is formed (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In this context, an audit trail report was created for the research and presented to 3 evaluators consisting of field experts. In line with the inferences drawn from the evaluators, it was determined that the processes carried out within the scope of the research were largely reliable.

Confirmability refers to the compatibility of the researched topic with the practice, as opposed to the researcher's interpretations (Guba, 1981). From this point of view, the research was conducted with the support of the Kars Cheese Route project and studies were carried out for the field application of the theoretical model of cheese route development developed within the scope of the research. In order to test the applicability of the theoretical model put forward within the scope of the research, a cheese route was developed in Kars, which has an important gastronomy tourism potential due to its cheesemaking culture. The developed route was found to fit the theoretical model of cheese route development. In addition, the audit trail technique can be used to increase the level of verifiability. While the process of the research is evaluated in the audit trail technique used to increase the level of credibility, the focus is on the data set in the audit trail technique used to increase the level of confirmability. In this context, the audit trail report mentioned on credibility and presented to 3 external evaluators was also used for this phase, and the evaluators were asked to evaluate the data and the theoretical model rather than the research process. In line with the conclusions of the evaluators, it was determined that the data and the theoretical model of the research were largely accepted.

4. Results

Findings of qualitative interviews with working groups

The qualitative interview phase was carried out through a semi-structured interview form. The semi-structured interview form consists of some statements about the content of the Kars Cheese Route project. In the semi-structured interview form, the draft theming study for the route was examined. Participants were requested to review the draft theming process for each route stop and to submit their theme suggestions. In addition, through a semi-structured interview form, the participants were asked to indicate the local cheese types that exist in the region and are about to be forgotten. Again, through the form, the opinions and suggestions of the participants in the context of ensuring the sustainability of the Kars Cheese Route project were asked. The participants were also asked if they had any distinctive stories, products, dairy, historical or touristic value that they thought the draft route should include in another question. In order to learn more about the creation of the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route, more questions were posed to the authorized person (P1).

Three subject-matter experts were consulted over the semi-structured interview form's content, and the updated version of the form was then prepared. The participants in the interviews were allowed to express themselves freely and refrain from any actions or behaviors that might have directed them. The theoretical sampling technique was used to choose participants for the research's interview phase, and the saturation point criterion for the data was taken into consideration when gathering the data.

Table 2. Identifying information about participants

Participant Code	Participant Characteristics
P1	Founder of the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route
P2	Cheese producer
P3	Cheese producer
P4	Academician
P5	Academician
P6	Representative of Boğatepe Environment and Life Association
P7	NGO representative
P8	Cheese producer
P9	Entrepreneur
P10	Entrepreneur
P11	Entrepreneur
P12	Representative of Kars Chamber of Commerce and Industry
P13	Representative of Kars Governorate
P14	Representative of Kars Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism
P15	Representative of Kars Provincial Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry
P16	Serhat Development Agency (SERKA) representative
P17	Representative of the Kars Directorate of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development and Support Organization (KOSGEB)
P18	Cheese producer
P19	Cheese producer
P20	Cheese producer
P21	Cheese producer
P22	President of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB) Northeastern Anatolia Regional Representation Board
P23	Representative of the Eastern Anatolia Health, Thermal and Alternative Tourism Development Association
P24	President of the Chamber of Veterinarians of Kars, Ardahan, Iğdır Region

Source: Authors elaboration

24 participants, including female cheese producers, Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route officials, NGO representatives, cheese producers, and representatives of regional public institutions and organizations, make up the working group for the qualitative interview portion of the research. The researcher participated in the interviews either in person or through online meeting procedures, and they were conducted at various times and locations chosen by the participants. The interviews were completed in different times and lasted an average of 25 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, the interview was recorded with 2 voice recorders, with the permission of the participants. In addition, written notes were taken by the researcher for the statements stated during the interview. After each interview, audio recordings and written notes were analyzed and documented. Depending on the order of the interview, code names (such as P1, P2, P3) were defined to the participants, and after each interview, open coding was carried out through the NVIVO 12 program. With the open coding made for the data obtained from the participant with the code name P24, it was decided that the data reached the saturation point and that a new open code could not be reached, and the qualitative interview process of the research was completed.

The data that emerged as a result of the qualitative interview process of the research were evaluated with thematic content analysis and continuous comparison analysis. In this direction, a total of 175 open codes were obtained from the interview transcripts. Some of the open coding practices made for the data obtained during the interview process are exemplified below.

P1: "A consensus was formed in 1989 to establish the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route. In the 1950s, it was understood that the producers had to come together with the effects of the economic bottlenecks that emerged after the Second World War, especially in the Schleswig-Holstein region. The request to create the route came from the cheese producers and the producers started the process. After the idea infrastructure of the route creation process and other studies, the route was officially created in 1998. Before the cheese route, there were wine routes in the region. After the idea of combining the wine route with cheese, this route was created in an area from Germany's Danish border to Hamburg, which is approximately 500 km across the state."

The expression "...a consensus was formed" stated by the participant was coded as "togetherness" because it expresses a cooperation with its stakeholders. The statement "...it has been understood that the producers should come together with the effects of the problems experienced after the economic bottlenecks" stated by the P1 participant during the interview was coded as "providing economic added value" because it evokes the desire to achieve an economic gain. The participant's statement "The idea of bringing together the wine route and cheese ..." was interpreted as benefiting from existing experiences and coded as "researching sample applications". The participant's statement that "... This route, which is across the state and approximately 500 km in length in an area from the Danish border to Hamburg" was evaluated as an expression for the route route and the open code of "determination of the route" was created.

P8: "We had a historical building in our village. We turned our historical building into a museum. We knew we had 20 kinds of cheese, but we learned that we have 32 kinds of cheese. We learned that a Swiss cheese shop named David Moser built our historical building and we learned that the first Gravyer Cheese in Türkiye was made in our village and we prepared our museum. This winter, we hosted 12.000 people, together with autumn and spring, we hosted 15.000 people. Our women are mostly telling about our museum..."

Some of what the participant with the code name P8 expressed during the interview is stated above. The participant said, "We knew we had 20 kinds of cheese, but we learned that we have 32 kinds of cheese." Since the expression "local cheese variety" indicates the traditional cheese variety in the region, a code was created as "local cheese variety". The participant said, "We learned that a Swiss cheese shop named David Moser had built our historic building." Based on the expression "cultural heritage" open code has been created considering the existence of deep cultural heritage elements in the region.

The participant's statement "...we learned that the first Gravyer Cheese was made in our village in Türkiye..." suggested the existence of artisanal production and the open code of "artisanal production" was created. With the statement "...we prepared our museum" taken from the participant, an effort to create tourism attraction in the region was observed and coding was made in the form of "creating a tourism resource". With the sentence of the P8 participant, "Our women mostly tell about our museum", it was determined that there was an approach to bring women to the fore in the region and the open code of "developing the social role of women" was created.

Findings of the workshop with working groups

In order to answer the research question in the second phase of the research, a workshop was held on within the scope of the Kars Cheese Route project with the participation of the project partners and working groups. The persons or actors in the working group participating in the workshop held within the scope of the research are shown in Figure 4.

Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Anadolu Efes
Kars Governorate
Atatürk University
Kafkas University
Kars Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route
Boğatepe Environment and Life Association
Kars Directorate of Provincial Culture and Tourism
Kars Directorate of Provincial Agriculture and Forestry
Serhat Development Agency (SERKA)
Kars Directorate of Provincial Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization of Turkey
TÜRSAB (Association of Turkey Travel Agencies) Northeast Anatolia Regional Representative Board Presidency
Eastern Anatolia Health, Thermal and Alternative Tourism Development Association
Eastern Express Travelers
Cheese Producers
Kars, Ardahan, Iğdır Region Chamber of Veterinarians

Figure 4. The participants of Kars Cheese Route project technical consultation workshop

Source: Authors elaboration

The workshop, which was held in the second step of the data collection process, was organized to evaluate the Kars Cheese Route project, which aims to contribute to the social and economic development of the region through the development of a tourism understanding shaped around the cheese route in Kars, with a collective structure and to obtain data for research. The main theme of the workshop was determined as the creation of the basic theoretical infrastructure for cheese route development with a collective approach. In the workshop, various data were collected in the context of many issues, especially thematic elements, visible or forgotten

values, and fiction priorities in order to establish the route development infrastructure. In the workshop, a SWOT analysis was conducted in line with the evaluations of the participants. Sample open codes that emerged as a result of the SWOT Analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Open code process examples for SWOT analysis results

	Statements (Strengths-Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)	Open codes
Strengths	Keeping the cheese culture and diversity brought to the region by the Malakans and Duhobors alive	"variety of local cheeses" "cheese making culture" "cultural accumulation" "Keeping Culture Alive" "intangible cultural heritage"
Weaknesses	Failure to carry out the desired level and quality of work for branding	"branding" "brand experience" "media relations"
Opportunities	Especially thanks to the Boğatepe Village, gastronomy tourism has attracted the attention of the region.	"gastronomic experience" "special attention" "service offered" "trend"
Threats	The risk of not exhibiting a collective approach for tourism awareness that many sectors can come together to create.	"togetherness" "collective work"

Source: Authors elaboration

The data obtained within the scope of SWOT analysis were subjected to continuous comparison analysis and content analysis, and open coding was performed. The open coding process for the data was carried out considering the theoretical saturation level of the data. As a result of the coding process, 112 open codes emerged.

Findings of document analysis

Some e-resources, written and visual sources related to the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route were subjected to document review in order to find an answer to the research question in the third phase of the research. These resources consisted of the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route website, logo, map, tour plan, signage and brochure. The examined documents were evaluated in the context of the cheese route development strategy. With the help of NVIVO 12 and NCapture extension, open coding process was applied to the documents, which were subjected to thematic content analysis with the continuous comparison technique. As a result of the coding, 46 open codes were obtained. The sources and the findings obtained from the document analysis are exemplified as follows.



Image 1. SH Cheese Route website home page

Source: KäsestraßeSchleswig-Holstein (2021b)

A map of the route welcomes visitors on the website homepage. In addition, there is the logo design of the route on the upper left side of the page. In the upper right corner of the website, there are sections named Route Members, About Us, Information About Cheese, Recipes with Cheese, Contact and Current News. Cheese producers are positioned on the map with the image of cheese. In the light of this information, open coding was done for the website and codes such as "increasing map visibility, logo design, route members, communication channel creation, route visibility, symbolization, digital positioning" were accessed.



Image 2. SH Cheese Route map

Source: KäsestraßeSchleswig-Holstein (2021a)

It was observed that a total of 29 cheese producers were marked on the SH Cheese Route map, which was evaluated within the scope of the document review. This map was created with an approach where only cheese related facilities and areas are marked. There are also members sponsoring route activities in the areas indicated by the round icon on the map. In the areas marked with a square symbol, there are facilities where the sales activities of the route are carried out. The points with the cheese symbol indicate the cheese production facilities/dairies on the route. After the open coding process on the map, open codes such as "digital map, digital route, map marking, positioning the stops on the map, categorizing the symbols, expressing the stops with symbols, describing the geography on the map" were obtained.



Image 3. Front of SH Cheese Route brochure

Source: KäsestraßeSchleswig-Holstein (2018)

On the first page of the SH Cheese Route brochure, there are information about the route (such as address, telephone, e-mail address) as well as the philosophy of the route union, its aims and detailed information of the route. In this context, in line with the findings obtained as a result of the document review for the front of the brochure, the open codes of "digital brochure, printed brochure, route information in the brochure,

a large majority of similarity. The differences were re-examined by the researcher, literature support was sought, external evaluators were consulted, and necessary adjustments were made. As a result of the coding process carried out during the data collection process of the research, a total of 333 open codes were reached. In open coding for research data, the open code that appears in any document can also be found in another document. In this direction, repetitive open codes were combined and the total number of codes was determined as 295. In this context, the axis coding phase was started by taking into account the approaches put forward by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Saldaña (2021). With the axis coding process made through the NVIVO 12 program, the open codes that are in large numbers were summarized and combined under categories.

The first of the categories that emerged with axis coding was called "Research-Planning". The Research-Planning category was created by bringing together open codes such as "creating a gastronomic tourism resource, roadmap-planning, researching sample applications, expert opinions, route elements, creating an action plan". ÇEKÜL (2015) emphasizes the research and planning processes for the process of creating a cultural route. According to Hugo (1999) and Timothy and Boyd (2015), during the route creation process, it is necessary to determine the physical and human characteristics of the destination, to reveal the infrastructure and superstructure possibilities, to analyze the local dynamics, to examine the local cultural values, to get expert opinion on the subject, to compare with sample destinations, to search for financial resources and to create a plan for obtaining this information. The data obtained and the supporting statements in the literature emphasize the importance of a comprehensive research on the destination. Another category created was named "Organization". The organization category was created by bringing together open codes such as "creating a team, collective work, local cooperation, international solidarity, finding volunteer support". Mason (2010) evaluated the cooperation to be made on touristic routes out of personal interests. According to (Mason, 2010), collaborations to be established with local organizations, public institutions and organizations, financial support institutions, various partnerships and voluntary participation activities are concrete steps that will strengthen the route development organization. According to Zurnacı (2012), organizational activities are to establish a civil society in which every stakeholder in the destination is involved.

In the data collection process, the category of "Evaluation of Entrepreneurship" emerged as the third. This category was created by bringing together open codes such as "women entrepreneurship, cheese producers, social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship-themed NGOs, traditional product manufacturers". The concept of entrepreneurship, which is expressed as the economic value of the ideas that individuals put forward as thoughts (Diandra & Azmy, 2020), can be examined in many types, especially women's entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, public entrepreneurship and virtual entrepreneurship. In regions where regional development-oriented studies are carried out, women's entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship activities are considered very important (Forouharfar, Rowshan, & Salarzahi, 2018; Le & Raven, 2015). When the open codes obtained were examined, it was seen that evaluating the entrepreneurial potential of the region in the route creation process is an important supporting activity. Another emerging category was named as "Evaluation of Gastronomy Tourism Resources". This category was created by bringing together open codes such as "gastronomic heritage, local cuisine, local cheese variety, farm-to-table dining experience, artisanal production, gastronomic experience creation". Gastronomic resources are explained as a touristic product that meets the concepts of local food and beverages, businesses that produce and offer these products, gastronomic heritage narratives and agricultural production (Hall & Mitchell, 2006). Activities such as local food experiences, gastronomic-themed events, visits to production sites, routes, eating and drinking experiences in rural areas and crop harvesting are seen as sources of gastronomic tourism (Deneault, 2002; Getz, 2000; Ignatov, 2003; The Economic Planning Group of Canada, 2001). In this direction, cheese culture, cheese diversity and cheese-themed activities in the region have been evaluated as gastronomic tourism resources. In addition, the use of traditional production techniques in the region, the adoption of an artisanal production approach and the emphasis on the agricultural heritage from the past show the richness of regional gastronomic tourism resources. With axis coding, another category named "Evaluation of Alternative Touristic Resources" has emerged. This category, which can also be supported by the information obtained from the literature, was created by bringing together open codes such as "cultural heritage, thematic elements, rural landscape, stories, local culture, spatial and environmental texture". The phenomenon of attractions is among the basic elements of the touristic product (Kozak, Kozak, & Kozak, 2015). Attractiveness can be diversified depending on the factors that are separated as socio-cultural elements, natural elements, economic elements

and psychological elements. This differentiation may vary depending on the type of value considered as touristic attraction (Pigram, 2016). In addition, a single activity or experience is not enough for a touristic movement and individuals may seek alternative experiences (Pearce, 2016). Although the research focuses on the development of cheese route, the products in the region that can offer alternative touristic experiences for tourists are considered important in the context of touristic activity diversity. In line with the data, cultural heritage elements, rural resources, natural resources, traditions and customs, stories, natural and cultural attractions, narratives and natural landscapes of the region were evaluated as alternative touristic attractions. In addition, forgotten values, cultural accumulation, elements that make up identity, multiculturalism and historical stories diversify the touristic attractions in the region. Another category obtained by combining the open codes revealed within the scope of the research data is called "Branding". The branding category was created by bringing together open codes such as "logo design, representation of cheese in the logo, representation of the destination in the logo, symbolization, visual identity studies, digital route". The concept of brand is expressed as an effort to create an identity with the combination of local cultures and geographical features in terms of a touristic destination (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Image studies that reveal the relationship between the destination and the gastronomic product and show a clear connection with the related components highlight as important steps of branding (Askegaard & Kjeldgaard, 2007). Accordingly, the data obtained within the scope of the research support the originality, image, prestige activities and visual and digital designs of the route in the context of branding. The use of logos, brochures, signs, maps, colors and symbols for the route is considered within the scope of branding. In the route materials, the representation of the route, destination, culture and cheese are expressed as the points to be considered at the point of creating a brand identity. In the axis coding process, a category called "Implementation-Capacity Development" was formed by combining open codes such as "map marking, stop themes, determining the route, developing sample tour programs, associating the physical environment with the gastronomic product". As a result of the literature research, it has been seen that the implementation or capacity building process is considered as an important step of the route creation phase. According to the study titled "Mapping of Eco Route Bartın Natural and Cultural Corridors" by Görmüş, Özkazanç, Günşen, Artar and Atmış (2016), the implementation stages are expressed as the basic steps of the route creation action plan. ÇEKÜL (2015), on the other hand, examined the implementation phase under the title of management (realization and promotion process), which is the step after the infrastructure (process preparation), perspective (research and evaluation), planning (regional route setup). In line with open codes, the implementation phase in the region and capacity building activities for regional opportunities are emphasized in the cheese route development activity. It is thought that a system setup should be made with practices such as thematizing the route stops during the implementation and capacity building phase, and making different touristic arrangements depending on the stories of the places at the stops.

"Promotion and Marketing", another category that emerged with the axis coding stage, was created as a result of bringing together open codes such as "striving to keep on the agenda, visibility, sharing on social media, word of mouth marketing, press trip, website". Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Beerli and Martin (2004) consider image studies to increase visibility in promotional and marketing activities as the most important factor. In many studies for gastronomy destination marketing (Enright & Newton, 2005; Fields, 2002; Getz, Robinson, Andersson, & Vujicic, 2014; Horng & Tsai, 2011; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Jones & Jenkins, 2002; Kim, Yuan, Goh, & Antun, 2009; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007; Plummer, Telfer, Hashimoto, & Summers, 2005) it is seen as an important tool. Visibility studies on the developed cheese route should be done considering the potential visitor profile. It is considered important for marketing studies to bring snobbish activities to the forefront by disseminating WOM and e-WOM techniques and to use the strong effect of social media on travel decisions. It is necessary to create a remarkable communication channel with the potential tourist group through the creation of promotional videos and the organization of events such as press trips in order to use the power of the media in publicity. Digital channels such as the website to be created with an open access policy will contribute to supporting marketing activities.

As a result of the axis coding stage, the category of "Creating Memorable Experience" was created by combining open codes such as "rural traditional architectural experience, creating pleasant memories, authentic experience, activities, learning experience". Recallable touristic experiences are defined as touristic experiences that are not forgotten after the touristic visit and that keep a place in the minds of individuals as memories (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) state that there is a significant

difference between the real experiences of individuals and the unforgettable experiences that take place in their minds. Individuals can recall their experiences by reviving the narratives they have heard from the local people in the destination they travel and the memories they have accumulated during the trip in their memories after the touristic activity (Torres, 2016). It is thought that the high level of memorability of the experiences presented to the visitors during the cheese route development process will increase the tendency to revisit. Rural traditional architectural elements in the region are considered as a memorable experience for visitors. It is thought that activities such as tasting events for visitors and including them in the production stages will provide a learning experience to the visitors and thus the memorability of the route will be increased.

The last category formed by open codes such as "ensuring the sustainability of products, feeling of ownership, protection and survival, intergenerational transfer, responsible tourism, hospitality, respect for the environment and destination", which were brought together with the axis coding stage, was named as "Ensuring Sustainability". Bramwell (1994) argues that gastronomic sustainability is as important as environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, cultural sustainability and political sustainability in tourism studies. Scarpato (2003) states that gastronomy studies add a new perspective to the search for sustainable tourism. In this context, it is thought that the sources of gastronomic tourism and the concept of sustainability are important concepts for each other. It is thought that it will be important for sustainability to ensure that the local people in the destination where the cheese route is located, adopt the route. Considering the balance of conservation and survival, ensuring cultural unity, creating environmental and social awareness, and developing a culture of transmission between generations can be expressed as works to be done for route sustainability. The practices to be carried out in the field based on the responsible tourism approach are among the studies that should not be ignored in terms of sustainability. Maintaining the hospitality culture specific to the destination is considered as another important activity in this context.

As a result of the axis coding phase of the research, all open codes were combined under 10 categories. The resulting categories were supported by the findings of the research and the literature. The determined 10 categories were brought together with the selective coding method. With the findings of the research data, the evaluations of external evaluators and the support of the literature, it was determined that the "Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Model" consisted of 10 components. The "Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model", which was developed substantively in line with the research, is shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Sustainable gastronomy route development theoretical model

Source: Authors elaboration

Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model consists of the categories of "Research-Planning, Organization, Evaluation of Entrepreneurship, Evaluation of Gastronomy Tourism Resources, Evaluation of Alternative Touristic Attractions, Branding, Implementation-Capacity Development, Promotion and Marketing, Creating Memorable Experience, Ensuring Sustainability". In addition, each of the categories in the developed theoretical model describes a process. In this context, it is thought that it would be more accurate to examine the Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model with the order of the categories and separately for each category. The "Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model", which emerged as a result of the research, has been designed as a theoretical framework whose validity and reliability has not been proven (Creswell, 2016) and has a substantive feature.

It can be said that the model developed in this direction does not have the feature of generalization and expresses a conceptual framework.

The proposed theoretical model of sustainable gastronomy route development is based on the multi-stakeholder structure and resource-based development dimension of the destination, in line with the approaches in the destination management literature (Dredge, Jenkins, & Whitford, 2011; Pike & Page, 2014). However, unlike traditional destination management frameworks, the model focuses on gastronomic identity and local production-ecosystem relations, and addresses destination attractiveness not only in the context of touristic experience but also in an integrated manner with sustainable development goals. Sustainable gastronomy routes often intersect with agrotourism and local economy strengthening strategies discussed in rural development models (Crosta, Davies, & Maguire, 2006; Kneafsey, 2001). However, the model proposed in this study theoretically expands gastronomy routes not only as an economic rural development tool but also in terms of integrated management of social capital, community participation and ecological balance. In this respect, the theoretical model in question can provide an interdisciplinary contribution to both rural development and gastronomy tourism literature. Sustainable tourism literature (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; WTO, 2005) emphasizes the balanced management of environmental, socio-cultural and economic dimensions. The proposed theoretical model specifically adapts this tripartite structure to the design, management and monitoring of gastronomy routes, thus bringing general sustainable tourism models into a context focused on local gastronomic products. This reveals the theoretical novelty and practical originality of the study.

4.5. Harmonization of the Kars Cheese Route with the Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model

In the last phase of the research, the Kars Cheese Route project and the Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model were compared and both studies were harmonized. In this context, the processes of the Kars Cheese Route project were evaluated as follows, considering the categories of the theoretical model. The activities relevant to this context are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Harmonization of the Kars Cheese Route with the theoretical model

Categories of Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model	Examples of activities carried out within the scope of the Kars Cheese Route
1. Research-Planning	Literature and field studies conducted during the project proposal and implementation processes Determination of the project team and stakeholders
2. Organization	Collaboration with the founders and managers of the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route Conducting a workshop with all stakeholders of the project
3. Evaluation of Entrepreneurship	Inclusion of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial organizations in the project team Increasing the visibility of entrepreneurs in the visual works of the project
4. Evaluation of Gastronomy Tourism Resources	Conducting field research to activate the gastronomic heritage of the region Selling all types of cheese to maintain the local cheese diversity at route stops
5. Evaluation of Alternative Touristic Resources	Increasing the visibility of alternative tourist attractions in the visual works of the project Cooperation with touristic businesses in the region
6. Branding	Preparation of Kars Cheese Route Visual Identity Guide Material studies carried out with the project funders for the visibility of the Kars Cheese Route
7. Implementation-Capacity Development	Carrying out touristic arrangements at route stops Providing sustainable gastronomy tourism training to employees and project stakeholders at route stops Preparing tour programs for the route and sharing them with travel agencies in the region
8. Promotion and Marketing	Using social media tools to reach the target audience of the project Organizing press tours with gastronomy journalists
9. Creating Memorable Experience	Providing information to preserve the rural and authentic tourism experience in the region Designing a destination that can be part of the rural and authentic tourism experience in the region
10. Ensuring Sustainability	Carrying out representation activities that highlight the cheesemaking craft in the region Contributing to the region's cheese masters' assets by including them in the project team Ensuring sustainability by determining the project team on the basis of participation and collectivity.

Source: Authors elaboration

Kars Cheese Route project was supported within the scope of “Gelecek Turizmde”, which is carried out in partnership with the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Anadolu Efes. Research and planning processes were implemented in many stages of the project, from the submission of the project as a project proposal to the implementation stage. Various literature studies and field studies were carried out in the context of the cheese culture, cheese types,

gastronomic attractions and touristic potential of Kars. Field researches were carried out with cheese producers in various dairy farms in Kars, which will be marked as project stops, and the reports of public institutions and organizations in the region on cheese culture were examined. After the research activities started in 2019, Gelecek Turizmde fund was applied with the project proposal. Subsequently, iterative studies were conducted on various dimensions of the project proposal activities and process. After the shortlisting phase, the project proposal entered the first 6 grades. After this stage, Gelecek Turizmde team visited the project area and conducted various field researches in company with the project team. After the process in which the field researches were carried out in great detail, the project proposal was entitled to be among the 3 projects to be awarded.

Within the scope of these studies, a collective work approach was adopted by sharing project proposals with tourism actors in the region, various NGOs and other public institutions and organizations. In addition, interviews and correspondence were made with the authorities of various cheese routes in Europe. As a result of these correspondences, it was decided to carry out joint activities with the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route, which stated that it wanted to provide international voluntary consultancy to the Kars Cheese Route, and information was exchanged with the route founders at all stages of the project process. At the Kars Cheese Route Workshop, which was held with the institutional support of the Schleswig-Holstein Cheese Route, one of the route founders, Mr. Detlef MÖLLGAARD made an information presentation. In addition, a qualitative interview was conducted by the researcher in order to provide data for the research process of the route. During the studies carried out to form the Kars Cheese Route project team, considering the regional dynamics, many local tourism actors were in solidarity. A working staff with the participation of each group was formed with the selected project partners.

Kars has attracted significant touristic interest in recent years, with its multicultural past and its culinary culture shaped around milk and dairy products. In order to respond to the demands and expectations of visitors in the face of the developing tourist interest, some of the people of the region have started to offer various products and services by showing an example of entrepreneurship. In the context of factors such as the active participation of women in cheese production in the region and the Kars cuisine restaurants owned by women entrepreneurs, women's entrepreneurship has also been evaluated as an important resource. In this context, the visibility of entrepreneurs was ensured in the determination of route stops and map icons in order to evaluate entrepreneurship in the region during the creation of the Kars Cheese Route. The Kars Cheese Route, which was paused with 4 dairy farms and 2 museums for the initial phase, is planned to include more entrepreneurs in the following periods.

The Kars Cheese Route project has been prepared with the aim of keeping the gastronomic heritage items alive in the region and using them as a source of gastronomic tourism. Within the scope of the project, in order to create the Kars Cheese Route, topics such as cheese variety in Kars, cheese culture, Slow Food Presidium registered Boğatepe Gravyer Cheese and Türkmen Saçak Cheese as an artisanal and special product were studied. In addition, considering the Malakan stories in the Boğatepe Village and the fact that this village hosts Türkiye's first eco-museum such as Eco Museum Zavot, it was decided that a dairy in this area and Eco Museum Zavot would be among the project stops. The route stops (dairies and museums) within the scope of the Kars Cheese Route project were chosen considering the characteristics such as maintaining/exhibiting traditional production techniques or continuing natural production. It is seen that the culinary culture of Kars, as well as the cheese making culture, has very special and ethnic characteristics. In this context, other gastronomic products of Kars were included in the route map in order to raise awareness of Kars culinary culture and to transform culinary culture elements into touristic products. With this approach, it is aimed to offer a gastronomic experience to the visitors with the cheese culture of Kars and the cuisine of Kars.

At the stage of determining the route of the Kars Cheese Route, some plans were made considering the alternative touristic attractions in the project area. Various symbols were used on the map, such as the Baltic architecture symbol for the unique historical city view in Kars, the Sarıkamış Forests symbol for natural attractions and rural landscape, the symbol of the Minstrel tradition artist for cultural attractions, and alternative attractions were emphasized along with the route. Alternative touristic resources on and around the route of Kars Cheese Route contribute to the awareness of the route. In addition, these resources provide the route visitors the opportunity to learn about different touristic elements and to have alternative touristic experiences during their visit.

In this context, since the beginning of the Kars Cheese Route project, all corporate identity and image studies have been carried out together with the Atatürk University Rectorate Corporate Communications Directorate Brand Management Directorate. First of all, various logo designs were made for the project, considering the representation of Gravyer Cheese, Kars destination and the route in the logo. The route logo determined after these studies is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Kars Cheese Route logo

Source: Authors elaboration

Gravyer Cheese, one of the most special cheese types of the region, was used in the design of the Kars Cheese Route logo. Gravyer Cheese is depicted as a kind of cursor title that marks a point on the route. In addition, in the design of the logo, the letters "K", "P" and "R", which are the first letters of the name -in Turkish- Kars Cheese Route, were combined to form a Gravyer Cheese piece. The visual design of the logo is shown in Figure 7.

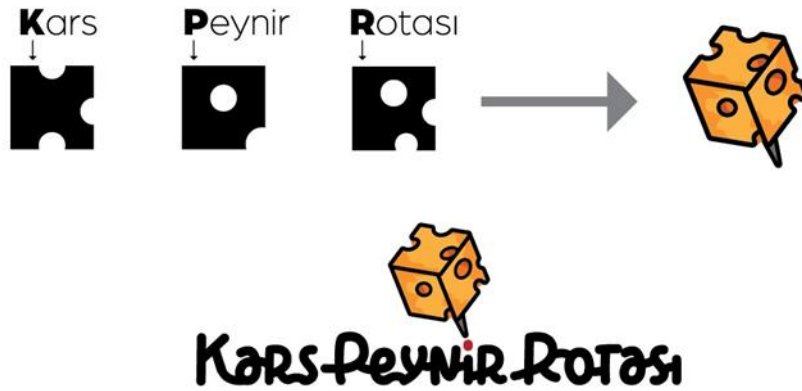


Figure 7. Visual design of Kars Cheese Route logo

Source: Authors elaboration

The cursor design titled Gravyer Cheese used in the Kars Cheese Route logo was also used to represent the route stops and the route. The stops selected within the scope of Kars Cheese Route consist of a total of 6 points located in Sarıkamış district, Kars, Boğatepe Village, Bozyiğit Village and Ardahan-Yanatlı Village. The design showing the regions where the route stops are located and the representative route is shown in Figure 8.

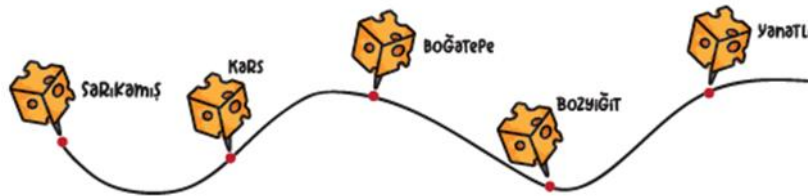


Figure 8. Display of the areas with the stops of the Kars Cheese Route

Source: Authors elaboration

As part of the visual identity studies for the Kars Cheese Route, route-specific packaging designs were also created. With these designs, it is aimed to ensure the institutional visibility of the route on the cheese packages specific to the route. Design studies were applied on the packaging label, packaging card and carrying case. Attention has been paid to the fact that the materials used in the designs have natural properties. These designs are shown in Image 4.



Image 4. Material designs of Kars Cheese Route

Source: Authors elaboration

Within the scope of branding activities, “Kars Cheese Route Visual Identity Guide” was also prepared. In addition to visual design activities, route map studies were also carried out. The Kars Cheese Route map, which has been completed with a long process, includes the symbolized route, stops and alternative tourist attractions on the route area. It is aimed to use interesting and unique colors and lines on the route map, where local values are emphasized. Kars Cheese Route map is shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9. Kars Cheese Route map

Source: Authors elaboration

As part of another branding work, a trademark application was made to the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office for the registration of the "Kars Cheese Route" brand. In 2022, the “Kars Cheese Route” brand was entitled to receive a registration certificate. In this context, it is thought that the legal rights and institutional sustainability of the route design will be protected.

The first implementation step of the Kars Cheese Route project was to develop a route map. After the developed map, route-specific sales units and stop signs were designed in order to increase the touristic capacity of the route stops. Developed materials are indicated in Image 5.



Image 5. Kars Cheese Route sales units and stop sign

Source: Authors elaboration

Route-specific cheese types (Boğatepe Gravyer Cheese, Kars Old Kaşar Cheese, Kars Fresh Kaşar Cheese, Malakan Cheese, Çakmak White Cheese, Boğatepe Shepherd Cheese, Türkmen Saçak Cheese) are displayed on the sales units and the visibility of the route products is ensured. The packaging works of the route cheeses to be exhibited on the route-specific sales units were also carried out with route visuals. With the signage works for 4 dairy farms and 2 museums, which are among the route stops, information about the project and the route has been provided to be seen in the visited area. "Sustainability Trainings" were given to cheese producers within the scope of the route in the last period of the project in the context of application-capacity development studies. A team of six tourism faculty members from Atatürk University conducted the relevant training. A 2-day tour schedule was also been created for the route. The visibility and emphasis of the region's values other than its culinary riches were given consideration when creating the tour packages. The goal of all the work done throughout the implementation and capacity-building phase was to make the Kars Cheese Route a specialized tourist destination in the area.

Kars' social media visibility was used for the Kars Cheese Route project. In order to ensure the visibility of the project in the social media, first of all, an Instagram account named "karspeynirrotasi" was created. Activities and information about the project are shared periodically on the Instagram account and the account is actively used. More accessibility is aimed with frequently used hashtags such as "#kars" and "#doguekspresi" in Instagram posts. In order to carry out the promotion and marketing processes of the project effectively, the website karspeynirrotasi.com, a brochure and a promotional film were prepared. In the brochures prepared, the route map, information about the route stops and the general characteristics of the destination are emphasized. In the promotional film of the route, the story of the Kars Cheese Route and the destination of Kars began to be conveyed to potential visitors. At the end of the project period, a press trip was organized to the route area by Gelecek Turizmde team. Hürriyet Newspaper gastronomy writer Ebru ERKE, Milliyet Newspaper gastronomy writer Zeynep KAKINÇ, Capital Magazine Deputy Editor-in-Chief Özlem AYDIN AYWACI, Sabah Newspaper writer Sinan ÖZEDİNCİK, Sözcü Newspaper writer Deniz ZEYREK, Dünya Newspaper writer Handan Sema CEYLAN, Oksijen Newspaper writer Elif ERGU DEMİRAL has participated.

Various cultural heritage items in Kars were used to create a memorable experience. Tour programs were created to include activities such as the Minstrel Shoot and the sleigh ride on the frozen Lake Çıldır. Touristic sales units were located in related production areas in order to provide authentic experiences in dairy farms. In addition, glass add-ons were used to monitor the production area in some dairy farms so that tourists can experience learning in the production areas.

The trademark registration application made to ensure the sustainability of the Kars Cheese Route project is seen as a very important sustainability activity. It is thought that the route, which stands out as a formation with brand value, will become a successful destination by ensuring its corporate sustainability. In addition,

within the scope of the Kars Cheese Route project, which has made it its mission to ensure the sustainability of the environment, life and tourism, it is planned to develop activities that will contribute to the development of product and service quality, the protection of natural resources and the effective use of cultural heritage in order to create a culture of respect for the destination. The phenomenon of hospitality among the protected values in the region is also kept alive at the stops within the scope of the route. Visitors to the region are hosted by local women at tables prepared with Kars cuisine products and handcrafted cloths. In addition, in order to ensure the sustainability of the route, it is planned to establish a non-governmental organization called "Kars Cheese Route Management Association".

5. Discussion

Cheese tourism is a niche type of gastronomic tourism that has witnessed the increasing interest of academics around the world in recent years (Ermolaev, Yashalova, & Ruban, 2019). While focusing on cheese tourism, this type of tourism reflects the relationship between cheese and tourism, which acknowledges the process of giving tourism value to a local dairy product. Environments such as rural and natural environments are seen as areas where old traditions that are still preserved and transmitted exist – in a sense, are hidden (Fusté Forné, 2015). The natural resources and rural areas in the environment where cheese is produced are considered as a symbol of rural identity and a tourist attraction factor (Fusté Forné, 2016).

Cheese routes are basically associations created for the purpose of protecting and maintaining the local cheese diversity and cheese production techniques, which are the gastronomic heritage of a region. Along with cheese production and sales areas, farms, pastures, cheese museums and tasting or experience centers are identified and marked through cheese routes. Then, a route that includes all these areas is determined and the entire route is turned into a holistic touristic product.

Cheese routes have begun to be seen as one of the important sources of food tourism. The traditional, artisanal cheese varieties and production techniques that are kept alive in the countryside through these routes attract the attention of the visitors. Gastronomic heritage products and techniques, which have been hidden in the countryside for many years and transferred from generation to generation, are brought to the relevant regions as tourism resources and contribute to socioeconomic development.

Theoretical and practical studies in the field of cheese tourism and cheese routes are very limited. Despite this, it is seen that the gastronomy tourist profile, which changes day by day, has developed an interest in cheese tourism. Cheese tourism and cheese routes studies, which will be supported by academic research in recent years, suggest that traditional and artisanal cheeses will be considered among the important sources of gastronomic tourism in the near future. Due to the limited number of cheese tourism and cheese route studies and the fact that there is no study directly in the context of cheese route development theory in the literature, it is thought that the study has an original value. In this context, the research has been prepared to create a substantive gastronomy route development model in which various processes are revealed.

After the process of obtaining the study data was completed, the open codes obtained were subjected to axis coding in the next stage and various categories were obtained. It is thought that applying these categories in order in the route development processes would be a correct strategy. In line with the findings obtained within the scope of the research, the "Sustainable Gastronomy Route Development Theoretical Model", which is obtained from 10 categories and has a substantive quality, was created in the last part of the research. The validity of the categories and the realization processes of the Kars Cheese Route were tested by trying to harmonize the categories for which the Kars Cheese Route project and the developed theoretical model were created.

It is thought that the gastronomy route development model created can be used in the studies of wine routes or other product-oriented food routes. The reason why the developed theory was designed specifically for the cheese theme is seen as a matter that can be explained by the researcher. As Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban (2019) stated, apitourism meets the concepts of bee/honey tourism (Pantoja, Gómez, Contreras, Grimau, & Montenegro, 2017) and enotourism wine tourism (Winfree, McIntosh, & Nadreau, 2018), cheese tourism will be in Latin in the near future. Based on the word "caseus" meaning "cheese", it can be expressed as "casetourism". From this point of view, it is thought that cheese tourism and cheese routes are artisanal phenomena such as wine tourism and wine routes, and that the product in both concepts is directly related to

the geography in which it is produced, in the context of factors such as gastronomy tourism or gastronomy routes to a certain extent. In this context, it can be said that it has been decided to conduct the research on the theme of cheese, taking into account cheese tourism and the location of cheese routes in the near future.

It is thought that the developed theoretical model can be applied in many destinations famous for their gastronomic heritage cheeses. It can be stated that the regions that want to develop as a cheese tourism destination can offer a holistic touristic product to the visitors through cheese routes and in this context, they can have the opportunity to promote an effective destination. Although a theoretical model for cheese has been developed within the scope of the research, it can be said that original gastronomy routes can be developed or transformed into original theoretical models by associating the relevant model with different products. It is thought that other research and studies to be carried out in this context will contribute significantly to the original value of this research.

The theoretical model created within the scope of the study has a substantive quality. In order to bring the developed theoretical model to a generalizable approach, certain studies should be done through quantitative methods. It will be important to test the model developed in subsequent studies and bring it into the literature with a generalizable approach.

The qualitative design of the study and the use of cross-sectional data collection techniques have limited the representation of the views of the entire local population and potential visitors. This can be considered one of the limitations of the research. In addition, although theoretically meaningful, the use of theoretical sampling may inherently involve subjectivity. The open coding process applied to make sense of the data is based on the researcher's interpretations, which may also introduce a degree of subjectivity. This, too, should be acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

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