

Investigation of perceptions regarding the concept of gastronomic experience with word association test

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Abstract

The process of food consumption is not only one of the vital activities but also various gastronomic experiences shaped by motivations, specializations or social perspectives. Gastronomic experiences, especially today, draw attention as one of the most important experience activities of the whole world, and have started to be examined multidimensionally in the relevant literature. Especially in our country, an in-depth examination of the word gastronomic experience conceptually can contribute to the framework of the concept of gastronomic experience. In this direction, the study aims to reveal the cognitive and mental perspectives on the concept of gastronomic experience. Word association test (WAT) was used to examine individuals' cognitive perceptions of the concept of gastronomic experience, how gastronomic experiences create a conceptual perception of individuals, and the relationships between these concepts. The research data were collected from 40 people who participated in various pastry and chocolate workshops at Atölye Deneyim, the first pastry and chocolate workshop offering a gastronomic experience in Nevşehir province. The 385 vocabulary and 40 definition responses were obtained with the WAT form. As a result of word cloud and word frequency analyses, gastronomic experience was mostly associated with the words "new, cuisine, different, culture", while definitions such as "experiencing new tastes", "experiencing things I have not eaten before and having information about them", "learning new tastes by traveling", "traveling for food tasting", "eating good and quality food" emerged in the answers given about gastronomic experience.

Keywords

Keywords: Experience, Gastronomy, Gastronomic Experience, Word Association Test

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Artificial Intelligence Usage Statement

The authors declare that no generative or AI-supported tools were used at any stage of the study, including idea development, data analysis, text writing, or language editing. All academic, ethical, and legal responsibility for the content, analyses, and conclusions of the manuscript rests entirely with the authors. No AI-generated or fabricated data, results, analyses, references, or citations are included.



1. Introduction

In post-modern societies, gastronomy is an important source of cultural identity and has an important position in cultural tourism (Şahin, & Ünver, 2015). Considered as a tool for understanding the historical background, cultural values or traditions of societies, gastronomy offers sensory and cognitive sensations beyond the daily experience (Davidova & Dudkina, 2024). Gastronomic experience is one of the most popular experience types of recent times in line with the meaning and motivations attributed to food and beverages such as socialization, status, and the search for diversity, as well as the characteristics specific to the product and service of food and beverages such as taste, quality, or environmental context (Robinson & Clifford, 2012; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2024). Today, gastronomic experiences are both an alternative and a peak leisure activity (Quan & Wang, 2004). The gastronomic experience process is influenced by many different factors and these factors affect decisions and attitudes during and after the experience. In this context, many factors that affect eating and drinking behaviors and preferences such as personality traits, motivations, cultural or religious rituals shape gastronomic experiences (Mak et al., 2017).

On the other hand, gastronomic experiences significantly affect satisfaction with a business or destination. Therefore, a destination's positive or negative gastronomic identity can affect consumers' loyalty and future intentions towards the business (Onat & Guneren, 2024). In this context, having information about what the concept of gastronomic experience means in consumer perceptions and how they define gastronomic experiences can shape the developments and regulations regarding gastronomic experiences in the food and beverage activities of businesses, destinations or the food and beverage sector. In addition, gastronomic experiences are extremely important for sustainable, unique market segmentation strategies (Zrnić & Lončar, 2024). When the relevant literature is examined, the concept of gastronomic experience is emphasized as an important concept or keyword, especially in recent studies conducted in the field of food and beverage (Mora et al., 2021; Mora et al., 2021; Yoo, Park & Cho, 2022; Vukolic, Gajić & Penic, 2025; Moura, Mira & Teixeira, 2025).

In this framework, the current study aims to examine consumer perceptions of the concept of gastronomic experience. Consumers were asked to write the first words that come to their mind when they think of gastronomic experience and to define it. In this way, it is thought that it may benefit the development of consumer-oriented strategies in line with the suggestions in the relevant literature.

2. Conceptual Framework

Experience

In the current dictionary of Turkish Language Association of Turkey (TDK), the concept of experience is defined as "all of the knowledge acquired by a person in a certain period of time or acquired throughout life, expertise, experience" (Turkish Language Association, 2024). Experience is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon. Experience is considered as a whole of people's sensory and cognitive, social and cultural characteristics, behaviors, feelings and thoughts, evaluations and interactions (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Moreover, experience can also be a reference to other experiences. In the field of consumer behavior, marketing and management, experience is shaped around consumer characteristics, previous experiences, environmental and sensory conditions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this framework, according to Andersson (2007), experience occurs when production and consumption meet. Experience can be experienced in internal and external spaces. The individual may not always be involved in the experience process with physical elements. When we think of experience, environmental, external areas such as experiencing physical elements and experiencing various activities may first come to mind. However, it is emphasized that the concept of experience is also valid for the process in which all the emotions and feelings that the individual experiences in his/her inner world are formed (Benli, 2020; Koçak, 2020). Therefore, when the experience obtained with external elements is considered together with the internal experiences of the individual, it can bring many factors such as evaluations, judgments, feelings of liking or disliking, and intention to experience again (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Robinson & Clifford, 2012).

Gastronomic Experience

The concept of gastronomy, which consists of the words Gastro (stomach) and Nomi (law), is defined as a branch of science that examines the scientific and artistic activities in the preparation, cooking and presentation of food and beverages, as well as the eating and drinking behaviors and habits of countries or regions from a historical, cultural, social and economic perspective (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Gastronomy in a region or country can create unique experiences that cannot be imitated. Every question such as "who", "what", "where", "when", "how" in gastronomic experiences is considered important for making sense of the experience process and is analyzed interdisciplinary (Mak et al., 2013). Therefore, gastronomic experiences are one of the multidisciplinary fields of study (Köster, 2009). The gastronomic experience process is shaped by many different types of motivations such as novelty/diversity, familiarity, interpersonal

communication, sensory/contextual pleasure, authenticity, escape/relaxation, status/prestige or health concerns (Mak et al., 2017). From the moment individuals aim to enrich their daily nutritional needs around factors such as new, unique, ethnic, and to give sensory meaning to the process, the food consumption process emerges as a gastronomic experience that varies according to motivations (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). We can say that food-related motivations are one of the antecedents in the development of the gastronomic experience process and the subsequent formation of various attitudes and behaviors (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). For example, gastronomic experiences can sometimes be learning-oriented, depending on the individual's interests and even their education and work. Alternatively, the desire to get away from the difficulties or routine of daily life, even for a short time, can make sense with gastronomic experiences (Ding & Lee, 2017).

It has been mentioned that the gastronomic experience process should be examined with various components from different dimensions (Benli, 2020; Tkach, et al., 2021). Since it is a process experience, it may be important to consider gastronomic experiences as a whole and explain the successors obtained from the experiences holistically. Even though the components of gastronomic experience are classified with different dimensions, the components have a direct relationship with each other. These components can be called the antecedents of the gastronomic experience. Therefore, these components that determine the gastronomic experience process can determine the factors that lead to the gastronomic experience process and the direction of the process during the gastronomic experience (Yılmaz, 2021).

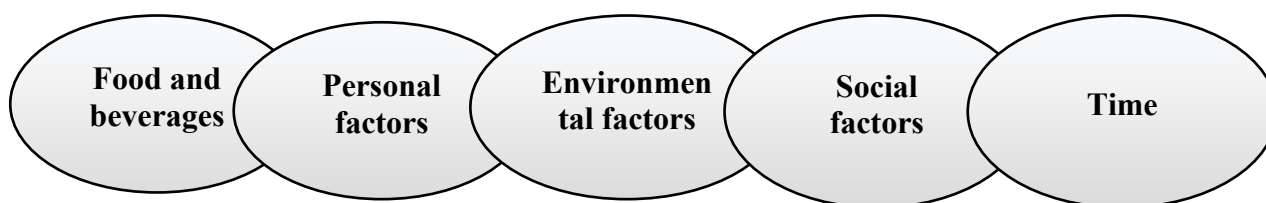


Figure 1: Components of Gastronomic Experience

Source: (Yılmaz, 2021).

Food and beverages, which are the main components of gastronomic experiences, are affected by qualities such as flavor, quality, safety, presentation, temperature, smell, consistency, texture (Mengual-Recuerda et al., 2020). The sensory (smell, taste, etc.) and contextual (color, texture, etc.) dimensions of food and beverages cause positive and negative evaluations of the experience process as they affect the before and after of gastronomic experiences. In addition, both general personality traits (extraversion, introversion, etc.) and food-related personality traits (neophilia, neophobia and variety seeking) affect the gastronomic experience process and the satisfaction and future intentions (recommendation, revisit, loyalty) that are likely to occur after the experience (Mak et al., 2017; Tarinc et al., 2023). On the other hand, environmental factors are examined within the framework of features such as ambiance, layout, decoration, location, music, color (Pappas et al., 2022). While all external elements that appeal to the five senses in the gastronomic experience process affect the attitudes obtained from the experiences, gastronomic experiences are considered as an important tool to increase and facilitate the social interaction of individuals with family and friends or other people (Mossberg, 2007). As a matter of fact, social interactions are known to be an important element that adds value to gastronomic experiences. While social interactions and cultural values can have a positive impact on the gastronomic experience process, they may result in negative attitudes and behaviors or the experience may not take place at all (Kovalenko et al., 2023). The gastronomic experience is also influenced by the time of special events (celebrations, birthdays, honeymoons, etc.) and special days (holidays, vacations, weekends, etc.) and the rituals that take place. Therefore, as a temporal factor, it is considered to play a decisive role in shaping the experience (Yılmaz, 2021).

Gastronomic experiences take place primarily in restaurants, hotels, private or public food and beverage businesses both in daily life and in the travel experience process. However, it may be incomplete to evaluate only within the framework of these businesses. As a matter of fact, gastronomic experiences become more detailed, more enjoyable or instructive with different activities, especially for consumers interested in gastronomic experiences. Yarış (2014) lists the activities that create gastronomic experiences such as festivals, gastronomic tours, gastronomic museums, street flavors, gastronomic courses, spending a day with a chef.

3. Method

This study was designed within the framework of qualitative research methods. Data was collected using a word association test (WAT) to reveal participants' perceptions of the concept of 'gastronomic experience.' The data obtained was examined using thematic analysis, and themes reflecting participants' mental representations were identified. In this respect, the study is evaluated within the scope of descriptive qualitative research design. WAT is one of the measurement and evaluation methods used to identify the first words that a word determined for measurement is associated with in the

mind and to make sense of associations and thought processes (Özatlı & Bahar, 2010; Keskin, Örgün & Akbulut, 2017). The word association test is a qualitative data collection method used to reveal individuals' mental representations of a particular concept. In this method, participants are presented with a key word (cue word) and asked to write down the first few (e.g., 5–10) words that come to mind in association with that word. The words participants provide through association offer natural and direct clues reflecting their knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and value judgements regarding the concept in question. The word association test is a highly effective and low-intervention tool for analysing cognitive structures, conceptual frameworks, and cultural patterns. In this context, it is widely used in fields such as social sciences, education, psychology, marketing, and tourism for concept analysis and thematic analysis (Pranoto & Afrilita, 2019; Rojas-Rivas et al., 2022).

Therefore, in line with the purpose of this study, WAT, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was preferred to reveal the cognitive and mental perspectives on the concept of gastronomic experience. The research data were collected from 40 people who participated in various pastry and chocolate workshops accompanied by an instructor chef, which is a type of gastronomic experience, at Atölye Deneyim, the first pastry and chocolate workshop operating in Nevşehir province. Purposive sampling method was utilized by choosing the research sample from the participants in the gastronomic experience.

In the data collection process, first of all, WAT was introduced to the participants with examples, and then the steps in the form were briefly explained. 40 participants were asked to write the first words that came to their minds in front of the concept of “Gastronomic Experience” listed 10 times. Then, they were asked to define the concept of “Gastronomic Experience” with a sentence in order to prevent possible misconceptions in the analysis process and to reach whether there is a scientific answer. The response time was determined as 30 seconds, which is accepted as the appropriate time in the studies in the literature (Bahar & Özatlı, 2003; Polat, 2013). A total of 440 responses were obtained and analyzed. Firstly, the frequency values of the words that the participants associated with the concept of gastronomic experience were analyzed. Then, the definitions obtained were analyzed and supported with the relevant literature.

The ethical committee approval document required for the collection of data used in the study was obtained from the Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University Ethics Committee on 5 February 2025 with decision number 27/1. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation was ensured, and their consent was obtained. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Findings

As seen in Table 1, a total of 40 participants were included in the study. In terms of gender, it is seen that there are 26 female and 19 male participants and that these participants are more in the 32-43 age range. Participants in the 18-30 age range followed, while the lowest number of participants was in the 44-56 age range.

Table 1: Demographic feature results

		f	%
Age	18-30	26	10.4
	31-43	19	7.6
	44-56	40	
Gender		f	%
	Female	12	4.8
	Male	19	7.6
		9	3.6

Source: Authors own elaboration

Table 2 shows the results of the word association test. The participants answered the first 6 words without leaving the first 6 words blank, and left 15 words blank after the 7th word. Two participants left the 7th word blank, three participants left the 8th word blank, and five participants each left the 9th and 10th words blank. According to the results, a total of 385 word responses were obtained from 40 participants.

Table 2: Word Association Test Results

Word	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Total Participant	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
Answer Rate	40	40	40	40	40	40	38	37	35	35
Skip Rate	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	5	5
Word Count	385									

Source: Authors own elaboration

Table 3 shows the word frequencies of the word responses obtained from the participants.

Table 3. Frequencies of the Words Generated for the Concept of Gastronomic Experience

Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
New	17	Cultural	4
Food	12	Delices	4
Different	11	Famous	4
Culture	11	Authentic	4
Cuisine	10	Restaurant	3
To learn	9	To familiarize	3
By traveling	9	Recipes	3
To socialize	7	Trip	3
To taste	7	Tentative	3
World	7	Pleasure	3
Traditional	6	Italy	3
Quality	6	Odour	3
To discover	6	Learned	3
Flavor	6	Special	3
Interaction	5	Peculiar	3
Delicacy	5	Aesthetic	3
Popular	5	Experince	3
Street	5	Unforgettable	3
Presentation	4	Meals	3
Wine	4	Sustenance	3
Habits	4	Local	3
Gastronomy	4	Enjoyment	3
Tour	4	Feast	3
Total 385		Others...	

Source: Authors own elaboration



Figure 2. Word Cloud of Participants' Responses to the Concept of Gastronomic Experience

Source: Authors own elaboration

Figure 2 shows the word cloud visualization created in line with the frequency values of the words that the participants responded to the concept of gastronomic experience in the WAT form. As a result of the word cloud analysis used for the word association test, it was revealed that the words “New”, “Food”, “Different”, followed by “Cuisine”, “Culture”, “By traveling”, “To learn” were repeated the most in the answers of the participants in the study regarding the concept of gastronomic experience. In the word cloud, among the 385 word responses obtained from the participants, there are words that are repeated at most 17 times and at least 3 times.

Table 4. An Analysis of Participants' Word Responses Regarding the Concept of Gastronomic Experience Based on Themes

Gastronomy & Food/Drink	Culture & Identity	Discovery & Learning	Emotions & Experiential Quality	Travel & Tourism	Interaction & Social Life
food	culture	learning	new	travel	socializing
cuisine	traditional	exploring	different	journey	interaction
tasting	cultural	discovering	high-quality	popular	
flavor	authentic	recognizing	pleasure		
taste	local	learned	unforgettable		
delight	unique	experience	enjoyment		
wine	special	practice			
restaurant	habits	exploration			
recipes	artistic				
edibles	Italy (as a cultural reference)				
dishes					
presentation					

Source: Authors own elaboration

Table 4 shows the word responses given by the participants regarding the concept of gastronomic experience, sized according to themes. Within the scope of this study, the themes were named as Gastronomy & Food/Drink, Culture & Identity, Discovery & Learning, Emotions & Experiential Quality, Travel & Tourism and Interaction & Social Life. It is seen that the words related to the dimensions “Gastronomy & Food/Drink” and “Culture & Identity” were used the most, and the words related to the dimensions “Interaction & Social Life” were used the least.

In the WAT form, the participants were asked to make a one-sentence definition regarding the question “What is the concept of gastronomic experience?”. The definitions obtained by 40 participants about Gastronomic Experience are as follows:

1. *“Trying new flavors recommended by experts.”*
2. *“Experiencing firsts in food and drinks.”*
3. *“It is a way of life for me.”*
4. *“To access and experience new recipes and dishes.”*
5. *“To gain experiences in the field of food and drink.”*
6. *“To get new experiences out of the ordinary.”*
7. *“To learn about food culture.”*
8. *“To experience and learn about things I have never eaten before.”*
9. *“To understand cultures around the world through new flavors.”*
10. *“It is the presentation of information and experiences about food and beverage.”*
11. *“The experience of cooking.”*
12. *“Eating good and quality food.”*
13. *“Creativity about food.”*
14. *“Having knowledge about types of food and the tendency to make them.”*
15. *“It is life itself.”*
16. *“Experiences to develop skills in the field of gastronomy.”*
17. *“Learning about world cuisines.”*
18. *“Experiencing good and beautiful food.”*
19. *“It is everything related to food and beverage.”*
20. *“It is to taste or experience making dishes from different cultures.”*
21. *“To learn local flavors.”*
22. *“Seeing new places and tasting new flavors.”*

23. *"It is tasting food made with intensive labor in a place where an individual goes for money."*
24. *"To gain new experiences by experiencing new flavors."*
25. *"Tasting different flavors in different countries or cities."*
26. *"Eating at a new restaurant."*
27. *"To see the act of eating as an experience that appeals to the senses rather than just a need."*
28. *"It is an experience where we discover new flavors, perhaps traveling for it."*
29. *"It is the whole process of cooking, presenting and eating."*
30. *"Being happy by discovering new flavors."*
31. *"To try and observe the food of other cultures."*
32. *"Learning new dishes and improving yourself."*
33. *"It is a cultural and artistic journey."*
34. *"Traveling for food tasting."*
35. *"To experience different flavors while traveling."*
36. *"To present food and cooking in an aesthetic way that is pleasing to the eye rather than out of necessity."*
37. *"Experiences that help people learn to enjoy food."*
38. *"It is gaining new experience by tasting flavors we have not tasted before."*
39. *"To interact with food in any way."*
40. *"It is a journey to try new flavors."*

When the definitions given by the participants for the concept of gastronomic experience are examined, "Experiencing new tastes", "Experiencing things I have not eaten before and having information about them", "Learning new tastes by traveling", "Traveling for food tasting", "Eating good and quality food", Definitions such as "Gaining experiences in the field of food and beverage", "Learning about different cultures", "Everything related to food and beverage", "Experiences that help people learn about the taste of food" and "Trying and observing the food of other cultures" were created.

5. Conclusion

As in the basis of the concept of experience, the individual encounters the qualities of gastronomic experience in each of the components of gastronomic experience, such as the direct, intrinsic qualities of food and beverages or the presentation of food and beverages. When the studies on gastronomic experience are examined, it is seen that many variables affect the experience process (Sthapit, 2019). Studies on gastronomic experience have been examined especially in terms of the importance of gastronomic experiences in consumers' travel experiences, the relationship between gastronomic experience and food image of the destination, the place and importance of gastronomic motivations in gastronomic experience, and the relationship between gastronomic experience and future intentions (Dixit & Prayag, 2022; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Richards, 2021). In this study, the cognitive perceptions of the participants in the pastry workshop who experienced various pastry and chocolate workshops on the concept of gastronomic experience were examined through the word association test (WAT). The findings obtained support the related literature.

As a matter of fact, while explaining the concept of gastronomic experience in the relevant literature, it is mentioned that gastronomic experiences have various characteristics. These characteristics allow for different experiences that can be obtained during the gastronomic experience process. Gastronomic experiences are considered as an important tool to increase or facilitate individuals' social interaction with family and friends or other people they do not know (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021; Martín et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been revealed that social interactions are an important element that adds value to gastronomic experiences (Mossberg, 2007). In this context, as a result of the findings obtained in the current study, it is seen that the participants associate the concept of "socializing" with the concept of gastronomic experience at a high rate. On the other hand, an individual may not be involved in gastronomic activities only for pleasure. Gastronomic experiences can be realized with the aim of learning and discovery according to the individual's interests, education level or occupational group (Ding & Lee, 2017). It is possible to say that the participants in this study also evaluated gastronomic experiences for learning and exploring at a high rate.

On the other hand, gastronomic products and services are expressed as experiences that are difficult to imitate or unique (Chang, Kivela & Mak, 2010). Gastronomic experiences are evaluated together with sensory characteristics of food and beverages such as presentation, color and texture, environmental (contextual) characteristics such as atmosphere, service, music or cultural characteristics such as habits and rituals. Indeed, the characteristics of food and beverages are differentiated as an important part of culture (Hendijani, 2016). Within the framework of this study, when the responses given by the participants are analyzed, it is seen that the participants defined gastronomic experiences in terms of sensory, contextual or cultural aspects and were frequently paired with the words “culture”, “authentic”, “cuisine” or “traditional”.

Finally, within the scope of the current study, it was revealed that the participants most frequently evaluated gastronomic experiences as “new” and “different” food and beverage experiences. Ultimately, it can be said that the findings obtained correspond to the relevant literature. The desire to get away from the difficulties or routine of daily life, even for a short time, can gain meaning through gastronomic experiences. At this stage, the individual can use gastronomic experiences as a tool for his/her field of specialization or for his/her own social and cultural development. On the other hand, gastronomic experiences can be made more enjoyable, especially with creative gastronomic activities.

The entertainment factor, one of the most common leisure experience attributes, can be perceived through the senses obtained from gastronomic experiences (Ding & Lee, 2017). The feelings, thoughts and judgments obtained as a result of gastronomic experiences affect consumers' intentions that emerge after the experience (Kovalenko et al., 2023; Mora et al., 2021). Therefore, all stakeholders in gastronomic experience routes have a responsibility in order to benefit the sustainable activities, competitive advantages or economic and prestige gains of destinations. On the other hand, the attitudes and intentions of individuals with different personality traits or motivations towards gastronomic experiences vary. For example, in order to increase the energy and excitement of consumers who tend to easily participate in new gastronomic experiences, it may be valuable to pay attention not only to food but also to all sensory and physical conditions that appeal to the five senses during the gastronomic experience process.

This study directly and unstructuredly reveals how individuals perceive the concept of ‘gastronomic experience.’ In the literature, gastronomic experience is usually measured using questionnaires and specific scales; however, this approach can paint a more natural, in-depth, and culturally unique picture by revealing the meanings that participants attach to the concept through free association. The words obtained may vary across different countries or cultural groups. Therefore, the study can contribute to the literature by revealing the mental representations of gastronomy among individuals in a specific country or region, thereby shedding light on how local gastronomic culture is perceived. Since the gastronomic experience offers a multi-layered structure that encompasses not only eating and drinking, but also the senses, interaction, learning, discovery, culture and emotion, a study conducted in this context could contribute to the fields of experiential marketing, tourist behaviour and hedonistic consumption. In addition, the list of words obtained can be used as an item pool for scales or questionnaires to be developed in the future.

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