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**Address** Akdeniz University, Tourism Faculty  
Dumlupınar Boulevard  
Post Code: 07058 Campus ANTALYA,  
TÜRKİYE

**Telephone** + 90 242 227 45 50  
+ 90 242 310 20 20

**Fax** + 90 242 227 46 70

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## FOOD IMAGE AND DESTINATION LOYALTY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LOCAL FOOD CONSUMPTION VALUES

Merve ÇETİN<sup>1</sup>

*School of Tourism and Hotel Management, Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0001-5254-7428

Semra AKAR ŞAHİNGÖZ

*Faculty of Tourism, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6727-5277

### ABSTRACT

Local food tourism is becoming increasingly popular, riveting academics to determine the relationships between food image, loyalty, and local food consumption values. The authors particularly aimed to examine how food image might impact loyalty and the mediating role of local food consumption values in this relationship. The research sample comprises foreign tourists visiting İstanbul and Antalya. Analyses were performed over the data collected from 659 foreign tourists visiting the relevant destinations. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for testing the hypotheses. The results revealed that food image is an influential element that plays a determinant role on local food consumption values. Moreover, it was found that food image affects loyalty positively and significantly. It was concluded that taste/quality value, epistemic value and interaction value mediate the relationship between food image and loyalty. On the grounds of the research findings, suggestions were presented for practitioners and future research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The significance of food and beverages within the tourism industry has progressively increased over time. Local food and beverages feature national, regional, or individual identity of a destination and thus develop the food image (FI) in the destination concerned. With the positive FI

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Merve Çetin, School of Tourism and Hotel Management, Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Burdur, Türkiye. E-mail: [mgudek@mehmetakif.edu.tr](mailto:mgudek@mehmetakif.edu.tr)

created in the minds of tourists, destinations gain greater competitive advantages over their rivals (Chen & Tsai, 2007). It has come to light that the image increases destinations' potential of being preferred, affects decision-making processes and tourist behaviors at large (Wang, 2021). For this reason, it can be argued that FI is a fundamental element that impacts tourist behavior.

Numerous studies have delved into the effects of FI on loyalty and have concluded that a destination's FI has a noteworthy impact on loyalty (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Yasami et al., 2020). However, a positive destination image alone does not necessarily explain revisit intentions (Yasami et al., 2020). In addition, most studies have examined the mediating role of food satisfaction, personality traits, and culinary quality in the relationship between FI and loyalty (Peštek & Činjurević 2014; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019) but disregarded the idea of value.

On the other hand, value has been emphasized as an antecedent variable impacting loyalty, one of the strongest predictors of the perceived value attracting the growing attention of researchers (Chen & Chen, 2010). Previous studies have revealed that the perceived value of a travel destination or tourist experience plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' decisions to revisit (Choe & Kim, 2019; Hussain et al., 2022; Leow et al., 2024; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Prominent marketing constructs such as image and perceived value are often cited as indicators of loyalty. Numerous studies in service industries have explored the reciprocal relationships between the two constructs (Clemes et al., 2014).

Beyond the basic benefits obtained from food consumption, the characteristics and benefits of local foods consumed in any destination also differ. For example, consumption of local foods in a destination is associated with values such as meeting the local culture, eating new local foods, showing interest in the food culture of the host country, expecting good memories, interacting, gaining prestige, and expressing oneself as a tourist (Mak et al., 2012, 2017). For this reason, the consumption value of local foods offered in the tourism destination differs from the perceived value of other products and services (Choe & Kim, 2019). While the number of studies is limited, they have acknowledged the importance of consumption value in the realm of food tourism. These studies have shed light on the importance of tourist's local food consumption values (TLFCVs) and their influence on attitudes towards local food, destination image, satisfaction, and intentions to consume local food (Choe & Kim, 2019; Gupta et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2022; Leow et al., 2024; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020).



The impact of tourists' TLFCVs on their behavior has thus remained an under researched issue, with just a few studies addressing it (Choe & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, TLFCVs have far-reaching implications for destinations (Mak et al., 2017).

In parallel, no previous study has linked these concepts to the mediating mechanism of TLFCVs despite the FI and loyalty being salient concepts in consumer behavior and tourism research. Also, many scholars have highlighted the lack of mediated analysis in tourism research (Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015; Tyagi et al., 2016).

Given the lack of research and gaps in this area, this study aimed to reveal the relationship between FI and loyalty and explore the mediating role of TLFCVs in this relationship. Hence, it intended to fill the research gap by integrating the concepts of the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) model and the theory of consumption values to explain the research framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The concept of consumption values helps to understand the influence of TLFCVs on loyalty behavior.

Overall, the findings are expected to contribute significantly to knowledge in the field. This study primarily evaluates the utility of the S-O-R theory and consumption values to explain how FI impacts TLFCVs and loyalty intentions. Second, this research makes a valuable contribution to the field of literature by uncovering the mediating role played by TLFCVs in the association between FI and loyalty. Third, in the context of the Turkish tourism market, it theoretically proposes a new model for the mediating role of TLFCVs between FI and loyalty. The emerging framework might provide academics and managers with a deeper understanding of the key factors impacting the loyalty behavior of tourists who prefer a specific destination, particularly concerning FI. Consequently, identifying TLFCVs of tourists and how FI impacts on loyalty is essential to foresee the behaviors of tourists and to plan future steps accordingly.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

### **S-O-R Theory**

The S-O-R theory was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and later revised by Jacoby (2002). It is a widely used theory for understanding the antecedents, interventions and consequences of core tourism activities (Yasami et al., 2020). It includes three elements: stimulus, organism and response (Kamboj et al., 2018). In this study, food image is defined as

“tourists' holistic impressions of the gastronomic products and food culture of a particular destination” (Chang & Mak, 2018). Therefore, this study considers food image (FI) as a stimulus that triggers tourists' evaluations and information processing.

In S-O-R theory, organisms are mediating variables such as perceptions and emotions that represent the full mediation process between stimulus and response (Kamboj et al., 2018). In this study, TLFCVs, which play an important role in tourists' destination choice, pre- and post-travel evaluations, decision-making process, and outcome behaviors (Choe & Kim, 2019), are considered as organisms. In the S-O-R model, response is the final component that encompasses an individual's decisions and/or behavioral outcomes. In this study, loyalty represents the response, as loyalty is considered as a response to human behavior and is considered as a critical factor for the sustainability of the travel industry (Su & Hsu, 2013).

### *The Theory of Consumption Values*

Choe and Kim (2019) developed TLFCVs based on consumption value theory, as the food experience in a tourist destination encompasses various qualities. They proposed that TLFCVs consist of emotional, epistemic, health, prestige, taste/quality, price, and interaction values. Emotional value relates to emotions evoked by the dining experience, epistemic value to the desire to learn about local cuisine, and health value to nutritional and safety concerns. Prestige value refers to the benefit of increasing one's status, taste/quality value to taste, flavor, and functional consequences, price value to food cost, and interaction value to the food's ability to facilitate social interaction. Examining these value dimensions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that enhance the appeal of local cuisine and tourists' motivations for selecting a food destination. This insight can elucidate the decision-making and behaviors of tourists more effectively.

### *FI and TLFCVs*

Food image (FI) can be described as the “*overall impression that tourists have of a destination's food culture and culinary products*” (Chang & Mak, 2018). Image is of great importance as it impacts on decision-making processes as well as experiences, evaluations, and destination loyalty of tourists (Chen & Tsai, 2007). The close relationship between destination image and perceived value has always been an area of interest for the academics studying in the field of tourism. However, the relationship between value

and image is complex. Some researchers suggest that value influences image (Leow et al., 2024; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019), while others argue the reverse (Wu et al., 2018). Additionally, although some studies do not explicitly address image, they propose that destination attributes enhance perceived value. For instance, Calza et al. (2020) found that onboard ambiance significantly contributed to the perceived value of a cruise. Similarly, Kim et al. (2013) observed that perceived healthy food positively impacted both perceived value and the intention to revisit a restaurant. Therefore, this study analyzes a destination's FI and suggests that it can help increase the TLFCVs of the destination. The better the destination FI, the higher the tourists' perception of its value, which leads to their satisfaction with the destination. Omar et al. (2015) found that FI significantly affects tourists' emotional experiences and overall satisfaction. Mak et al. (2012) examined tourists' motivation to try new and exotic foods and found that FI influences the desire to acquire new knowledge. Similarly, Guan and Jones (2015) investigated the role of local cuisine in tourists' cultural learning experiences and showed that favorable FI encourages cultural knowledge acquisition. Grunert (2010) showed in his study that consumers are greatly influenced by FI when evaluating the health value of food products. National identity and prestige play a role in food product evaluation and purchase intentions, especially for local products (Šapić et al., 2018). Overall, a positive destination FI can increase tourists' perceptions of taste and quality (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). Destination image has been shown to influence perceived price fairness for iconic regional products, especially among consumers with less product knowledge (Velikova et al., 2023). These findings emphasize the importance of destination image in shaping tourists' overall evaluations of TLFCVs. Accordingly, the hypotheses developed are as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: FI affects emotional value positively.

H<sub>2</sub>: FI affects epistemic value positively.

H<sub>3</sub>: FI affects health value positively.

H<sub>4</sub>: FI affects prestige value positively.

H<sub>5</sub>: FI affects taste/quality value positively.

H<sub>6</sub>: FI affects price value positively.

H<sub>7</sub>: FI affects interaction value positively.

### *FI and Loyalty*

Playing an essential role in the interpretation of tourists' attitudes towards a destination, image is regarded as an important determinant in studies addressing destination management, marketing and tourist behavior in the field of tourism (Yasami et al., 2020). It is known that destination image plays a significant role in leading the tourist behavior and decision-making processes as well as evoking revisit intentions in tourists for the future (Eren, 2016). As image has a remarkable impact on perceptions, destination preferences and future behaviors of tourists, its importance has been widely recognized in the literature. It is anticipated that tourists with positive image perceptions would have higher levels of loyalty, and the studies supporting the argument in question do exist in the body of literature (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Furthermore, the small number of studies in the area of culinary tourism also tested the relationship between FI and loyalty (Yasami et al., 2020). The literature puts forward that local food has a positive impact on the revisit intention and the recommendation intention of tourists (Deng & Tang, 2020; Yasami et al., 2020). Accordingly, the hypothesis developed is as follows:

H<sub>8</sub>: FI affects loyalty positively.

### *TLFCVs and Loyalty*

According to Khanna et al. (2022), patrons who experience emotional benefits such as exhilaration, enjoyment, relaxation, or satisfaction from consuming local cuisine are satisfied and eager to revisit an ethnic food establishment. In local food consumption, it has been established that epistemic value notably influences behavioral intention (Shin et al., 2021). According to Kim et al. (2009), tourists are concerned about the health benefits of their food intake while traveling to destinations, as emphasized in prior research (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). Enjoying delightful culinary experiences at a destination requires tourists to be assured of their safety and hygiene standards. Prior research has identified the significance of both interaction value and prestige value in the context of food tourism (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Consequently, the consumption values of prestige and interaction engender a favourable attitude towards local foods. Good quality and taste of products or services at a tourist destination, aligned with tourists' preferences, encourage positive behaviors and intentions to return (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). According to Talwar et al. (2020), both money and quality values play a significant role in influencing purchase intention toward

online travel agencies. Fair pricing enhances consumers' willingness to pay and revisit restaurants (Bichler et al., 2020). Accordingly, the hypotheses developed are as follows:

H<sub>9</sub>: Emotional value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>10</sub>: Epistemic value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>11</sub>: Health value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>12</sub>: Prestige value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>13</sub>: Taste/quality value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>14</sub>: Price value affects loyalty positively.

H<sub>15</sub>: Interaction value affects loyalty positively.

### *The Mediating Role of TLFCVs*

It has been demonstrated in past studies that there is a relationship, whether direct or indirect, between destination image and loyalty. Some researchers have argued the likelihood of perceived value having an impact on loyalty as a mediator. Studies supporting the finding concerned do exist in the body of literature (Heung & Ngai, 2008; Shafiq et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, the relationship concerned has not yet been investigated in the context of culinary tourism. The significance of destination image as a mediating factor cannot be overlooked. Previous studies have demonstrated that it has a profound impact on perceived value, and consequently, it is highly likely to influence customer loyalty as well (Leow et al., 2024; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019; Wu et al., 2018). In the light of the above-mentioned argument, FI is expected to increase TLFCVs, which is likely to result in an increase in loyalty. In light of this, the formulated hypotheses are as follows:

H<sub>16</sub>: Emotional value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>17</sub>: Health value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>18</sub>: Prestige value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>19</sub>: Price value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>20</sub>: Epistemic value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>21</sub>: Taste/quality value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H<sub>22</sub>: Interaction value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the relationships between the variables of FI, loyalty, and TLFCVs were examined, and therefore the relational survey model was used as the research model. This research model is used to determine the relationships between multiple variables. This model is used to determine whether variables change together or not. It is used to determine whether there is a change, and if there is a change, how this change occurs. It is also used to determine the relationships between multiple variables (Crano & Brewer, 2002).

### Research Area

Turkish cuisine is known nationally and internationally for its diversity, unique taste, and unique presentation techniques. Turkish local dishes create originality with various cooking techniques that reflect Turkish traditions and create unique dining experiences. Therefore, local cuisine plays an important role in stimulating tourism in Türkiye. At the same time, Turkish local food is an important source of motivation for domestic and foreign tourists (Eren, 2016). Türkiye, with its unique location and rich and diverse gastronomic heritage that has developed over time, can be considered a center for gastronomic tourists. Therefore, it was chosen as the study area.

İstanbul and Antalya are the research areas in the present study. There are two fundamental reasons why these provinces were selected. First, they are the most preferred destinations by foreign tourists. Türkiye hosted 15,971,201 foreign tourists in 2020 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020). While 5,001,981 of those visited İstanbul, 3,444,426 tourists visited Antalya (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020). Second, Antalya and İstanbul are peculiar destinations where the food and beverage industry is well developed, the number of food and beverage establishments is high and foreign tourists are provided with the opportunity to experience

different flavors of Turkish cuisine at one-stop. Data showing the exact number of food and beverage establishments in İstanbul and Antalya could not be found; however, it is indicated in a report that the food and beverage industry encompassing nearly 150,000 restaurants and cafes generates a revenue of 20 billion dollars, and that 43% of the revenue concerned comes from İstanbul and 30% from cities including Antalya, while the remaining percentage comes from other places throughout Türkiye (HRI Food Service Sector, 2016). İstanbul and Antalya are included in the research scope in order to examine the arguments made regarding the links based on the previously stated justifications.

### **Measurement Items**

The survey form was structured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for "Strongly Disagree" to 7 for "Strongly Agree." It is claimed that this scale makes more accurate measurements compared to others (Tsang, 2012), yields more reliable results, and better reflects the actual assessments of the respondents (Finstad, 2010). In previous studies, a 7-point Likert scale was used for these scales (Choe & Kim, 2019; Williamson & Hassanli, 2020). Because of these considerations, the 7-point Likert scale was chosen more acceptable. The survey form comprises 4 parts including questions to identify demographic characteristics and travel behaviors of the respondents. Information concerning the survey parts are presented below.

In the first part, the scale used by Choe and Kim (2019) in their study addressing TLFCVs was adopted to identify FI in the present study. The scale had one dimension and 5 items. In the second part, the scale developed by Choe and Kim (2019) employed to detect TLFCVs. The scale concerned employs several advantages. To put it more clearly, the facts that it was developed to directly measure TLFCVs, that merely tourism-related subjects were involved, and that it has a high level of reliability and validity laid the foundation for the adoption of the scale to measure TLFCVs in the current study. The measurement encompasses a total of 29 items, which are categorized into seven distinct dimensions.

In the third part, items related to behavioral intention were utilized to measure loyalty, as in prior studies (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Williamson & Hassanli, 2020). The loyalty scale adopted in the present study also consists of one dimension and 3 items. The fourth and last component of the survey form includes questions about the demographic characteristics and travel behaviors of foreign tourists (gender, education level, age, marital status, nationality, yearly income, purpose of visit, and duration of stay).



As the research sample comprises foreign tourists, the survey forms are prepared in different languages. The countries from which the highest number of visitors arrived in İstanbul in 2020 are Russia, Germany, and England, respectively. On the other hand, tourists visiting Antalya the most are from Russia, Ukraine, Germany and England, respectively (TÜRSAB, 2020). In this vein, the survey forms are in English, German and Russian. In its early stages, the form was crafted in English, subsequently translated into German and Russian. The back-translation method was used for this purpose (Brislin, 1976). The forms were translated by those having professional knowledge of both source (English) and target languages (German, Russian).

A pilot test was conducted to ensure the language validity and face validity of the study. For this purpose, the pilot study was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews with a total of 105 foreign tourists by selecting 35 foreign tourists (British, Russian, and German) for each of the questionnaires prepared in three different languages. In order to make communication with Russian and German tourists easier, support was received from tourist guides. Within the scope of this pilot study, the comprehensibility and format of the measurement tool were examined, and it was stated that the statements were generally short, clear, and understandable. Expert evaluation was conducted to ensure face validity. Three experts in two different languages, Russian and German, were consulted for expert evaluation. The questionnaire was finalized in line with the feedback from the experts.

### **Data Collection and Respondent Profile**

The technique employed to gather research data involved conducting face-to-face interviews during the period from June to July 2021. The survey form was applied by the researcher herself and three other interviewers who were informed and trained by the researcher about the survey content. All the interviewers involved in the research have good command of English and data collection experience. In İstanbul, historical sites like Topkapı Palace, Hagia Sophia Mosque, Sultan Ahmet Mosque and Basilica Cistern were preferred to conduct interviews, while in Antalya the ancient city of Kaleiçi and Side were chosen for the same purpose. There are several reasons underlying the preference of those places. The first is that their foreign tourist attraction potential is high, and they are the most visited attractions. The second is that airport administrations do not permit data collection due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The third is that those places are main tourist attractions characterized by a wide range of local restaurants



for tourists. The fourth is that the researchers desired to avoid conducting the research in a single area.

For data collection, convenience sampling and purposive sampling methods were employed, respectively. While applying the purposive sampling method, the criteria taken into account to select the units fitting the best to the aim of the study are as follows: respondents being over the age of 18 years, being of a foreign nationality, having experienced Turkish local cuisine and having consented to take part in the research.

A minimum response time and two survey questions were determined to ensure the suitability of the survey data for the study. The desired sample for this study is made up of international tourists who are curious about local Turkish cuisine and have had the chance to savor it during their trips. Participants who showed no interest in local food or had never tasted Turkish dishes were not included in the investigation. In light of this, the study posed the questions:

(1) Is experiencing Turkish food one of your primary motivations for visiting Türkiye?

(2) Is experiencing Turkish food an important part of your trip?

Tours organized for foreign tourists were utilized throughout the data collection process. Foreign tourists visiting historical places via such tours were contacted through tour guides and the research context was briefly explained to them. Tourists who consented to take part in the research were interviewed based on the survey form. In addition, those visiting the above-mentioned places individually were contacted personally and guided to fill in the survey. No motivation used to encourage the respondents. In total, 800 questionnaires were distributed, with a subsequent collection of 716 questionnaires that were fully answered. 22 respondents providing negative responses to the first two questions ("Is experiencing Turkish food one of your leading motivations to visit Türkiye?" and "Is experiencing Turkish food an important part of your trip?") in the first part of the survey were excluded from the analysis. Since the missing values in 9 survey forms were above 50%, they were deemed ineligible for analysis (Hair et al., 2014). So as to identify the outliers, the Mahalanobis distance was calculated and 26 survey forms containing outliers were excluded from the data set. After eliminating invalid questionnaires, 659 replies were analyzed, indicating an effective feedback rate of 82.37%.

In studies conducting structural equation modeling, the sample size of around ten times the number of observed variables is considered sufficient (Chin, 1998). In their study, According to Hair et al. (2014), a sample size that is at least five times the number of variables being analyzed is necessary for reliable findings. Accordingly, 659 participants qualify for PLS-SEM tests as they meet various sample size requirements for this type of study.

Male respondents accounted for 58.1% of the total, while female respondents accounted for 41.9%. 71.3% of the female respondents are married and 29.6% are in the age range of 34-41 years. Regarding the educational background, half of the respondents are undergraduates while 32.3% of high-school graduates. 61.9% of the respondents visited Türkiye 2 to 4 times, 62.1% stayed over 5 nights and more. Nearly all the respondents visited İstanbul and Antalya for holiday/leisure purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Demographic profile of the survey participants was disclosed through the utilization of descriptive statistics. The statistics were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). To evaluate the research model, the SmartPLS 3 program was employed. There are two main reasons for preferring the SmartPLS 3 program. First, the model embodies high numbers of latent variables and correlations. While the complex structure of the model may cause troubles in other programs, SmartPLS has the capacity to analyze complex structures smoothly (Chin, 1998). Second, TLFCVs, price value and interaction value are variables having two indicators. While the other programs merely analyze the variables having at least three indicators, the SmartPLS program can analyze variables with one or two indicators as well (Doğan, 2019).

The structural equation modeling was implemented by adopting the two-stage approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The approach concerned requires the testing of the external (measurement) model first. On the condition that the external model has acceptable fit indices, the process proceeds with testing of the internal (structural) model. To identify the existence and type of mediating effect in the present study, the stages and approach suggested by Zhao et al. (2010) were followed.

## RESULTS

### Common Method Variance (CMV) and Non-response Bias

The examination of Common Method Variance (CMV) used Harman's single-factor test, revealing only one component explaining 39% (0.5) of the variation, indicating CMV was not a significant issue. Additionally, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below the 3.3 threshold, supporting this conclusion (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To check for non-response bias, independent sample t-tests and Chi-square tests were conducted, showing minimal differences between early and late respondents, suggesting non-response bias was not a concern (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

### Outer Model

Table 1 presents the validity and reliability scores of the external model. Since all the variables concerned have reflective structures, the evaluations take into account the reflective models. In formative modeling, researchers should treat the latent variable as being caused by and affecting its indicators, whereas in reflective modeling, they should consider the indicators as manifestations of the latent variable (Aybek & Karakaş, 2022; Duarte & Amaro, 2018). At the same time do Valle and Assaker (2016) reveals reflective conceptualization is widely preferred when using PLS in tourism-related literature. Since all the variables concerned have reflective structures, the evaluations take into account the reflective models. In this vein, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity were tested (Doğan, 2019; Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1. *Results of The Measurement Model*

Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
<i>Food Image</i>		0.909	0.770
FI1	0.948		
FI2	0.918		
FI3	0.919		
FI4	0.915		
FI5	0.867		
<i>Loyalty</i>		0.956	0.814
LY1	0.921		
LY2	0.902		
LY3	0.902		

<b><i>Emotional Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.827</i></b>	<b><i>0.548</i></b>
EMTN1	0.752		
EMTN2	0.779		
EMTN3	0.612		
EMTN4	0.803		
<b><i>Epistemic Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.935</i></b>	<b><i>0.705</i></b>
EPST1	0.775		
EPST2	0.830		
EPST3	0.837		
EPST4	0.811		
EPST5	0.873		
EPST6	0.905		
<b><i>Health Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.884</i></b>	<b><i>0.656</i></b>
HLT1	0.728		
HLT2	0.804		
HLT3	0.899		
HLT4	0.800		
<b><i>Prestige Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.917</i></b>	<b><i>0.736</i></b>
PRS1	0.801		
PRS2	0.810		
PRS3	0.837		
PRS4	0.972		
<b><i>Taste/Quality Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.885</i></b>	<b><i>0.609</i></b>
TST1	0.662		
TST2	0.750		
TST3	0.797		
TST4	0.837		
TST5	0.842		
<b><i>Price Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.933</i></b>	<b><i>0.874</i></b>
PRC1	0.906		
PRC2	0.963		
<b><i>Interaction Value</i></b>		<b><i>0.910</i></b>	<b><i>0.834</i></b>
INT1	0.911		
INT2	0.915		

First, Composite Reliability (CR) coefficient being  $\geq 0.70$  indicates that internal consistency is achieved (Hair et al., 2014). As presented in Table 1, composite reliability coefficients for all structures range between 0.827 and 0.956. Thus, it can be reported that all the structures have reliable internal consistency.

Second, the convergent validity results were analyzed. To validate convergent validity, external loadings and AVE coefficients are controlled (Hair et al., 2014). It is reported that the coefficients for external loadings should be  $\geq 0.50$  with the ideal threshold being  $\geq 0.70$  (Hair et al., 2014). The AVE coefficient is supposed to be  $\geq 0.50$  (Chin, 1998). It is seen that the AVE coefficients of the structures range between 0.548 and 0.874, revealing that convergence validity is achieved.

Table 2. *HTMT results*

	FI	EMTN	EPST	HLT	PRS	TST	PRC	INT	LY
<b>FI</b>									
<b>EMTN</b>	0.639								
<b>EPST</b>	0.652	0.696							
<b>HLT</b>	0.673	0.581	0.568						
<b>PRS</b>	0.597	0.564	0.693	0.491					
<b>TST</b>	0.660	0.586	0.575	0.628	0.536				
<b>PRC</b>	0.639	0.502	0.642	0.527	0.626	0.633			
<b>INT</b>	0.603	0.539	0.584	0.532	0.632	0.570	0.627		
<b>LY</b>	0.809	0.665	0.756	0.597	0.640	0.694	0.661	0.672	

**Notes:** FI: Food Image, EMTN: Emotional, EPST: Epistemic, HLT: Health, PRS: Prestige, TST: Taste/Quality, PRC: Price, INT: Interaction. LY: Loyalty.

Third, it is required for external models to be tested for discriminant validity. In the current research, cross-loadings and heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) were taken into notice to test the discriminant validity. As a result, it was revealed that the items EMTN5 and EMTN6 under the dimension of emotional value were overlapping, therefore, their exclusion from the analysis underwent a re-performance. Thus, the criterion related to cross-loadings was met (Chin, 1998). Lastly, as stated in Henseler et al. (2015) HTMT should be below 0.85. The HTMT values observed in the current study, as displayed in Table 2, are all below the threshold of 0.85.

### Inner Model

Table 3 displays the inner model findings. The evaluation criteria present in the literature for inner models were taken as the basis (Hair et al., 2014). The first criterion to be checked is, as suggested by Hair et al. (2014), whether there exists a multicollinearity problem among the variables. Findings on the inner model are provided in Table 3 and demonstrated in Figure 1.

As shown in Table 3, all VIF values are below 5, revealing that no multicollinearity problem exists in the inner model. Then, the  $R^2$  values for

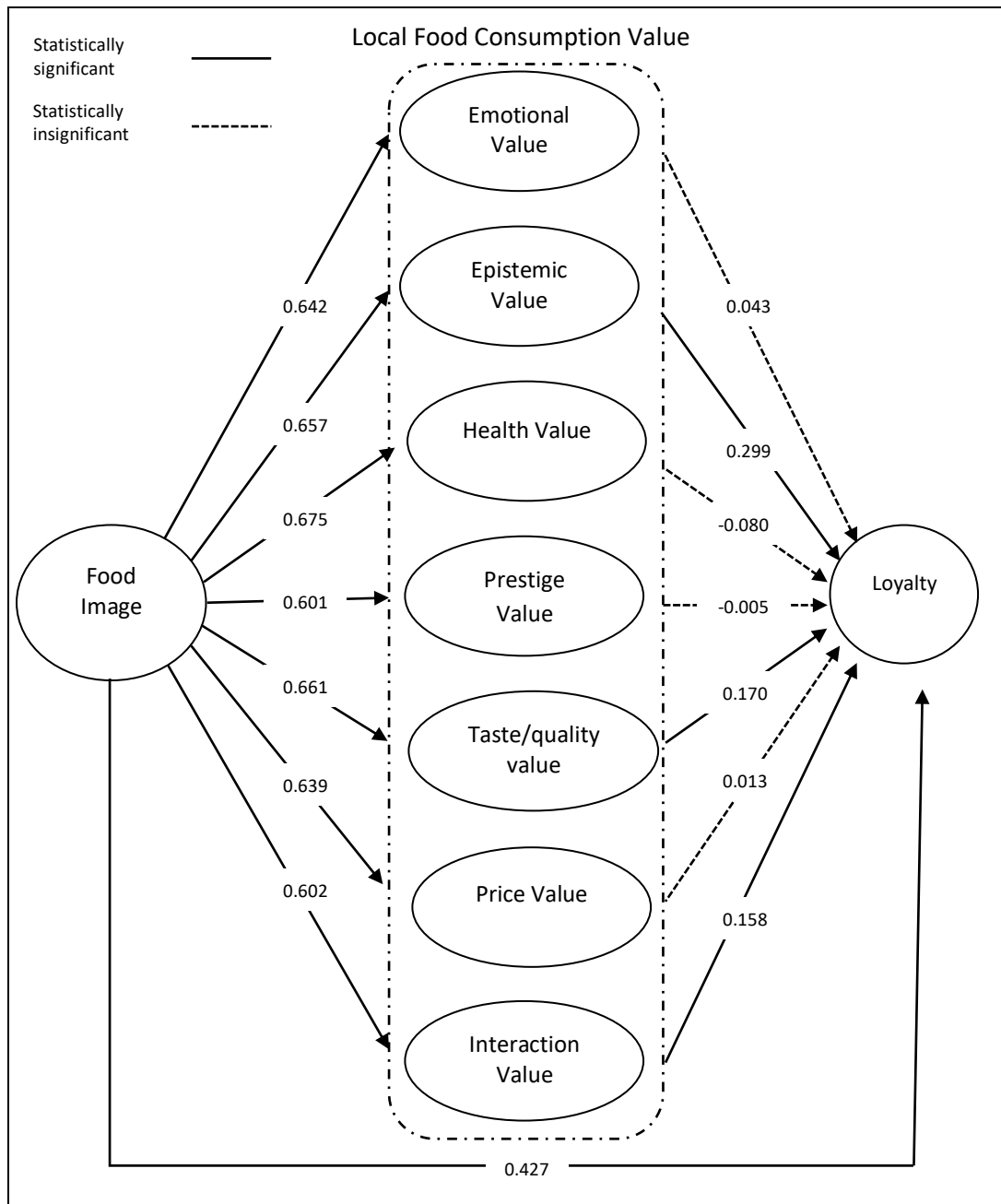
the impact power and the  $Q^2$  values for the predictive power were explored. Having examined the  $R^2$  scores of hypotheses, it was observed that they have weak and strong impact powers. To establish predictive strength,  $Q^2$  values need to be higher than zero. Having examined the  $Q^2$  values of the variables, it was observed that they are greater than zero, showing that they have predictive power. It is important to note that PLS-SEM does not offer specific indices for evaluating a model's overall goodness of fit (GoF). Consequently, the model's fit and predictability can be assessed using the GoF index, defined as:  $\sqrt{(\text{av.AVE} \times \text{av.R}^2)}$  (Tennenhaus et al., 2004). In this study, a GoF value of 0.573 was calculated for the proposed model, suggesting a strong model fit (Wetzels et al., 2009). As a last step, path coefficients, significance and  $f^2$  values were analyzed in order to proceed with the testing of the hypotheses.

Table 3. *Inner Model Results*

Hypothesis	Effect	$\beta$	t	p	Result	VIF	$f^2$
$H_1$	FI $\rightarrow$ EMTN	0.642	23.959	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.702
$H_2$	FI $\rightarrow$ EPST	0.657	26.300	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.759
$H_3$	FI $\rightarrow$ HLT	0.675	26.265	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.836
$H_4$	FI $\rightarrow$ PRS	0.601	23.709	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.566
$H_5$	FI $\rightarrow$ TST	0.661	23.173	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.777
$H_6$	FI $\rightarrow$ PRC	0.639	22.560	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.690
$H_7$	FI $\rightarrow$ INT	0.602	23.094	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.569
$H_8$	FI $\rightarrow$ LY	0.427	8.860	0.000	Supported	2.818	0.297
$H_9$	EMTN $\rightarrow$ LY	0.043	0.911	0.362	Not supported	2.354	0.004
$H_{10}$	EPST $\rightarrow$ LY	0.299	6.710	0.000	Supported	2.962	0.139
$H_{11}$	HLT $\rightarrow$ LY	-0.080	1.957	0.050	Not supported	2.175	0.014
$H_{12}$	PRS $\rightarrow$ LY	-0.005	0.122	0.903	Not supported	2.419	0.000
$H_{13}$	TST $\rightarrow$ LY	0.170	3.759	0.000	Supported	2.341	0.057
$H_{14}$	PRC $\rightarrow$ LY	0.013	0.329	0.742	Not supported	2.435	0.000
$H_{15}$	INT $\rightarrow$ LY	0.158	3.693	0.000	Supported	2.154	0.053

EMTN  $R^2=0.412$   $Q^2=0.214$ ; EPST  $R^2=0.431$   $Q^2=0.287$ ; HLT  $R^2=0.455$   $Q^2=0.283$ ; PRS  $R^2=0.361$   $Q^2=0.249$ ; TST  $R^2=0.437$   $Q^2=0.252$ ; PRC  $R^2=0.408$   $Q^2=0.339$ ; INT  $R^2=0.363$   $Q^2=0.288$ ; LY  $R^2=0.783$   $Q^2=0.582$

FI has a positive, significant and high-level impact on emotional value ( $\beta=0.642$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.702$ ), epistemic value ( $\beta=0.657$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.759$ ), health value ( $\beta=0.675$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.836$ ), prestige value ( $\beta=0.601$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.566$ ), taste/quality value ( $\beta=0.661$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.777$ ), price value ( $\beta=0.639$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.690$ ) and interaction value ( $\beta=0.602$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $f^2=0.569$ ), revealing that  $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ ,  $H_3$ ,  $H_4$ ,  $H_5$ ,  $H_6$  and  $H_7$  are accepted.



Note:  $p < 0.05$ .

Figure 1. *Structural Model*

Furthermore, it has been noted that FI has a considerable and beneficial effect on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.427$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.297$ ). Therefore,  $H_8$  is supported. Since emotional value does not have an important impact on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.043$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.004$ ),  $H_9$  is not supported. While epistemic value has a positive, significant and low-level impact on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.299$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.139$ ), meaning that  $H_{10}$  is supported, health value ( $\beta = -0.080$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.014$ ) and prestige value ( $\beta = -0.005$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.000$ ) have no significant impact on loyalty. For this reason,  $H_{11}$  and  $H_{12}$  are not supported.

As taste/quality value has a positive, significant and low-level impact on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.170$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.057$ ),  $H_{13}$  is supported, whereas  $H_{14}$  is not supported since price value has no effect on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.013$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.000$ ). Interaction value, on the other hand, has a considerable and low-level influence on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.158$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.053$ ), hence,  $H_{15}$  is accepted.

### Mediating Effects of TLFCVs

For analyzing the mediating effects, the stages and perspective proposed by Zhao et al. (2010) were followed. It has been found that the indirect impacts of FI on loyalty through emotional value ( $\beta = 0.028$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), health value ( $\beta = -0.054$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), prestige value ( $\beta = -0.003$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and price value ( $\beta = -0.003$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) are insignificant, while its direct effects are significant ( $\beta = 0.427$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In the light of these findings, the aforementioned relationships are not influenced by mediation and there are only direct effects concerned. It is seen that the direct as well as indirect effects of FI on loyalty through epistemic value ( $\beta = 0.197$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), taste/quality value ( $\beta = 0.112$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and interaction value ( $\beta = 0.095$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) are significant. Accordingly, a supplementary effect does exist in the aforementioned relationships. These findings reveal the fact that FI affects loyalty directly as well as indirectly through taste/quality, epistemic, and interaction values. As presented in Table 4, the 95% confidence intervals (5000 bootstrap samples) for all indirect effects do not contain zero. Therefore,  $H_{16}$ ,  $H_{17}$ ,  $H_{18}$  and  $H_{19}$ , are not supported whereas  $H_{20}$ ,  $H_{21}$  and  $H_{22}$  are supported.

Table 4. *Results of The Mediation Test*

Effect	Indirect Effect	t	p	Direct Effect	Mediation type	95% CI	
						LL	UL
FI→EMTN→LY	0.028	0.915	0.360	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.032	0.087
FI→HLT→LY	-0.054	1.940	0.052	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.109	0.001
FI→PRS→LY	-0.003	0.121	0.903	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.051	0.045
FI→PRC→LY	0.009	0.328	0.743	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.043	0.060
FI→EPST→LY	0.197	6.424	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.136	0.257
FI→TST→LY	0.112	3.742	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.053	0.171
FI→INT→LY	0.095	3.600	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.042	0.148



PLS predict analysis was conducted to evaluate the out-of-sample predictive power of the model. During the process, the guidelines proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019) were taken into account, and the mean absolute error (MAE) values for the PLS-SEM model and the linear model (LM) and the Q2\_predict values for the key endogenous structures of the model were analyzed. Q2\_predict values of the indicators are positive. The results show that all of the indicators in the PLS-SEM analysis have lower MAE values compared to the LM benchmark, indicating high out-of-sample predictive power.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the light of the findings, H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6 and H7 are supported which argue that FI has a positive and significant impact on emotional, epistemic, taste/quality, prestige, health, price, and interaction values. Strong FI paves the way for foreign tourists to have strong TLFCVs. Since no study measuring the effect of FI on TLFCVs exists in the body of literature, the findings could not be compared. However, the studies conducted so far on the effect of destination image on perceived value address similar effects (Ozturk & Qu, 2008). These findings emphasize the importance of FI in shaping TLFCVs. This means that if tourists have a higher level of FI they will be able to process information about LFCVs more efficiently when evaluating local food. Since it is confirmed that LFCVs perceived by tourists are influenced by tourists' FI, improving the FI that tourists have of a destination should be the main objective of management.

H8 which argues that FI has a positive and significant effect on loyalty is supported. FI is acknowledged as one of the leading determinants of loyalty. According to findings, a destination's positive FI has a strong impact on loyalty (Peštek & Činjurević, 2014; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Likewise, the current study revealed that FI affects loyalty positively, and the findings show parallelism with those concluded in previous studies. Tourists' loyalty is ultimately influenced by FI. Therefore, tourists' perception of a favorable FI will need to be promoted and managed in a way that leads to loyalty. In addition, destination management should endeavor to effectively create, maintain and improve the perceived FI of the destination. Creating a consistent local food "brand" can further enhance the loyalty of local, regional and global tourists to the destination.

Of the hypotheses suggesting that emotional, health, prestige, epistemic, taste/quality, price and interaction values have a positive and significant effect on loyalty, only H10, H13 and H15 are supported.

Hypotheses suggesting that emotional, health, and prestige values positively and strongly impact loyalty were rejected. These findings discorded with previous research in tourism (Jiang & Hong, 2021). Unlike previous studies in the literature, which showed that emotional, health, and prestige values were positively related to destination attachment and visit intention (Alexandris et al., 2006; Jiang & Hong, 2021; Thio et al., 2022), this finding shed new light on the link between these constructs in the context of food tourism.

The absence of a positive correlation between price value and loyalty was observed. This finding confirmed the studies that did not find a notable effect of price value on satisfaction, belongingness, and loyalty within the scope of ecotourism and night tourism (Jiang & Hong 2021).

Epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values were found to impact loyalty positively, confirming the studies that identified a substantial impact of epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values on attitudes, belongingness, and loyalty toward local foods in the context of tourism (Hussain et al., 2022; Jiang & Hong, 2021; Thio et al., 2022). Research findings suggest that when foreign tourists attribute high epistemic, taste/quality and interaction values to local foods, they find a destination more attractive and are more likely to revisit it in the future. It is important for local food suppliers to provide detailed information about their food culture on social media or in food courts to attract tourists. Organizing fun events such as gastronomy festivals or cooking competitions can increase the chances of building long-term relationships with tourists. In addition, local food providers preserving authentic flavors and traditional presentation methods can offer a unique experience for tourists. Providing a comfortable dining area where tourists can comfortably consume local food is also of great importance, as this enriches their interaction and experience.

The reason why emotional value does not pose any effect on loyalty can be explained on the grounds that the destination's cuisine and local dishes may not trigger positive emotion or contribute to the food experience for tourists. Moreover, some studies suggest that tourists' dispositions are often dominated by food neophobia, which may create negative emotions and food experience at the point of travel (Hsu & Scott, 2020). In addition, the fact that health value does not affect loyalty can be due to tourists' having low perception of food hygiene and food safety of Turkish food. Contextual differences between local food environments in Türkiye and developed countries may be influential. In Türkiye, food establishments are

likely to fail to meet the standards and expectations of foreign visitors. In this context, the health value associated with poor service culture and unhygienic business environments is not related to loyalty intention. It is also seen that prestige value has no impact on loyalty, which can be explained on the grounds that foreign tourists have different cultural backgrounds, and the ethnicity of most visitors may not align with the diversity of local food available in Türkiye. Lastly, the reason why price value does not impact on loyalty can be that price value varies depending on the hotel tourists choose for accommodation. Due to all-inclusive system and exclusive service delivery characterizing the hotels in Antalya, tourists mostly spend their holidays within the premises. Therefore, it is considered that comparison regarding price value would depend on the hotel and may not reflect the overall situation in the destination. Consequently, support managers should pay attention to local price competition and carefully choose strategic pricing strategies.

In the present research, it was revealed that FI poses indirect effects on loyalty through taste/quality value, epistemic value, and interaction value. Therefore, it was concluded that taste/quality value, epistemic value, and interaction value play a mediating role in the relationship between FI and loyalty. This finding can be a useful concept for both researchers and destination management focusing on key strategies for building tourist loyalty. According to the analysis conducted using the mediation classification framework proposed by Zhao et al. (2010), it was discovered that taste/quality, epistemic, and interaction values play a role in partially mediating the relationship between FI and loyalty.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The first of the most important theoretical findings of this research is its focus on the mediating impact of TLFCVs in the correlation between FI and loyalty. As a matter of fact, no study was found in the body of literature that specifically examines the impact of TLFCVs on the correlation between FI and loyalty.

Second, despite the fact that the effects of destination image on perceived value are researched frequently in the literature (Ozturk & Qu, 2008), it has been observed in the light of the literature review that the studies concerned do not address the relationship among FI, loyalty and TLFCVs. Taking into consideration that FI has started to be addressed and measured as a different concept than destination image relatively recently and that food experience is regarded as a supporting and secondary

element in tourism (Quan & Wang, 2004), it comes to the light why the relationship between FI and TLFCVs has been researched rarely.

Third, it is seen in the literature that the studies conducted on TLFCVs have approached the subject from a unidimensional perspective (Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Oh, 2000). Few studies (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020) examined local food consumption within the framework of the theory of consumption values. Unidimensional approaches toward TLFCVs are subject to criticism (Choe & Kim, 2019). The current research study adds to the existing body of knowledge in the literature on local foods by examining the concept of TLFCVs within the framework of the theory of consumption values.

Fourth, consumer value is recognized as a fundamental notion in the context of the hospitality and tourism industry. In this respect, offering value to customers is of great importance to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Lee & Min, 2012). Consumer value plays a key role in loyalty. For instance, value perceptions of tourists for products and services may influence their loyalty in a positive way. Likewise, it is known that value in the context of dining experience impacts on repurchase intention positively both before and after the experience concerned (Oh, 2000). Despite the fact that no study is found in the literature that empirically tests the relationship between TLFCVs and loyalty, the present research provides empirical findings supporting the argument that taste/quality, interaction, and epistemic values have a beneficial impact on foreign tourist loyalty. From this point of view, this study can be regarded as one of the first attempts to reveal that taste/quality, interaction, and epistemic values do affect loyalty.

This study emphasizes the advantages of using consumption values theory and the SOR paradigm in understanding tourists' destination loyalty. Moreover, as there are limited studies investigating the determinants and consequences of the local food consumption values, the variables used in this paper and their consequences are original to the theory. In particular, it is documented that FI can play a determinant role on TLFCVs. Although the tourism literature has recently attempted to examine the impact of TLFCVs on tourist behavior (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020), there are no studies on how FI can influence TLFCVs. Moreover, the influence of TLFCVs on destination loyalty has not been explicitly recognized in both marketing and tourism literature. Considering these, both research findings will be extremely useful for

understanding consumption values and their limits to complete the main picture of the theory.

### **Practical Contributions**

The current study encompasses various practical implications. First, the findings in this study verify that FI has a positive effect on TLFCVs and loyalty, besides highlighting the significant contribution of FI to TLFCVs and loyalty development. Destination managers and marketers should constantly work on the destination FI in terms of eateries/restaurants, food and culinary culture, food quality, food events, food safety and quality, and local food. In particular, tourist hotels and airports might actively promote Türkiye's FI by providing information on the country's local food and food destinations. Second the findings of this study shed light on the interplay between FI, TLFCVs, and loyalty. It is evident that marketing and promoting a positive FI can significantly enhance TLFCVs among tourists, thereby fostering loyalty.

Accordingly, improving the FI of a destination in the eyes of tourists should be among the goals of destination management organizations. Destination managers can help improve Türkiye 's FI by means of social media and a range of promotional activities. They can offer a unique FI to the visitors and travelers from different countries. Promotion and marketing initiatives that would highlight the difference of its cuisine from other destinations in the world should be taken so that Türkiye increases its market share in culinary tourism and destinations gain further attraction and competitive advantage. It has been reported that Türkiye falls short of marketing, advertising and providing up-to-date services within the framework of culinary tourism and that the attempts for promoting local food are not effective (Sahingoz & Kızıleli, 2019). Promotional activities should highlight the richness of Turkish cuisine, and the attributes differentiating it from other cuisines in the world should be addressed.

Our findings show that epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values promote tourists' loyalty to the destination. In addition, TLFCVs of Turkish food should be well-communicated to tourists. Choe and Kim's (2019) suggested strategies could be advantageous in addressing this matter. Taking into notice that learning about different cultures is an important component of travel, the epistemic value of the cuisine can be promoted for the potential tourism market by emphasizing that local food consumption is an opportunity to learn novel things about Turkish cuisine and would bring along unique experiences (Choe & Kim, 2019). More

emphasis should be placed on experienced traditional chefs, local ingredients, and equipment to reflect the Turkish culinary heritage and authenticity. This, in turn, will allow tourists to learn more about culinary culture.

Careful preparation of buffets, ensuring sensory food quality, and presentation of local foods in an acceptable taste and look are recommended to enhance the taste/quality value. Also, Turkish culinary practitioners are advised to carefully adjust some recipes and utilize popular international seasoning and best presentations to ensure nutritional value, taste, texture, appearance, and flavor.

In order to increase the interaction value, gastronomy-themed activities such as gastronomy days, festivals, tasting events and cooking workshops can be promoted more. Such activities would yield fruitful results in the event that they are treated by destination managers as important components increasing the interaction value of the destination rather than just being leisure-time activities enjoyed by local residents and tourists. In addition, the grill culture in Turkish cuisine and offering self-catering opportunities should be highlighted to enrich the dining experience by increasing the value of interaction.

Tourists having positive value perceptions of local cuisine in Türkiye would consider Türkiye as a culinary tourism destination and their likelihood of revisiting Türkiye would increase. In order to increase loyalty, destination marketers and managers are recommended to focus further on taste/quality, interaction and epistemic values, as revealed in the current study that these components create a positive impact on foreign tourist loyalty. Therefore, it is of great importance to organize more memorable and effective promotional activities for foreign tourists where these values are highlighted.

The research results demonstrate that taste/quality value, interaction value, and epistemic value play a mediating role in the relationship between FI and loyalty. Therefore, improvement merely in FI would not suffice to develop high-level loyalty toward culinary tourism. In the event that positive FI is accompanied by high levels of taste/quality value, interaction value and epistemic value, loyalty of foreign tourists would reach higher levels. In this vein, destination marketers and managers are recommended to view this relationship from a holistic perspective and organize activities accordingly.



## Limitations and Future Research

Future research should address several recommendations based on current study constraints. First, expanding research to destinations known for culinary tourism, rather than just cultural or sea-sand-sun tourism, could offer deeper insights into the relationships among food involvement (FI), loyalty, and tourist's local food consumption values (TLFCVs). Second, examining how personality traits and food characteristics affect culinary experiences could enhance understanding of their impact on FI, TLFCVs, and loyalty. Third, repeating studies post-pandemic, when tourism is back to normal, could provide more accurate data. Fourth, using longitudinal data instead of cross-sectional data could better capture changes over time in FI, loyalty, and TLFCVs. Additionally, incorporating indicators like variety and location value (Hussain et al., 2022) into TLFCVs and considering factors such as destination attachment could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, investigating TLFCVs in contexts like food festivals or cooking classes could offer valuable insight.

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## COMPREHENDING GASTRONOMY FESTIVALS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON ALANYA TROPICAL FRUIT FESTIVAL

Gökay GÜDEN

*Hotel Restaurant and Catering Services Department, Cookery Program, Tunceli Vocational School,  
Munzur University, Tunceli, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1482-9448

Oğuz NEBİOĞLU <sup>1</sup>

*Department of Gastronomy and Culinary Arts, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-3436-7754

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivations for organizing gastronomy festivals, their management, the strategic approaches followed, and their role in tourism. The selected research area is Alanya in Turkey, which has recently emphasized gastronomy in its tourism-based activities, including through a tropical fruit festival. For this qualitative case study, data were collected using document analysis, a focus group, and face-to-face interviews. First, documents were obtained to understand Alanya's festival history. A focus group meeting was then organized to prepare a semi-structured interview form. Finally, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the people responsible for the organization of Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival. The data were subjected to content analysis. The findings indicated that the festival is organized in Alanya for social, cultural, economic, and political reasons while festival management includes design, planning, operation, and evaluation processes. Resource-based strategies and emerging strategies are important while the festival plays encouraging, supportive, and complementary roles in the region's tourism. These findings have several theoretical and practical implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Oğuz Nebioğlu (Ph.D.), Department of Gastronomy and Culinary Arts, Tourism Faculty, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, Antalya, Türkiye. E-mail: [oguz.nebioglu@alanya.edu.tr](mailto:oguz.nebioglu@alanya.edu.tr)

## INTRODUCTION

Gastronomic tourism is a valuable sector that offers visitors diverse experiences, whether simply by eating at a restaurant, shopping in markets selling local food products, or visiting a gastronomy-themed museum (Seyitoğlu & Alphan, 2021; Smith & Xiao, 2008). In recent years, gastronomy festivals have also become a significant site for tourism experiences (López-Guzmán et al., 2017).

These festivals, which mainly focus on a specific gastronomic product, are expected to benefit both organizers and participants (Chang & Yuan, 2011; Horng & Tsai, 2012). For example, they can enable tourists to have unique travel experiences while helping destinations in their branding, promotion, and marketing (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Henderson, 2009; Lee & Arcodia, 2011; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012).

The contributions of gastronomic festivals to the tourist experience and destination stakeholders have also attracted academic attention. For example, studies of tourists in relation to gastronomy festivals have addressed a range of issues: tourists' motivations for attending (Chui, 2018; Markovic et al., 2015; Saayman et al., 2012); their quality perceptions of festivals (Axelsen & Swan, 2010; Bruwer, 2014; Chang & Yuan, 2011; Marais, 2009; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012; O'Regan et al., 2019; Smith & Costello, 2009; Taylor & Shanka, 2002; Yuan & Jang, 2008), satisfaction levels (Chang, 2014; Dimitrovski, 2016; Hubbard et al., 2012); participant typologies (Bayındır & Çalışkan, 2022); and the effects of festivals on destination revisit intentions (Bekar et al., 2017; Doğrul et al., 2015; López-Guzmán et al., 2017). By approaching gastronomy festivals from a tourist perspective, these studies have made a valuable contribution to the field.

Studies of destinations in relation to gastronomy festivals mostly approach this phenomenon from marketing perspective by focusing on the effects of festivals on destination branding (Crompton et al., 2001; Lee & Arcodia, 2011) and destination image (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2014). While considering both tourists and destinations, these studies focus on the outcomes of festivals. That is, they sometimes draw inferences from tourist perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, and sometimes from destination branding and image. Their main purpose is to evaluate the outcomes of festivals or to understand how festivals contribute to the success of tourism destinations.

In contrast, there are few holistic studies of festival management, and these do not focus on gastronomy festivals but address a specific aspect of

management instead. Accordingly, the present study aims to address the deficiencies in the literature in three ways. First, it focuses on the causes of gastronomy festivals rather than the results in order to reveal the dynamics underlying gastronomy festivals. Second, it analyzes gastronomy festival management holistically, from start to finish. Third, it seeks concrete evidence regarding the role of gastronomy festivals in tourism from the findings of recent theoretical research into integrating gastronomy and tourism. It thereby aims to provide a holistic understanding of gastronomy festivals in terms of motivations, management processes, and strategies, and determine these festivals' role in tourism.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### **Festivals in Tourism and Prominent Issues in Festival Management**

Festivals are defined as touristic products that have become a strong touristic attraction element that can offer a competitive advantage to destinations due to the increasing interest and curiosity of tourists regarding alternative tourism types (Bakırcı et al., 2017; Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014; Kömürcü et al., 2014; Lee & Arcodia, 2011; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012; Özkan et al., 2015). These events, which can significantly influence tourists' destination preferences, can revitalize the local economy by increasing tourism revenue and increase employment (Baptista Alves et al., 2010; Crompton et al., 2001).

These developments have made festival management a popular topic in the literature from various perspectives. Although not specifically focused on gastronomy festivals, the relevant literature emphasizes certain aspects of festival management. For example, from their study of municipalities' festival management practices, Tinga and Arcipe (2021) suggest that there are four stages: planning, organization, leadership and control.

The planning phase generally starts with the topic that will form the basis of the festival. Research in this context (Andersson & Getz, 2008; Carlsen et al., 2010) concludes that resources are one of the most important elements in planning, although other issues can be relevant, such as identifying the potential audience (Negrusa & Murareanu, 2020), determining when to hold the festival (Carlsen et al., 2010; Getz, 2002), and location planning (Simon et al., 2017). Another important issue at this stage is financing, primarily how to meet the financial cost of organizing the festival (Getz, 2002) and cost management practices (Andersson & Getz,



2008; Presenza & Iocca, 2012; Simon et al., 2017). The organization phase focuses on three important points for managing festivals: volunteerism (Getz & Frisby, 1988), stakeholder management (Andersson & Getz, 2008; Getz, 2002; Miller et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2017; Tepeci et al., 2022) and visitor management (Negrusa & Murareanu, 2020). In addition, it focuses on the question of how to market the festival (Andersson & Getz, 2008). Festival management also requires making the complex decision about who should lead the event. One view is that municipalities should take the lead, given their greater financial and human resources (Tinga & Arcipe, 2021; Yin et al., 2024). Finally, festivals are evaluated during the control stage based on specific parameters, such as the festival's effects on local people (Agbabiaka, 2016), administrative inadequacies (Carlsen et al., 2010), and security (Miller et al., 2021). As the research outlined above shows, each of these stages in festival management, planning, organization, leadership, and control, have a different focus. For example, Getz and Frisby, (1988) emphasize volunteerism in festival management, Presenza and Iocca, (2012) emphasize relations with stakeholders, while Yin et al. (2024) emphasizes leadership.

A few studies have evaluated festival management in terms of festival success based on various conceptualizations. For example, Adongo and Kim (2018), evaluated the sustainability of local festivals in terms of the relationships between stakeholders, finding that festival sustainability is significantly related to giving the appropriate priority to each stakeholder. Tepeci et al. (2022) evaluated the shortcomings, benefits, and contributions of Turkey's long-running Mesir Paste Festival. They concluded that the festival did not provide significant social, cultural, or economic benefits. They identified four main shortcomings: inability to reflect the local culture, insufficient cooperation between stakeholders, insufficient promotion, and insufficient participants.

Although these studies provide a basis for managing festivals, there is still uncertainty regarding the management of gastronomy festivals specifically. This is reflected both in the tourism literature on festival management and also in studies investigating specific strategies regarding the relationship between gastronomy and tourism.

### **Noteworthy Strategies in the Relationship between Gastronomy and Tourism**

The literature on gastronomic initiatives in tourism suggests that most gastronomic initiatives should be developed in line with specific strategies,

which are often conceptualized in terms of specific destinations and gastronomic products. For instance, Hjalager (2002) argues that the development of gastronomic tourism products can take place in four different strategic phases, with each one differentiating the products from their counterparts and thus of strategic importance. The four main strategies are protecting the local, establishing production standards, integrating gastronomic products with other tourism products, and adding new products to existing gastronomic values. Harrington and Ottenbacher (2010) claim that issues like the destination's gastronomic identity, tourist motivation and behavior, and implementation problems are important when integrating gastronomy and tourism.

Other researchers explain these strategies in terms of three main approaches drawn from strategic management literature. The resource-based approach focuses on new gastronomic tourism products, the emerging approach focuses on developing them, while the deliberate approach concerns positioning products in the market (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2018; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020).

The resource-based approach argues that the natural resources used to create the destination's gastronomic products should be identified with the specific destination. With the help of entrepreneurs, unplanned actions can enable an institutional strategy to emerge, which can then become a deliberate strategy. According to Aydın (2020), four main variables characterize the strategic relationship between gastronomy and tourism: diversity of gastronomic products, stakeholder management, leadership, and changes in tourist demand. Drawing on Mintzberg, Aydın (2020) argues that emerging strategies in gastronomy tourism may develop differently from planned ones.

Some of above studies focus only on the gastronomic product itself (Hjalager, 2002) whereas others adopt a holistic framework to examine the gastronomic product's destination context (Aydın, 2020; Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010). Other studies draw on different disciplines to conceptualize strategies regarding the relationship between gastronomy and tourism (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2018; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). However, previous studies of festival management, gastronomy, and tourism have various deficiencies. The following section analyzes research on gastronomy festivals according to their contextual approaches to better explain this gap.



## **Studies of Gastronomy Festivals**

Studies of gastronomy festivals have focused either on tourists (demand side) or destinations (supply side). The former group evaluates gastronomy festivals in terms of tourists' motivations, perceptions and behavioral intentions, and the participants' characteristics.

Regarding motivation, tourists attend gastronomy festivals for various reasons, such as excitement, getting away from daily routines (Chang & Yuan, 2011; Draper et al., 2016; Saayman et al., 2012), experiencing the food and beverages offered at the festival (Dodd et al., 2006; Park et al., 2008; Yuan et al., 2004), and socializing and learning (Isaykina, 2001; Weiler et al., 2004).

Regarding participating tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions regarding a festival, studies have investigated various types of festival in different countries, focusing on the effects of factors like food and beverage quality, festival stands, and festival activities. The findings suggest that festival characteristics can have positive effects on the participants' satisfaction and behavioral intention (Chang, 2014; Choo & Park, 2017; Dimitrovski, 2016; Hubbard et al., 2012).

Finally, other tourist-focused studies have sought to understand gastronomy festival participants by categorizing them. The categorization criteria include age group (Axelsen & Swan, 2010; Dodd et al, 2006), interest in gastronomy (López-Guzmán et al., 2017), and spending levels (Kim et al., 2014; Saayman et al., 2012).

In contrast, destination-oriented researchers address the relationship between gastronomy festivals and destinations from a supply-side perspective as an important auxiliary destination branding tool (Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore, 2016; Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). The findings suggest that gastronomy festivals can shape destination image positively (Bekar et al., 2017) and strengthen the destination's gastronomic identity and culinary heritage (Kim et al., 2014). Destination branding can also be accelerated by political and economic support (Getz et al., 2015). However, successful destination branding through festivals requires that the destination maintains stability and maintains a certain threshold level of festival participants (Lee & Arcodia, 2011).

Gastronomic festivals have become globally important. In Germany, for instance, gastronomy festivals are the second most popular festival type after music festivals (Davies 2024). Portugal's cherry festival makes a

significant economic contribution to the associated destinations by increasing hotel occupancy rates by 45% and restaurant revenues by 55% (Baptista Alves et al., 2010). Similarly, the Alaçatı Herb Festival in Turkey provides various socioeconomic benefits, such as enabling local people and tourists to mingle, and increasing shopping opportunities (Ön Esen & Yılmaz, 2016).

As this literature review demonstrates, gastronomy festivals are an important research area that has been analyzed from different perspectives. In particular, analyzing gastronomy festivals from both the demand and supply perspectives is very valuable in terms of revealing the characteristics and perceptions of participating tourists and the socio-economic contributions of festivals to the destination. However, there are also areas that these studies do not focus on, particularly a holistic analysis of managing gastronomy festivals. These studies also tend to focus on the results rather than the causes of festivals. Finally, studies of strategies to integrate gastronomy and tourism tend to explain them generally and mostly conceptually in terms of destinations rather than a gastronomic product like festivals. Accordingly, the present study aims to address these gaps in previous research by investigating the causes rather than the results of gastronomy festivals, examine festival management processes holistically, and identify the role of festivals in tourism by providing empirical evidence of the prominent strategies for integrating gastronomy and tourism.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Study Setting: Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival, Turkey**

Alanya, the selected research area, is an important touristic destination in Antalya Province, Turkey, known for its natural and historical features (Seydioğulları, 2010). Until the 1950s, Alanya was a small fishing town in an agricultural region producing bananas and citrus fruits. Since the 1980s, it has become a destination for mass sun, sea, and sand tourism. Currently, it receives approximately 7 million tourists annually, with tourism being the region's most important economic sector (ALTSO, 2022; Saruhan, 2019).

While Alanya's natural beauty is the main motivation for tourists (Doğan et al., 2010), it has also become known for many annual events, including the International Children's Festival, Alanya International Culture and Art Festival, International Jazz Days, Triathlon European Cup, International Stone Sculpture Symposium, and International New Year

Bazaar (Alanya Municipality, 2023). Alanya is also developing gastronomy tourism (Nebioğlu, 2021). Initiatives include geographical indications and patents (TPE, 2023) for regional gastronomic products, a web-based culinary heritage application to highlight local products and introduce them to tourists, internationally organized cooking competitions, and the Culinary Culture House to introduce local dishes (Nebioğlu & Ak, 2023). Alanya is also a very rich place in terms of tropical fruit production. So far, more than forty kinds of tropical fruits such as avocado, mango, and dragon fruit, have been grown in Alanya, where the Tropical Fruit Festival has been organized since 2022 (Alanya Municipality, 2023). Thus, Alanya is an appropriate research area both because it positions gastronomy as a part of its tourism strategy and because it has hosted events for many years.

### **Research Questions and Data Collection Tools**

The research questions were formulated using two approaches. First, document analysis was conducted with articles, papers, books, and websites about Alanya regarding gastronomy, tourism, and festivals to identify aspects of Alanya that could form the basis of a gastronomy festival. For this, 8 printed documents were identified published between 1989 and 2020: 6 books and 2 research articles. These documents provide general information about Alanya's culinary culture. On the other hand, 35 online documents accessed from the websites of local governments and news organizations provide more up-to-date information about Alanya's gastronomy. These documents mainly mention Alanya's local foods, especially tropical products, as well as cooking competitions, cooking courses, gastronomy promotion activities, culinary heritage, and food museum projects organized in Alanya. The analysis indicates that Alanya is a destination with identifiable local characteristics, many gastronomic products, and intensive tourism activities; it is also highly experienced in terms of activities.

The relevant literature was reviewed to draft the research questions, given that the main aim of the study was to understand the management process of Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival. This was addressed to four main research areas: tourist motivations, management process, Alanya's gastronomy strategy approaches, and the festival's role in tourism. The main categories and sub-categories related to these four areas were determined from the literature (Table 1). A focus group interview was then conducted to confirm Alanya's suitability as a research site and to clarify the research questions.

Table 1. *Categories and Sub-categories in Developing Interview Questions*

Categories	Sub-categories in developing interview questions	Sources
<b>Motivations</b>	Tourist motivations (excitement, getting away from daily routines, food experience, socializing and learning) Destination perspective (auxiliary tool of destination branding, positive destination image, strengthening destination's gastronomic identity and culinary heritage)	Chang & Yuan (2011), Draper et al. (2016), Saayman et al. (2012), Dodd et al. (2006), Park et al. (2008), Isaykina (2001), Weiler et al. (2004), Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore (2016), Blichfeldt & Halkier (2014), Kim et al. (2014)
<b>Management Process</b>	Planning, organization, leadership, control, resources, potential audience, settlement planning, time interval, finance, cost management, stakeholder management, visitor management	Tinga & Arcipe (2021), Andersson & Getz (2008), Carlsen et al. (2010), Negrusa & Murareanu (2020), Simon et al. (2017), Miller et al. (2021), Yin et al. (2024)
<b>Destinations' Gastronomy Tourism Strategy</b>	Resource-based strategies, emerging strategies, deliberate strategies	Özdemir & Seyitoğlu (2018), Aydın (2020), Seyitoğlu & Ivanov (2020)
<b>Role in Tourism</b>	Auxiliary tool of destination branding, economic support to destinations, positive destination image	Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore (2016), Blichfeldt & Halkier (2014), Baptista Alves et al. (2010), Ön Esen & Yılmaz (2016)

Prior to the focus group interview, which aimed to create an environment for discussion, open-ended questions were prepared to understand the interviewees' thoughts on creating and implementing Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival. The participants were experts of various ages, professions, and work experience (Table 2). The focus group interview, which lasted 74 minutes, was recorded and transcribed into a 7,399-word text.

Table 2. *Information on Focus Group Interview Participants*

Participant Code	Age (years)	Education Level	Profession
FGP1	36	Doctoral	Academician
FGP2	35	High School	Executive Chef
FGP3	53	High School	Marketing Manager
FGP4	43	Bachelor's	Organization Manager
FGP5	55	Bachelor's	Festival Coordinator
FGP6	44	Doctoral	Academician
FGP7	43	Doctoral	Academician
FGP8	36	Master's	Tour Guide

The document analysis and focus group interviews revealed that Alanya has started to integrate its local gastronomic products with tourism activities, and that Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival plays an important role in this process. After the focus group interview, the study addressed four research questions: What are the reasons for organizing a tropical fruit

festival in Alanya? What stages should be followed to organize the festival? What type(s) of strategies should the festival adopt? What is the festival's role in Alanya's tourism sector? To generate rich and deep answers to these research questions, a qualitative case study research method was preferred.

Table 3. *Socio-Demographic Information of Interview Participants*

Participant Code	Age (years)	Education Level	Profession	Total Work Experience (years)	Length of Residence in the Region (years)
P1	33	Bachelor's	Food Engineer	10	33
P2	37	Doctoral	Academician	11	25
P3	52	Bachelor's	Manager-Organizer	30	52
P4	60	Bachelor's	Veterinary- Organizer	45	60
P5	41	Bachelor's	Hotel Operator	10	35
P6	66	Master's	Agricultural Engineer	35	66
P7	43	Bachelor's	Operator-Organizer	12	32
P8	54	Bachelor's	Agricultural Engineer	29	54
P9	48	Bachelor's	Food Engineer	26	26
P10	49	High School	Operator-Organizer	30	49
P11	41	Bachelor's	Advertiser	26	26
P12	46	Master's	Architect	14	46

The individual face-to-face interviews were conducted after preparing an open-ended questionnaire. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select participants with knowledge about Alanya's culinary culture and interested in event tourism. In qualitative research the study group size can vary (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Here, theoretical sampling was used to determine the sample size. That is, no further interviews were conducted once the participants' statements became repetitive (Robinson, 2014). In the present study, this occurred with 12 participants. Table 3 presents the socio-demographic information about the participants. Their ages ranged between 33 and 66 years old; their total work experience ranged between 10 and 45 years; and their length of residency in Alanya region varied from 25 to 66 years, indicating that they were well acquainted with Alanya in many respects. Finally, most worked in relevant positions, for example as organizers and coordinators in Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival.

The interviewees were first contacted and provided with detailed information about the interview's subject, place, and time. At the interview, voluntary participation forms were presented to each interviewee and permission obtained to voice record the interview to make data collection more efficient. The data from the interviews, conducted over a month, produced a 39,375-word transcript.

## Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data from the document review, focus group discussions, and interviews were subjected to content analysis using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. Following Creswell and Poth (2018), the data were coded, the codes were classified, and themes were created and interpreted.

An important concept in qualitative research is credibility, which defines the reliability and validity of the research. Because qualitative research includes holistic and multidimensional data, credibility requires consideration of various elements, including the extent to which the sampled people represent the population (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To achieve this, we interviewed people with shared experiences from living in Alanya and involvement in regional event tourism activities. Shenton (2004) suggests that rich descriptions can increase credibility. In the present study, direct quotations were included for this purpose. Accurate coding processes also affect credibility, which can be ensured by having least two coders (Hall & Valentin, 2005). Finally, credibility can be increased by developing code schemes after separate coding, discussions while applying code schemes to the text and determining categories, and searching for a consensus (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

## FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the document analysis, focus group discussions, and individual interviews to answer the research questions.

### Reasons for Organizing the Tropical Fruit Festival in Alanya

The participants suggested many different reasons for the festival (Table 4), which could be categorized into four groups: social, cultural, economic, and political.

According to the participants, the main reason for this festival is social need. This festival is an event that *“fulfils people’s social needs”* (P3) and *“heralds the start of the tourism season and is thought of as hello to summer”* (P12). At the same time, *“being a part of the activity is seen as a situation that motivates people”* (P2).

The participants also considered the festival to be a powerful tool for remembering and keeping alive cultural values that are an integral part of



societies. For example, *“foods that have become the tradition of the region or have the potential to become a tradition will come to the fore.”* (P2).

Table 4. *Reasons for Organizing the Tropical Fruit Festival in Alanya*

Reasons	Brief Descriptions
<b>Social</b>	Providing social morale and motivation
<b>Cultural</b>	Reminding, promoting, and transferring the region's cultural values to future generations
<b>Economic</b>	Supporting traders by commercially revitalizing the region Supporting regional tourism activities through festivals Using local products as a tool for branding and registering them with the region Helping local producers find markets more easily
<b>Political</b>	Competition between local governments, political ideologies, and local governments' desire to provide public services Creating a positive city image and urban awareness

Economic reasons are also important: *“For Alanya, tourism means money ... As such, I think that the more culture, art and social activities increase in the region, the higher the awareness of a city will rise. The more festivals increase, the more beneficial it is for us. The Tropical Fruit Festival is a tool for this”* (P2). Economically, festivals also encourage *“more tourists to come, to be a source of promotion”* (P10). It also helps in branding and registration of local products: *“while organizing the festival, you get the registration of some local products such as avocado. These products then turn into brands. Because of this, we benefit from festivals”* (P4). Similarly, thanks to this festival, *“producers are brought to the forefront, and it helps them to find a market.”* (P5) *“Especially encouraging the use of local products in this festival supports gastronomy tourism in terms of the sustainability of local products”* (P1).

Finally, festivals also emerge for political reasons: *“Festivals are defined as a task performed to strengthen the perception that the local government attaches importance to the cultural values of the city, a trunk show of local governments”* (P9). In addition, *“this festival is also organized by Alanya Municipality to contribute to a positive image of Alanya and to create urban awareness”* (P2).

### Management of Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival and Key Issues

Management of the festival also fell into the four stages outlined earlier: design, planning, organization, and evaluation. Table 5 presents each stage and the main issues.

According to the participants, at the design stage, the first issue is selection of gastronomic products, Participant P1 explained: *“First of all, it*



*is necessary to determine what the gastronomic product will be. Should it be a local product or a product that gains local character? We decided this by consulting many places and taking ideas.”* That is, an idea should be proposed first before being transformed into a theme.

Table 5. *Management Stages and Key Issues in Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival*

Stage	Stage Description	Key Issues
<b>Design</b>	Determining the idea, theme, and concept	Selection of gastronomic product(s) Festival nomenclature Festival timing and duration Location and venue selection Identification of activities
<b>Planning</b>	Formation of organizing committee, definition of goals and objectives, identification of strategies, interviews with stakeholders, financing, target group, etc.	Leadership Committee Stakeholder and stakeholder relations Financing Identifying target audience
<b>Operation</b>	Development of business / event plans, identification of sponsorships / invitees / target audience, promotion, and publicity activities	Advertising and promotion Space and personnel management
<b>Evaluation</b>	Reporting of activity, collection of visitor surveys, evaluation of festival	Situation assessment

Product selection involves several criteria: popularity, suitability for the local cuisine, coincidence of harvesting with festival timing, potential brand value, and value added to the festival and the region. In Alanya’s case, for example, *“Avocado can be the main product of a gastronomy festival as it is a very popular product for almost all world cuisines in recent years”* (P1). For agricultural products, *“the harvest period and festival dates should be compatible”* (P1), and *“it should reflect the culture of the region and especially products with geographical indication, rarely grown in the country and difficult to imitate”* (P9).

Another noteworthy issue is naming festivals. According to the participants, the name should arouse curiosity while being broad enough to cover several products: *“There are forty kinds of herbs in the Aegean, but they don’t say let’s highlight one of them. It’s just an herb festival”* (P9). *“When naming it, it is necessary to determine the concept in a way to diversify and enrich it every year”* (P12). Accordingly, Alanya Tropical Festival develops a different main theme every year, such as avocado or mango.

Regarding timing, as explained above, *“it should be planned at an appropriate time with the harvest period and should also have a feature that will extend the season by covering a time period outside the high tourism season”* (P1).

The festival is organized in September and October, close to the end of the busy tourist season.

The selected festival date range, timing, and duration should coincide with potential visitors' spare time: *"No one will come for a one-day festival; it should be planned for at least two days. In this way, they can attract participants from different cities"* (P10). In addition, *"this festival is planned to extend the season, especially outside the high tourism season; the harvest time of tropical fruits is taken into account in the planning"* (P9).

There are several key considerations regarding location and venue: *"being in a central place"* (P1), *"covered in winter"* (P3) but *"in an open area in summer"* (P7), *"depending on the time period to be arranged, and being a central place with the capacity to accommodate crowded groups of people"* (P12). Accordingly, Alanya's festival area is in the old town center, which is very popular and easily accessible to everyone.

The design stages also involve choosing the festival activities. *"This entails the identification of various gastronomy-related events, such as cooking competitions, various workshops (jewelry making, woodworking, painting, photography), and diverse workshops focusing on local products like aromatic oils and plants, banana fiber utilization, and citrus jam production. Additionally, conferences, talks, children's activities, farmer producer meetings, and exhibitions should be incorporated to offer a comprehensive range of topics and experiences"* (P9).

The planning stage focuses on effectively executing the festival. In particular, the leader should be *"a competent individual with expertise in a field related to food"* (P7) and *"a solid understanding of local gastronomy"* (P12). Moreover, *"it is imperative that these events be organized under the auspices of official entities"* (P1). This is because *"local governments (municipalities) bear substantial responsibility for a wide array of sectors, ranging from tourism to agriculture"* (P4). Accordingly, Alanya's festival is carried out under the leadership of Alanya Municipality.

Local governments should establish specialized committees for organizing festivals effectively, with *"wide-ranging representation and participation"* (P3). The committees should also regulate relationships with stakeholders. Participant P9 defines the main stakeholders of the festival as *"Alanya Municipality, Alanya Chamber of Commerce and Industry, district governorship, tourism promotion foundations, tourism and cookery associations, producer associations, tradesmen's chambers"*.

A significant concern is financing, which plays a critical role in ensuring festival sustainability: *"The realization of any festival venture, be it related to gastronomy, tourism, or the arts, heavily relies on securing adequate financing"* (P8). According to Participant P1, this is done by the municipality in Alanya's case: *"Our festival is a festival where financing is provided by a single institution, but apart from financial issues, we receive accommodation support especially in cooperation with ALTID (Alanya Touristic Hoteliers Association)"*.

Another issue is the target audience, which the interviewees considered to be primarily residents: *"Our festival primarily targeted the entire population of Alanya and the surrounding areas"* (P12). However, according to P8, *"This festival should start from national and go towards the international arena. Since there are also resident foreigners in Alanya, we appeal to both segments"*.

The operational stage implements the decisions and procedures defined during the planning stage. Advertising and promotional activities take precedence, commencing prior to the festival and continuing throughout. Recently, advertising and promotion are highly significant, particularly regarding the efficacy of social media promotions: *"Advertising and promotion, particularly through social media, serve as vital tools for festivals to effectively engage with the appropriate participants. In this respect, social media influencers are very effective, and we cooperate with them in this regard"* (P7).

Another important component is management of space and personnel, particularly meticulous organization of stands and efficient coordination of support personnel: *"We must exercise utmost caution in ensuring uninterrupted management of our vital requirements and securing the necessary support personnel (such as security personnel, technical service staff, etc.), encompassing elements such as determining the quantity and location of stands, as well as the provision of electricity"* (P6).

In the evaluation stage, also known as the post-festival process, the organizers assess the festival. This requires careful examination of festival attendee feedback to identify the event's strengths and weaknesses: *"Positive and negative aspects of the festival are identified, and appropriate measures are implemented to rectify any shortcomings"* (P12). Finally, *"the observations and insights gathered in this evaluation report are then compiled into a written document"* (P1).

## Strategies Followed in the Festival and the Roles of the Festival in Tourism

The participants' responses implied certain strategic management theories, with the resource-based strategy appearing to be the most important in planning a gastronomy festival. As Participant P2 put it, *"There are no products that do not grow in this region ... Endemic plants can also grow ... A gastronomy festival should be supplied by the region's local and difficult to imitate products."* A number of participants suggested that the focus of gastronomy festivals should be determined by identifying food products with a specific connection to the locality. These responses suggest that Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival draws on a resource-based strategic approach.

Because the festival is fairly new, the emerging strategy was also implied in the interviews. For example, Participant P3 said, *"When we embarked on this endeavor, we did not deliberately focus on the specific details of how the event should be organized. Rather, we hosted this event to invigorate the local community and celebrate tourism. It is worth noting that we have gradually enhanced our professionalism each year, surpassing our achievements from the previous year."*

Table 6. *Strategies Followed in the Festival and the Roles of the Festival in Tourism*

Strategy and Roles	Subcategories	Short Descriptions
<b>Strategies Implemented in the Festival</b>	Resource-Based	Achieving competitive advantage through
	Strategy	difficult-to-imitate products
	Emerging Strategy	Strategies that emerge spontaneously during the activity
<b>The Significance of the Festival in Tourism</b>	Encouraging Roles	Encouraging tourists to travel to the destination, Offering tourists new areas for gastronomic experiences
	Supportive Roles	Contributing to destination promotion and marketing
	Complementary Roles	Extending the tourism season

The research findings also indicate that the festival plays distinct roles within tourism, including encouraging, supporting, and complementing other activities. The encouraging role pertains to motivating tourists to embark on specific journeys. As participant P1 noted, *"I closely follow gastronomy festivals. When I have a desired destination in mind, I coordinate my annual vacation accordingly. I firmly believe that such festivals occur only once and cannot be replicated. This serves as a significant motivation for my travel plans. I think this will be similar for Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival in the future."* Similar motives were shared by many other participants.

Especially for tourists who are curious about different flavors, Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival provides an interesting event. As Participant P5 noted, *“tropical fruits are an area that attracts tourists and offers them new gastronomic experiences”*.

The supportive role includes activities that contribute to promoting and marketing the destination: *“Tourists from various corners of the globe, as well as within Turkey, converge on these festivals. Consequently, it presents an ideal opportunity to showcase historical culinary delights to visitors. In addition, both chefs and other culinary professionals can further develop their craft. Ultimately, it serves as a means to promote the region itself”* (P3).

Finally, complementary roles involve extending the tourism season: *“For instance, if the necessary infrastructure is established, organizing this festival during the off-season could effectively prolong the tourism season. Therefore, it would be prudent to explore such possibilities”* (P12). Similarly, Participant P5 said, *“I think that the Tropical Fruit Festival will help to extend the tourism season a little longer by stimulating domestic tourism movements”*.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study identified the underlying reasons for holding Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival, the stages of festival management, the implementation of strategic approaches within the festival, and the role of the festival in promoting tourism with the help of a case study. Figure 1 shows the interplay between the formation and management of gastronomy festivals, and the strategies they are built on. The following section discusses the theoretical and gastronomic implications of these relationships.

### Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study indicate that Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival is driven by four groups of motivations: social, cultural, economic, and political. Social and cultural motivations are of particular relevance to tourists. Research shows that tourists participate in festivals for diverse reasons, such as engaging in social gatherings or gaining insights. This experiential aspect is an integral component of tourism (Quan & Wang, 2004) whereby tourists seek to enrich their experiences through various motivations, including socializing and acquiring knowledge (Fields, 2002). From the sociocultural perspective, the Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival aims to boost morale and motivate local people while protecting local values. In

addition, because this festival is quite new, it targets local people rather than tourists. Economic factors are also prominent in organizing festivals, for example as a way to revitalize the local economy (Tepeci et al., 2022). Likewise, Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival, as a festival sponsored by Alanya Municipality, makes an economic contribution by supporting local trade, adding value to tourism activities, and helping to brand local products. Destinations can leverage gastronomy in their tourism sector to foster local economic growth, gain a competitive advantage through unique and difficult-to-replicate gastronomic products, and thereby contribute to the destination's sustainability (Hall & Mitchell, 2003; López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012; Sims, 2009). Festivals may also be organized for political reasons. However, whereas Getz et al. (2015) argue that political and economic backing are important for festival branding, we found that Alanya's local government organizes festivals for the local populace to fulfill a previous promise. That is, satisfying the local community is prioritized over branding efforts.

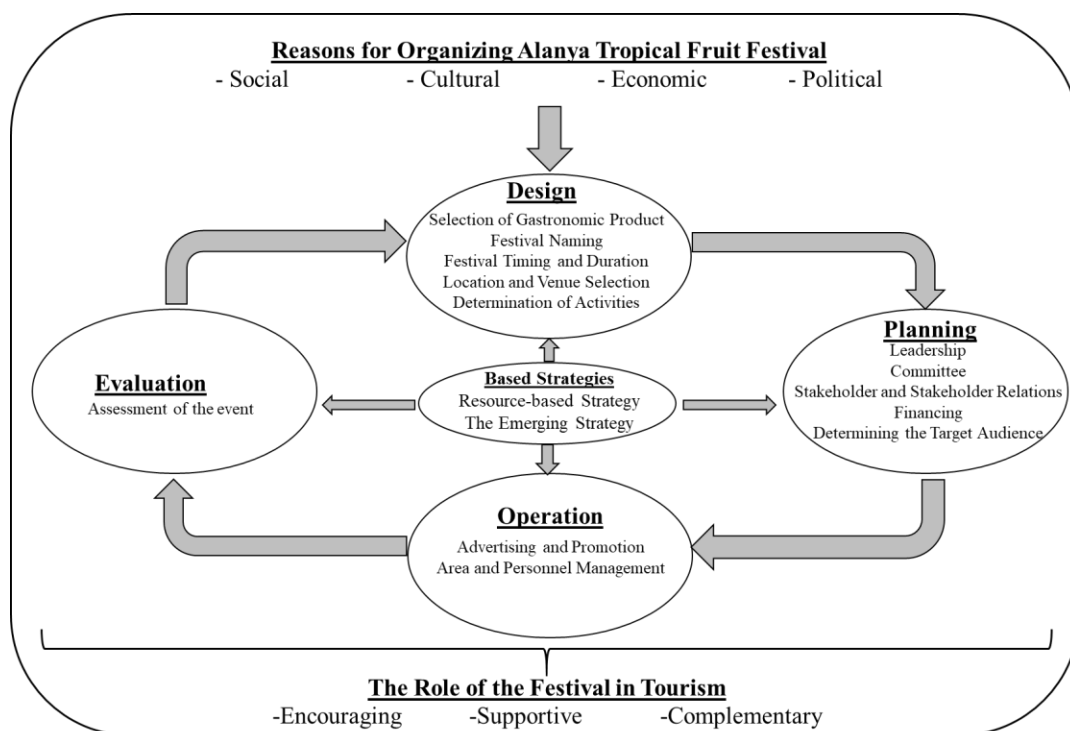


Figure 1. A Holistic View of Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival

Two strategies attract particular attention regarding the emergence of Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival. Unsurprisingly, the leading strategy is resource based. Given that Alanya is Turkey's main tropical fruit producer, it makes strategic use of products like avocado and banana in its festival because they have gained a local character and geographical mark. In addition, they are very suitable for resource-based strategies as they are not



very likely to be imitated. This parallels previous findings (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2018; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020).

Second, emerging strategies are also prominent, which have sometimes emerged spontaneously because Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival is fairly new. As some participants noted, the festival organizers did not plan every detail in advance. This aligns with Aydın's (2020) finding that some strategies for integrating gastronomy and tourism may emerge spontaneously. The relationship between gastronomy and tourism in Cappadocia demonstrates that there may be emerging strategies in which stakeholders are not very involved. Our findings suggest that this also applies to Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival.

Management of gastronomy festivals can be divided into four key stages: design, planning, operation, and evaluation. A crucial factor in the design phase is selection of gastronomic products that are locally sourced or have acquired a local identity. The chosen product must reflect the region's character and be difficult to replicate. Previous research has highlighted how such products can represent a destination (Harrington, 2005). In Alanya, tropical fruits are important because they have a distinct local identity and cannot be cultivated elsewhere in Turkey. Subsequent management decisions, such as festival nomenclature, timing, duration, location, and event, depend on the chosen product.

The planning stage involves key elements, such as leadership, committee formation, stakeholder relationships, financing, and target audience selection. Festival organizations in Turkey are mostly led by state institutions, as is the case for Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival. The festival has an organizing committee and many stakeholders. In line with the present findings, previous studies of festival management have reported that inter-stakeholder relations and giving due importance to each stakeholder are important issues (Adongo & Kim, 2018). Regarding financing, Alanya's festival is supported by the municipality. Municipalities support such events to strengthen the local economy (Tepeci et al., 2022). Regarding the operational phase for Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival, two issues stand out: advertising and promotion, and location and personnel management. The former is mostly achieved through local promotions, while social media tools are also used to increase national recognition. Regarding the latter issue, participants suggested that the festival management needed to be more effective. Tepeci et al. (2022) also found that location and personnel management are important issues for festivals.



All stages of the festival's management process are resource-based and driven by the emerging strategy. In the first stage, the festival is based on a product like tropical fruits that is difficult to imitate nationwide. This product is then nurtured by a stronger institution like Alanya Municipality in terms of financial and human resources compared to private institutions. Here, product, financing, and human resources can be associated with the resource-based approach. In addition, the study detected an emerging strategy in all the festival's management processes. In short, the festival's management processes derive from both planned and spontaneous strategies.

The evaluation stage involves an analysis of the festival's entire lifecycle, from planning to implementation. According to Getz and Frisby (1988), there are two main areas: organizational and environmental. Our findings indicate that Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival is evaluated organizationally, but the event's environmental impacts are not much considered.

Based on the present findings, festivals can have three roles in tourism: encouragement, support, and complementarity. First, they can be catalysts, encouraging tourists to visit a specific destination, as reported by numerous studies (Bekar et al., 2017; Doğrul et al., 2015; López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Second, they can positively contribute to a destination's promotional and marketing efforts, as also found for gastronomy festivals in Portugal (Baptista Alves et al., 2010) and Turkey (Ön Esen & Yılmaz, 2016). Third, a well-planned gastronomy festival can extend the destination's tourism season. The present findings indicate that Alanya Tropical Fruit Festival fulfils all three functions in its contribution to tourism.

### **Practical Implications**

The present case study's findings have practical implications as well in providing guidance to practitioners regarding the reasons for the emergence of gastronomy festivals, the strategies to be implemented to organize them, festival management processes, and the role of festivals in tourism.

Alanya's crucial gastronomic assets are tropical products like avocado, papaya, and banana, which cannot be easily cultivated elsewhere in Turkey. Previous studies of Alanya's culinary characteristics have also demonstrated the importance of tropical fruits in its gastronomy tourism

efforts (Karsak, 2020; Nebioğlu, 2021; Soner, 2013). Practitioners should therefore investigate geographical indication, developing new food recipes, and organizing scientific meetings on this subject to further fuse these products with local culture. These planned efforts can be seen as a reflection of resource-based strategies.

The present findings suggest that new, even unexpected, emerging strategies can appear alongside the resource-based approach at any stage. As Mintzberg et al. (1998) argue, strategies implemented intentionally can later become emerging strategies, which in turn can again become intentional.

Finally, gastronomy festivals should be regarded as alternative tourism resources for tourist destinations. From the perspective of practitioners, they not only increase tourist motivation but also contribute to promoting and marketing the destination while extending its tourism season.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Despite providing significant insights into the emergence of gastronomy festivals, their management processes, applied strategies, and contribution to tourism, the present study has certain limitations. First, it only explores one gastronomy festival in a tourist destination, so future studies should investigate diverse locations. Second, a qualitative approach was adopted, specifically interpreting semi-structured interview data. Consequently, future studies should also incorporate quantitative research designs.

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## SATISFIERS AND DISSATISFIERS FOR LAS VEGAS CASINO BUFFET RESTAURANTS: A GOOGLE REVIEW AND LIWC ANALYSIS

Tevfik DEMIRCIFTCI <sup>1</sup>

*Davis School of Business, Colorado Mesa  
University, USA*

ORCID: 0000-0002-3706-2147

Amanda BELARMINO

*William F. Harrah College of Hospitality,  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA*

ORCID: 0000-0002-5284-9247

Carola RAAB

*William F. Harrah College of Hospitality,  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA*

ORCID: 0000-0002-0285-278X

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify satisfiers and dissatisfiers by analyzing Google Reviews on Las Vegas Casino Buffet Restaurants. It also compared its results to the nascent literature regarding satisfiers and dissatisfiers for restaurants, as revealed in online review by analyzing 14,064 reviews using Nvivo and Excel, with content analysis and text analysis with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count to gain insights into reviewers' emotional expressions. It found that food, option/variety, price/value, employees, and atmosphere were important satisfiers/dissatisfiers. For casino buffets, the theme of options was present as both satisfier and dissatisfier, indicating it is important to this type of restaurant.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, casino-hotels in Las Vegas were forced to close their properties indefinitely (Merlan, 2020). As they reopened, operators were forced to adjust their outlets, including the iconic casino buffet, to meet health guidelines (McCarthy, 2020). Many operators reevaluated the business model for the buffet; some chose to close their buffets permanently. Treasure Island turned its buffet space into a race and

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Tevfik Demirciftci (Ph.D.), Assistant Professor, Davis School of Business, Colorado Mesa University, Grand Junction, Colorado, the USA. E-mail: [tevfikd@gmail.com](mailto:tevfikd@gmail.com)



sportsbook (Stapleton, 2020). The Rio converted their famous Carnival World buffet into a food hall (Wright, 2023). These decisions were made based on profitability due to increased food shortages, increased costs due to inflation, and labor shortages (Wright, 2023). However, this has caused a public backlash, with many consumers feeling that Las Vegas has become more expensive and less consumer-focused (Kline, 2023).

When companies make these decisions, it is important to consider the consumers' perspective. Online reviews are a way to do this (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Online reviews are really important in the hospitality industry. They give consumers' insights into a property's amenities, service quality, and atmosphere. For businesses, reviews can help identify areas for improvement and understand customer satisfaction. Ultimately, online reviews significantly shape a property's reputation and drive bookings (Chen et al., 2021).

Restaurants also employ online reviews to improve guest satisfaction through product involvement, understanding guest problems and experiences, analyzing competitive strategy, and monitoring their reputation (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Consumers also benefit from advancements in internet technology. It allows consumers to post their content to other consumers (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Additionally, consumers use online reviews to gain information about new products (Kim et al., 2021). Frequently, consumers read online reviews while making restaurant decisions since they are perceived as trustworthy and practical (Kwok & Yu, 2013).

However, limited efforts have been made to analyze online reviews to reveal factors that lead to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in restaurants, specifically casino buffets. Pantelidis (2010) pointed to the complexity of collecting online reviews as the reason for few studies focusing on online reviews in the restaurant industry. It is important to understand if the information gathered from this source is valuable enough to make business decisions for casino companies. This exploratory study aims to determine if online reviews can reveal the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of casino buffets, which operators can use when making decisions related to a) whether or not to close the buffet and b) what kind of restaurant should replace them. The results could provide casino companies with consumer information to help them make informed business decisions. For academics, this provides a new avenue of research related to the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of niche restaurants.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Las Vegas Casino Buffets

Casino buffet restaurants are significant for casinos. They offer many dining options, and these restaurants have different functions. Buffets in Las Vegas used to be considered to be bargains in the late 1950s. By the mid-2010s, a dinner buffet could cost over \$50 and include expensive items like Kobe Beef and king crab legs (Lam, 2014). Leading casinos in Las Vegas, like the Mirage, the Bellagio, and Caesars Palace, increased the quality of casino buffets by offering sumptuous choices of alternatives (Kaplan, 2019). Quality is essential for them. This can be seen in the Bacchanal Buffet at Caesars Palace. This buffet prepares ninety percent of the food in front of its customers and serves it in single portions to keep it fresh and reduce waste (LVCVA, 2019).

Previous research on casino buffets mainly examined their effect on gaming revenues (Tanford & Eunju, 2013). Repetti (2013) stated that casinos view restaurants as an amenity for their guests to help promote gaming by giving free or discounted meals. While some believe Poker players prioritize casinos based on the quality of their buffets, the reality might be more nuanced. As one gambler at Bellagio noted, "We lose a few hands, get frustrated, and take it out on the buffet" (Kaplan, 2019). This suggests that the buffet might serve as a consolation prize, a way to recoup perceived losses through a hearty meal. However, the paradigm shifts to higher quality, expensive buffets demonstrates that their appeal and profitability only partially rely on this function.

This changed when the COVID-19 pandemic caused several casino-hotels to close their operations temporarily and reevaluate their business models (Wright, 2023). As a result, several properties determined that buffets were not highly profitable and closed their operations (Kline, 2023). However, these closures have caused backlash from many guests (Schultz, 2023). Figure 1 displays the searches for Las Vegas Buffets from 2019 to 2024. There was a drop during quarantine and a spike in 2021 when travel picked up again. After that, the searches are close to their pre-pandemic levels. Consumers still value this type of restaurant even though fewer exist. Determining the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of casino buffets is important for three main reasons. First, casino buffets have a large footprint in a casino and are costly to run (Lane, 2023). For instance, the Bacchanal Buffet is 25,000 square feet with 600 seats; its 2012 remodel cost was \$17 million.

Additionally, \$2.4 million was spent on makeovers in 2021 after COVID-19 (Stapleton, 2021). Second, unlike traditional restaurants, buffets combine a variety of cuisines in a self-service model (Lane, 2023), making it challenging to understand which specific food items have positive and negative impacts on consumers. Third, when replacing these outlets with new concepts, operators will still need to meet the expectations of their customers. Therefore, it is critical to understand the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of casino buffets for guests.



Figure 1. Google trends searches for “Las Vegas Buffets”

### Satisfiers and Dissatisfiers in Restaurants

While casino buffets are an under-researched part of hospitality, the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of restaurants have been researched. From an examination of online reviews, Bilgihan et al. (2018) found that food, menu offerings, ambiance, and service emerged as themes related to satisfaction and dissatisfaction for restaurants in general. A review of Google Reviews for restaurants in the U.K. reported that food, service, atmosphere, and value significantly impacted star-rating, with specific food items emerging as satisfiers and dissatisfiers (Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020). When examining the difference between positive and negative E-WOM as proxies for satisfiers and dissatisfiers, Kim and Hwang (2022) found that food taste was significant as both a satisfier and dissatisfier; value was only significant as a dissatisfier while authenticity was only significant as a satisfier.

### Google Reviews

Jonathan Goldman, a software engineer, created Google Reviews, a platform where online consumers can do reviews for companies (Pitman, 2019). In 2021, 73% of online reviews had been posted to Google in comparison to Yelp (6%), Facebook (3%), and TripAdvisor (3%) (Reviewtrackers, 2022). Additionally, 87% of consumers stated that they

scanned Google reviews in 2023 (Paget, 2024). Finally, one billion restaurant searches per month were conducted on Google.com in 2020 (Kelso, 2020). To the authors' knowledge, based on comprehensive literature reviews, no Google Reviews study focuses on the factors influencing online casino restaurant reviews (Bogicevic et al., 2013). Thus, this study examines the following research questions:

- 1) What are casino buffet restaurants' satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors as perceived by diners on Google Review?
- 2) How do the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of casino buffets relate to the established satisfiers and dissatisfiers of traditional restaurants?
- 3) How can LIWC analysis of online reviews be utilized to better understand the factors contributing to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in casino buffets?

## **METHODOLOGY**

To answer these research questions, Google Reviews were gathered and analyzed. The data was extracted from Google Reviews using the Data Miner extension in Google Chrome. Excel, Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC), and NVivo were used to analyze the data. The DataMiner extension in Google Chrome assists researchers in taking data from web pages and converting them into CSV files or Excel spreadsheets (DataMiner, 2019). DataMiner was employed to collect data from Google Reviews. A related casino buffet restaurant review site was opened in Google Chrome. Using the DataMiner extension in Google Chrome, related data was extracted. This data includes the reviewer's name (Nickname), restaurant star ratings, reviews, comment date, and reviewer's number of reviews. Both qualitative and quantitative data collections were part of the data collection. The unit of analysis for this study was restaurant experiences.

Google Reviews offers an overall rating service by asking online customers to specify their experience levels using a five-star rating scale from five to one star. Five stars indicate that the customer loves it, and one star means the customer hates it (Google, 2019). This study analyzed reviews rated five and four stars to identify satisfiers; reviews rated one star/two stars were analyzed to identify dissatisfiers. This data was cleaned in Excel for inconsistencies, duplicates, and errors before being analyzed. Two authors also controlled for inconsistencies within the data.

Text mining was used in this study to analyze reviews of buffet restaurants to understand customers' perceptions and discover new information about their patrons. The text mining process consists of multiple stages. The raw data underwent a cleansing and conversion process to make it usable (He et al., 2013). Various text-mining techniques analyzed customers' perceptions of casino buffet restaurants. In this study, Nvivo 12 software was used to conduct query searches. These searches aimed to explore ideas and identify interesting patterns, connections, and unusual information through the research questions. NVivo was utilized to identify the words customers commonly use. The "frequency query module" in NVivo examined the text, identified the words that appeared most frequently, and created word trees (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). A list of the top one thousand most frequent words was generated, with a minimum word length set at two. Focusing on the 1,000 most frequent words captures the foundation of a reviewer's vocabulary and conveys the essential meaning. These 1000 words carry the most meaningful weight in conveying the overall document content (Kilgarriff, 2005) and are highly correlated with the meaning (Scott & Tribble, 2006). The one thousand most frequent words were selected based on the total words used in the satisfied file (167,294 words) and the dissatisfied file (125,126 words). This criterion made it possible to classify the factors contributing to customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with casino buffet restaurants. A minimum word length of two was set, and we excluded punctuation marks, symbols, and articles like "a," "an," and "the."

LIWC was used to answer the third research question. LIWC is a transparent text analysis program that quantifies words based on psychologically meaningful categories (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). LIWC has been employed by numerous studies to uncover meaning in various experimental settings, including investigating attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships, thinking styles, and individual differences (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The method has previously examined gender differences in language use (Newman et al., 2003), Internet communications (Owen et al., 2003), and Yelp restaurant reviews (Bilgihan et al., 2018). LIWC assesses text samples by matching words to a dictionary (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Initially, categories like word expression emotions were established by independent judges who determined the inclusion of each word in specific categories (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). This process combines human judgment with computerized and consistent coding systems (Bilgihan et al., 2018). LIWC identifies around 80% of the words in a given document (Newman et al., 2008).

The researchers inputted the text into the LIWC software and analyzed it across seven dimensions: self-references, social words, positive sentiments, negative sentiments, overall cognitive words, articles, and big words (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Each dimension was linked to specific terms from a predetermined dictionary (Pennebaker et al., 2015). LIWC analysis was employed to determine how LIWC analysis of online reviews can be utilized to better understand the factors contributing to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in casino buffets. This analysis allows for the measurement of emotional expressions in reviewers' feedback.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the reviews by star rating. Four-star/five-star totaled 9765 reviews, and one-star /two-star reviews totaled 4299. These reviews were taken from 14 casinos, all on the Las Vegas Strip. Non-Strip properties were excluded from the mix of local/non-local visitors to those locations.

Table 1. *Breakdown of reviews*

Buffet	4/5 Stars	1/2 Star
Bacchanal	988	247
The Buffet at Aria	904	295
Cravings	871	295
The Buffet at Bellagio	868	323
The Buffet at MGM	818	351
LeVillage Buffet	791	404
The Buffet at Luxor	725	374
The Buffet at Excalibur	720	374
Carnival Buffet	651	532
Flavors Buffet	649	188
Bayside Buffet	607	224
Spice Market Buffet	462	297
Paradise Buffet	434	222
Circus Buffet	277	173
Total	9765	4299

## Satisfiers

Satisfiers are variables that evoke feelings of delight and satisfaction but do not cause dissatisfaction if they are absent (Kueh, 2006). According to Bilgihan et al. (2018), a high overall rating indicates customer satisfaction. In this study, a total of 9,765 reviews with four-star and five-star ratings were analyzed to explore customer satisfaction.

The most frequently used words by satisfied customers included food, good, great, option (selection), price, and best. Based on the frequency of these words, several themes were identified, namely "food," "option," "value," "employee," "quality," "drinks," "atmosphere," "healthy choices," and "promotions." Satisfied casino buffet guests perceived food, options, value, employees, and quality as the most significant themes. Figure 2 presents a summary of the statistical data for satisfiers.

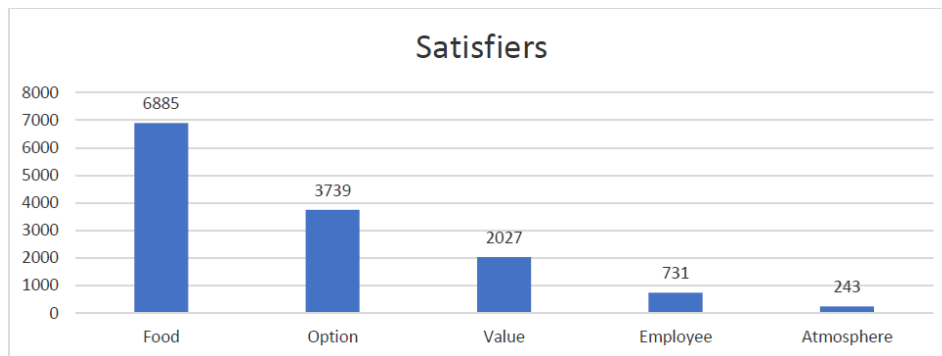


Figure 2. *Satisfiers*

### **Food**

This study specified that the most frequently stated satisfier was "food." Food was also classified into four themes. These themes are food, seafood, desserts, and meat, as shown in Figure 3. It shows the summary statistics for satisfiers-types of food. According to the Figure 3, food was mentioned 7074 times, seafood was mentioned 1190 times, desserts were mentioned 753 times, and meat was mentioned 462 times.

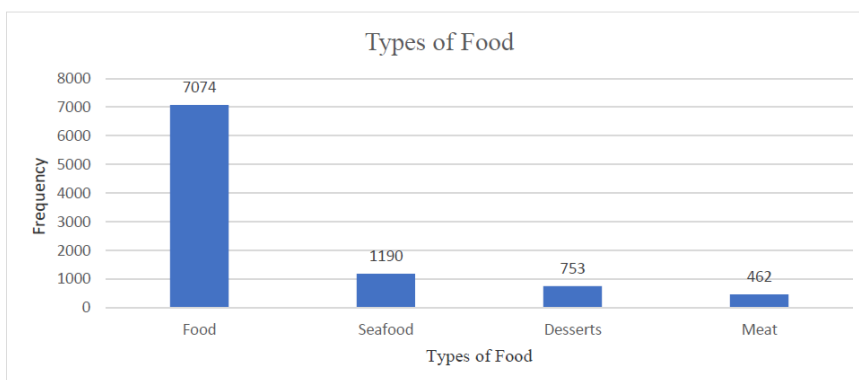


Figure 3. *Satisfiers-Types of Food*

Seafood was also categorized into five themes based on word frequencies. The term "crab" was mentioned 549 times, followed by "sushi" mentioned 132 times, "lobster" was mentioned 44 times, and "salmon" was



mentioned 36 times. One intriguing aspect of this analysis is that seafood, particularly crab legs, is highly valued by casino buffet customers, second only to general food items. One reviewer emphasized the quality of the seafood, stating, "The food was great!! The seafood buffet was worth every penny." Another reviewer highlighted the importance of freshness of seafood: "The seafood prepared fresh in front of you every time is a real treat." Crab legs emerged as the dominant aspect of seafood, with many reviewers expressing a preference for the casino buffet due to the availability of crab legs.

As depicted in Figure 3, desserts were referenced 753 times. Specific types of desserts were mentioned: crepes (n=114), gelato (n=32), and waffles (n=13). Oyewole (2013) emphasized the importance of food variety for buffet customers, and desserts are commonly regarded as comforting treats by individuals (BC Cook Articulation Committee, 2015). Most reviewers expressed satisfaction with the dessert options provided by casino buffet restaurants. One reviewer highlighted, "The dessert bar was awesome, huge, and the gelato to die for." Among the dessert choices, crepes were the most frequently mentioned item, followed by gelato and waffles. Although desserts are often considered a challenging aspect for restaurant operators (Ling et al., 2023), some buffet establishments succeed in providing high-quality desserts that enhance customer satisfaction.

Customers mentioned various cuisines in their reviews, categorized under the international cuisine theme. These cuisines include Asian (n=148), Italian (n=88), Mexican (n=77), Chinese (n=51), Indian (n=27), and Thai (n=24). Most respondents expressed satisfaction with the diverse culinary options casino buffets offer. For example, one reviewer remarked, "This buffet was the best. They had stations based on various themes like Mexican (Tacos), South Asian (Curries), and Italian (Lasagna, Pasta Station, and Meatballs)."

Meat was mentioned 462 times and classified into eight types: ribs, beef, chicken, bacon, lamb, pork, brisket, and ham. Among these, the most frequently mentioned words were ribs (n=178), beef (n=81), chicken (n=51), and bacon (n=51). Despite concerns regarding the environmental impact and public health implications associated with excessive meat consumption (Palomo-Vélez et al., 2018), the findings of this study indicated that casino buffet patrons engage in extensive meat consumption. One reviewer expressed satisfaction with the meat selection: "The meat selection was awesome and extremely tasty."

### *Options*

The words most frequently associated with the option theme were identified as follows: selection (n=1069), variety (n=454), options (n=427), lots (n=322), many (n=321), selections (n=153), choice (n=147), and various (n=26). The results of this study indicated that most reviewers expressed high satisfaction with the abundant choices of food and drinks available. One reviewer mentioned, "The buffet had a wide selection of foods, and all trays were full." Oyewole (2013) also supported that buffet customers expect various options to cater to individual preferences. Further analysis was conducted using a word tree for the term "selection," revealing common phrases like "selection was great," "selection was good," "selection was pretty," "selection was awesome," "selection was huge," "selection was incredible," "selection was outstanding," and "selection was amazing." The phrase "selection of food" (n=193) was the most frequently mentioned word group associated with the concept of "selection," followed by "selection of desserts" (n=22) and "selection of seafood" (n=10).

### *Value*

The words most frequently associated with the value theme were identified as follows: price (n=867), worth (n=589), expensive (n=216), decent (n=188), and values (n=167). There was a significant consensus among satisfied customers regarding the buffet pricing. Many customers mentioned that the buffet prices were high. For example, one customer expressed, "Very, very expensive. But good food!!! Excellent!" However, some customers found the buffet prices to be affordable. For instance, one customer stated, "Best buffet, good food, great variety, and not too expensive." Previous studies have consistently highlighted the importance of value for money as a crucial factor contributing to the success of restaurants (Sukhu et al., 2017).

### *Staff*

Staff emerged as this study's fourth most frequent satisfier theme, with 514 mentions. In addition to staff, there are mentions of servers (n=97), chefs (n=50), employees (n=42), waiters (n=30), and hostesses (n=15). Extensive research has been conducted to explore the significance of employees in ensuring customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Gunden, 2017). The findings of this study support the notion that the performance of the staff plays a crucial role in satisfying guests. For example, one reviewer stated, "The food was great, a lot to choose from, and the staff was fantastic." Some reviewers even mentioned the names of specific employees. For

instance, a reviewer expressed, "Ms. Su made the experience perfect with her kindness and professionalism. Superb."

### *Atmosphere*

Atmosphere emerged as the fifth most frequently mentioned theme of satisfiers. Along with the atmosphere, terms like ambiance (n=37), environment (n=29), and décor (n=29) were also identified. The results of this study further corroborated the existing literature, indicating that the restaurant atmosphere directly impacts customer satisfaction. One reviewer expressed their endorsement, stating that the buffet provided a superior experience in Las Vegas, with ample fresh and delicious food, friendly staff, and an upscale atmosphere. Additionally, other reviewers shared positive sentiments towards the buffet, attributing it to the exceptional ambiance.

### **Dissatisfiers**

Dissatisfaction is an attribute that must be avoided to prevent customer complaints and inhibit revisit intentions. This becomes even more important in online reviews; as negative reviews can prevent other guests from choosing your restaurant. This study analyzed 3,763 one-star and two-star reviews to explain customer dissatisfaction. The most frequently occurring words for dissatisfied customers were food, good, price, better, and quality. One interesting finding was that reviewers used several positive adjectives, like "good" and "better." However, these adjectives were often used with negative adverbs. Many reviewers said the food was "not good" or "not a good assortment to choose from." Another interesting finding was that reviewers sometimes used sarcastic expressions. For example, one reviewer said they "spent 20 bucks for two the next day at Denny's and way better food." Based on the frequencies of the words used, the study identified six themes: food, value, options, quality, employees, and atmosphere (see Figure 4).

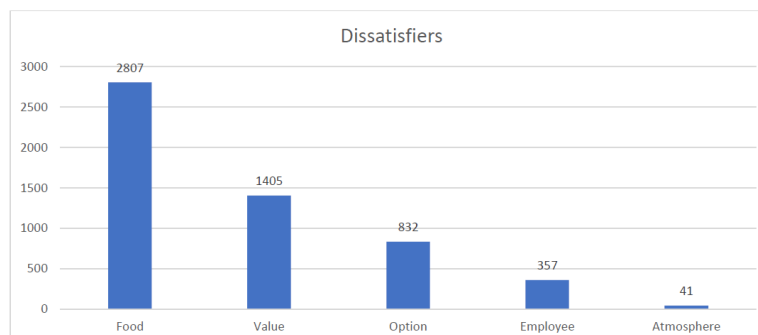


Figure 4. *Dissatisfiers-Theme*

## Food

Food was classified into four themes. These themes are food, seafood, desserts, and meat, as they were for dissatisfiers. Casino buffets' food quality is a significant concern for many customers. A study of online reviews found that the most common word used in the reviews was "food." Many of the reviews used negative adjectives to describe the food, like "horrible," "terrible," and "cold." The study also found that the words "quality" and "is" were frequently used together, suggesting that many customers are dissatisfied with the food quality at casino buffets.

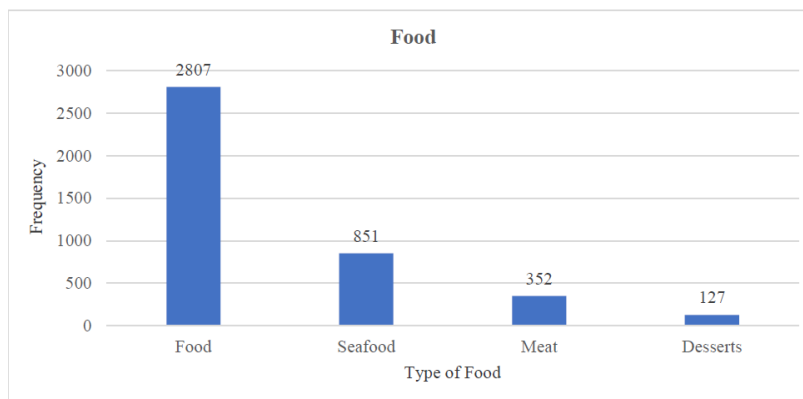


Figure 5. *Dissatisfiers-Food*

Seafood was one of the topics discussed the most in online reviews. Crab was the most mentioned seafood, with 395 mentions. Sushi was mentioned 79 times, lobster 73 times, and salmon 18 times. Many of the reviews about crabs were negative. A word tree of the word "crab was" was formed to determine why people were dissatisfied. The most common negative words used to describe the crab were "cold," "dry," "frozen," "hard," "salty," and "terrible." One reviewer specifically stated that the crab was "served frozen solid (not joking)" and that the hot crab "was soaked in boiling water." These descriptions suggest that crab needed to be fresh and appropriately prepared.

This study found that many reviewers were dissatisfied with the meat quality at casino buffets. The most frequently mentioned types of meat were ribs (n=108), chicken (n=95), beef (n=60), and pork (n=22). The most common complaints about the meat were that it was dry, cold, brown, flavorless, and tough. One reviewer said the meat was "dry like it's been sitting out for...So gross...In so many ways, Not worth \$42." These descriptions suggest that the meat was not fresh or cooked properly.

Food poisoning (n=79) was also mentioned as an extreme dissatisfier. Customers perceived food safety as crucial (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Food poisoning was one of the main reasons which dissatisfied casino buffet guests. One of the customers wrote, "Want food poisoning and bad food? This is the spot. I got very sick on the plane ride home, and it was confirmed food poisoning from here." Another customer announced his negative experience by saying, "I am changing my review from 4/5 to 1/5 because I am currently in the middle of the worst about of food poisoning, I have suffered through. What a way to spend a honeymoon."

### *Value*

Value was another common dissatisfier theme. Value has several synonyms. These are the numbers of occurrences for specific terms related to the value: price (607), worth (504), expensive (220), and decent (74). An analysis of the word tree related to "price" revealed that "for," "is," "and" "was" were the most frequently mentioned words. Among these, the word tree for "price is" was selected to understand what customers expressed about the price. This analysis identified that the attributes "too high," "not worth," and "too expensive" emerged under the "price is" context. Reviewers' evaluations of the price were linked to the quality of the food. One reviewer expressed dissatisfaction with the food, stating that "the selection was small, and the price was too high" for what they received.

### *Option/Variety*

Option emerged as the third most frequently mentioned aspect. "Variety" was the most expressed item among the words associated with this theme. Consequently, a word tree focusing on "variety is" was created, revealing that guests were dissatisfied with the "limited," "poor," and "scarce options" available. One reviewer expressed dissatisfaction, mentioning that the variety and quality were limited. They believed that the experience was not worth the \$35 they paid. Another reviewer expressed disappointment, stating there were not as many options as expected for a Las Vegas buffet. One of the tourists was also unsatisfied with the limited options, mentioning that "there weren't enough choices for a Las Vegas world buffet and that the restaurant did not offer dishes representing all major countries." Consequently, their expectations were not met, and they felt let down.

### *Employee/Staff*

In Pratten (2003), the significance of employees, particularly the servers, was emphasized as they play a crucial role in the interaction between the customer and the restaurant. Therefore, the performance of restaurant employees is critical. The findings of this study supported the notion that staff training greatly influences guest satisfaction. Reviewers expressed their dissatisfaction, attributing it to poor staff training and even suggesting that others should go somewhere else to eat. Employee knowledge and training are paramount for customers visiting a casino buffet, as evidenced by guest reviews. For instance, "The counter chef says I cannot know if the food is at the correct temperature. So much for running an efficient hotel kitchen."

### *Atmosphere*

Maintaining cleanliness in the casino buffet is of utmost importance. A spotless and hygienic environment is vital for creating a positive and attractive dining atmosphere. Patrons are more likely to return to a casino buffet where they feel confident in the safety and quality of the food and surroundings. A clean buffet area, with sanitized tables, utensils, and serving dishes, displays a commitment to maintaining high standards of hygiene (Demirciftci et al, 2024)

Oyewole (2013) emphasized that guests who visit all-you-can-eat buffets place significant importance on hygiene. For example, casino buffets must ensure customers have clean dishes and utensils. Additionally, casinos should closely monitor the quality of their food and ensure that it is stored according to health standards to prevent food poisoning. Collaborating with the Southern Nevada Health District is essential, as they conduct unannounced inspections of food establishments at least once a year (SNHD, 2020). Increasing the frequency of these visits and training relevant employees could be considered. Lastly, organizing seminars and workshops can enhance managers' knowledge and awareness of food safety (Yu, 2018).

Word frequencies also show that the atmosphere was perceived as dissatisfier. Besides atmosphere (n=23), décor (n=18) was also considered a source of dissatisfaction. One of the reviewers expressed negative feelings about the atmosphere of a restaurant "in bad need of updating and repairs. Seating is ripped in multiple seats and places. Flavors were more expensive, the atmosphere was worse, and the food was subpar."

### **Buffets vs. traditional restaurants**

To understand the possible differences between satisfiers and dissatisfiers for buffets and traditional restaurants, the researchers undertook a systematic review of previous research on restaurants examining online reviews. Scopus, EBSCOhost, and Elsevier were searched, with an additional check using the researcher's university database. The keywords "satisfiers," "dissatisfiers," and "satisfaction" were used paired with restaurant and online reviews. The researchers sought examinations of online reviews to create a direct parallel to the current study as survey and experimental design papers choose the measured variables instead of the themes coming organically from the reviews. Studies that did not explicitly examine satisfiers and dissatisfiers in online reviews were also eliminated. Due to this narrow search parameter, 12 articles were found. Out of 12, one was eliminated because of examining wineries, another for focusing on robots in restaurants, which were not a part of the casino buffet experience at the time of this writing. Therefore, 10 papers were used for this analysis.

Table 2 demonstrates that various topics were discussed in online reviews for restaurants in general. Factors directly related to COVID-19 were eliminated for this paper due to the date when our data was collected. As demonstrated in Table 2, various factors have been found to be significant for traditional restaurants. The themes of food, service, value, and atmosphere/ambiance overlapped between this study and previous studies. Regarding food, just as this study found that both quality and food selection were dominant themes, previous research supported this dynamic (e.g., Oh et al., 2023). Certain specific factors in traditional restaurants that were not mentioned in buffet reviews may be since the buffets are imbedded in the casino; Wi-Fi and parking were significant in traditional restaurants (e.g., Bilgihan et al., 2018) but are controlled by the casino, separate from the buffet operation. Certain elements have been specific to the type of restaurant being studied; e.g., Barrera-Barrera (2023) examined online reviews for Michelin-star restaurants. Therefore, wine pairing was mentioned in those reviews but not in other papers or this study. For casino buffets, the theme of options was present as both a satisfier and dissatisfier but was not mentioned in other research, indicating it is specific and of inherent importance to this type of restaurant.

### **Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Text Analysis**

LIWC analysis was conducted to examine the third research question. LIWC allows researchers to examine various emotional, cognitive, and



structural elements of individuals' verbal and written expressions (Pennebaker et al., 2015). This approach enables detailed analysis of reviews across seven dimensions, including self-references, social words, positive emotions, negative emotions, overall cognitive words, articles, and big words.

Table 2. *Antecedents of satisfiers and dissatisfiers from hospitality research*

Satisfier	Citation	Dissatisfier	Citation
Food	Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Bilgihan et al., 2018; Farinha et al., 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021; Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020; Rita et al., 2023; Tontini et al., 2022	Food	Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Bilgihan et al., 2018; Farinha et al., 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021; Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020; Rita et al., 2023; Tontini et al., 2022
Service	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Farinha et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2023; Oh & Kim, 2022	Service	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Farinha et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2023; Oh & Kim, 2022
Outdoor Seating	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Luo & Xu, 2021	Outdoor Seating	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Luo & Xu, 2021
Delivery	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Delivery	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Wi-Fi	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Wi-Fi	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Alcohol availability	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Alcohol availability	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Good for kids	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Good for kids	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Accepts credit cards	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Accepts credit cards	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Parking	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Luo & Xu, 2021	Parking	Bilgihan et al., 2018; Luo & Xu, 2021
Good for groups	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Good for groups	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Noise level	Bilgihan et al., 2018	Noise level	Bilgihan et al., 2018
Service	Luo & Zu, 2021; Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020; Rita et al., 2023; Oh & Kim, 2022	Service	Luo & Xu, 2021; Oh & Kim, 2022; Rita et al., 2023
Atmosphere	Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020;	Atmosphere	Rita et al., 2023
Value	Barrera-Barrea, 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021; Mathayomchan & Taecharungroj, 2020	Value	Barrera-Barrea, 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021
Location	Luo & Xu, 2021	Location	Luo & Xu, 2021
Price	Farinha et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2023; Rita et al., 2023; Tontini et al., 2022	Price	Farinha et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2023; Rita et al., 2023; Tontini et al., 2022
Ambiance	Barrera-Barrera, 2023	Ambiance	Barrera-Barrera, 2023
Attentiveness	Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Tontini et al., 2022	Attentiveness	Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Tontini et al., 2022
Wine pairing	Barrera-Barrera, 2023	Wine pairing	Barrera-Barrera, 2023
Reliability	Tontini et al., 2022	Reliability	Tontini et al., 2022
Empathy	Tontini et al., 2022	Empathy	Tontini et al., 2022
Tangibles	Chen et al., 2020; Tontini et al., 2022	Tangibles	Chen et al., 2020; Tontini et al., 2022
Meal	Chen et al., 2020	Meal	Chen et al., 2020
Promotion/Refund	Chen et al., 2020	Promotion/Refund	Chen et al., 2020
Type of food	Oh et al., 2023	Type of food	Oh et al., 2023
		Hygiene	Oh et al., 2023

These dimensions were established based on predefined target words derived from a specific dictionary. Previous studies, including those conducted on platforms like MySpace, have utilized these methodologies (Kim et al., 2023) in the online context. The present study analyzed and compared satisfying and dissatisfying emotional expressions with personal and formal text collections (Bilgihan et al., 2018). Table 3 shows the LIWC dimension for satisfiers.

Table 3. *LIWC Dimensions Satisfiers*

LIWC Dimension	Examples of Linked words	Google Reviews Data	Personal Texts	Formal Texts
Self-References	I/We	2.46	11.40	4.20
Social Words	Family/Friends/Female/Male	5.01	9.50	8.00
Positive Emotions	Happy/Good/Nice	15.56	2.70	8.00
Negative Emotions	Anger/Sad	0.58	2.60	1.60
Overall Cognitive Words	Inside/Cause/Discrepancy	9.70	7.80	5.40
Articles	An/A/The	6.25	5.00	7.20
Big Words	(>6 letters)	18.00	13.10	19.60

Individuals who frequently employ self-references in their language use are associated with higher levels of insecurity, nervousness, and possibly depression (LIWC, 2020). The LIWC analysis revealed that both satisfied and dissatisfied customers of casino buffets displayed a lower frequency of self-references than formal and personal texts. This suggests that casino buffet customers tend to possess higher confidence, calmness, and overall happiness with themselves.

Table 4. *LIWC Dimensions Dissatisfiers*

LIWC Dimension	Examples of Linked words	Google Reviews Data	Personal Texts	Formal Texts
Self-References	I/We	3.12	11.40	4.20
Social Words	Family/Friends/Female/Male	4.93	9.50	8.00
Positive Emotions	Happy/Good/Nice	4.61	2.70	8.00
Negative Emotions	Anger/Sad	4.44	2.60	1.60
Overall Cognitive Words	Inside/Cause/Discrepancy	11.19	7.80	5.40
Articles	An/A/The	6.75	5.00	7.20
Big Words	(>6 letters)	14.83	13.10	19.60

Individuals frequently using positive words are generally considered optimistic (Pfeil et al., 2009). In the context of satisfied casino buffet guests, they had a positive emotion score of 15.56, indicating that approximately 15.56 percent of the words used in their comments were associated with positive emotions. These findings indicate that providing excellent service to guests leads to satisfaction, resulting in a higher prevalence of positive emotions than negative emotions about casino

buffets. Zibarzani et al. (2022) recommended that restaurants strive to offer an exceptional experience to receive higher ratings online. The dissatisfied guests had a relatively high positive score of 4.61, but that is due to the use of positive words in a negative context. The most frequently occurring words for dissatisfied customers included "good" and "better." They were used in conjunction with words and phrases like "not," which negated the positive sentiment.

The utilization of words associated with negative emotions is often linked to individuals who have higher levels of anxiety or even neurotic tendencies (LIWC, 2020). It is observed that customers who have had negative experiences tend to perceive the world in a negative light. Dissatisfied guests in the casino buffet context had a negative emotion score of 4.44, indicating that approximately 4.44 percent of the words in their LIWC file were related to negative emotions, as shown in Table 3. As mentioned earlier, these negative emotions may be attributed to low food quality, poor atmosphere, limited variety, food poisoning, a lack of healthy menu options, and long waiting lines.

Overall, cognitive words indicate the extent to which individuals actively engage in thoughtful consideration of their writing topic (Pfeil et al., 2009). Examples of such words include "thinking," "wonder," "because," and "knowledge." The LIWC analysis revealed that both satisfied and dissatisfied customers of casino buffets utilized cognitive words more frequently than personal and formal texts. Specifically, satisfied guests had an overall cognitive word score of 9.7, while dissatisfied guests had a score of 11.19. These findings suggest that buffet customers actively reflect when writing their reviews, which aligns with the findings of Bilgihan et al. (2018).

Individuals who frequently use a higher rate of big words tend to be more rational and exhibit psychological distance. In the context of casino buffet customers, both satisfied (18.03) and dissatisfied (14.83) individuals employed big words (defined as words with more than six letters) more frequently compared to personal texts (13.1). This suggests that casino buffet customers try to present themselves as knowledgeable, which aligns with the findings of Bilgihan et al. (2018). Zibarzani et al. (2022) further highlighted that restaurant reviews are not solely about the business but also reflect the reviewers' perspectives.

Finally, four summary variables are generated in the latest versions of LIWC: analytical thinking, clout, authenticity, and emotional tone. These variables are assessed using standardized scores converted to percentiles,

ranging from 0 to 100, based on the area under a standard curve (LIWC, 2020). The first dimension, the analytic dimension, examines words that reflect formal, logical, and hierarchical thinking patterns. This study's analytical dimension scores for satisfiers and dissatisfiers were 64.21 and 56.14 out of 100, respectively (Table 5). The findings of this study indicate that casino buffet customers demonstrate a rational approach in their reviews. The second parameter is clout, which pertains to the relative social status, confidence, or leadership demonstrated by reviewers in their writing or communication (LIWC, 2020). In this study, the clout dimension scores for dissatisfiers and satisfiers were 39.21 and 50.87 out of 100, respectively. This indicates that satisfied customers exhibited more confidence and leadership skills than dissatisfied customers. The third variable is authenticity, which relates to how persons come across as personal, humble, and vulnerable in their expressions (LIWC, 2020). The authenticity scores for dissatisfiers and satisfiers were 38.12 and 28.83 out of 100, respectively. These figures indicate relatively low levels of authenticity for both dissatisfiers and satisfiers.

Table 5. *LIWC Dimension Summary Variable*

Summary Variables	Dissatisfiers	Satisfiers
Analytical	56.14	64.21
Clout	39.21	50.87
Authenticity	38.12	28.83
Tone	45.15	86.81

LIWC analysis was utilized to discover the satisfiers/dissatisfiers of casino buffet restaurants in an online review on Google Reviews. It was revealed that satisfied customers use a positive tone while writing their reviews. Satisfied and dissatisfied casino buffet customers used a lower rate of self-references, meaning they were more self-confident and happier with themselves. Casino buffet customers attempted to portray themselves as educated. Finally, casino buffet customers were rational while writing their reviews.

## DISCUSSION

Restaurant customers rely on social media reviews when deciding where to dine (e.g., Gunden, 2017). A significant body of literature has been published regarding the factors influencing customers' restaurant choices (e.g., Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Additionally, numerous studies have examined various restaurant attributes, including food quality (Gunden, 2017), atmosphere (Pantelidis, 2010), employee service (Pacheco, 2018),

value for money (Pacheco, 2018), the number of reviews (Lee & Sozen, 2016), and overall restaurant ratings (Gan et al., 2017). This study added to the literature by identifying several factors that contributed to the satisfaction of casino buffet guests, including food quality, menu options and variety, pricing, employee service, and atmosphere. Menu options significantly differ from previous studies regarding online reviews for traditional restaurants, indicating this is an expectation and may be an expectation of any restaurant that replaces the buffet.

The study's results indicated that food was predominantly mentioned by casino buffet customers as a source of satisfaction, consistent with previous findings regarding online reviews (e.g., Farinha et al., 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021). Customers preferred diverse food options, particularly seafood, desserts, and meat. Customers used various adjectives, like good, great, delicious, fantastic, excellent, and tasty, to evaluate the quality of the food. Notably, guests showed a strong appreciation for international cuisines. This could be attributed to Las Vegas being an international tourist destination, and tourists often seek food that aligns with their cultural backgrounds. This aligns with the findings of Vu et al. (2019), who found that certain tourist groups prefer national cuisine that resonates with their cultural heritage.

This study is unique in its examination of the availability of options and variety. Customers expressed satisfaction with the range of choices using words like selection, variety, everything, option, and lots. Additionally, customers used adjectives like good, pretty, awesome, amazing, and outstanding to describe the variety. Customers were delighted by the extensive food and drinks offered at casino buffets.

The third most commonly mentioned source of satisfaction was value. Customers used terms like price, worth, expensive, and decent to describe their perception of value. While some guests expressed satisfaction with the food and drinks, they also mentioned high prices. One guest, for instance, remarked, "Great buffet. I can recommend it. A bit expensive; do not forget about taxes." However, some guests felt that the buffet prices needed to be higher. For example, one guest stated, "Good quality. \$25 for a buffet in Las Vegas is not expensive." This supports previous research on online restaurant reviews (e.g., Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Luo & Xu, 2021).

Additionally, some buffet customers took advantage of Groupon promotions or coupons to enjoy value-priced buffets. For example, one reviewer mentioned, "We wanted to try one of the buffets. We found this one on Groupon. We are so glad we purchased it since it was cheap." This

echoes a study on fast-food restaurant satisfaction, which found that promotions were a significant theme (Chen et al., 2020).

Atmosphere was the fifth most frequently cited factor contributing to customer satisfaction. Guests referred to the atmosphere using terms like *ambiance*, *environment*, and *décor*. Several positive adjectives, including *excellent*, *good*, *nice*, and *incredible*, were used by reviewers to describe their experience of the atmosphere. Casino buffet customers regarded the atmosphere as crucial to their dining experience. This supports previous research, which indicates that atmosphere/ambiance is a significant theme (e.g., Farinha et al., 2023).

This study also aimed to explore the dissatisfiers of casino buffet restaurants. The findings revealed that several themes contributed to the dissatisfaction of buffet guests, including food quality, value for money, options and variety, employee performance, and the atmosphere. Interestingly, this study uncovered the widespread use of positive adjectives in negative reviews. It seems that customers often use words like "good" and "better" in combination with negative adverbs, showing a more nuanced level of dissatisfaction. Reviewers employ subtle linguistic techniques such as sarcasm, comparing the establishment unfavorably to competitors or using understatement to convey their disappointment with the dining experience.

The analysis was based on reviews rated one or two stars, totaling 3,684 reviews from 14 casinos located on the Las Vegas Strip. NVIVO's word frequency module was utilized to identify the words customers frequently used.

Food emerged as the most frequently mentioned dissatisfier among casino buffet customers, which aligns with the findings of Park (2007). Dissatisfied customers expressed discontent with low food quality, lack of healthy options, and food served at excessively high or low temperatures. Adjectives like *cold*, *bland*, *good*, *horrible*, *mediocre*, and *dry* were commonly used to describe food quality in negative reviews. Again, food quality is a dominant theme in restaurant literature and frequently emerges as a dissatisfier in online reviews (Rita et al., 2023; Tontini et al., 2022).

The second most mentioned dissatisfier was related to value. Customers used words like *price*, *worth*, *expensive*, and *decent* to express their perception of value. Dissatisfied guests felt that buffet prices were high and were not justified in the food quality. Examples of such feedback include remarks like "The buffet is expensive, and the food is not very good



to pay almost 100 dollars for four people, and they have nothing of variety.” To address this, casino buffets should examine the aspects of value that their guests find important and consider this when creating replacements for the buffet.

The lack of options and variety was the third most commonly mentioned dissatisfier. Customers used terms like selection, variety, everything, option, and lots to express dissatisfaction. Buffet customers frequently cited limited, poor, and scarce options as a source of dissatisfaction. For instance, one reviewer commented that the buffet could have better food options. Some customers also noted the lack of previously offered unlimited wine and beer options. To address this issue, casinos should ensure a wide variety of food and drink choices for their guests. When replacing the buffet, some locations have chosen to have a food hall. The Rio Hotel and Suites in Las Vegas replaced their iconic buffet with a food hall to continue offering their guests options (Karel, 2024). An off-strip casino located near Red Rock National Conservation Area, Red Rock Resort, opted instead to replace its buffet with three new restaurants that offer three styles of cuisine (Greek, Seafood, and Thai) to continue to offer the concept of options to their guests (Szydelko, 2022). Other casinos are urged to consider this when replacing casino buffets.

Employee performance emerged as the fourth most frequently mentioned dissatisfier. Reviewers often referred to the staff as rude, unhelpful, unfriendly, not knowledgeable, and uninterested. The findings emphasized the importance of employee training for restaurants, including casino buffets. One reviewer who expressed disappointment with the rude staff even mentioned management's need for improved training, friendliness, and courtesy. This supports previous findings on the importance of service in restaurant online reviews (e.g., Chen et al., 2020).

The fifth dissatisfier mentioned by customers was the atmosphere. Guests used terms like ambiance, environment, and décor to describe it. Reviews frequently used poor, sad, and outdated subjects to express dissatisfaction with the atmosphere. Customers emphasized that the atmosphere was critical in their perception of casino buffets. Reviewers cautioned against pictures that did not match the low-class atmosphere and mentioned dated décor. To enhance performance, casino restaurants should invest in creating a favorable atmosphere. This notion agrees with previous studies Heung and Gu (2012) and Wansink (2007), highlighting the importance of atmosphere in customer satisfaction and spending behavior.



The results of this study confirm that niche restaurants, like casino buffets, may have different satisfiers and dissatisfiers than traditional restaurants. The unique variable for buffets was options. The reviews mention options and detail the types of food and food items, which is unique among restaurant satisfiers and dissatisfiers studies. Only Oh et al. (2023) had something close to these results regarding the importance of specific menu options, as that was for a vegan restaurant where menu items were also of fundamental importance. Interestingly, several themes that emerged in the previous literature were not found here, some of which can be explained by the difference between a free-standing restaurant and a restaurant in a hotel. This indicates that hotel restaurants may also have different satisfiers and dissatisfiers than free-standing restaurants.

A LIWC analysis was employed to delve deeper into answering the research question. This tool analyzes the emotional tone and word choice used in the text. By looking at positive and negative emotions, self-references, and complex vocabulary, the researchers hoped to gain insights into how casino buffet customers felt about their experience. The findings revealed that satisfied customers expressed their satisfaction using a positive tone in their reviews. Additionally, satisfied and dissatisfied casino buffet customers showed a lower rate of self-references, indicating higher self-confidence and overall happiness.

Interestingly, casino buffet customers, regardless of their satisfaction levels, aimed to present themselves as more educated. This was evident as satisfied and dissatisfied customers used more big words (words with more than six letters) than personal texts. Lastly, casino buffet customers demonstrated a rational approach when writing their reviews.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of Las Vegas casino buffet restaurants by analyzing Google Reviews. The data collection involved analyzing 14,064 reviews using Nvivo and Excel, with content analysis and text analysis with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to gain insights into reviewers' emotional expressions. This study also compared its results to the nascent literature regarding restaurant satisfiers and dissatisfiers, as revealed in online reviews.

The findings of this study revealed that food, option/variety, price/value, employees, and atmosphere were identified as important factors influencing customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Food quality

and variety emerged as the main themes for customer satisfaction, indicating the significance of offering diverse and high-quality food options. Given that Las Vegas is an international destination, the study emphasized the importance of providing international cuisines to cater to customers' diverse preferences.

### **Implications**

This study adds to the nascent literature related to online reviews in restaurants. While hotel reviews have been well-studied, the literature on restaurants needs to be more varied. Additionally, the existing literature focuses on free-standing restaurants rather than restaurants in hotels and casinos. The results of this study indicated that there are factors not mentioned in buffet reviews, like Wi-Fi and parking, which are most likely seen as a part of the casino and are not directly connected with the buffet. This signifies that certain elements are specific to the type of restaurant, as mentioned by previous research (Barrera-Barrera, 2023). This also indicates that the nuances of running a hotel restaurant differ from those of free-standing restaurants and can bear more study. Additionally, the results of this study demonstrate that LIWC is a reliable tool for examining restaurant reviews, which is consistent with other studies, and that LIWC can be applied to a wide variety of restaurants.

Casino buffet executives should actively monitor online reviews to gain insights into customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as emphasized in the study by Bilgihan et al. (2018). Casino buffet managers must carefully review online feedback to grasp customers' opinions, pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, and quickly address any issues. Casinos can improve their menus, service quality, and overall operations through sentiment analysis, keyword research, and studying competitors. Casinos must have a robust review management system that includes centralized monitoring, timely responses, and employee training to protect their online reputation. By acting on customer feedback, casinos can increase satisfaction, loyalty, and overall business success.

The primary practical implication derived from this study is the importance of food as an attribute for casino buffet restaurants, which corresponds to previous research (Luong et al., 2022; Jamaludin et al., 2021). This study's findings demonstrated the importance of food quality and the variety of food options. Casino buffets must offer guests international cuisines since Las Vegas is a major international destination. Another crucial discovery was the occurrence of food poisoning. It is imperative for

casino buffet executives to closely monitor the quality, freshness, and temperature of food to prevent instances of food poisoning. It is crucial to address this issue to avoid extreme dissatisfaction among casino buffet customers.

Casino remodels should remember buffets' core function: offering variety and value. While buffets with good food options satisfy customers, there's also a desire for new and innovative dishes. New restaurants replacing buffets should consider food hall concepts to cater to this variety-seeking clientele. However, a la carte pricing might make it less attractive compared to buffets, and the convenience factor of trying multiple dishes could easily be missed. Casinos should be mindful of these drawbacks when deciding to replace buffets.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

There are a few limitations to consider when examining this study's findings. Firstly, it only looks at Google reviews, so it might only capture part of the range of customer opinions. It would have been helpful to gather data from multiple sources, including Yelp reviews, TripAdvisor feedback, or conducting on-site customer surveys. Also, the study focused on a small geographic area and language, which may have missed essential perspectives from a broader range of customers. Additionally, the study only analyzed reviews in English from casinos on the Las Vegas Strip, excluding other regions, languages, and types of casinos. Future research could expand upon these findings by examining customer reviews from various geographic locations, casino types, and languages.

It's important to consider that while the study identifies satisfiers and dissatisfiers based on star ratings, this approach may oversimplify the complexity of customer sentiment. A more nuanced analysis as future studies, such as sentiment analysis or thematic coding of review text, could provide a richer understanding of customer experiences. Additionally, the use of LIWC for emotion analysis, while a common tool, has inherent limitations in capturing the subtleties of human language.

It's important to note that the study only looked at consumer reviews, not professional reviews from food editors. Also, online reviews may be biased as certain groups are likelier to leave reviews than others. Future research could investigate the discrepancy between consumer and professional evaluations of casino buffets by comparing online reviews to expert critiques. Additionally, satisfiers and dissatisfiers were identified

solely based on the star rating in Google reviews (1 and 2 stars = dissatisfier, 4 or 5 stars = satisfier). However, this approach fails to capture the nuance within individual reviews.

The text mining process needs to be made more transparent. As it is written, other researchers could not follow this method and replicate it. The tool used to analyze emotions in the reviews, LIWC, has its limitations. It focuses on predefined categories and may miss important aspects of the reviews or introduce bias. It may also need help distinguishing between factual statements and opinions. These limitations must be considered while using LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2015).

The findings of this study may not be directly applicable to buffets outside of casinos, as casino buffets cater to a specific clientele and price point. While some aspects may be relevant to other buffets, caution should be taken when applying all findings directly. Future research should explore the transferability of findings from casino buffets to other buffet settings by conducting comparative studies to identify both shared and unique characteristics influencing customer satisfaction.

Finally, the study assumes the authenticity of all online reviews analyzed. However, fake reviews may exist to manipulate a business's reputation. Future studies should consider strategies to identify and address fake reviews during data collection.

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## REVEALING IMMERSIVE GUEST EXPERIENCES (IGX) IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY USING CLUSTERING ANALYSIS

Tayfun YÖRÜK

*Department of Management Information Systems, Akdeniz University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4900-5705

Nuray AKAR<sup>1</sup>

*Department of Management Information Systems, Akdeniz University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2444-1233

Zeynep KARSAVURAN

*Department of Tourism Management, Akdeniz University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1701-3321

Fulya ALMAZ

*Department of Management and Organization, Akdeniz University, Türkiye*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1537-3278

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze existing research on the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry and build academic and practical knowledge to explore current areas of immersive technology research and development that are critical for the effective digitalization of the hotel industry. Clustering analysis was applied to the publications analyzed by unsupervised machine learning method using the K-Means algorithm. To verify these concepts and answer the research questions, the clustered publications were subjected to in-depth content analysis within the framework of the research questions. The findings provide comprehensive information on the scope of Immersive Guest Experiences (Hereinafter referred to as IGX) for hotel industry and categorize the antecedents, dimensions, and consequences of IGX in hotels to better understand the reasons for the use of immersive technology in the hotel industry. The results provide guidance for practitioners in the design of IGX in hotels.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the experience economy, the sequence of economic value has evolved to experience through the senses and experiences have become a strategic tool for businesses (Ketter, 2018; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In this framework,

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Nuray Akar (Ph.D.), Assoc. Professor, Department of Management Information Systems, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Akdeniz University, Türkiye. E-mail: nurayyapici@akdeniz.edu.tr

consumers are viewed not just as rational decision-makers, as in the traditional view, but as both rational and emotional individuals who seek enjoyable experiences that offer sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral, and social dimensions from an experiential marketing standpoint (Schmitt, 1999). In experiential marketing, the core of the product is emphasized, and the value of services is enhanced and transformed into tangible, physical, and interactive experiences (Williams, 2006).

In the tourism industry, experiences play a crucial role, especially due to the inherently intangible nature of tourism (Manhas & Ramjit, 2013). For hotel businesses, the shift in distribution channels and the predominantly intangible nature of their products and services heighten the significance of prior experiences. Therefore, the use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies in the hotel industry can help alleviate uncertainty about products and services by providing potential guests with an opportunity to experience them in advance. These technologies, which offer a variety of experiences from pre-stay to post-stay, help meet the physical evidence requirement in service marketing (Kabadayı, 2020).

Extended reality (XR), encompassing VR, AR, and mixed reality (MR), is reshaping the customer journey by integrating immersive experiences (Santoso et al., 2022). Thus, physical space and virtual space are intertwined, and this is expressed by the term “phygital” (Neuburger et al., 2018). In this context, omnichannel touchpoints are integrated into customer experiences (CX) to create positive customer journeys (Hilken et al., 2018). Since the adoption of these digital and interactive technologies by customers depends on different cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors, it can be explained based on different theoretical origins such as the technology acceptance model (TAM), uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Boudkouss & Djelassi, 2021); flow theory, the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (An et al., 2021); hedonic-motivation system adoption model (HMSAM) (Fan et al., 2022). Therefore, the adoption of a human-centered design perspective plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of business strategies and practices for the use of immersive technologies (Stankov & Gretzel, 2020).

This study analyzes existing research on the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry. The aim is to build academic and practical knowledge to explore current immersive technology research and development areas that are critical for the effective phygitalization of the hotel industry. In this context, the relevant literature has been synthesized

to answer the specific research questions put forward regarding the use of immersive technology in the hotel industry, revealing the current trends and future agenda for this subject. Eventually, a comprehensive analysis has been presented on how the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry affects the guest experience.

## **BASICS OF THE RESEARCH**

Although early studies, such as Cheong (1995), expressed skepticism about the subject and even viewed it as a potential threat to tourism, academic interest in the tourism industry—particularly in hospitality businesses—has grown significantly in recent years. This interest focuses on technologies and applications that immerse potential travelers and guests in digital environments (Filimonau et al., 2024; Flavián et al., 2021; Hanaa & Abdul, 2024; Orús et al., 2021; Wei, 2019). Despite this, the adoption of these technologies by consumers in tourism remains relatively recent, and the corresponding body of research is still emerging (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). Innovative technologies have found applications across various aspects of tourism, including planning, management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility, and cultural heritage preservation (Ali, 2022; Dogan & Kan, 2020; Guttentag, 2010). The integration of advanced human-computer interactions is enabling intelligent environments in tourism, which attract digitally savvy consumers, deliver tailored experiences (Go & Kang, 2023; Loureiro, 2020), and foster value co-creation (Buhalis et al., 2019). The use of immersive technologies has been shown to enhance the tourism sector's profitability, competitiveness, and sustainability (Cranmer et al., 2020) by optimizing corporate performance, improving organizational communication, and strengthening customer relationships (Chen, 2023).

In the course of the literature review, which was conducted with the objective of identifying research gaps in the subject area and of establishing the original value of the present study, it was observed that the reviews of VR and AR technologies in the context of general tourism (e.g. Loureiro et al., 2020; Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019) merit particular attention. Furthermore, studies such as those conducted by Buhalis et al. (2023) and Wei (2019) address the combined use of VR and AR technologies within a broader framework, namely that of tourism and hospitality. Conversely, there are studies that concentrate on the specific applications of VR in tourism (e.g., Pestek & Sarvan, 2021; Sousa et al., 2024), AR in tourism (e.g., Hanaa & Abdul, 2024; Jingen Liang & Elliot, 2021), MR in tourism (e.g., Bec

et al., 2021), XR in tourism (e.g., Santoso et al., 2022), and the metaverse in tourism (e.g., Go & Kang, 2023).

Nevertheless, Lodhi et al. (2024) pointed out that no comprehensive study has yet examined the state of research on VR and AR technologies in the hospitality sector. Their bibliometric analysis provided insights into the growth of publications over time, identifying the most productive countries, journals, authors, and institutions, as well as highlighting key topics through a keyword co-occurrence network. Han and Tom Dieck (2019) underscored the need for more user-centered VR research within the hospitality and tourism industry. Similarly, Çolakoğlu et al. (2024) noted a lack of studies exploring VR experiences specifically in the hospitality sector. Shin and Jeong (2021) suggested that future research should investigate the adoption of AR in hospitality, and comparing these findings to studies conducted in the broader tourism industry. Ali (2022) observed that, despite the increasing importance of interactive and co-creative approaches, studies on AR's potential to enhance visitor experiences in hospitality and tourism remain scarce. Additionally, Chen (2023) highlighted a research gap regarding the impact of metaverse hotels on visitors.

In addition to the aforementioned considerations, there is a paucity of research in the specific context of the hotel industry that illuminates the general view of studies on immersive technologies. These technologies, which can be characterized as an umbrella structure of VR, AR, MR and XR technologies, have the potential to impact the guest experience as a whole. Consequently, the present study seeks to address this research gap. The research objectives (ROs) that have been developed in this context are presented below.

- RO1: Identifying the motives for using immersive technologies in the hotel industry,
- RO2: Identifying the immersive technologies commonly used in the hotel industry,
- RO3: Revealing the theoretical and conceptual origins of the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry, and
- RO4: Revealing how the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry affects the guest experience.

In order to perform these specific ROs, publications selected from Web of Science (WoS) directory in line with the PRISMA checklist were first

analyzed and clustered by unsupervised machine learning using the K-Means algorithm. The algorithm facilitated identifying document clusters with similar thematic content. Subsequently, a comprehensive and in-depth examination of these clusters was conducted to reach the specified ROs through content analysis. Consequently, both quantitative and qualitative insights were integrated into this study. In this context, the current study differs from previous reviews in the relevant literature in terms of its specific context, ROs and methodology. The results of the study contribute to the general view of studies on immersive technologies in the hotel industry and their effects on guest experience as a whole. In this respect, the study provides insights that inform future research directions and practical implications regarding the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry and their effects on guest experience.

An examination of the current literature on the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry highlights several prominent themes but also exposes notable gaps that require further exploration. First, the influence of immersive technologies on fostering long-term customer loyalty (Husain et al., 2023) and encouraging repeat business (Ozdemir et al., 2023) remains underexplored. Investigating this relationship is vital for developing strategies to enhance customer retention, a cornerstone of business sustainability (Cranmer et al., 2020; Flavián et al., 2021). Second, there is a scarcity of studies addressing the cost-benefit analysis of adopting these technologies from a managerial standpoint (Pillai et al., 2021). Such insights could guide hotel managers in making strategic investment decisions. Third, the role of immersive technologies in improving accessibility for guests with disabilities (Das, 2023) has not been sufficiently addressed. Addressing this issue is socially significant and could help the hospitality sector tap into new market segments. Fourth, further research is needed on the application of immersive technologies to enhance business competencies and management skills in the hospitality industry (Konovalova & Demenev, 2020). This research should shift focus from marketing to human resource management. Lastly, adopting research methodologies based on real-world hotel practices rather than controlled laboratory settings (McLean & Barhorst, 2022) could yield more practical and applicable insights.

Addressing these research gaps is crucial for several reasons. Academically, it enhances our understanding of the diverse effects of immersive technologies within the hospitality industry. Practically, it provides hotel managers and stakeholders with insights to create more effective and holistic strategies, improving the overall guest experience and



maintaining a competitive edge in an increasingly digital world. By exploring these unresolved issues, future research can make valuable contributions to both the theoretical framework and real-world applications of immersive technologies in the hospitality sector.

## **IMMERSIVE TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY**

Immersive technologies are based on the reality-virtuality continuum, encompassing concepts like AR and augmented virtuality (AV), which are collectively referred to as mixed reality (MR). Additionally, VR represents a fully virtual environment (Pratisto et al., 2022). Immersive technologies offer consumers interactivity, visual behavior, and immersive experiences (Raptis et al., 2018). With these opportunities offered by these technologies, potential visitors in the tourism sector can have an idea about destinations in advance and shape their decision-making processes through immersive experiences (Cheong, 1995).

Considering the examples of sectoral practices on the subject, the Marriott Hotel Group creates promotional opportunities for potential customers through a virtual travel content platform. Thus, it offers support to its customers to reduce uncertainty and facilitate booking decisions (news.marriott.com). As a sponsor of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games, Holiday Inn opened the world's first augmented reality hotel in the London Kensington Forum (Zou, 2022).

In the existing literature, while there are relatively more studies focusing on tourism destinations and tourist attractions, there is a limited number of immersive technology usage studies in hotels (Pratisto et al., 2022). Looking at the scope of these relatively few immersive technology applications in the hotel industry studies; for example, Israel et al. (2019b) investigated whether presenting hotels in virtual reality affects potential customers' booking intentions. Similarly, Lim et al. (2024) examined using AR and VR for hotel bookings and found that perception of using these technologies easily, innovativeness, and usefulness enhance tourists' satisfaction. Bharwani and Mathews (2021) and Gonçalves et al. (2024) questioned the challenges of technology adoption such as immersive artificial intelligence, AR, VR, wearable technology, and robotics in luxury hotels. Vilar et al. (2014; 2015) studied wayfinding and route-choice through virtual hotel and environmental variables. Patiar et al. (2021) examined the development of hospitality management students' knowledge and skills through a virtual field trip platform.



## IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

Presence, which expresses a state of consciousness, refers to the feeling of being psychologically present in the virtual environment in terms of immersive experience. Immersion, another core element of this experience, describes capacity of technology to offer individuals a comprehensive, all-encompassing, and realistic illusion of reality (Slater & Wilbur, 1997). Vividness, another key feature of immersive experience, reflects technology's capacity to create a sensory-rich, mediated environment (Steuer, 2006). Interactivity refers to the technology's ability to facilitate seamless interaction and engagement with content (Lee et al., 2021).

The immersive guest experience in tourism context refers to the cognitive, emotional, or behavioral reactions elicited by touchpoints involving immersive technologies throughout the guest journey, shaping the overall tourism experience (Flavián et al., 2019). Narrowing this concept from the broader tourism industry to the specific context of hotel consumer experiences, Walls et al. (2011) identified key elements of the luxury hotel guest experience. These include the physical environment (ambiance, multisensory elements, space/functionality, and symbolic features), human interactions (employee factors such as attitude, professionalism, proactive service, and appearance; and fellow guest factors like demeanor, behavior, appearance, and social engagement), trip-related aspects (trip purpose, hotel type, travel companions, and the experience continuum), and personal characteristics (sensitivity, personality, travel history, and expectations). The hotel consumer experience constructs put forward by Walls (2013) consist of physical environment dimensions and human environment dimensions. The physical environment dimensions of this construct reflect the physical environment experience of the hotel, which includes design, property upkeep, and physiological/ambiance factors. The human environment dimensions reflect the human interaction experience, which includes attentiveness/caring, professionalism, guest-to-guest interactions, and reliability.

The current research focuses on the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry. In the literature review conducted in this context, beyond the general tourism practice and experience, no research on the reflections of immersive technology use on CX specific to the context of the hotel industry was found. Therefore, in the current research, the phenomena related to immersive guest experience (IGX) scope for the hotel industry have been tried to be revealed in full detail.

## METHOD

The WoS database served as the primary data source for this research. WoS provides extensive options for inclusion and exclusion, along with a wide array of query criteria. As one of the leading databases, it offers broad interdisciplinary coverage, encompassing journals from various fields, particularly social sciences and business studies (Birkle et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018). Furthermore, in comparison to Scopus, which is regarded as a comprehensive database, WoS is distinguished by its higher quality standards (Forliano et al., 2021) and the inclusion of content from esteemed academic sources (Lodhi et al., 2024). In this context, within the scope of the research, the WoS database was searched with the query: “*TS=(hotel) AND (TS=(augmented reality) OR TS=(virtual reality) OR TS=(mixed reality) OR TS=(extended reality))*”. After the application of the mentioned query sentence, 114 records published between 1995 and 2023 were reached. While 67 of these 114 records are “articles”, the others are proceeding and review-type studies. Of the 67 articles, 1 is early access and 5 are book chapters, so they were not included in the study.

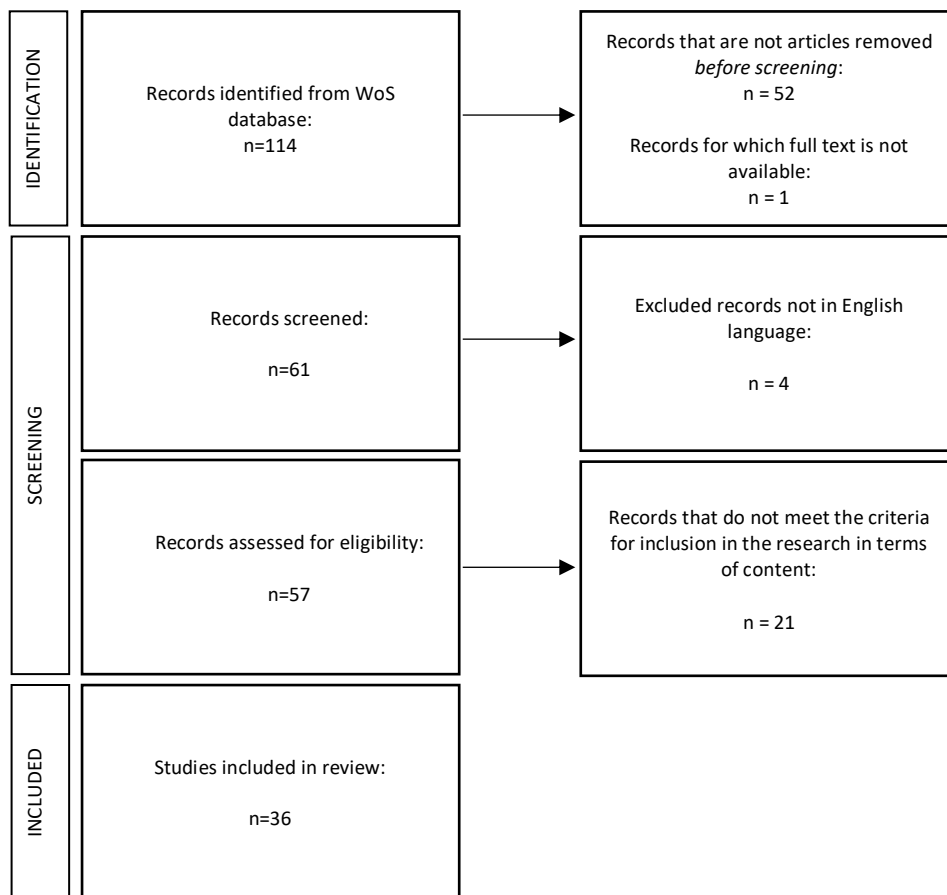


Figure 1. *The PRISMA Flowchart*

57 publications were analyzed individually and meticulously to identify publications focusing on customer experience with immersive technologies in the context of hotels and accommodation. Seventeen studies on topics such as sightseeing, hotel construction, technology-independent marketing, etc. were eliminated and 36 publications were used for this study.

The selection and analysis of data sources and records were carried out following the PRISMA checklist, originally published in 2009 and updated in 2020. This approach ensured transparency, thoroughness, and enhanced the study's overall value, as outlined by Moher (2018). A flowchart was created using the PRISMA checklist's "eligibility criteria" and "information sources" sections under the "Methods" heading. Additional details were provided under headings such as "search strategy," "selection process," "data collection process," "data items," and "synthesis methods." Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flowchart.

Before proceeding to the subsequent sections, it would be appropriate to provide a summary of the methodology employed in the study and to identify all the stages discussed in the methodology section by means of a figure, with the aim of facilitating the follow-up of the procedures in the remainder of the study. Figure 2 provides a summary of all the processes discussed in the method section.

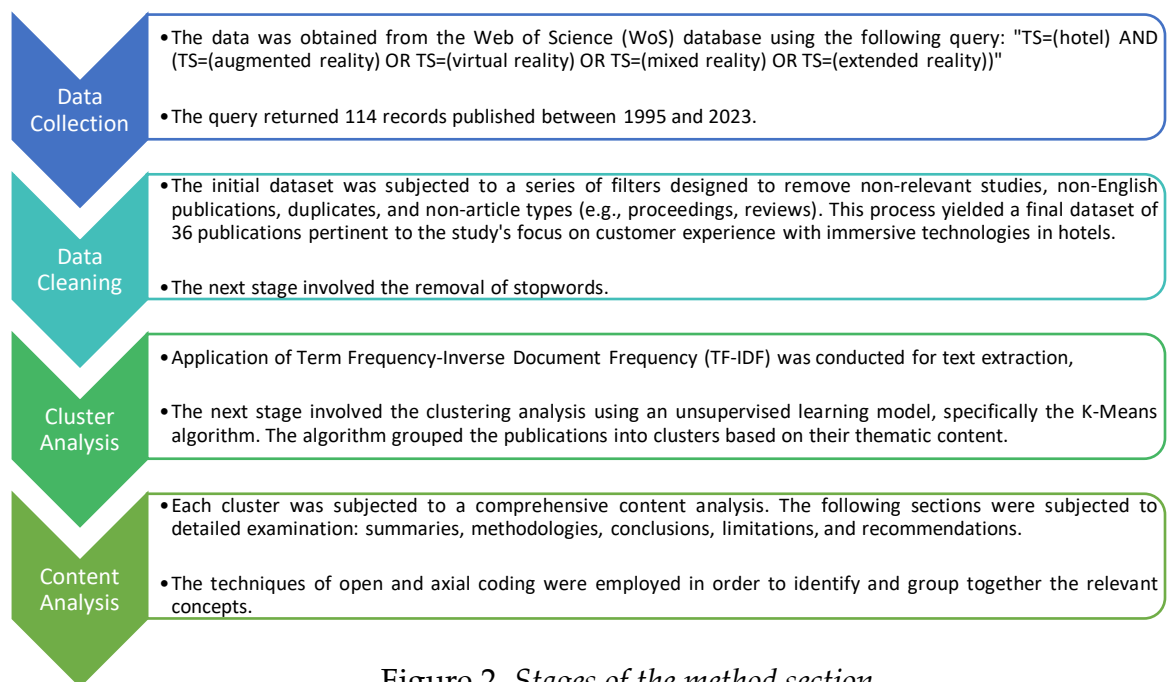


Figure 2. *Stages of the method section*

## Cluster Analysis

In this study, clustering analysis was performed with an unsupervised learning model, one of the machine learning methods, using Python programming language. Unsupervised learning has a very important function in classifying written or online documents into clusters in the absence of labels provided by the supervised learning model (Greene et al., 2008). Cluster analysis is an unsupervised learning technique that plays a key role in data analysis, used to identify relationships between patterns by grouping them into similar clusters. Unlike supervised learning, which involves classifying patterns and labeling them, unsupervised learning focuses on uncovering the cluster structure of the entire dataset. A crucial factor in unsupervised learning is interconnectedness, which measures the density of connections within a single cluster. High interconnectedness suggests an effective clustering arrangement, as the instances within the same cluster are strongly interdependent (Kotsiantis & Pintelas, 2004).

## K-Means Algorithm

The study encompassed not only the specific fields, such as title, abstract, and keywords, but also the full texts of the publications comprising the dataset. So full texts of the records were included in the source text mining. Various algorithms have been proposed to perform clustering analysis (Sisodia et al., 2012), and in this study, the K-Means algorithm developed by J. B. MacQueen, which is frequently used for document analysis, was preferred. The K-Means algorithm is a preferred method in text mining and clustering analyses due to its capacity to provide rapid and effective results, particularly for large data sets (Kanungo et al., 2002). In comparison to alternative methods, K-Means is distinguished by its suitability for working with high-dimensional data and its intuitive comprehensibility (Lloyd, 1982). It does not require the same level of processing power as other algorithms and minimizes the distance between clusters by providing iterative improvement with different initial conditions, thus facilitating the interpretation of data distributions (Wu et al., 2008). In particular, when analyzing data sets comprising inhomogeneous groups, such as document clusters, K-Means can facilitate the production of more appropriate results for the research questions by grouping the data in vector space (Li & Wu, 2012). Consequently, it is distinguished from other methods by offering both speed and accuracy advantages in the analysis of large data sets within the scope of the study. While applying the K-Means algorithm, in order for it to fulfill its function for the research questions, the words in the

documents that are not thought to contribute to the research should be excluded from the analysis.

To conduct a comprehensive text mining analysis, several NLP techniques were applied to the collected data. Initially, stopwords detection and removal were performed using a standard stopwords list from the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) library. Additionally, domain-specific stopwords (e.g., “et”, “al”, “http”, “https”, “doi”) were manually identified and excluded to ensure that only relevant terms were retained (Fayaza & Farhath, 2021; Sarica & Luo, 2021). Beyond stopwords detection, the text data underwent morphological analysis to better understand the structure and meaning of the words. This involved lemmatization, which reduces words to their base or root form, thereby standardizing the text and improving the accuracy of keyword extraction. Both nouns and other parts of speech, such as verbs and adjectives, were considered in the analysis to capture a more holistic view of the text. The inclusion of verbs and adjectives was crucial as they provide context and additional nuances that nouns alone might miss. In this way, the findings of the study are more focused on the research objectives. To narrow down the selection of keywords, a criterion based on term frequency was employed. Words that appeared with high frequency across all documents were further analyzed using Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) scores. TF-IDF measures the importance of a word in a document relative to its occurrence in the entire dataset. High TF-IDF scores indicate that a word is not only frequent within a document but also unique to that document compared to others, highlighting its significance.

### **TF-IDF**

In the field of text mining, term frequency - inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) is frequently used for text extraction (Luo et al., 2008). In this study, TF-IDF is used for text analysis while the K-Means algorithm is used for clustering. With this method, the frequency of repetition of words in the documents provides sufficient clues for text analysis. TF-IDF also provides a weighted score based not only on the frequency of occurrence of a particular word in a text but also on the frequency of occurrence of that word in all documents, thus ensuring that words related to the research question that appear infrequently in a document are not included in the analysis (Mahmood et al., 2018; Qin et al., 2021). In the context of this study, high TF-IDF scores were interpreted as indicators of key concepts and themes that are uniquely emphasized in certain publications. For example, if the term “augmented reality” has a high TF-IDF score in several

documents, it suggests that these documents specifically focus on this technology as a significant aspect of IGX in the hotel industry. This relevance is contrasted against the broader corpus, where such terms may be less emphasized, thereby marking them as critical for specific discussions. Low TF-IDF scores, on the other hand, suggest that while the term may be frequently mentioned across many documents, it is not uniquely significant to any particular document. These terms often represent more general concepts that, while common, do not provide specific insights into the unique themes of literature. The importance of a keyword with a higher TF-IDF score lies in its ability to uncover nuanced discussions and specialized topics that are pivotal for understanding the depth of research in IGX. For instance, a high TF-IDF score for “guest engagement” in certain clusters of publications highlights its role as a central theme, guiding the identification of critical research areas and gaps. By examining the distribution and significance of these scores, we can draw meaningful conclusions about the prevalent and emerging themes in literature. This method ensures that the identified keywords are not only frequent but also contextually relevant, providing a robust foundation for further content analysis and thematic exploration.

The K-Means algorithm requires the number of clusters to perform clustering (Cheng & Yu, 2022; Lei, 2022). After all the documents were expressed as vectors, the documents were tested to find the most appropriate cluster, assuming that there can be between 2 and 10 clusters for the K-Means algorithm to work experimentally. Although the number of clusters can be determined based on the researcher's experience, this mathematical determination was also made through the software, thus testing the consistency between the researcher's experience and the result of the software developed. On the graph obtained as a result of this test, the ideal number of clusters was decided with the Elbow method. The elbow method is one of the most common methods used to determine the appropriate number of clusters for the K-Means algorithm. With this method, the algorithm is run repeatedly on the data set within the range of the estimated number of clusters (as the researchers chose the range of 2-10 in this study) and the average scores for each cluster number are calculated (Et-Taleby et al., 2020; Onumanyi et al., 2022). In this study, these averages were calculated in the range of 2-10 clusters, and the sum of squared errors (SSE), which is the performance indicator of the clusters, was obtained and a graphical representation of these indicators was provided. The graph plotted for SSE against the number of clusters indicated a noticeable 'elbow'

at three clusters, suggesting this as the most appropriate number for our dataset.

While analyzing the graph, the optimal number of clusters was determined at the point where the SSE value showed a sharp decline, creating an "elbow" shape. This cluster count was then compared with the "Cross-Validation Score" and the number of clusters was controlled by 2 factors, at the same time, the consistency of the cluster membership of the documents was tested with the cross-validation score algorithm, which has a theoretically similar working logic with the Elbow method (Krieger & Green, 1999). To further ensure the robustness of our clustering approach, we cross-validated the results using additional metrics such as silhouette scores, which evaluate how well an object aligns with its assigned cluster compared to other clusters. The silhouette scores confirmed the appropriateness of our three-cluster solution by showing high cohesion within clusters and clear separation between them. By providing this additional methodological rigor, we affirm that the number of clusters was reasonably selected, and clusters accurately reflect the focused nature of the research topics they encompass.

### **Content Analysis**

A content analysis was conducted in conjunction with a cluster analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the themes and topics within the literature on IGX in the hotel industry. The initial step involved the utilization of the K-Means clustering algorithm to group the publications based on the extracted keywords and key phrases. The algorithm facilitated the identification of clusters of documents with similar thematic content, thereby providing a structured foundation for further qualitative analysis.

Subsequently, content analysis was conducted on each cluster, with the objective of elucidating the identified themes in greater depth. This qualitative method involved both open and axial coding techniques. In the open coding stage, each document within a cluster was read in detail, and initial codes were generated by identifying significant concepts, phrases, and themes. The objective of this stage was to identify as many relevant codes as possible, without limiting them to predefined categories. The open codes were then subjected to axial coding, during which relationships and patterns among them were identified. The codes were then grouped into broader categories and subcategories, thus highlighting the interrelationships and contributions of the different concepts to the overarching themes within each cluster.



The study employed a dual approach, combining content analysis with cluster analysis, to ensure the integration of both quantitative and qualitative insights. The clusters provided a structured overview of the main themes, while content analysis offered an in-depth examination of the specific topics and nuances within each cluster. This integrated approach facilitated a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the literature. The content analysis was not conducted in isolation from text mining; rather, it built directly upon the results of the text mining activities. This sequential and iterative process ensured that the qualitative insights derived from content analysis were firmly grounded in the quantitative patterns identified through cluster analysis. The detailed descriptions of the qualitative methods, including the coding process and the criteria for categorizing themes, are provided in the subsequent sections to offer transparency and reproducibility. After this grouping process, Cohen's Kappa analysis was applied to the coding process performed by two researchers, and the coefficient was found to be 0.76, thus the consistency of the coding process was also tested.

Based on the theoretical framework and methods outlined above, the research questions (RQs) for this study are as follows:

- RQ1: What are the motives for using immersive technologies in the hotel industry?
- RQ2: What are the immersive technologies commonly used in the hotel industry?
- RQ3: What are the theoretical and conceptual origins of the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry?
- RQ4: How does the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry affect the guest experience?

The research methods employed in the present paper, including scoping review techniques and clustering analysis, were crucial in defining the research questions as they provided a structured and comprehensive approach to understanding the complex landscape of immersive technologies in the hotel industry. The use of clustering analysis allowed us to identify patterns and groupings within the data, which in turn helped us to formulate specific, targeted research questions that addressed the most relevant and impactful aspects of immersive technology use. By integrating these methods, we ensured that our research questions not only reflected the current state of knowledge, but also addressed gaps and emerging

trends in the field, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and actionable understanding of immersive quest experiences in the hotel industry.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### RQ1-Motives for Using Immersive Technologies

As a result of analyzing the 36 publications included in the scope of the research as described in the methodology section in detail, an answer to the research question regarding the reasons for the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry was sought. At this point, 3 clusters were revealed in the clustering analysis performed with the K-means algorithm: (1) *Guest security*, (2) *Experiential Marketing*, (3) *HR Development*. Lodhi et al. (2024) also identified three primary thematic clusters in VR/AR research within the hospitality industry, based on a keyword co-occurrence network. The clusters were: “(i) The effects of VR on hospitality, tourism, and destinations; (ii) The role of technology in enhancing hotel satisfaction and performance; and (iii) User acceptance of AR in travel contexts”. According to the authors, the first cluster focuses on how VR influences consumer services, intentions, attitudes, experiences, and destination image. The second cluster examines the impact of technology on satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and performance in the hotel sector. The third cluster explores consumer acceptance of AR technology, emphasizing user perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of AR usage.

#### *Cluster 1-Guest Security*

Looking at the word cloud for Cluster 1 in Figure 3, the words evacuation, signage, information, wayfinding, and environment are notable.



Figure 3. Wordcloud for Cluster 1

The TF-IDF Scores obtained through text mining given in Table 1 also support this finding. Accordingly, words such as travel anxiety (1.01), evacuation (0.71), and trust (0.68) have high TF-IDF Scores.

Table 1. *Cluster 1 for the motives for using immersive technologies in the hotel industry*

Clusters	Contents	Term frequencies (TF-IDF Score)		Publications	# of articles
<b>Cluster 1:</b> Guest security	Reducing travel anxiety with wayfinding, evacuation and escape route tracking through immersive technologies in and around the hotel in everyday and emergency situations	Travel anxiety	1,01	Ahn & Lee (2013);	10
		Evacuation	0,71	Ahn et al. (2013);	
		Trust	0,68	Arias et al. (2019);	
		Signage	0,61	Lee & Oh (2007);	
		Information	0,60	Lewinson &	
		Wayfinding	0,56	Esnard (2015);	
		Emergency	0,50	Meng & Zhang	
		Fire	0,50	(2014);	
		Environmental factors	0,44	Rokhsaritalemi et al. (2022);	
		Relief	0,35	Snopková et al. (2022); Vilar et al. (2014); Vilar et al. (2015)	

Based on the content analysis, Cluster 1 was found to have content related to reducing travel anxiety by wayfinding, evacuation and escape route tracking through immersive technologies in and around the hotel in daily and emergencies. In other words, it was revealed that the first of the triggers of immersive technology use in the hotel industry was related to security and thus Cluster 1 was named “*Guest security*”. At this point, it can be stated that the findings of the research obtained from clustering, text, and content analyses are consistent.

In the existing literature, it has been emphasized that security, reliability, and privacy are essential for creating a favorable hotel environment (Bhat, 2013; Hilliard & Baloglu, 2008; Walls, 2013). It has been stated that guests may be willing to pay more for strict security measures (Feickert et al., 2006). Ahn and Lee (2013) found that narrative video clips on hotels' embedded virtual reality websites can provide guests with the escape route and surrounding neighborhood information to provide psychological relief and alleviate travel anxiety.

While it is true that Cluster 1, which focuses on guest security, appeared relatively homogeneous, this homogeneity is an inherent characteristic of the content covered by the publications within this cluster. The focus on specific topics such as wayfinding, evacuation, and travel

anxiety reflects a concentrated research interest in enhancing guest security through immersive technologies. This uniformity underscores the critical and specialized nature of security-related research in the context of immersive experiences in the hotel industry.

### Cluster 2-Experiential Marketing

Figure 4 shows the word cloud for Cluster 2. In Cluster 2, words such as experience, emotion, response, value, and color stand out.



Figure 4. *Wordcloud for Cluster 2*

This conclusion is further supported by the TF-IDF Scores for Cluster 2 in Table 2. In this respect, words with high TF-IDF Scores in Cluster 2 include experience (1.61), marketing (1.29), and presence (1.28).

In terms of content analysis findings, Cluster 2 covers issues such as the interaction of immersive technologies with guests' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attitudes; creating unique guest experiences through immersive technologies; and the impact of immersive technology use in the hotel industry on brand marketing and purchase intention. At this point, Cluster 2, which is the second of the triggers of immersive technology use in the hotel industry, is characterized as “*Experiential marketing*”.

Considering the findings of other studies on experiential marketing in the hotel industry, Bailey and Ball (2006) emphasized that the information that a tourist gains after seeing, feeling, and hearing a hotel will create associations with the brand. Wu et al. (2017) pointed out that room comfort, and co-creation platforms to create engaging experiences are among the main experiential marketing factors for hotels. McLean and Barhorst (2022), in their research focusing on VR's ability to influence tourism consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions, revealed that VR



games offer an authentic experience. They also stated that immersive VR hotel experience plays an important role in encouraging the development of detailed mental images before the visit and managing tourism consumers' expectations.

Table 2. Cluster 2 for the motives for using immersive technologies in the hotel industry

Clusters	Contents	Term frequencies (TF-IDF Score)		Publications	# of articles
Cluster 2: Experiential marketing	Interaction of immersive technologies with guests' cognitive, emotional and behavioral attitudes;	Experience	1,61	Alfaro et al. (2019); Alfaro et al. (2022); Ballina et al. (2019); Bogicevic et al. (2019); Bogicevic et al. (2021); Flavián et al. (2021); Golja & Paulišić (2021); Israel et al. (2019a); Israel et al. (2019b); Leung et al. (2020); Lo & Cheng (2020); Lyu et al. (2021); McLean & Barhorst (2022); Orús et al. (2021); Ruiz-Molina et al. (2018); Siamionava et al. (2018); Slevitch et al. (2022a); Slevitch et al. (2022b); Surovaya et al. (2020); Xu et al. (2022); Yoon et al. (2021); Zeng et al. (2020)	22
		Marketing	1,29		
		Presence	1,28		
		Information	1,00		
		Intention	0,85		
		Brand	0,80		
		Advertising	0,75		
		Perceptions	0,67		
	Creating authentic guest experience through immersive technologies;	Positive emotions	0,67		
		Immersion	0,67		
		Preview	0,63		
		Environment	0,63		
		Attitude	0,62		
		Outcomes	0,61		
		Technological innovations	0,59		
		Responses	0,59		
		Cognitive load	0,57		
Impact of immersive technology use on brand marketing and purchase intention in the hospitality industry	Value	0,57			

### Cluster 3-HR Development

For Cluster 3 in Figure 5, the words employee, negative mood, mindfulness, intervention, and turnover intention attract attention.



Figure 5. *Wordcloud for Cluster 3*

Table 3 shows that words such as soft skills (0.50), hospitality students (0.41), and training (0.40) have higher TF-IDF Scores.

Table 3. *Cluster 3 for the motives for using immersive technologies in the hotel industry*

Clusters	Contents	Term frequencies (TF-IDF Score)		Publications	# of articles
<b>Cluster 3:</b> HR development	Use of immersive technologies in the education, training and development of hospitality students, employees and managers	Soft skills	0,50	Chalupa & Chadt (2021); Konovalova & Demenev (2020); Leung et al. (2023); Patiar et al. (2021)	4
		Hospitality students	0,41		
		Training	0,40		
		Learning	0,39		
		Negative mood	0,37		
		Mindfulness	0,35		
		Employees	0,31		
		Development	0,28		
		Education	0,25		
		Knowledge	0,22		
		Turnover intention	0,16		
		Workplace stress management	0,12		

As a result of the content analysis, Cluster 3 was found to be related to the use of immersive technologies in the education, training, and development processes of hotel students, employees, and managers. In this context, Cluster 3, which constitutes the third triggering factor of the use of immersive technology in the hotel industry, is named “*Human resource (HR) development*”.

Bharwani and Jauhari (2017) propose that hospitality intelligence—which encompasses emotional, cultural, and experiential intelligence—combined with technical expertise, may enable frontline staff to interact more positively with guests, thereby helping to make their stay more memorable. Ampountolas et al. (2019) discovered that employing hotel simulations promotes experiential learning and enhances students' decision-making abilities. Leung et al. (2023) state that the work stress of hotel staff can be reduced with VR support. In this direction, they suggest that practitioners should ensure that natural spaces are brought indoors through VR when break times are not enough to relax in outdoor environments. Thus, with VR experience, the negative mood of the hotel staff can be dispersed and the possibility of leaving the job can be reduced.

## RQ2-Immersive Virtual Experiences

The findings related to the second research question, which examines the immersive technologies commonly used in the hotel industry, are presented



in Table 4. The content analysis results, along with the TF-IDF scores, complement each other and indicate that VR-based immersive technologies are most used in the hotel industry. In other words, the visual appeal and imaginative potential of VR (Orús et al., 2021; Slevitch et al., 2022b) are leveraged to create immersive virtual experiences.

Table 4. *Immersive technologies common in the hotel industry*

Clusters	Immersive technologies	Total publications (f)
<b>Cluster 1:</b> Guest security	Virtual Reality (VR)	8 (TF-IDF Score: 1,05)
	Augmented Reality (AR)	1
	Geographic Information System (GIS)	2
	Mapping	
<b>Cluster 2:</b> Experiential marketing	VR	19 (TF-IDF Score: 3,70)
	AR	1
	Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)	2
<b>Cluster 3:</b> HR development	VR	3 (TF-IDF Score: 0,22)
	Simulation	2

Table 5. *Publications by research methodology*

Clusters	Research methods	Total publications (f)	Data collection methods
<b>Cluster 1:</b> Guest security	Quantitative	8	Experiment (VR / AR / GIS mapping-based) & survey
	Qualitative	1	Grounded theory approach (interview & GIS mapping & photovoice)
	Mixed	1	Experiment (VR-based) & Survey & Qualitative observation
<b>Cluster 2:</b> Experiential marketing	Quantitative	18	Experiment (VR / AR / 360-degree tour / video / image-based) & survey
			Survey
	Qualitative	2	Case study (semi-structured interview & website analysis & document analysis)
			Content analysis
<b>Cluster 3:</b> HR development	Mixed	2	Interview & Experiment (immersive virtual reality (VRI) with 360-degree video) & Survey
			Scale development (interview & survey)
	Quantitative	1	Field experiment (VR-based) & survey
	Qualitative	2	Pre-open-ended questionnaire & using the virtual field trip platform & post-open-ended questionnaire & thematic analysis
			Semi-structured interview
	Mixed	1	Experiment (simulation game) & Qualitative observation & Survey

It can be stated that the distribution of publications by research methodology seen in Table 5 also supports this finding. The 36 publications analyzed in this study were largely designed as VR-based experiments. In this direction, the embedded VR hotel websites with narrated video clips

(Ahn et al., 2013; Ahn & Lee, 2013), smartphone-based VR systems (Israel et al., 2019b), and virtual field trip platforms (Patiar et al., 2021) can be exemplified as VR-based immersive technologies used.

### *RQ3-Theoretical and Conceptual Origins of the Use of Immersive Technologies in the Hotel Industry*

The results related to the theoretical and conceptual foundations of immersive technology use in the hotel industry, as addressed in the third research question, are presented in Table 6. Upon reviewing Table 6, it becomes evident that the application of immersive technologies in the hotel industry is largely grounded in behavioral models. Notable models in this context include those focused on technology acceptance, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its Extended and Unified Versions (Israel et al., 2019a), as well as models examining the behavioral effects of emotional responses to environmental stimuli, like the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model (Yoon et al., 2021). An additional key finding is that half of the 36 publications analyzed did not rely on any theory.

Table 6. *Theoretical and conceptual origins of the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry*

Clusters	Theoretical and Conceptual Origins	Total publications (f)
<b>Cluster 1:</b> Guest security	Mayer et al.'s Trust Model	2
	N/A	8
<b>Cluster 2:</b> Experiential marketing	Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) / Extended and Unified Versions of TAM	3
	The Theory of Technological Mediation	2
	Presence Theory	2
	Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model	2
	Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)	2
	Limited Perceptual Capacity Model of Attention	2
	Perceptual Load Theory	1
	Theory of Reasoned Action	1
	Self-determination Theory (SDT)	1
	Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	1
	Transportation Imagery Model (TIM)	1
	Dual Coding Theory	1
	Color Theory	1
	Color-in-context Theory	1
	Hierarchy Model of Advertising Effects	1
<b>Cluster 3:</b> HR development	N/A	7
	Spillover Theory	1
	Stress Recovery Theory	1
	Mindfulness Theory	1
	N/A	3

## RQ4-IGX

The findings for the fourth research question on how the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry affects the guest experience are presented separately by cluster below.

Table 7, which includes IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 1, shows that explicit environmental and conditional knowledge about the hotel provided by immersive technologies is an important IGX antecedent within the scope of guest security. Through the realistic, immersive, personalized, and visualized experiences created, travel anxiety is alleviated and consumer behavior toward choosing the hotel is exhibited with the psychological comfort experienced. Barsky and Nash (2002) pointed to comfort, and security as examples of different guest emotions that are components of satisfaction and loyalty during a hotel stay. Walls (2013) considers reliability, a human interaction dimension of the hotel consumer experience, as a human interaction dimension of the hotel consumer experience when hotel employees make guests feel safe and secure during their stay at the hotel. Tractinsky et al. (1999) found that the level of trust in hotels affects consumers' online hotel booking intentions. Meng and Zhang (2014) pointed out that fire evacuation system design in hotels can be improved based on a virtual fire environment. Thus, in case of emergencies such as fire, the wayfinding behaviors and reactions of guests who have no prior knowledge about the hotel can be predicted in a VR-based manner.

Table 7. *IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 1*

Cluster 1	Antecedents	IGX		Consequences
		<i>Immersive Components</i>	<i>Affective and Cognitive Components</i>	
Guest security	Explicit environmental and conditional knowledge about the hotel provided by immersive technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realism</li> <li>• Immersion</li> <li>• Personalization</li> <li>• Visualization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of psychological relief</li> <li>• Sense of trust</li> <li>• Perception of travel security</li> </ul>	Preference of hotel

The IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 2 is shown in Table 8. In this framework, IGX antecedents within the experiential marketing cluster include some perceptions of technology type and technology use from TAM, individual innovativeness towards technology, and some demographic characteristics. Emotional and cognitive

experiences of the hotel are developed through immersive experiences such as presence, mental imagery, and co-creation. This leads to positive outcomes such as guest satisfaction with the hotel and its brand, willingness to make reservations, intention to revisit, and willingness to pay more. Flavián et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of integrating VR with hotels' communication strategies in providing hotel-based pre-experiences in terms of promoting psychological and behavioral engagement. Orús et al. (2021) pointed out that presence as a pre-experience drives the booking intentions of potential guests. Israel et al. (2019b) revealed that the hedonic and utilitarian value of a virtual hotel experience boosts the likelihood of customers booking travel accommodations.

Table 8. IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 2

Cluster 2	Antecedents		IGX		Consequences
	Technology-based Components	Individual-based Components	Immersive Components	Affective and Cognitive Components	
Experiential marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technological embodiment (<i>desktop computers, smartphones, and VR devices etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Type of technology (<i>self-service, mobile, web-based, and social media etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Type of technological device (<i>VR headsets, and natural devices etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Preview mode (<i>static images, 360-degree tours, and VR etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Commercial type (<i>traditional, and VR etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Attractiveness of preferred technology</li> <li>• Ease of imagination</li> <li>• Visual appeal</li> <li>• The value of the preferred technology in creating experience (<i>hedonic, utilitarian, etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Task-technology fit</li> <li>• Perceived usefulness</li> <li>• Perceived ease of use</li> <li>• Perceived enjoyment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal innovativeness towards technology</li> <li>• Elaborateness</li> <li>• Cognitive style</li> <li>• Cognitive load</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Social and cultural background</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence / Telepresence</li> <li>• Interactivity</li> <li>• Vividness</li> <li>• Mental imagery</li> <li>• Affective arousal</li> <li>• Immersion</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Co-creation</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pleasure from the hotel room design</li> <li>• Enjoyment from the service atmospherics</li> <li>• Sense of relaxation</li> <li>• Having positive emotions</li> <li>• Perceived service quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guest satisfaction</li> <li>• Willingness to pay more</li> <li>• Brand attitude</li> <li>• Visit intention</li> <li>• Booking intention</li> <li>• Purchase intention</li> <li>• Revisit intention</li> <li>• Brand engagement</li> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> </ul>

When Table 9, which includes IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 3, is examined, it is understood that immersive employee experiences have consequences for IGX. In this framework, individual and technological antecedents within the scope of HR development for the hotel industry affect immersive employee experiences in different dimensions

Table 9. IGX scope for the hotel industry based on Cluster 3

Cluster 3	Antecedents		Immersive Employee Experiences				Consequences for IGX	
	<i>Technology-based Components</i>	<i>Individual-based Components</i>	<i>Immersive Components</i>	<i>Affective Components</i>	<i>Cognitive Components</i>	<i>Behavioral Components</i>	<i>Cognitive Outcomes</i>	<i>Behavioral Outcomes</i>
HR development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic simulation of managerial situations through innovative technologies</li> <li>• Perceived usefulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness to use immersive technology of employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realism</li> <li>• Mindfulness</li> <li>• Emotional involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of employee positive mood</li> <li>• Feeling of employee satisfaction</li> <li>• Feeling of employee motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee perceptions of actual acquisition of coping with workplace stress management</li> <li>• Perceived importance of improving employee soft skills</li> <li>• Perceived importance of enhancing professional knowledge and developing employees' practical skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreasing willingness to employee turnover intention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guest-perceived high-quality service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining guest satisfaction</li> </ul>

and create cognitive and behavioral outcomes towards IGX. Konovalova and Demenev (2020) pointed out that realistic simulation of problematic situations in hotel management with VR-based technologies and the readiness of hotel staff to use new digital technologies such as VR are important for practical training of managerial skills. Chalupa and Chadt (2021) discovered that employing VR as a tool for simulating real-world scenarios during the training of hotel and front office managers positively influences employee motivation and job satisfaction. Guests perceive high quality in the services provided by such personnel.

### A Comprehensive Model of IGX in the Hotel Industry

A Comprehensive model of IGX in the hotel industry is revealed by grouping the findings of the research, which are discussed separately and in detail based on clusters in terms of how the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry affects the guest experience.

Table 10. *The antecedent variables of IGX in the hotel industry*

Antecedents		
Technology-based Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technical Drivers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technological embodiment</li> <li>Type of technology</li> <li>Type of technological device</li> <li>Preview mode</li> <li>Commercial type</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value Drivers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visual appeal</li> <li>Attractiveness</li> <li>Ease of imagination</li> <li>Creation of experience value</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Motivational Drivers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informativeness</li> <li>Task-technology fit</li> <li>Perceived usefulness</li> <li>Perceived ease of use</li> <li>Perceived enjoyment</li> </ul>
Individual-based Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal Characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal innovativeness</li> <li>Elaborateness</li> <li>Cognitive style</li> <li>Cognitive load</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demographic Features</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender</li> <li>Age</li> <li>Socio-cultural background</li> </ul>

Table 10 shows the antecedents of this comprehensive hotel IGX model. These antecedents are categorized into two main groups: technology-based, and individual-based. Technology-based components are divided into three subgroups: technical, value, and motivational drivers. Individual-based components are divided into two subgroups:



personal characteristics and demographic characteristics. Technical antecedents include factors related to technology type and infrastructure. Value antecedents include the attractiveness of the immersive technology used and its potential to create an experience. Motivational antecedents consist of factors such as ease of use and convenience, which reflect individual attitudes towards the technology such as acceptance intention.

Ali and Omar (2014) identified the physical surroundings that represent a hotel's service environment and the social dynamics involving interactions with staff and other guests as key factors shaping the customer experience. Israel et al. (2019b) noted that the VR application used in their study on the hedonic and utilitarian value of VR hotel experiences relies on static panoramic images. They suggested that incorporating visual and auditory elements, such as audio, video, and animation, could enhance the level of immersion. Lyu et al. (2021), in their study on the effectiveness of VR in hospitality advertising, combined presence model and gender effects and found that women are more affected by VR than men in a virtual environment.

Table 11. *The dimensions of IGX in the hotel industry*

IGX	
<b>Immersive Components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realism</li> <li>• Personalization</li> <li>• Visualization</li> <li>• Presence / Telepresence</li> <li>• Interactivity</li> <li>• Vividness</li> <li>• Mental imagery</li> <li>• Affective arousal</li> <li>• Immersion</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Co-creation</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> </ul>
<b>Affective Components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of psychological relief</li> <li>• Sense of trust</li> <li>• Pleasure from the hotel room design</li> <li>• Enjoyment from the service atmospherics</li> <li>• Sense of relaxation</li> <li>• Having positive emotions</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive Components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of travel security</li> <li>• Perceived service quality</li> </ul>
<b>Social Components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff-guest interactions</li> </ul>

Table 11 presents the dimensions of IGX in the hotel industry. In this context, four main groups are formed immersive, affective, cognitive, and

social components. Immersive components reflect experience dimensions such as realism, personalization, visualization, presence, and co-creation. Affective components include positive emotions in terms of factors such as psychological relief, room design, and service atmospherics. Cognitive components consist of perceptions of travel security, and service quality.

Social components, on the other hand, reflect the results of immersive employee experiences related to IGX, which emerged within the scope of cluster 3 of the research regarding the use of immersive technologies for HR development, and emphasize staff-guest interactions in this direction. Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) identified emotional experiences, staff-guest interactions, guest-to-guest interactions, lifestyle, learning opportunities, atmosphere, and guest security as key first-order indicators of customer experience in their model of customer experience quality within the hotel industry. Yoruk et al. (2023) discovered that emotional experiences emerged as the most significant dimension in understanding guest interactions with service robots in the hospitality sector. This was followed by functional experiences as the second most prominent dimension. Among the sub-dimensions, social interactions, a key aspect of emotional experiences, received relatively greater attention. In terms of functional experiences, convenience was found to be at the forefront. Rahimian et al. (2021) emphasized the critical role of using technology in developing, integrating touchpoints, and personalizing hotel services within the scope of customer experience management in the hotel sector. Slevitch et al. (2022a), using psycho-physiological measurement tools, found that customers comprehensively processed VR stimuli for hotel promotion by combining emotion and cognition experiences.

Table 12 presents the consequential variables of the comprehensive model of IGX in the hotel industry. In this scope, there are three main groups: affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. Affective outcomes include guest satisfaction. Cognitive outcomes include quality service perceived by the guest, and willingness to pay more for immersive technologies used by the hotel throughout the guest journey. Behavioral outcomes include attitudes such as preference, reservation, revisit, and recommendation, and tendencies such as satisfaction and loyalty towards the hotel and brand. Walls (2013) found a positive relationship between the physical environment and human relations dimensions of hotel consumer experience and the perceived value dimension consisting of emotional, cognitive, and social/self-concept value. Lyu et al. (2021) revealed that VR ads positively affect customers' attitudes towards the hotel's advertisements, brand attitude, and booking intention, as VR ads create

presence through higher levels of vividness and interactivity. McLean and Barhorst (2022) found a significant effect between satisfaction with a hotel's appearance and intention to revisit when guests use a VR preview.

Table 12. *The consequential variables of IGX in the hotel industry*

Consequences	
<b>Affective Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guest satisfaction</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guest-perceived high-quality service</li> <li>• Willingness to pay more</li> </ul>
<b>Behavioral Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand attitude</li> <li>• Preference of hotel</li> <li>• Visit intention</li> <li>• Booking intention</li> <li>• Purchase intention</li> <li>• Revisit intention</li> <li>• Maintaining guest satisfaction</li> <li>• Brand engagement</li> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

CX is a phenomenon that has been analyzed in different contexts and its scope has been tried to be revealed. As a phenomenon that attracts academic interest within the tourism sector, the wide range of field-specific studies contributes to a broader understanding of the concept and its contextual foundations. However, research on CX within the hotel industry, a key part of the tourism sector, remains relatively limited, and a comprehensive CX approach in this specific context is yet to be established. Additionally, understanding how technological advancements and digital transformation shape the conceptualization and dimensions of CX in the hotel industry represents another area for further exploration. Furthermore, it is significant that a thorough conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework regarding the impact of immersive technologies on CX in the hotel industry has yet to emerge in the literature. In this regard, the current study addresses context-specific phenomena by presenting a comprehensive model of immersive guest experiences (IGX) in the hotel industry.

### Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the understanding of the reasons for the use of immersive technology in the hotel industry, the types of immersive technology commonly used, the theoretical and conceptual origins of

immersive technology use, and the effects of immersive technology use on guest experience. Accordingly, it provides detailed information on the IGX scope for the hotel industry and categorizes the antecedents, dimensions, and consequences of IGX in hotels.

Research results revealed that immersive technology is used in hotels for guest security, experiential marketing, and HR development. The immersive technology commonly used in hotels is VR-based. Thus, it is noteworthy that immersive virtual experiences are created. The use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry is relatively more based on behavioral models. As a result of the examinations within the scope of IGX scope for the hotel industry, a comprehensive model of IGX in the hotel industry has been put forward. In this framework, antecedents of IGX (Technology-based components: Technical, value, and motivational drivers; and Individual-based components: Personal characteristics, and demographic features), dimensions of IGX (immersive, affective, cognitive, and social components), and consequences of IGX (affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes) were revealed. Additionally, the dimensions of immersive employee experiences were determined to consist of immersive, affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. At this point, the social components of IGX reflected the outcomes of immersive employee experiences related to IGX that emerged for the use of immersive technologies for HR development and emphasized staff-guest interactions in this direction.

In conclusion, the three clusters identified in this study each highlight potential research gaps. Additionally, the comprehensive model of immersive guest experiences (IGX) in the hotel industry, derived from the research findings, could serve as a foundation for future empirical studies. However, most existing studies lack a solid theoretical basis, and the use of immersive technologies in the hotel industry is mainly examined through laboratory experiments. This underscores the need for empirical research to be conducted in actual hotel settings. Despite this, the growing interest in VR technology in the hotel industry, as indicated by relevant studies, points to the need for further exploration of experiences with other immersive technologies. Such research would allow for comparisons between immersive technology experiences in the hotel sector and the broader tourism industry, helping to guide stakeholders in the field. Moreover, the relatively high number of studies in the second cluster, which focuses on marketing applications of immersive technology in hotels, will provide valuable insights for developing new perspectives by concentrating on human resource management in the third cluster.

## Practical Implications

The results of the research guide practitioners in the design of IGX in hotels. As many studies examined the use of immersive technologies for marketing purposes at the pre-trip stage, the positive effects of technologies like AR and VR on the behavioral intentions of potential guests are proven. Hotels can adopt these applications as effective marketing tools in their websites to attract attention, overcome the guests' risk perception by providing visually supported information, speed up the customer decision process, and increase the number of bookings. Moreover, this study highlights potential applications of immersive technologies that can serve as valuable resources for hoteliers. These technologies can be utilized to enhance guest security perception, elevate experiential marketing efforts, and support human resource (HR) development initiatives. Based on the understanding of the background and outcomes of IGX in hotels, creating positive experiences throughout the guest journey reveals the benefits to the business and brand such as revisiting intention and brand engagement. It also allows for the evaluation of touchpoints and practices that can contribute to the improvement and development of IGX design in hotels from the customer, employee, and business perspectives. Thus, it enlightens the creation of phygital guest experiences through the placement of omnichannel touchpoints on guest journey maps to create positive IGX in hotels.

On the other hand, the findings, especially within the scope of technology-based antecedents of IGX, and immersive dimensions of IGX, draw attention to the impact of adopting a human-centered design perspective on the success of business strategies and practices for the use of immersive technology. Hotels should also be aware of the skepticism of using immersive technology as it can have negative effects, too. For example, in the specific context of luxury hotels, immersive technologies using artificial intelligence reduce customers' behavioral intentions of choosing these services and degrade their perceptions of the luxury value for these services (Gonçalves et al., 2024). Results suggest that customers do not want to benefit from artificial intelligence and immersion while getting luxury services. Considering the traditional luxury elements of hospitality such as exclusivity, craftsmanship, and a personalized service, luxury hotels should find the fine tune between high-tech and high-touch (Bharwani & Mathews, 2021). Managers are advised to consider hybrid options and be informed about their customers' priorities.

In conclusion, the utilization of immersive technologies in hotel businesses for purposes such as guest security, experiential marketing, and human resource (HR) development can contribute to the creation and sustenance of sustainable business models within the context of the hospitality sector. Furthermore, the application of immersive technologies, in particular IGX, can serve as a foundation for strategic and managerial success, as evidenced by the provision of personalized services and the development of staff competencies.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The 36 studies within the scope of the research were selected only through WoS database query. Considering that the phenomenon of IGX in hotels has a multidisciplinary nature based on different origins such as psychological, behavioral, technological, etc., queries can be made through different databases in future research. In the current research, by considering machine learning and content analysis together, an evaluation was not made only on titles, abstracts, and keywords, but meticulous and repeated full-text papers were reviewed. For this reason, although the inclusion of 36 articles within the scope of the current research is not considered as a limitation based on both the relative novelty of the subject and the detailed analyses performed, future research can be conducted with larger samples. Thus, the scope of IGX in hotels can be expanded and enriched. In addition, evaluations of the IGX phenomenon in other pillars of the tourism and hospitality sector such as food and beverage and transportation will also allow for comparative analyses. On the other hand, research designs focusing on negative IGX in hotels can provide different perspectives on the subject and pave the way for a comprehensive conceptualization of hotel IGX.

While text mining and clustering techniques provide a valuable high-level overview of the existing literature on IGX in the hotel industry, they also have limitations. The complex motivations behind the use of immersive technologies can be better captured through detailed qualitative analysis. Given that our dataset consisted of 36 articles, a comprehensive qualitative review could provide richer, more nuanced insights that are directly relevant to our research questions. Manual, qualitative analysis allows for in-depth exploration of themes, contexts, and underlying motivations that may be missed by automated methods. Future research should consider a mixed methods approach, integrating qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, thematic analysis and case studies to complement the findings from text mining and clustering. This would



provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomena and provide deeper insights into the motivations and impacts of immersive technologies in the hotel industry.

The comprehensive model of IGX in the hotel industry dimensions revealed as a result of the research can be evaluated for the theoretical, and methodological development of further research. At this point, while designing new research designs and research models to produce a well-grounded study, the finding that half of the 36 publications in the current study were not based on any theoretical framework should not be overlooked. In this direction, instead of models that focus on individual acceptance of new technologies, such as TAM, which has been widely used in relatively previous research, turning to constructs such as Presence Theory, which focuses on revealing the experiences created by immersive technologies, has the potential to offer different perspectives. At this point, in the light of the IGX scope for the hotel industry, and the comprehensive model of IGX in the hotel industry findings of the current research, mediators, and moderators of IGX can be investigated. In this framework, studies can be conducted in which immersive components are specifically included in the existing customer experience in the hotel industry models.

Considering that the 36 publications analyzed in the current research were largely designed as VR-based experiments, mixed methods can be used in future research. The results of the current research revealed that the immersive technologies commonly used in the hotel industry are VR-based. In future research on the topic, this scope can be expanded to reveal the immersive effects of VR, AR, and MR technologies on guest experience. It is noteworthy that the publications analyzed within the scope of the current research focus more on the pre-stay phase of the guest journey and include sales, marketing, and advertising efforts. Accordingly, future research must be designed to provide a framework for all stages of the guest journey. In addition to marketing, conducting research that focuses on business operations, human resources strategies, technology management, and design, and collecting data from consumers, employees, and managers can provide a holistic view of IGX in hotels that goes beyond one-sided and narrow evaluations.

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