

Understanding Components of The Memorable Ethnic Food Experience: A Case of Turkish Cuisine in London*

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Abstract

The primary goal of this study is to understand the memorable ethnic food experience of Turkish cuisine in London. To achieve the aim of the study, netnography approach, which is a qualitative study method, was used to ascertain the components of the memorable ethnic food experience via the User-Generated Content (UGC) technique. The data was garnered via TripAdvisor from consumers' reviews posted regarding their food experience of Turkish food (n: 2324). The findings of this study posed that the memorable ethnic food experience has five main components: hospitality and social interaction, taste, and food characteristics, servicescape, authenticity, satisfaction, recommendation, and revisit intentions. The results of this study allow service providers to create a framework of memorable ethnic food experience design by focusing on components identified in the present work. The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of memorable ethnic food experiences. Because of its original contributions, this study extends the food experience literature by providing original findings.

Keywords: London, Turkish Cuisine, Ethnic food, Memorable Food Experience,

* This study is not included in the study group that requires TR Index Ethics Committee Approval.

1. Introduction

People may look for new tastes and be interested in foreign foods from other countries and seek exotic, unique and different tastes (Jang & Ha, 2015). Ethnic restaurants can play an important role in bringing people from different cultures together, contributing to cultural exchange and improving the image of the country (El-Said, Smith, & Al Ghafri, 2021; Shi, Dedeoğlu & Okumus, 2022; Aybek & Özdemir, 2022). Ethnic food is “an ethnic group’s or a country’s cuisine that is culturally and socially accepted by consumers outside of the respective ethnic group” (Kwon, 2015, p. 1). To have authentic cultural experiences, ethnic cuisine is one of the best places for consumers (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). Consumers who are looking for different and new foods can choose dishes that reflect the culture of that country to get to know the cultures of other countries closely. Thus, ethnic restaurants are considered as one of the best ways to learn about cultural differences between nationalities. As being consequence of cultural heritage, ethnic restaurants constitute an enticement for customers who seek an extraordinary food experience (Jang, Liu & Namkung, 2011).

Although there are many ethnic food studies in the hospitality and tourism literature (Jang, Liu & Namkung, 2011; Ting, Fam, Hwa, Richard & Xing, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2020; Aybek & Özdemir, 2022; Shi, Dedeoğlu & Okumus, 2022) studies aimed at determining the nature and components of the ethnic food experience are limited. In addition, despite numerous studies exploring memorable food experiences (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour, 2015; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018) limited studies have been conducted to identify the reveal of memorable ethnic food experiences and better understand the structure of ethnic food experience. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to explore the components of memorable food experiences from an ethnic food perspective focusing on the Turkish cuisine in London, England. This study contributes to the existing literature by revealing the components of memorable ethnic food experiences and to the enrichment of the literature.

2. Literature Review

Destination or country foods, which are a strong driving force in tourists’ destination selection decisions and preferences, are regarded as an important tourist attraction, especially for tourists who are looking for authentic and new dishes named post-modern tourists (Kivela & Crotts, 2009). Tourist wants to collect good memory after travelling or experiencing a tourism product. In this line, offering the experiential aspect of touristic products and services to the tourist provides very important advantages for tourism practitioners, and it provides the tourists with unforgettable and memorable experiences (Kodaş & Özel, 2023). In the tourism literature, memorable tourism experiences are an essential construct that tourists focus on and are defined as the unique experiences that tourists have with the local food and beverages they consume during their holidays, which turns into an unforgettable memory after the holiday (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). For this reason, tourism destination stakeholders and food establishments focus on the memorable food experience, which plays an important role in the destination selection process and positively affects the desired behavioural outcomes. Previous research in the existing body of literature shows that tourists who are satisfied with the experience and have unique and different experiences tend to have positive behavioural outcomes (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Di-Clemente, Mogollon & Cerro, 2019; Sharma & Nayak, 2019). In other words, since the consumer's satisfaction regarding the quality of the experience increases, they develop positive behavioural intentions such as revisiting, recommending and re-consuming touristic products again (Huang, Chou & Lin, 2010; Lee & Chang, 2012; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Tsai, 2016; Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Antón, Camarero, Laguna & Buhalis, 2019).

Apart from the research conducted to determine its various antecedents and consequences (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Sthapit, Coudounaris & Björk), the academic papers conducted to explain the structure and components of the memorable gastronomy experience indicated that the memorable gastronomy experience is multidimensional (Table 1). A considerable amount of literature on memorable tourism

experiences shows that memorability with experience has gained popularity among both practitioners and academicians. One of the pioneering studies in this field was conducted by Kim Ritchie and McCormick, (2012). The authors attempted to develop a scale of memorable tourism experience and they found the memorable tourism experience dimensions which are comprised of seven components: hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. Following this study by Kim et al., (2012), numerous studies have been conducted to emphasize the importance of memorability with local food experience (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour; 2015; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018; Kodaş & Aksoy, 2022). The existing literature shows that memorable gastronomy experience is a multidimensional construct and is seen as one of the important elements of food experience. For example, In the study of Adongo et al., (2015), the memorable food experience was categorized under five main dimensions, namely, local culture, knowledge, novelty hedonism–meaningfulness, and adverse experiences. Stone, Soulard, Migacz and Wolf (2018), tried to determine factors leading to memorable gastronomy experiences and the factors of memorable gastronomy experiences are found as food or drink consumed, location/setting, companions, the occasion, and touristic elements.

3. Methodology

The aim of the current study is to understand the dimensions of ethnic food experiences in the scope of memorability by analyzing the online customer reviews in Turkish restaurants in London. For this purpose, this study adopted a qualitative case study approach for the research design by using UGC based on tourists' reviews related to consumers' ethnic food experience. The netnographic technique was used in the study. Netnography analysis is based on the collection of consumers' reviews to obtain rich information about consumers' experiences on internet platforms such as Tripadvisor, and withlocals (Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the food experience using netnographic technique in the context of gastronomy and food research since it is one of the most appropriate analyses to explain the nature of experience (Mkono, Markwell & Wilson, 2013; Sthapit, 2017; Kodaş & Aksoy, 2022; Atsız, Cifci, & Rasoolimanesh, 2022; Kodaş, 2024).

Before data collection, archival data was used to analyze online reviews because the data was already available online and was obtained by copying without any involvement of the researcher (Kozinet, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). While examining the data, the names and nationalities of the reviewers were investigated and Turkish visitors or residents in London were not included in the research data set. For the research, the top 10 Turkish restaurants served in London were selected to collect data. Through user-generated content (UGC) on Tripadvisor, one of the most important social platforms in the world, data was collected in May 2024. The data consists of reviews posted by consumers in April 2024 and before. At the end of the data collection process, 2324 reviews were included in the research data analysis.

While identifying themes and codes before data analysis, relevant literature and expert opinion were used for trustworthiness. Open coding, axial coding and selective coding processes, which are frequently used in ethnographic and netnographic research developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), were applied for data analysis. Tables 1 and 2 depict how the coding process is practised. A content analysis technique was used to determine the themes. Content analysis requires systematic and objective investigation of texts, images, symbols, roles and elements (Krippendorff, 2004).

Table 1. Studies in the context of memorable food experiences

Authors	Year	Findings (Dimensions of Memorable Food/Gastronomy Experience)
Akyürek	2023	Atmosphere, entertainment, staff, emotions, and senses (Five dimensions)
Badu-Baiden, Kim, & Wong	2023	Novelty, cultural knowledge, and flavor (Three dimensions).
Sthapit, Björk & Piramanayagam	2023	Taste, novelty, spending time with family and friends, quality and safety, hospitality, ambience and experiencing others' culture through food (Seven dimensions).
Kodaş & Aksoy	2022	Novelty, hospitality and services, taste and food attributes, togetherness and local interactions, ambience and setting, and local culture (Six dimensions).
Badu-Baiden, Correia & Kim	2022	Hedonism, authenticity, hospitality, ambience, social interaction (Five dimensions).
Badu-Baiden, Kim, Xiao & Kim	2022	Relaxation and energizing, hospitable service experience, aesthetics and servicescape, learning exotic food culture, sensory appeal and authentic experience, hedonic food experience, conviviality, gastronomic novelty, and curiosity (Nine dimensions).
Sthapit, Piramanayagam & Björk	2020	Taste, socializing with friends and family members, novelty, authenticity, ambience, affordable price, and interacting with locals (Seven dimensions).
Tsaur & Lo	2020	Excellent service behavior, exquisite and delicious cuisine, amazing physical environment and unique atmosphere, and high perceived value (Four dimensions)
Cao, Li, DiPietro & So	2019	Sensory, affect, behavioral, social, and intellectual (Five Dimensions)
Williams, Yuan & Williams	2019	Deliberate and incidental gastro-tourists, travel stages, foodie risk-taking, interdependent co-created tourist–host relationships, authenticity, sociability, and emotions (Seven dimensions)
Stone, Soulard, Migacz & Wolf	2018	Food or drink experience, location/setting, companions, occasion and touristic elements (five dimensions).
Ölmez	2017	Hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, knowledge, adverse experiences (eight dimensions).
Sthapit	2017	Local specialities and food attributes (taste), authenticity, novelty, togetherness and social interaction, hospitality, and servicescape including food souvenirs (Six dimensions).
Tsai	2016	Hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge (Seven Dimensions)
Adongo, Anuga & Dayour	2015	Local culture, knowledge, novelty hedonism–meaningfulness, and adverse experiences (Five dimensions)

Table 2. An example of the open coding

Online reviews (extracted from TripAdvisor)	Line-by-line coding
<p>...The only Turkish restaurant you should definitely go to when you come to London. The food is very delicious. The hospitality of Turkish people shows itself everywhere. We thank you for everything...</p> <p>... From the moment you step inside, you are greeted with warm hospitality and a cozy atmosphere. The restaurant boasts an extensive menu of mouthwatering Turkish cuisine that is sure to satisfy even the most discerning taste buds...</p> <p>... Love this restaurant! Food always superb. Staff and service consistently friendly, helpful, polite and knowledgeable. Fabulous atmosphere, great for lunch or dinner. Easy to park nearby. Best sea bream I've ever tasted Totally recommend...</p>	<p>The hospitality Turkish people; warm hospitality; staff is helpful, polite; knowledgeable</p>

Table 3. The coding process in practice.

Open coding (line-by-line coding)	Subthemes (axial coding)	Main themes (selective coding)
<p>...The hospitality Turkish people, lovely staff, warm hospitality, staff is helpful, polite; knowledgeable, workers were helpful cheerful and welcoming, charming server, friendly, fantastic greeting, warm service, the staff are very nice, kind staff, staff are wonderful, attentive staff who make you feel like family, The staff was exceptionally friendly, The host was so accommodating, hospitable hosts, comfortable, etc.</p>	<p>Hospitality and Social Interaction</p>	<p>Hospitality and Social Interaction as a dimension of memorable ethnic food experience</p>
<p>...So tasty, food was amazing, food is really delicious, the food was so very good fresh and flavorful, The food is unbelievably tasty, there was plenty of food, The moussaka was brilliant, excellent food, The food was lovely, the food was incredibly tasty, Amazing chicken kebab, absolutely delicious, huge variety of food, good food, the food is exceptional, the tantalizing flavors of Turkish foods, amazing knafeh and baklava, the quality of the food was amazing, etc.</p>	<p>Taste and Food Characteristics</p>	<p>Taste and Food Characteristics as a dimension of memorable ethnic food experience</p>
<p>...Good atmosphere, atmosphere is chill and cool, nice music, great atmosphere, nice ambience, very cosy place, nice setting, Turkish music, nice atmospheric décor, Ottoman-style décor, relaxing atmosphere, nice music, unique atmosphere, atmosphere is best to relaxing, warm ambience, classical Turkish atmosphere, etc.</p>	<p>Servicescape</p>	<p>Servicescape as a dimension of memorable ethnic food experience</p>
<p>...Incredible experience, super Authentic Turkish Restaurant, unique foods, traditional Turkish experience, authentic Turkish cuisine, very authentic Turkish food, delicious home cooked authentically Turkish food, authentic flavors, etc.</p>	<p>Authenticity</p>	<p>Authenticity as a dimension of memorable ethnic food experience</p>
<p>...I will definitely go back really soon, I will be coming back soon, would definitely recommend to family & friends, would definitely go back there, would definitely recommend, we surely will be back in the future, would recommend it to anyone, would highly recommend, I really enjoyed, etc.</p>	<p>Satisfaction, Recommendation, and Revisit Intentions</p>	<p>Satisfaction, Recommendation, and Revisit Intentions as a dimension of memorable ethnic food experience</p>

4. Results

As a result of the data analysis of the research, it was determined that the memorable ethnic food experiences of the consumers were categorized under four main themes. These experiential dimensions are named as hospitality and social interaction, taste, and food characteristics, servicescape, authenticity, satisfaction, recommendation, and revisit intentions, respectively.

Table 4. The number of codes for related themes

Components	# of codes for each related theme
Hospitality and Social Interaction	336
Taste and Food Characteristics	234
Servicescape	182
Authenticity	153
Satisfaction, Recommendation, and Revisit Intentions	289

4.1. Hospitality and Social Interaction

The hospitality and social interaction dimension emerged as the most emphasized ethnic food experience dimension in this study. In the majority of reviews, it was stated that while the consumers experienced Turkish cuisine, the employees were helpful cheerful welcoming, helpful, polite; knowledgeable and exceptionally friendly. Additionally, participants reviewed that coming together with hosts and workers is a excellent food experience for them. This was concluded that this friendly attitude of the employees contributed to their memorable experience and that they were ultimately satisfied with this experience. Some examples of reviews are below:

...As always from beginning to end our experience was outstanding. Fantastic greeting, welcome and warm service throughout. All staff completely on the ball with a special mention to Yanko who was so friendly to my son. Additionally the food was so very good fresh and flavourful cooked to perfection. Many thanks to you all we look forward to our definite return...

...This Turkish gem is a culinary paradise! From savory kebabs to fluffy pide, every dish bursts with authentic flavors that transport you to Istanbul. The service is impeccable, with warm smiles and attentive staff who make you feel like family. The ambiance is cozy, inviting you to savor each bite in pure delight. With a menu that's a love letter to Turkish cuisine and service that's second to none, this restaurant is a must-visit for anyone craving a taste of Turkey with a side of hospitality that warms the soul...

...Very friendly staff and great food! I came to pick up a veggie kebab and something for my boyfriend. They gave me lovely turkish tea and a turkish delight while I waited...

... Friendly welcome and staff werry polite friendly food was cooked werry good and fresh they offer free salad and chilli garlic sauce best Turkish restaurant...

Hospitality and social interactions are crucial to create a memorable food experience and this dimension has been revealed in many academic studies (Sthapit, 2017; Stone, Soulard, Migacz & Wolf, 2022; Atsız, Cifci & Law, 2022; Atsız, Cifci, & Rasoolimanesh, 2022). In addition, the warm and friendly hospitality of the host and the interaction between workers and customers resulted in creating desired positive behavioural intentions of consumers (Lashley, 2008; Tsai & Lu, 2012).

4.2. Taste and Food Characteristics

For many reviewers, the food served in Turkish restaurants is good quality, so tasty, amazing, very good, fresh and flavorful. In many of the comments of consumers, the taste and service of Turkish food were perceived as a memorable and critical component of the food experience and revealed as an important

dimension in satisfying the consumers. The following are examples of reviews related to taste and food characteristics:

...Delicious kebaps. Special full platter was amazing. Thanks for good service and delicious food. It was a lovely experience...

... Came here with my Girlfriend. All the dishes were cooked to perfection and the service was Great! My favourite dish was the mousakka, personally one of the best things I have tried in ages, tasted so fresh! Will be coming again for sure! Worth the travel...

...The food was really delicious. We had the mixed grill platter and the cold mix meze, and for desert had tea and baklava. The best part was how Shahin, our host, made us feel - so warm and welcome. He was ever present and chatted with us and even taught us a word or two in Turkish. Definitely coming back here...

What an amazing place! Fresh salads, hummous and pitta followed by chicken shish with rice was a perfect supper. Great ambience; busy but not too noisy and you can sit back and watch the chefs at work in the open kitchen. Will definitely go back...

...Amazing chicken kebab. Best I've ever had. Great chilli and garlic sauce and filling salad. Service was speedy and friendly throughout...

Characteristics of the food, such as flavour and taste, are one of the factors that most affect the experience (Harrington, Ottenbacher, Staggs, & Powell, 2012). Experiential components related to the sensory attributes of the food make valuable contributions to the memorability of the food in the eyes of tourists (Chandralal &Valenzuela, 2013; Kauppinen-Räsänen, Gummerus & Lehtola, 2013).

4.3. Servicescape

In many reviews, codes such as good atmosphere, nice music, great atmosphere, nice ambience, very cosy place, nice setting, Turkish music, nice atmospheric décor, Ottoman-style décor, nice music, unique atmosphere, warm ambience, classical Turkish atmosphere were emphasized by the participants. For them, the interior surroundings of Turkish restaurants's environment are very unique, friendly and beautiful. The ambience is an important section of the servicescape (Bitner, 1992) and the quality of the surrounding space (Jang & Liu, 2008) and seen as a significant component of a memorable food experience (Sthapit, 2017). The results of the study illustrated that servicescape plays a remarkable role in the memorable ethnic food experience. Some examples of reviews are below:

...This is my 3rd time coming to this restaurant. I have brought my friends here before and thought it would be nice for a family meal. The decor in this place is really nice and it gives a very warm and cosy feeling. The food is 10/10. The staff are very friendly and are they go beyond catering to your needs. The best hidden gem in the east end of London...

... We really enjoyed our meal, and ko'nafe which is turkish sweet. Atmosphere friendly and very clean place to have a pleasant time...

... Very nice restaurant with the unique atmosphere. If you wish to taste exceptionally delicious Turkish food never hesitate to visit. Ordered Tower Special Menu and enjoyed all along. Definitely will come here again...

... Still love this restaurant even though the staff have changed a lot. The environment is beautiful and I love listening to the Turkish music. My husband and I love the food too! The wine is also excellent! Thank you for a brilliant dinner once again....

...I had an amazing experience at the restaurant. The customer service was outstanding, and the food was delicious I was so pleased with the service too. The quality of the food was very fresh. It hit all the right spots. The customer service at the restaurant is excellent. They were very welcoming and responsive to all my needs. One of the best Turkish meal I've had. I definitely will be back. Probably again this week ...

4.4. Authenticity

Another key dimension of memorable ethnic food experiences was found to be authenticity in the current study. Reviews indicated that consumers found Turkish foods authentic. For example, the participants who posted comments on their experiences emphasized their food experience with its authentic flavours and unique ambience.

...Lahmacun was amazing, so was the salad and chicken doner. Very authentic Turkish food and we even got to sit down and enjoy çay tea with owner. The restaurant is very clean and the service team was excellent. We came in same day from Miami to London and we will come back to eat again in the next 5 days!

...The food is delicious, plentiful, good quality and great service. The entertainment is high quality and great fun, traditional Turkish experience throughout that I haven't ever been to in London...

... A really delicious lunch! Delicious home cooked authentically Turkish food and friendly service. Loved the meze especially the hummus...

...Only came here due to the positive reviews of previous diners. Very grateful - my son and I had a fantastic meal. Really really good authentic Turkish food, excellently cooked, served with a smile and thoroughly recommended. Well done...

... Authentic Turkish food prepared with fresh ingredients. Very good and friendly servers. I would recommend this place...

Considering that an authentic experience positively affects consumers' food experience and future behavioural intentions, it is one of the main issues that destination practitioners should pay attention to. Previous studies show that authenticity is one of main components of memorable food experience (Sthapit, 2017; Atsız, Cifci, & Rasoolimanesh, 2022) and plays a pivotal role in the behavioural intentions of visitors such as loyalty, recommending intentions (Wijaya, King, Nguyen & Morrison, 2013; Jang & Ha, 2015; Muskat, Hörtnagl, Prayag & Wagner, 2019).

4.5. Satisfaction, Recommendation, and Revisit Intentions

The majority of the reviews mentioned that ethnic food satisfaction plays an important role in the memorable ethnic food experience. All indicators of the dimension of satisfaction and positive behavioural intentions such as recommendation and revisit intentions elicited from the reviews are seen in Table 3. Reviews show that consumers are satisfied with their ethnic food experiences regarding Turkish restaurants in London and develop positive behavioural intentions. It is seen in their reviews that they are willing to come back to the Turkish restaurant and recommend it to others. This dimension is emphasized by the following reviews:

...Great welcome and nice ambience. The food is attractively presented and delicious. The service is great and we were made to feel very welcome. We will definitely come back!...

...Overall excellent experience, tasty food with good quality and great service. Very good place for family and friends love to visit again...

...Everything was excellent, amazing service, staff really kind and available. Good atmosphere, good food. One of the best shisha garden. I will definitely go back really soon...

...It was my first time visiting Ishtar, the venue was lovely and the staff were very welcoming and polite. There was a group of us and we were seated in a lovely nook type area and had a great view of the 2 musician artists that were playing that night (Thursdays). The quality of the food was amazing! Enjoyed a lovely 3 course meal. Overall I would definitely recommend Ishtar if you have not been and would definitely go back there...

...So so good! Loved the lahmacun and chicken shish. Service was incredible and the food was amazing - will definitely be returning...

5. Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this study is to understand the memorable ethnic food experience of Turkish cuisine in London. For this purpose, a netnographic analysis of the data set consisting of online reviews was carried out to reach more realistic and valid findings. According to the findings, memorable ethnic food experiences emerged from five main components: hospitality and social interaction, taste and food characteristics, servicescape, authenticity, satisfaction, recommendation and revisit intentions. Although many empirical studies have been conducted on determining the memorable food experiences of tourists or travellers (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour; 2015; Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018; Sthapit, Piramanayagam & Björk, 2020; Tsaur & Lo, 2020; Badu-Baiden, Kim, & Wong, 2023) the number of studies exploring the memorable ethnic food experiences using netnography approach is limited. Although the results of this research are similar to the findings of the study dealing with the relationship between memorability and food experience, this research contributes significantly to the enrichment of the existing literature since the memorable food experience dimensions emerged from the perspective of ethnic food experience.

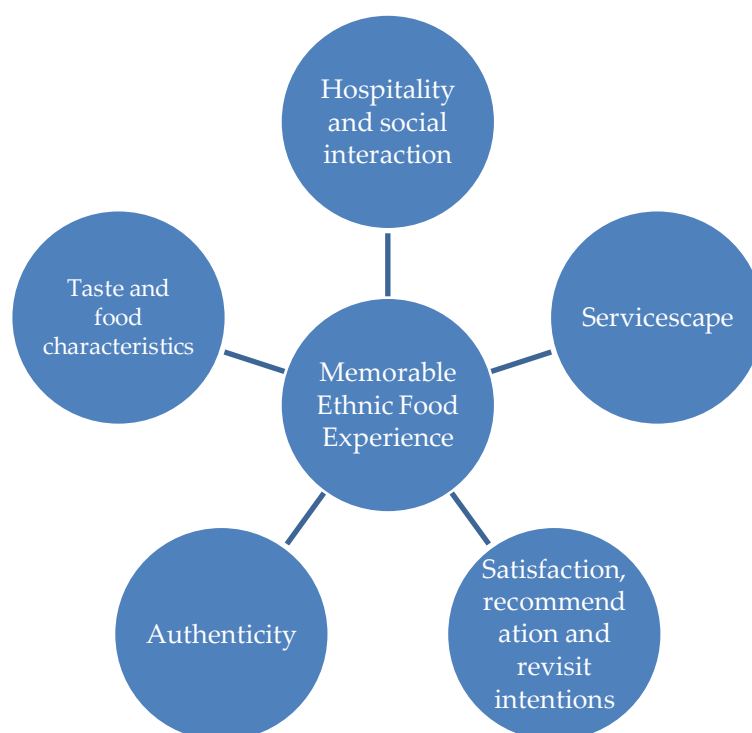


Figure 1. Memorable Ethnic Food Experience Components

From the managerial implication standpoint, the results of the study have some implications for food and beverage providers offering ethnic foods. The framework of dimensions of memorable ethnic food experience can help Turkish restaurants develop strategies to design experiences for their customer for their satisfaction. Additionally, to ensure positive behavioural intentions, these experiential components offer significant benefits to service providers in gaining competitiveness. For example, service providers can offer more authentic foods and design interior décor and ambience reflecting the Turkish culture. Besides, hosts and restaurant workers should be more friendly, hospitable, knowledgeable, and helpful to satisfy their customers. Because hospitality and social interactions are crucial to them as mentioned by consumers in the reviews. Furthermore, service providers try to learn more information about Turkish food and culture since customers are eager to learn about different cultures and food habits. Also, hosts and workers should be more friendly, hospitable, knowledgeable, and helpful to satisfy their customers to have high-level of country image.

This study has some limitations and implications for future research directions based on the findings of this study and may contribute to the development of the relevant literature. First, this research was conducted within the framework of the reviews on the Tripadvisor site. Therefore, similar research can be carried out on different country ethnic foods and the experience elements revealed in this research can be

developed and different elements can be revealed. Secondly, motivations that are closely related to experience can be examined with ethnographic or empirical (quantitative) research. Third, future research can be conducted to examine the perception of consumers of food neophobia related to ethnic foods.

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