

The Local Food Contribution in Revisiting a Destination: A Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach

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Abstract

Local food is considered as the indicator of a destination's intangible characteristics that contributes to the brand image of the destination, this paper aims to investigate whether tourists are primarily attracted by the local food when choosing a destination and if so, whether they revisit or recommend it. Therefore, the Island of Crete in Greece has been chosen as a case to study. Primary research has been undertaken with online distributed questionnaires regarding the four main aspects of the local food (taste, price, serving style, satisfaction from the vendor), while the collected data were analysed statistically performing descriptive statistics, Regression analysis and path modelling following a structural equation model (SEM) approach to determine the coefficient (significance) of each of the four aspects of the local food and thus, its significance and influence on the decision-making process of the tourist when it comes to destination revisit or recommendation. Findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between local food and destination revisit and recommendation. The paper may contribute to the industry professionals in adopting appropriate strategies to develop their business, optimizing their food services towards a high-quality gastronomic experience, leading tourists in revisiting the destination and recommend it to other potential travellers. Moreover, destination management organizations (DMOs) may be helped by the results of this research towards destination branding formulation using local food.

Keywords: local food, gastronomic tourism, food tourism, destination revisit, decision-making process, Crete, Greece

1. Introduction (Section Heading)

Tourism is considered as a driving force for local, regional, and national development, when it comes to international tourist arrivals, resulting in receipts, income, employment, and revenues for destinations (Chen and Tsai, 2007). It has had a significant impact on people and social life in emerging economies (countries). Tourism also provides travelers with "enjoyment, variety, respite, and amusement" (Jaiswal et al., 2013). Recent trends in tourism indicate that local food (local cuisine) is playing an important role in the overall tourist experience.

According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports from 2012 and 2018, food tourism present significant market trends, while it is also emerging as the most dynamic and creative segment of tourism, allowing local communities to generate income and job opportunities. Food and tourism are closely related, attracting the interest of researchers to investigate the aspects and the depth of this relationship. Chi et al., (2013) postulate that often the purpose of visiting a destination is the consumption of a specific food variety, while Okumus and Mckercher (2007) state that food and other related factors play an important role in the overall travelling experience. According to Akgol (2012), tourists travel in pursuit of having gastronomic experiences by tasting local food and beverages. It is worth mentioning that food tourists account for a sizable segment of the overall tourism market, and when choosing a destination, local cuisine is considered as a key factor in their decision-making process.

Destination management organizations (DMOs) focus on enhancing cultural experiences through local food-related activities offered in their destinations. Each destination has a unique story of local food related to the local culture, people and gastronomic traditions that can be shared with visitors. Therefore, “gastronomic tourism is considered as a contributor to cultural preservation and should be configured around the quality and authenticity of the product and the place” (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020). Thus, local food is a great tool for destination marketers to promote distinctive travel experiences and develop a unique destination branding based on the attractiveness of the local food myth, as an important element of the local culture, formulating a credible and authentic message about the products the offer (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020).

2. Literature Review (Section Heading)

2.1 Local food

Kim et al. (2009), as well as Choe and Kim (2018), state that local foods and beverages produced in destinations, enhance the local identity. Sims (2009) defined local foods as those produced "within a 30-mile radius of the target market." According to Yurtseven and Kaya (2011), local food is the best indicator of a destination's intangible characteristics. Furthermore, Katsoni and Poulaki (2020) postulate that local dishes of a region have become an important communication channel of a different culture, enhancing intercultural understanding, while culinary experiences such as trying local dishes in a destination, observing production phases and tasting a local dish made of raw materials available only in that specific region, not only motivate tourists for visiting the place, but also contribute to the sustainability of the region's resources and the development of gastronomic tourism, as an alternative tourism form (Kivela and Crotts, 2006), while tourist demand for innovation, diversity and adventure is continuously rising. Food -local food in particular- plays an important role in introducing tourists to the destination's traditions through its tastes and flavors (Nguyen, Dang, & Ngo, 2019). As a result, it creates a brand image of the community that strongly affects tourists' experiences. Food is considered as one of the most important attributes of destination attractiveness along with "climate, accommodation, and captivating scenery" and a fundamental tourism product (Zainal, Zali, & Kassim, 2010; Sukerti, & Marsiti, 2020). Local foods are excellent representatives of a community when it comes to its social, environmental, cultural, historical, and economic aspects (Mitchell & Hall, 2006; Sharma, & Kaurav, 2017). Therefore, it is very important for local communities to protect and preserve local products belonging to their region (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020). Food is not only a powerful symbol of life quality and authenticity, but also it is a representative of the local culture's identity (Frochot, 2003). In fact, food is an important part of the overall tourist experience in developing countries (Vietnam, Mexico, India, Malaysia, and a few others) (Paul, 2010; Sharma, & Kaurav, 2017), while food is a

necessary energy source for body functions influencing tourist's ability to gain a better travel experience (Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012; Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012).

2.2 The relationship between food aspects and revisit/recommend a destination

Customer satisfaction is linked to a collection of internal factors such as personality, lifestyle, previous experiences, perception, and image, as well as education, wants, desires, interests, and tastes of a personal character that shape and value tourism demand (Gaztelumendi, 2012). Furthermore, motivation is influenced by physical and physiological requirements (sensory perception and hedonism), safety, cultural and social needs, the desire for belonging or interpersonal needs, and the need for prestige (local delicacies), status, or self-realization. Furthermore, literature identifies two types of motivation: hedonistic, which includes aesthetic factors, and utilitarian, or rational (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020), while tourist motivation drivers are commonly divided into two factorial categories: internal (push factors) and external (pull factors). When it comes to the latter, destination resources (attractions) such as cultural and natural attractions, special events and festivals, local food experiences, friendly attitude of the residents, gastronomic variety and diversity attributes, and proximity are examples of pull factors (Ispas, 2011). Tourist motivations are the foundation for designing and developing value-added products and services. Given that the visitors' overall satisfaction is affected by the local food experience, restaurants are perfect venues for guests to have a "local experience" opportunity while travelling (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020). Besides, travel experience starts long before the trip itself, when tourists are seeking for inspirations following a standard process of 'gather-compare-buy', and ends after the trip, when they evaluate their whole experience and share it through social networks (WTO, 2012). This way, they become destination image creators affecting the travel decisions of their followers. Following the abovementioned, this study initially focuses on the relationship between food aspects (i.e., taste, price, serving style, satisfaction from the vendor) and revisits a destination or recommends it.

Taste: Among food image attributes, taste ranks first, having a significant impact on food consumption, customer satisfaction and behavior. Color, texture, freshness, and food taste play an important role in the food consumption experience of tourists (Gagic, Tesanovic and Jovicic, 2013). Related research to the quality of the food products indicates that one of the most important factors concerns the novelty of food tastes. Moreover, the tastiness or freshness, and novelty constitute the first and the strongest impression of the food a tourist may have. Ardabili et al. (2011) postulate that trying new foods could be an unforgettable part of their travel experiences.

H01: The taste of the food has a positive effect on the recommendation to revisit.

Price: The value of the daily expenses on vacation is used to assess the quality of the tourism product, which, among others, includes food (Al-Ababneh, 2013). Hanaysha et al. (2019) discovered a link between how much tourists have to pay for food, their satisfaction and behavioral intentions. According to Zhong and Moon (2020), price fairness has a significant impact on tourist satisfaction.

H02: the price of the food has a positive effect on the recommendation to revisit.

Serving Style: Given that different geographies mean different cultures, the way of serving food varies and distinguishes between destinations, ensuring unforgettable experiences for tourists on their trip (Okumus and McKercher, 2007). The serving style (table setting, location, ambient decoration and atmosphere) has a significant impact on the customer's overall satisfaction (Gagic et al., 2013). Additionally, one of the main components of food businesses is human resources and the level of customer satisfaction depends largely on the quality of service. It is necessary to fully reflect the concept of "people first" when serving customers. Thus, service quality

in hospitality industry (restaurants, hotel F&B units) heavily depends on staff training and its improvement that includes knowledge, techniques, skills, and abilities (Katsoni and Poulaki, 2020).

H03: the serving style of the food has a positive effect on the recommendation to revisit.

Satisfaction from the vendor: Vendors' staff attitude has been studied as an important point to measure customer service level in places where people come from many different cultures and nations (Coleman, 1998). This factor has a direct impact on both internal and external customer satisfaction (Ilbery, Saxena and Kneafsey, 2007).

H04: the vendor satisfaction has a positive effect on the recommendation to revisit.

Chen and Tsai (2007) and Yoon and Uysal (2005) postulated that tourist satisfaction may lead to high recommendation tendency and desire to return. As a result, the destination's reputation (brand image) improvement, may have a significant impact on first-time visitors and potential travelers via word-of-mouth (WoM) and media strategies.

3. Methodology

Explain the methodology including instrument development, measures, sampling, data collection, etc. here

3.1 The research model

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) combine statistical techniques that “allow a set of relationships between one or more independent variables (IVs), either continuous or discrete, and one or more dependent variables (DVs), either continuous or discrete, to be examined” (Ullman and Bentler, 2013). Both dependent or independent variables may be either factors or measured. Path analysis constitutes a special type of SEM. Research hypotheses are illustrated in the path diagram of a multiple regression model structured as follows in Figure 1.

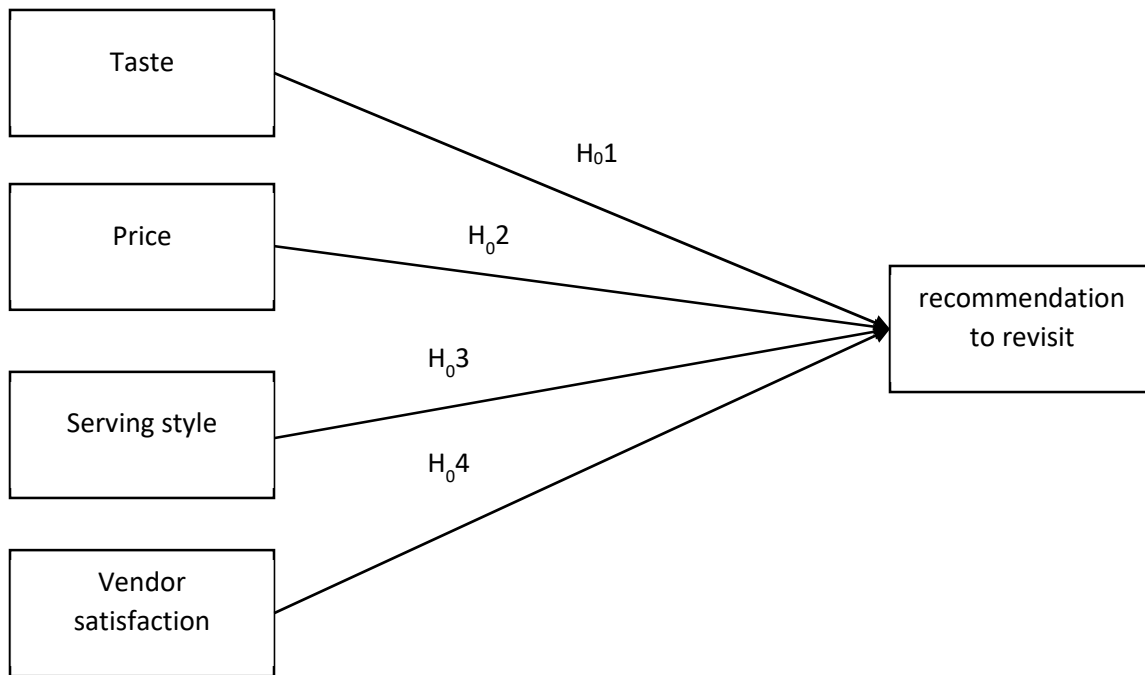


Figure 1: Path Diagram Structure based on Research Hypotheses

Path diagrams are fundamental to SEM, since the researcher is allowed to diagram the hypothesized relationships in the model. Furthermore, they contribute to the researcher with the clarification of the ideas regarding the relationships between the variables which may be directly translated into the necessary equations for the analysis (Ullman and Bentler, 2013).

3.2 Model Development

The items of the variables (DVs and IV) (taste, price, serving style, satisfaction from the vendor, and recommendation to revisit) are set based on previous relating studies and measured by Five-point Likert scale as follows in the Table 1.

Table 1. Item codes and item correspondence based on previous studies

Item codes	Item correspondence	Source
Taste		
TASTE1	“Food is very tasty”	Jaswal et al. (2013) Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019)
TASTE2	“The aroma of served food always fresh”	
TASTE3	“The quality of food is stable and consistent”	
TASTE4	“The taste of local foods is unfamiliar with my routine eating preferences”	
TASTE5	“There is a good variety and diversity of local food choices”	
Price		

PRICE1	"Price is rational"	Tan, Oriade and Fallon, (2014) Nguyen, Dang and Ngo (2019)
PRICE2	"Food is value for money"	
PRICE3	"Bills offered were always correct"	
PRICE4	"All customers are equally treated in term of price"	
Serving style		
SERVING1	"The food venue is well located and a clean place"	Jaswal et al. (2013) Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019).
SERVING2	"Speed of service is maintained even during a busy time"	
SERVING3	"I feel relaxed in the food venue or restaurant settings"	
SERVING4	"I have been served exactly what I ordered"	
SERVING5	"Table setting & serving offer unforgettable memorable experiences"	
Satisfaction from the vendor		
VENDSAT1	"Vendors/restaurant staff is friendly"	Tan, Oriade and Fallon (2014)
VENDSAT2	"Vendors/restaurant staff assure to correct something wrong"	
VENDSAT3	"Vendors/restaurant staff is willing to explain menu items, ingredients or method of cooking"	
VENDSAT4	"Vendors/restaurant staff is sensitive to individual needs"	
VENDSAT5	"Vendors/restaurant staff doesn't pressure me in decision making"	
Revisit Intention		
REVINT1	"How likely would you choose Crete again for one of your upcoming trips?"	Lertputtarak (2012) Luna-Cortés (2018)
REVINT2	"How likely are you willing to recommend local food in Crete for your families and friends?"	
REVINT3	"How likely are you willing to recommend Crete as a tourist destination for your families and friends?"	

3.3 Survey Method

The data was collected during the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, from December 2020 to March 2021. Taking into account the health protection protocols and measures the survey was conducted online. The participants were individuals that have visited Crete, Greece at least one time. International tourists were targeted from several countries of origin and approached via questionnaire distribution concerned 700 direct emails followed by three gentle reminders that were also sent to the participants. Finally, 612 questionnaires were collected, with 527 of them to be valid for use. This represents a higher than 75% response rate, which is considered good enough for studies in social sciences. Online questionnaire distribution contributed to the collection of more responses.

4. Results

4.1 Data analysis

Demographics

Below figures illustrate the demographics of the research sample. The majority of the participants are female (Fig. 2), while they belong to the elder age groups (Fig. 3). This may be considered as a research limitation due to the low participation of the millennials and generation Z. Looking at annual income groups (Fig. 4), each one presents a good coverage. However, most of the participants belongs to the lower income groups.

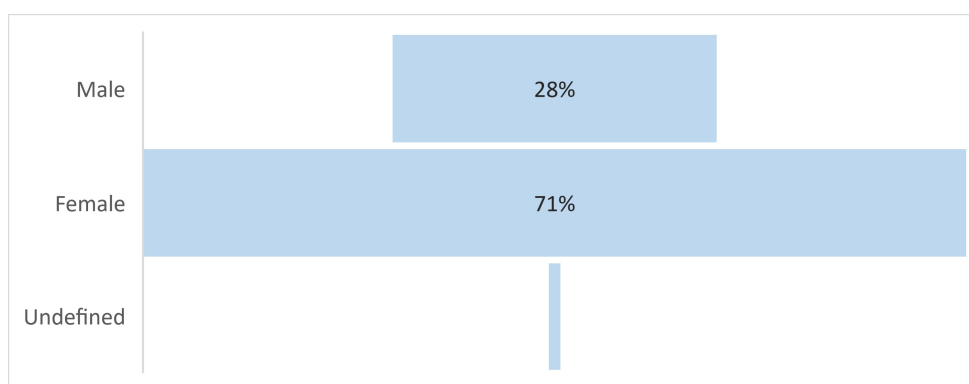


Figure 1. Gender

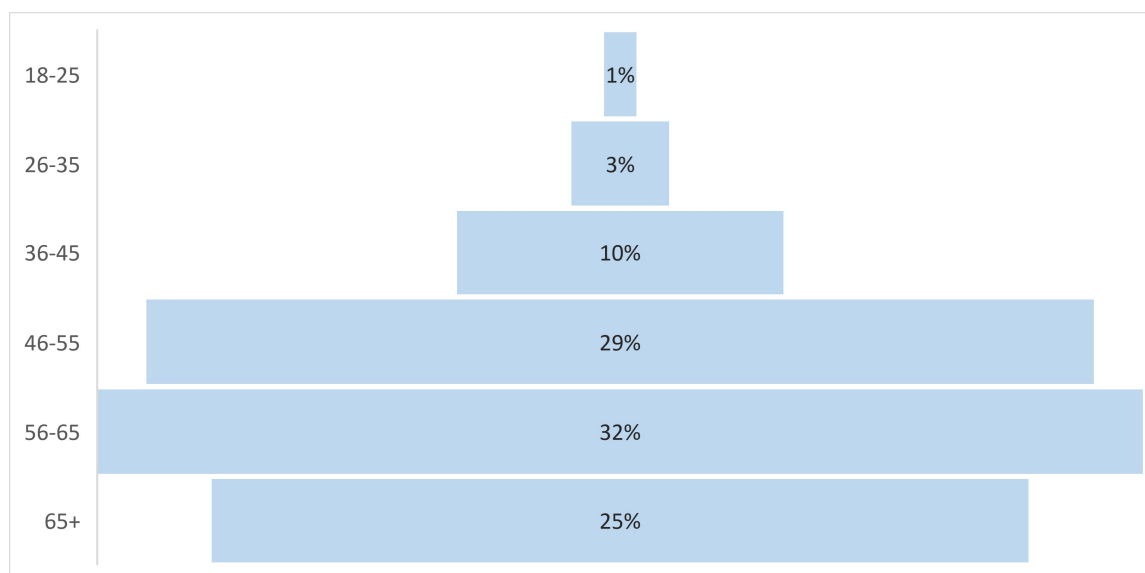


Figure 2. Age groups

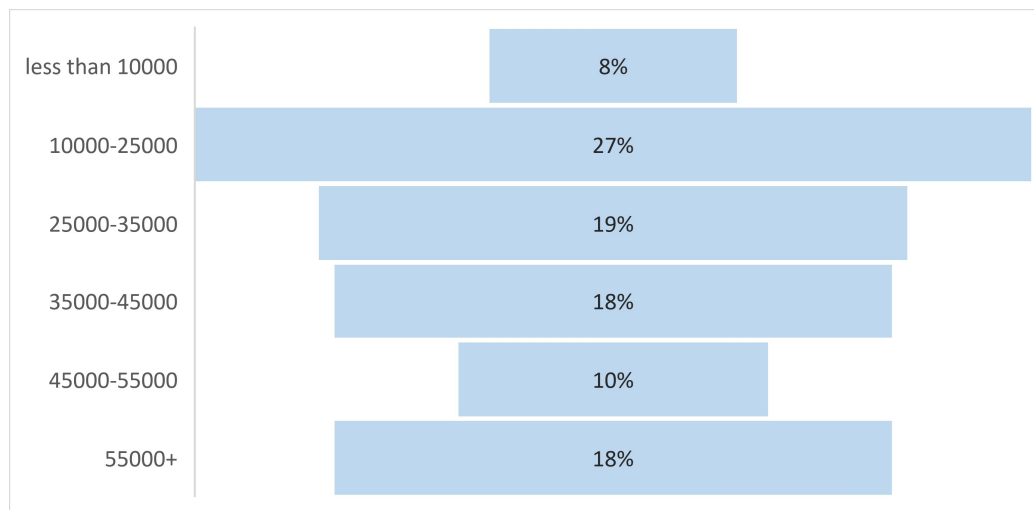


Figure 3. Annual income (in euros)

When it comes to the nationality of the participants (Fig. 5), most of them are British, followed by Scandinavian, Dutch and Americans. However, there is long list of participants from different nationalities. The nationality representation is rational since according to INSETE (2021) United Kingdom and the Netherlands rank to the second and fifth market respectively, in terms of nights spent in the Region of Crete.

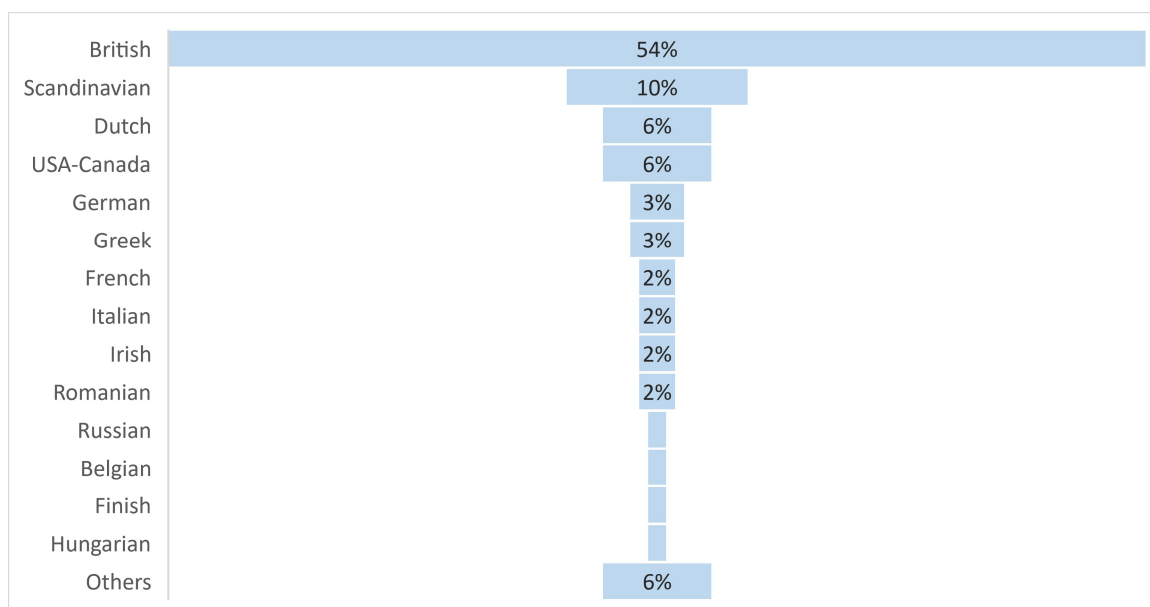


Figure 5. Nationality

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 refers to the descriptive statistics of the sample. The total sample is 527 participants. Likert scale minimum value is 1 and maximum value is 5. Normality scores of Shapiro-Wilk suggests that the data retrieved is normally distributed and suitable for any further parametric analysis. Most of the taste items' mean score higher than 4, which indicates that most of the tourists seems to be satisfied, in terms of taste. The fourth item which concerns the unfamiliarity with the taste, presents low mean score, suggesting that the tourists have found similar tastes to their countries of origin.

Tourists state the price as quite satisfactory and close to their cost estimates. In fact, all price items' mean score is higher than 4. Items of serving style score a higher than 4 mean, except the serving speed, which is very close to four however, i.e., close to agree point. All four items of the satisfaction from the vendor are indicating a strong agreement. When it comes to the revisit and recommendation, most of the items score a higher than 4 mean stating a strong agreement. Nonetheless, the item that refers to the question "Is Cretan local food the main reason for you to revisit Crete?" scores a slightly lower than 4 mean, probably because the participants have -generally- different main purposes when travelling.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the sample

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Shapiro-Wilk W	Shapiro-Wilk p
taste_tasty	527	1	5	4.63	0.744	0.555	< .001
taste_fresh	527	1	5	4.41	0.822	0.709	< .001
taste_quality	527	1	5	4.23	0.922	0.778	< .001
taste_unfamilier	527	1	5	2.7	1.39	0.882	< .001
taste_variety	527	1	5	4.45	0.862	0.669	< .001
price_reasonable	527	1	5	4.38	0.88	0.704	< .001
price_wmoney	527	1	5	4.43	0.89	0.67	< .001
price_billing	527	1	5	4.28	0.978	0.736	< .001
price_equal	527	1	5	4.25	1.05	0.728	< .001
serving_venue	527	1	5	4.38	0.959	0.686	< .001
serving_speed	527	1	5	3.84	1.1	0.858	< .001
serving_relaxed	527	1	5	4.51	0.912	0.594	< .001
serving_order	527	1	5	4.35	0.968	0.704	< .001
serving_table	527	1	5	4.15	1.01	0.787	< .001
vendor_friendly	527	1	5	4.53	0.93	0.567	< .001
vendor_correct	527	1	5	4.38	0.962	0.681	< .001
vendor_menu	527	1	5	4.39	0.969	0.672	< .001
vendor_sensitive	527	1	5	4.27	0.991	0.739	< .001

vendor_pressure	527	1	5	4.44	0.965	0.633	< .001
reccom1	527	1	5	4.62	0.949	0.449	< .001
reccom2	527	1	5	4.6	0.972	0.467	< .001
reccom3	527	1	5	4.62	0.943	0.452	< .001
reccom4	527	1	5	3.61	1.2	0.88	< .001

Reliability analysis

To ensure the reliability of the scale items, Cronbach's Alpha (α) index was calculated for each combination (construct) between them. Moreover, McDonald's Omega (ω) was calculated to check the consistency of each factor resulted from the analysis. The new generation of methodologists and statisticians postulate that Alpha is not a perfect measure of reliability whereas the more generalizable form of reliability is McDonald's Omega (ω) (Hayes and Coutts, 2020). Model constructs are found reliable as Alpha and Omega values are higher than ($>$)0.7.

Table 3. Reliability scores

	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω
Taste	0.75	0.847
Price	0.912	0.915
Serving style	0.94	0.942
Vendor	0.965	0.965
Recommendation	0.915	0.941
Overall	0.967	0.973

Correlation Heatmap

The correlations among the items are represented through the correlation heatmap. The correlation value ranges from -1 (negative correlation) +1 (positive relation) and the diagonal squares shows the correlation of the variable pairs. In Figure 6, the correlation values in the diagonal squares indicate the positive relationship among all items.

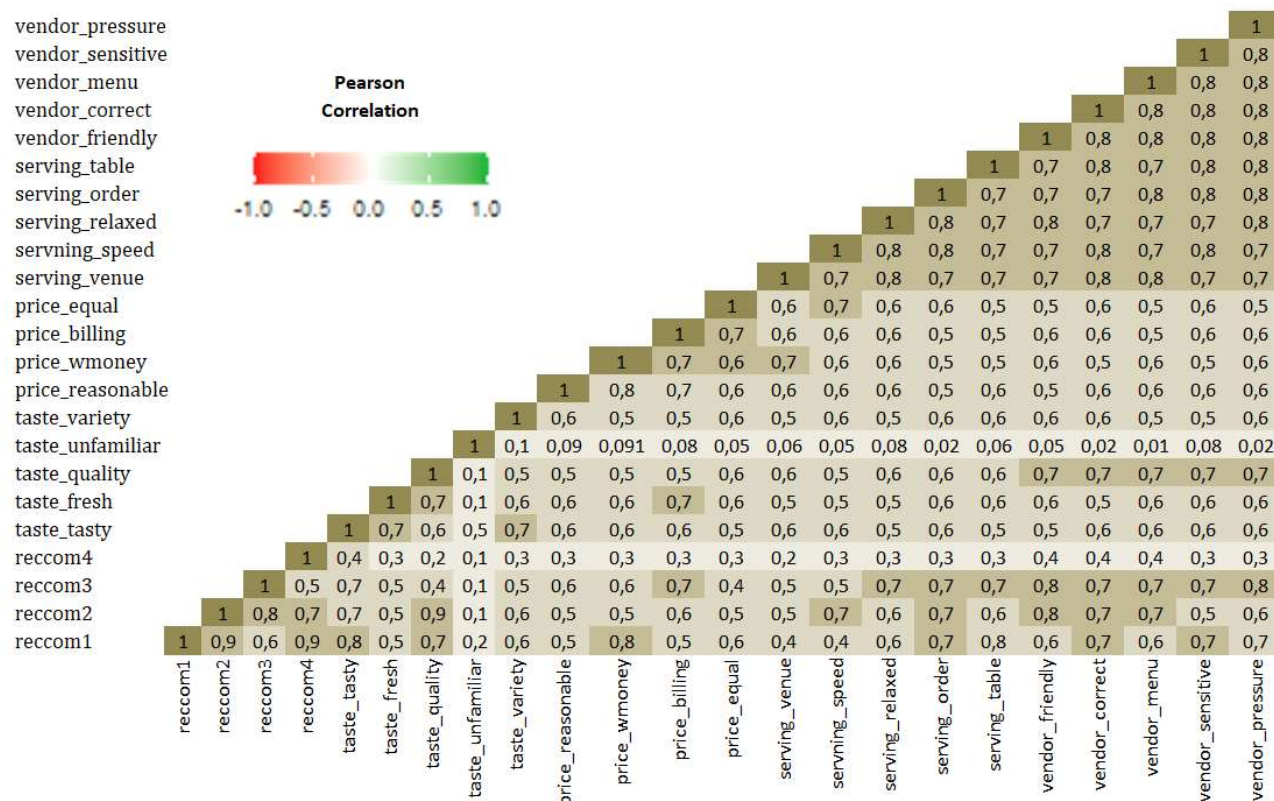


Figure 4. Correlation Heatmap

Regression Analysis

Assumptions' check accepted by the researchers (Kaurav, Prakash, Chowdhary and Verma, 2015) suggests

- measurement of variables: The variables of the study have been measured on a continuous scale, i.e., Likert scale.
- linear relationship between variables: Heatmap of the correlations proves that the variables have linear relationship. One to one relationship within the variable is also considered linear.
- no significant outliers: Outliers' detection was performed, and the outliers were removed prior to the analysis.
- independence of observations: The observations of all variables are independent. Durbin-Watson value is which is 1.83 (very close to 2) indicating the independence of observations used for this study.
- homoscedasticity of data: table of value correlations (not reported in the paper) have shown the homoscedasticity of the variables fall within upper and lower critical limits (UCL / LCL).

vi) residuals (errors) of the regression line: histogram (with a superimposed normal curve) and normal p-p plot were drawn indicating that the residuals of the regression line were normally distributed.

Consequently, the data collected in the context of this study satisfies all the assumptions. Therefore, linear regression is further interpreted. Model fit measures of regression analysis (Table 4) presents a model with $R=0.978$, which indicates a very high correlation among the variables, as already discussed in detail. Moreover, $R^2=0.956$, indicates that all independent variables (taste, price, serving style, and satisfaction from the vendor) interprets the 95% of variance of revisit intention and recommending to other tourists, which satisfies the study case, thus, the relationship model of relationship is best fit.

Table 4. Model fit measures of regression analysis

Model	R	R ²	DW Statistic
1	0.978	0.956	1.83

Coefficient table indicates the prediction of revisit and recommendation intentions. It also determines that all the factors significantly ($p<.001$ or $p<.05$) contributes to the model. Linear regression equation is formed as follows:

$$\text{Recommendation to revisit} = 0.68 + 0.22 (\text{taste}) + 0.15 (\text{price}) + 0.22 (\text{serving}) + 0.39 (\text{vendor})$$

while the model coefficients are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Model Coefficients - RECCOM

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.6868	0.1544	4.447	<.001
TASTE	0.228	0.0587	1.360	<.05
PRICE	0.153	0.0466	0.328	<.05
SERVING	0.2165	0.0594	2.633	<.05
VENDOR	0.3949	0.0549	10.835	<.001

Based on the regression analysis. The path diagram is verified with only a few changes. Independent variable satisfies and co-varies with beta values, while the total model is able to interpret more than 95% of the

phenomenon. The drawn model satisfies the conditions of Structural Equation Modelling and relevant reliability and validity concerns (Mehra, Paul and Kaurav, 2020) as follows in Figure 7.

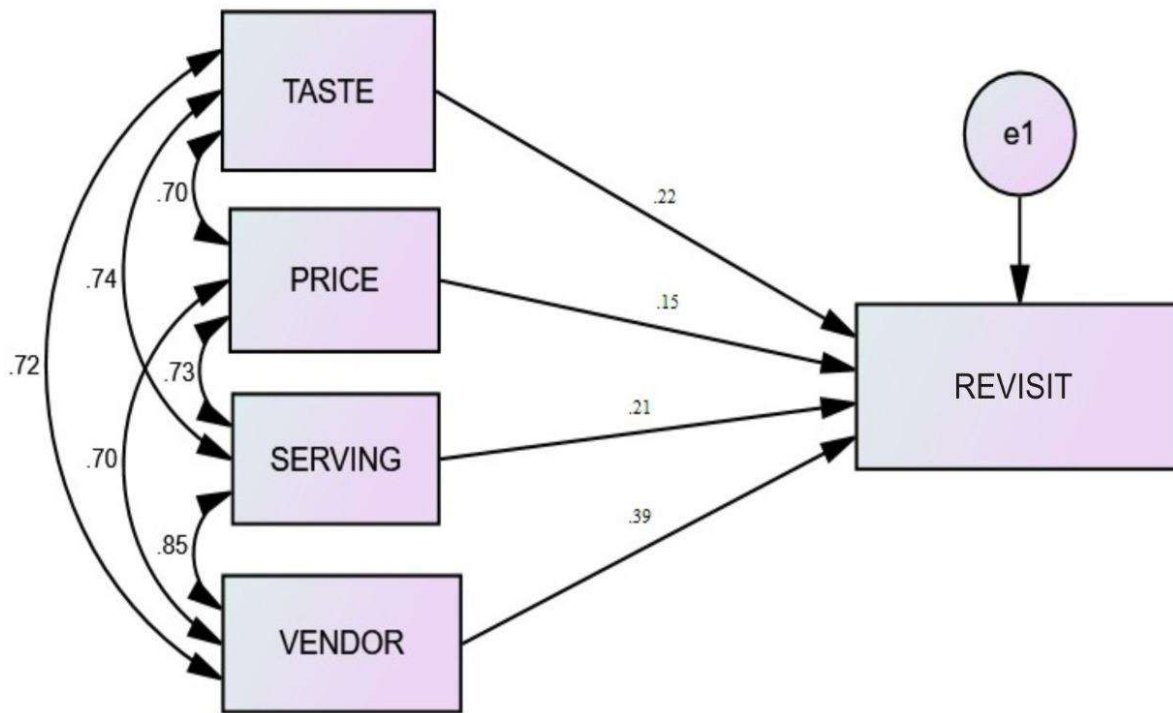


Figure 5. Path diagram of the Local Food Contribution Revisiting a Destination

5. Discussions

Food tourism obtains significant market trends (UNWTO 2012; 2018) and is considered as the most dynamic and creative tourism segment. There is a strong relationship between food and tourism, which has raised deep interest among researchers and academics. Local food and beverages are produced in local places signifying the local identity. Local foods are great representatives of the community when it comes to the social, environmental, cultural, historical, and economic aspects. In terms of personal effect, food is the obligatory energy source for body functions and influences tourists' offering better travel experience. Tourism is considered as a driving force for local, regional, and national development by increasing foreign tourist arrival, resulting in destinations' economic development in terms of employment and revenues.

A dual approach to the phenomenon of food tourism is made by Montanari and Staniscia (2009). Innovative and local food is more likely to be demanded in urban areas rather than in rural environments in which authenticity and freshness of the products are the most relevant attributes. As a result, the rise of "signature cuisine" is an innovative approach to gastronomy and a way to identify how strong the bond between food and tourism location might be. Further studies (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Rinaldi, 2017) present solid arguments that food holds a specific role in the decision of a tourist to choose a tourist destination.

Structural Equation Modeling in this paper indeed illustrates the local food contribution in revisiting and recommending a destination. It also indicates that satisfaction from the vendor has the strongest positive relationship with revisit or recommendation intentions (39% prediction), similarly to the taste and serving style that may predicting the 22% and 21% of revisit or recommendation intentions, respectively. Surprisingly, price predicts only the 15% (lowest) of such intentions. This may be explained by the fact that among holiday trip main expenses (transport, accommodation, food and activities), the food seems to be the lowest one, while minimum sacrifices need to be made in order to taste a good local food.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The structural equation model (SEM) that has been developed in the context of this paper determines the coefficient (significance) of each of the four aspects of the local food (taste, price, serving style, satisfaction from the vendor). Consequently, the significance and the influence of each aspect to the decision-making process of the tourist are defined, when it comes to destination revisit or recommendation.

5.2 Practical Implications

The paper may contribute to the industry professionals in adopting appropriate strategies in order to develop their business, optimizing their food services towards a high-quality gastronomic experience, leading tourists in revisiting the destination and recommend it to other potential travelers. Moreover, destination management organizations (DMOs) may be helped by the results of this research towards destination branding formulation using local food.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

The majority of the quantitative studies indeed have limitations especially when it comes to sample size. Regarding the present case study, a challenge may be the results' generalization due to the sample size and its demographics. Therefore, the authors recommend a larger sample size for the future. Additionally, more advanced tools may also be occupied for further analysis, which may reveal more interesting insights.

6. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, local food is considered as the indicator of a destination's intangible characteristics and contributes to the brand image creation that strongly affects not only decision-making process of the tourists when choosing a destination but also to their on-site experiences leading them in a new decision-making process that concern revisiting the destination or recommend it to other potential travellers. The structural equation model (SEM) that has been developed in the context of this paper determines the coefficient (significance) of each of the four aspects of the local food and thus, its significance and influence on the decision-making process of the tourist when it comes to destination revisit or recommendation. The authors assert that food and beverage sector in destinations should focus on local food quality when it comes to the utilization of local products in order to protect and preserve the authenticity and uniqueness of the local cuisine taste. Furthermore, to improve local food experience, price should be fair and well-trained staff should serve the customers in a nice and traditional environment. Thus, the visitors' satisfaction would be significantly enhanced and transformed into an unforgettable gastronomic experience leading them to revisit the destination or to share it via Word of Mouth (WoM) and/or e-WoM recommending their familiars, friends and followers that they visit the destination. Consequently, local food may be evolved into a strong marketing tool, for DMOs as well, helping them towards a destination brand image formulation.

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