



Research Article

**A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO PROPOSING A COMPETENCY MODEL FOR
GASTRONOMY GUIDING**

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Abstract

Gastronomy tours have developed into a major type of special interest tourism; however, the increasing importance of the role of the gastronomy guide has not corresponded with the development of an empirically supported, theory-based competency model for the practice of gastronomy guiding. This theoretical study is grounded in three established concepts in the field of tourism studies: interpretive guiding, the experience economy and service quality (the SERVQUAL scale). A Competency Model for Gastronomy Guiding was designed using these theories to provide clarity around the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective gastronomic tour delivery. This model situates the gastronomy guide as an experiential designer/creator of meaningful experiences and cultural ambassador whose actions define how destinations are understood and how visitors perceive their travel experiences. As such five major competency domains were identified: (1) gastronomic knowledge and expertise; (2) communication and storytelling; (3) experiential event planning/design and operational processes; (4) food safety/hygiene; and (5) sustainability/ethics. The study posits that the competency domains will influence both perceived service quality and experience quality, and ultimately affect tourist satisfaction, intent to revisit/recommend, and ultimately other macro-level outcomes including the image of the destination and national branding—positioning the gastronomy guide as a "silent diplomat" in gastrodiploacy. The study provides a basis for developing professional standards, training programs and for conducting empirical research (through the formulation of hypotheses and the construction of structural models).

Keywords Gastronomy Guiding Competency Model, Gastronomy Tourism

Introduction

Tourists travel for many reasons, but gastronomy has been shown to be one of the primary factors contributing to their travel decisions (Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002). Gastronomy tours have become increasingly popular among tourists because they not only allow tourists to experience local foods and drinks but also provide them with access to the stories behind the products and how they were produced, cultural codes and every day practice (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Ellis et al., 2018). It is the tour guide specialized in gastronomy that helps make these experiences authentic, memorable and meaningful for tourists (Aras, 2024; Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022).

Interpretive guiding research highlights that tour guides are not just simply conveyors of factual information; they are interpreters, creating a world of meaning for visitors by using the art of storytelling and cultural mediation to emphasize the authenticity of their tour (Ham, 1992; Tilden, 1957; Beck and Cable, 1998). The Experience Economy model defines gastronomy tours—when well-designed—are staged experiences that can provide entertainment, education, escapism and aestheticism, therefore extending the role of a tour guide from an experience provider to an "experience designer" and "experience manager" (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The service quality theory and specifically the SERVQUAL model demonstrates that guides' knowledge, communication and professionalism directly impact on perceived service quality, tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions (Çetinkaya and Öter, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Ghedeir Brahim, 2021).

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Despite the increasing importance of gastronomy guiding, no systematically developed or theoretically grounded competency model exists within the literature that clearly outlines what types of knowledge, skills and attitudes gastronomy guides require to effectively perform their job. Therefore, a comprehensive model of competencies is needed, which encompasses several key areas including: gastronomic knowledge and expertise, communicative and interpretive abilities, the ability to design and manage experiences, food safety and hygiene and sustainability/ethics. Based on the interpretive guiding theory, experience economy and service quality models, the purpose of this study is to develop a "Competency Model" for gastronomy guiding and thus add to the body of literature, and provide a theoretical foundation upon which professional standards can be developed.

Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy tourism is an aspect of special interest tourism where the principal or supplementary motives for travel is to experience the food-and-drink culture of a destination (Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002). The experience of food can be much greater than just satisfying a physiological need; food is a symbolic element of a destination's cultural identity, lifestyle and web of social relations (Bessière, 1998; Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Systematic reviews have demonstrated recent research has focused upon motivation, culture, authenticity and destination orientation in the food/gastronomy tourism literature (Ellis et al., 2018; Tort, 2023). Travelers' gastronomy-focused travel motivations include multiple-dimensional factors including the desire to taste new flavours and seek hedonistic pleasure, the wish to learn about local culture and "eat like a local," the pursuit of social prestige and status display, the tendency to consume healthy/local/authentic products, and the desire to make the travel experience "unforgettable" (Mak, et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2018).

Food and beverages produced within a local community are viewed as carriers of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage and tools for rural development and regional identity building (Bessière, 1998; Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Rachão, 2019). Studies show that local culinary products reinforce the destination image, increase tourist spending and promote agricultural diversification and rural revitalization (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Boniface, 2016). for this reason, geographical indication products, traditional dishes and local production practices are considered central attractions of gastronomy tourism and strategic tools for destination branding (Arslan, 2022; Arslan Özkan, 2024).

Tourism with a focus on gastronomy also has a significant "experience orientation." According to the experience economy framework established by Pine and Gilmore (1999), businesses should "stage memorable experiences" and that products and services function as carriers of these experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In the context of gastronomy tourism, this approach materializes through activities such as tastings, cooking workshops, visits to production sites, chef encounters and street food tours, creating value through multisensory, participatory and narrative-based experiences (Ellis et al., 2018; García-Pérez, 2024).

However, because the experiences associated with gastronomy tourism have a complex structure, it can be difficult for tourists to interpret relationships between product, place and culture on their own. therefore, there is a need for intermediate actors to read together the historical roots of the local cuisine, the production chain, symbolic meanings and contemporary transformations (Everett, 2012; Purnomo, 2022). At this point, tour guides emerged as cultural mediators and experience designers in the context of gastronomy tourism, thus providing access to the second component of the conceptual framework.

Tour Guiding

It is now well recognized that tour guiding is a major interface between visitors and destinations in the current tourism model (Weiler and Black, 2015). The evolution of the modern tour guide can be traced back to the figures of "Pathfinder" and "Mentor/Educator", which Cohen (1985) identified and described four main components of the tour guide's role in terms of: Instrumental, Social, Interactional and Communicative (Cohen, 1985). Rabić (2010) explains how guides serve as "Ambassadors" and "Representatives" of destinations and how they may influence tourist experiences, the image of a destination and provide the implementation of sustainable/responsible tourism.

Studies investigating the interrelationship between quality of guiding services, tourist satisfaction and intentions to return to a destination reveal that the quality of guiding performance is a major factor in determining the quality of the visitor experience. Studies conducted in Istanbul demonstrated a strong positive correlation between the quality of guiding services and both tourist satisfaction and intention to return to a destination (Çetinkaya and Öter, 2016). Additionally, Black and Weiler (2005), demonstrate that supporting

the roles of guides in interpretation, safety, group management and resource protection through quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms, are the primary factors influencing the tourist experience.

Specialization and thematization of products in the tourism sector has resulted in specialized areas of expertise developing within the tour guiding profession. These include fields such as Nature/Eco Guiding, Cultural Heritage Guiding, Religious Tourism Guiding and Gastronomy Guiding. This development is influenced by the growing diversity of tourist interests and increasing expectations regarding the professional competency of guides (Bahar, 2021; Düzgün, 2019; Akyurt Kurnaz and Güzel, 2022). Specifically, with regard to gastronomy tourism, the emphasis on local cuisine and food culture necessitates that guides develop additional knowledge and skill in this area (Arslan Özkan, 2024; Aras, 2024).

Theoretical foundations for tour guiding are further enhanced by the interpretive guiding literature. Tilden (1957) defined heritage interpretation as an "art" that serves as a means of inspiring meaning, connection and emotional response in the visitor's mind and emphasizes its transformational effect on the visitor experience. Ham (1992) interpreted interpretation as an educational communications process that identifies relationships between objects and events through either direct experiences or representations and states that successful interpretation is thematic, organized, relevant and enjoyable. Beck and Cable's (1998) principles of interpretation emphasize goals such as creating curiosity, encouraging participation, engaging multiple senses and promoting awareness of resource conservation.

In the light of this theoretical framework, the tour guide in gastronomic contexts is not simply a "narrator" providing factual information, but rather a "translator" and "experience designer" who constructs the story of local cuisine and then stages it and creates an overall experience for the visitor. This role offers the opportunity for the emergence of the concept of gastronomy guiding and lays the groundwork for the third component of the conceptual framework.

Gastronomy Guiding

Gastronomy guiding (gastro-guiding) represents a recently emerging, rapidly growing area of specialization that appears at the nexus of gastronomy tourism and tour guiding (Düzgün, 2019; Aras, 2024). Aras's (2024) bibliometric evaluation demonstrates that the term "gastro-guiding" is increasingly used in studies conducted in Türkiye and that this area of specialization is developing as a distinct sub-field within both gastronomy tourism literature and guiding research. Akyurt Kurnaz and Kurnaz (2022), in their book *Gastronomi Rehberliği*, treat gastronomy guiding as a hybrid form of specialization that combines gastronomic knowledge, the interpretation of cultural heritage and the professional standards of tour guiding.

In addition to performing the classical duties of tour guiding, the tasks of a gastronomy guide include many specialized responsibilities related to gastronomy tourism. Specifically, the gastronomy guide is tasked with planning gastronomy routes, selecting itineraries and places to visit, ordering the tasting sequence and handling logistical aspects of the program (Ahipaşaoğlu, 2001; Akyurt Kurnaz and Güzel, 2022). Moreover, the guide is expected to effectively communicate the historical context, methods of preparation, geographical and cultural origins, beliefs and daily habits of local foods and beverages in a clear and appealing way (Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022). Group management, compliance with health and safety regulations, attention to potential food allergies and special dietary needs, mediation between tourists and local producers/entrepreneurs and education related to the conservation of gastronomic heritage are all major responsibilities of gastronomy guides (Rusmiati, 2022; Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Düzgün, 2019).

The knowledge required of gastronomy guiding is interdisciplinary and multilayered in character. As emphasized by Kurnaz (2023) and Düzgün (2019), a gastronomy guide is expected to have at least some elementary knowledge of topics including basic cooking techniques, local and international culinary cultures, food safety and hygiene, geographical indications and local products, pairing food and beverages, gastronomy history and gastronomy sociology. Competencies for guides in gastronomy tours were identified by Ülkü and Göktaş (2022) in their qualitative study and were categorized into the themes of communication and presentation skills, intercultural competence, knowledge of the destination, knowledge of businesses and products, organizational skills, innovation and problem-solving. Participants stated that they perceived guides who provided detailed gastronomy-related information as more competent and trustworthy.

At this juncture, it is insufficient to consider the gastronomy guide as merely a "culinary encyclopedia" filled with information. At the confluence of the experience economy and interpretative guiding theories, the role of the gastronomy guide is redefined as creating theme-based, story-driven and sensorily-rich experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Ham, 1992; Beck and Cable, 1998). The gastronomy guide, therefore, manages holistically

the three phases of the gastronomic experience: the pre-experience phase of expectation setting (communications, promotional materials); the during-experience phase of organizing multisensory experiences (taste, smell, texture, sound and spatial ambiance); and the post-experience phase of constructing meanings that reinforce the memorability of the experience (Mak et al., 2012; García-Pérez, 2024). Therefore, the gastronomy guide emerges as both "designer" and "interpreter" of the gastronomic experience, producing lasting memories in tourists' minds of both the destination and its local cuisine.

Examples of gastronomy guiding continue to emerge and diversify globally. For example, in Spain, local guides lead gastronomy tours in cities such as San Sebastián, Barcelona and Madrid using local products such as pintxos, tapas and wine to create experiences that blend the city's historical and cultural stories (Vlachou and Savvinopoulou, 2020; Ellis et al., 2018). Research on gastronomy tours in Greece demonstrate that guides are key to making local products and gastronomic heritage visible. Additionally, neighborhood-themed or street food gastronomy tours in cities such as Bangkok, Rome, Istanbul and Medellín exemplify the ways in which local guides act as intermediaries providing safe and authentic locations and allowing tourists to "experience" local lifestyles and practices (Promsivapallop, 2020; Arslan Özkan, 2024; Aras, 2024). Collectively, these examples demonstrate that gastronomy guiding is increasingly becoming professionalized around the world and is an essential component of gastronomy tourism. Ultimately, this conceptual framework articulates gastronomy tourism by demonstrating tourists' multiple dimensional gastronomic motivations and local products and cultural heritage; identifies tour guiding as the primary profession involved in mediating and managing this experience; and describes gastronomy guiding as a specialized field at the nexus of these two professions, primarily focused on the interpretation and experiential design of gastronomic experiences. Future theoretical and empirical research on a competency model for gastronomy guiding will provide further insight into the triadic relationship of gastronomy tourism, tour guiding and gastronomy guiding and how this relationship impacts the quality of the gastronomic experience.

Theoretical Framework

Interpretive Guiding: Storytelling, Cultural Transmission and Authenticity

Tilden's 1957 paper on "Interpretation" presents the definition of Heritage Interpretation as a process for creating meanings for visitors' personal experiences and not simply for communicating factual information. The principles of interpretation by Tilden emphasize that visitors must be interested, experience the connection with their experiential world and memorize the interpreted content. Similarly, Ham (1992) defines Environmental Interpretation as an educational communication process for revealing connections between objects and events via representation and experience. Ham emphasizes that an effective interpretation experience will be fun, relevant, organized and have a theme.

The Beck and Cable (1998) principles of interpretation define how an interpreter should create an experience for visitors to encourage curiosity, provide a multisensory and participatory experience, and increase awareness of conservation. The research of Weiler (2005, 2014), highlights the role of tour guides as "Experience Brokers", and how they are central to the meaning creation process of tourism experiences, including the effect of their interpretive performance on visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions. More recent empirical research demonstrates that an interpreters performance has a significant positive relationship to "Memorable Tour Experiences" and visit intention.

Interpretive guiding in the gastronomy field, requires the position of local dishes as both "consumed products" and "told stories" that reflect the entire production process from raw materials to consumption, the history of the dish, the cultural values associated with it, the rituals surrounding its preparation and consumption and how the preparation and consumption of the dish reflects or constructs one's identity (Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Başoda et al., 2018; Aras, 2024). As such, the gastronomy guide acts as an interpretive actor and, based on the principles of Tilden and Ham, provides the meaning of the gastronomical components by providing authenticity, cultural mediation and telling stories about gastronomical elements.

Experience Economy: Experience Design, Tasting and Discovery Processes

According to Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) experience economy model, the economy is now at an experience-based level, with companies competing based on the unique experiences created for customers (commodities-goods-services-experience). The experience is described using four categories: entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics. Research studies on tourism have found that all four categories affect customer satisfaction and loyalty toward destinations (Oh, Fiore and Jeoung, 2007; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Chang, 2018).

Research on gastronomy tourism emphasizes that local food and beverage experiences are now a major part of a destination's experiential offerings which enhance a destination's attractiveness, enable cultural learning and support sustainable tourism objectives (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Putra, 2021). In addition, experiencing local foods contributes to visitors' perception of destination culture. Also, perceived authenticity has been shown to positively influence perceived quality, satisfaction and loyalty (Wan, 2025; Zhang et al., 2019).

Therefore, in this framework, the gastronomy guide could be viewed as an "experience creator" or "designer", creating the sequence of tastings, selecting venues, arranging the order of events and managing the rhythm (tempo) of the visit based on Pine and Gilmore's experience realms. Developing programs that strike a balance between the educational aspects (history of food, how it was produced), the entertaining elements (anecdotes and humor), the aesthetic aspects (the location, the presentation of the meal, the ambiance) and the escapist (getting away from one's daily routine, "live like a local") aspects will contribute to creating a positive gastronomic experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011).

Service Quality (SERVQUAL), Professional Competence, Communication and Satisfaction

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) developed a systematic theoretical base to Service Quality Theory with the SERVQUAL model. The SERVQUAL model defines service quality as the difference between what customers' expectations are and how well they perceive service and measures the gap under the five categories of Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. Literature of Tourism and Hospitality demonstrates that each category has a significant effect on tourist satisfaction and purchase intent.

Literature about Tour Guiding emphasizes the relationship between the professional competency of a tour guide and customer perception of service quality and satisfaction. The study performed in Istanbul by Cetinakaya and Oter (2016) found strong correlations between the quality of guiding services and the degree of satisfaction experienced by tourists and their decision to visit again. Most recent studies indicate that competences including professionalism, empathy, ethical integrity, communication and emotional intelligence have a direct impact on the satisfaction of visitors, their loyalty and their perception of a destination's image (Yilmaz, 2024; Ghedeir Brahim, 2021; Lackey, 2016).

Studies that examined the competency of a gastronomy guide and gastronomy tours in general include a study by Ulku and Goktas (2022), that examines the competency of a gastronomy guide, and other studies, such as those by Seyitoglu (2020), Altintas and Hazarhun (2020) and Basoda et al. (2018), indicate that the competency of gastronomy guides cluster into four main categories: gastronomic knowledge, communication/interpretative skills, experience design/organization and ethical-sustainability sensitivity. Qualitative studies indicate that gastronomy tour participants expect their guides to possess extensive knowledge of cuisine and culture, possess a clear, organized and fluent narrative style, possess communicative and interactive qualities and display a trustworthy and ethically responsible attitude (Aras, 2024; Ulku and Goktas, 2022; Guzel, 2019).

The service quality framework needs to be expanded to include food safety and sanitation. Multiple studies on the food safety knowledge and practices of tourism employees have indicated that employees trained in food safety techniques perform better in areas such as cross contamination, temperature control, personal hygiene and waste management (Sezer, 2024; Nurettin, 2020; Jevsnik et al., 2023; Reboucas et al., 2017). HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) principles provide a universally recognized method for controlling food safety through risk assessment, identification of critical control points, determination of critical limits, monitoring and corrective actions and have become an accepted industry standard in terms of guest safety.

Sustainability and ethics is becoming a greater focus of both the gastronomy tourism and guiding literature. Studies on local food and sustainable gastronomy illustrate that gastronomy tourism can have a two-way influence on local economies, social structures and environmental preservation, and that actors in gastronomy tourism -- especially guides -- have the capacity to model sustainable behaviors and attitudes (Putra, 2021; Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Zhang et al., 2019; Judijanto, 2025; Padyala, 2025). Studies that examine the role of guides in sustainable tourism demonstrate that guides are viewed as "on the ground" implementors and ethical representatives of both environmental and socio-culturally sustainable tourism (Nowacki, 2021; Guzel, 2019). In this context, gastronomy guiding is theoretically integrated from the interpretive guiding theory, the experience economy (tasting/discovery) and the experience design of the experience economy and the service quality theory findings on professional competencies, communication and satisfaction.

Proposing a Competency Model for Gastronomy Guiding

The "Competency Model for Gastronomy Guiding" is structured with five core competency areas, that will be influencing both quality (Service Quality SERVQUAL dimensions) and experience (Experience Economy Dimensions) on tourists' perceived satisfaction and loyalty. The model describes the individual competency area in terms of knowledge – skills – attitudes and relies on the experience economy and the interpretative guiding theory as a theoretical basis to explain how these competency domains work together (Ham, 1992; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Tilden, 1957; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Gastronomic Knowledge and Expertise Competencies

(What kinds of knowledge and competencies should a gastronomy guide possess in gastronomic terms?)

The initial element of the model represents the guide's degree of experience with food and their background knowledge of food in the world of tourism. Gastronomy tour research has identified that for a guide to be successful they need to have an abundance of knowledge about a region's culinary heritage, regional specialties and indications of origin, preparation and cooking methods, local recipes and methods of producing food and the history of food and gastronomy in general (Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Başoda et al., 2018; Altıntaş and Hazarhun, 2020; Aras, 2024). The knowledge of food will only create a meaningful connection between the visitor's life experiences when told through storytelling (Ham, 1992; Tilden, 1957; Beck and Cable, 1998), therefore, in the model, gastronomic knowledge competency also included the sub-dimensions of being able to tell the historical and cultural context of products, relate food to the destination identity and the daily lives of locals and to inform visitors of the debate surrounding authenticity (local/global; hybrid cuisine) (Zhang et al., 2019; Kivela and Crotts, 2006).

In a SERVQUAL model, this dimension contributes most to the perception of "assurance" and "reliability", where providing tourist guides with correct, up to date and consistent information enhances tourist confidence in the guide and the destination (Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Also, qualitative results suggest that participants in gastronomy tours report that the most competent and satisfying guides are those that provide extensive details about the origins, production processes and cultural meanings behind the food they serve (Seyitoğlu, 2020; Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022).

Communication and Interpretive Narrative Competencies

(What should gastronomy guides' communication competencies and skills look like?)

Effective tour guiding requires much more than simply knowing how to speak. Communication is a multi-faceted skill that encompasses the ability to break down complicated information into easy-to-understand concepts, manage the behavior of the group, stimulate and facilitate questions and conversation, use body language, and demonstrate cross-cultural awareness (Yılmaz, 2024; Ap and Wong, 2001; Weiler, 2014).

Effective interpretation is based upon the idea that interpretation should be thematic, organized, tailored to the audience and setting, enjoyable, and intellectually stimulating (Ham, 1992; Beck and Cable, 1998). The communication competence of a guide, therefore, has the following sub-dimensions:

- Narration that is clear, structured and thematic.
- Storytelling and humor.
- Question-based, participative guiding style.
- Active listening and emotional intelligence.
- Sensitivity to cultural differences and conflict resolution (Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022; Ghedeir Brahim, 2021; Lackey, 2016).

As for the SERVQUAL dimensions, effective communication and interpretive skills are especially important for enhancing empathy, responsiveness, and assurance so that the guide will be perceived by visitors as available, caring, and reliable (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Çetinkaya and Öter, 2016). Repeatedly, recent studies have emphasized the positive effects of a guide's professional communication skills on the visitor's satisfaction with the tour, their intention to recommend the destination, and their loyalty to the destination (Tour Guide Competence in Gastronomy Tours, 2022; Yılmaz, 2024; Ghedeir Brahim, 2021).

Experience Design and Process Management Competencies

(How should the gastronomy guide organise the experience process?)

Experience Economy has established that in addition to being a "storyteller," the food guide is an actor who "creates" and "orchestrates" the experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In the experience model, the competence of the food guide in organizing the gastronomy tour process in an experience-oriented manner from the beginning to the end of the tour consists of three parts. These consist of the pre-tour part (the management of expectations and the supply of information), the during-tour part (the management of routes, the management of the time, the rhythm, the breaks, and the tasting points) and the post-tour part (the feedback, and the practices that lead to the memory of the tour) (Weiler and Crabtree, 1999; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011).

Research has shown that qualitative research on gastronomy tours reveals that while the guides have usually been very strong in terms of knowledge, they have had weaknesses in terms of the structuring of the narrative, the maintenance of the thematic coherence, the management of time, and the design of the multisensory experience (Çapar, 2024; Ülkü and Göktaş, 2022).

Experience Design Competence can be composed of sub-dimensions which include the use of Pine and Gilmore's four experience realms (education – entertainment – aesthetic - escapism) in a balanced way, the consideration of the atmosphere of the location and the presentation of the aesthetics, the conscious structuring of the tasting sequences, the creation of the moment of the surprise and the discovery, and the support of the intra-group interaction (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Chang, 2018; Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

This competency area also encompasses the competencies in the management of the tour, the logistics, the risk management and the problem solving. The results of Ap and Wong (2001) on the guide professionalism show that, in addition to the product knowledge and communication, the "tour management" and the "problem solving" skills are also crucial for the customer's satisfaction; the same results were found in the most recent researches on the guiding competences (Ghedeir Brahim, 2021; Tour Guide Competence in Gastronomy Tours, 2022; Ap and Wong, 2001).

In the model, this competency area acts as a link between the experience economy (the quality of the experience) and the service quality (especially the reliability and the tangibles). A well-designed tour process both creates the experience that will be remembered by tourists and creates the perception among them about the service as professional and of a high quality.

Food Safety and Hygiene Competencies

(What knowledge and competencies should a gastronomy guide have regarding food safety and hygiene?)

Because of the relationship between gastronomy tours and eating and drinking, we have identified knowledge about food safety and hygiene as a unique element of this model. We know from many studies that when food service staff lack knowledge in areas such as their own cleanliness, temperature control, preventing cross-contamination, storing and reheating foods, they create serious potential hazards for their guests (Putri et al., 2021; Nurettin, 2020; Jevšnik et al., 2023; Rebouças et al., 2017).

The HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) principles provide a widely recognized international system to manage food safety through several steps which include hazard identification, determining critical control points, establishing critical limits, monitoring, taking corrective action and verifying (Intertek, 2025; FDA, 2022). Food safety competence for a gastronomy guide includes the following sub-competences:

- Fundamental understanding of food micro-biology and mechanisms of contamination
- Maintaining temperature and time controls
- Knowledge of allergens and other dietary restrictions
- Observation of the environmental hygiene standards of the places where you take your guests and the ability to inform them of possible risks
- The recognition of symptoms of acute illness or poisoning and prompt reporting to appropriate agencies (Jevšnik et al., 2023; Sezer, 2024; Putri et al., 2021)

As a consequence, this competence domain has close links to the "assurance" and "tangibles" components of SERVQUAL. A guide who takes guests to safe and clean places, identifies and mitigates risks and provides clear communications to the guests will promote trust in the destination and the tour and, thus, can produce

large effects on both tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Food Safety Knowledge and Practices of Tourism Employees, 2020).

Sustainability and Ethics Competencies

(How should a gastronomy guide behave in terms of sustainability and ethics?)

The last element of the proposed model is sustainability/ethics. Sustainable gastronomy literature illustrates how local food can help the local economy, build social connections and protect the environment (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Akdağ, 2017; Putra, 2021; Judijanto, 2025), and local gastronomy tourism actors – especially tour guides – play a key role in achieving these goals (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Akdağ, 2017; Putra, 2021; Judijanto, 2025). Additionally, experiencing local and authentic foods enhances the sustainable image of the destination, and studies have demonstrated that perceived authenticity positively affects quality and satisfaction (Wan, 2025; Zhang et al., 2019; Adekunle, 2023).

Research about guides and their role in sustainable tourism emphasize that guides are actors that model responsible behavior, influence environmental and socio-cultural impacts, and act as ethical mediators between local communities and tourists (Nowacki, 2021; Güzel, 2019). This competency area includes sub-dimensions such as

- Promote locally produced and seasonal food products
- Encourage behaviors to reduce waste and use resources efficiently
- Develop and maintain equitable and transparent relations with local producers and business organizations
- Represent local culture in a non-folklorized manner, avoid stereotypes and respect diverse cultures
- Non-manipulative, open commercial communications (transparency about commission agreements, etc.)
- Raise awareness about over-commercialization and the risks of overtourism (Judijanto, 2025; Padyala, 2025; Zhang et al., 2019).

Together with interpretative guiding theories, this competency area supports perceptions of authenticity and meaningfulness; together with the experience economy, it enables the development of "ethically comfortable" and "value-based" experiences. Furthermore, tourists' perceptions of sustainable and ethical behavior enhance the empathy and assurance elements of service quality, which subsequently indirectly affect satisfaction and loyalty (Güzel, 2019; Nowacki, 2021).

Conclusion

This study provides a basis for discussing the increasing relevance of gastronomy tourism and the role of specialized gastronomy tour guides via a theoretically based and comprehensive competency model. Gastronomy guides represent much more than mere "tour workers" providing visitor information when the interpretive guiding approach, experience economy and service quality theory are viewed collectively. Gastronomy guides are multi-dimensional cultural ambassadors for their destinations, translating the cultural world of meaning of their destinations for visitors, staging experiences and producing service quality. The proposed model illustrates gastronomy guiding competence across five core dimensions: (1) gastronomic knowledge and expertise, (2) communication and interpretative narrative, (3) experience design and process management, (4) food safety and hygiene, and (5) sustainability and ethics. Gastronomic knowledge and expertise enables guides to provide a holistic view of local cuisine, geography designation products, preparation methods and cultural context, thereby supporting both the visibility of destination identity and the country's image. Skills related to communication and interpretive narratives enable visitors to emotionally connect to the destination through the use of storytelling, cultural transmission and authenticity, which supports the function of the guide as a "cultural ambassador." Therefore, the guide does not only explain "what the food is," but also "who the country is."

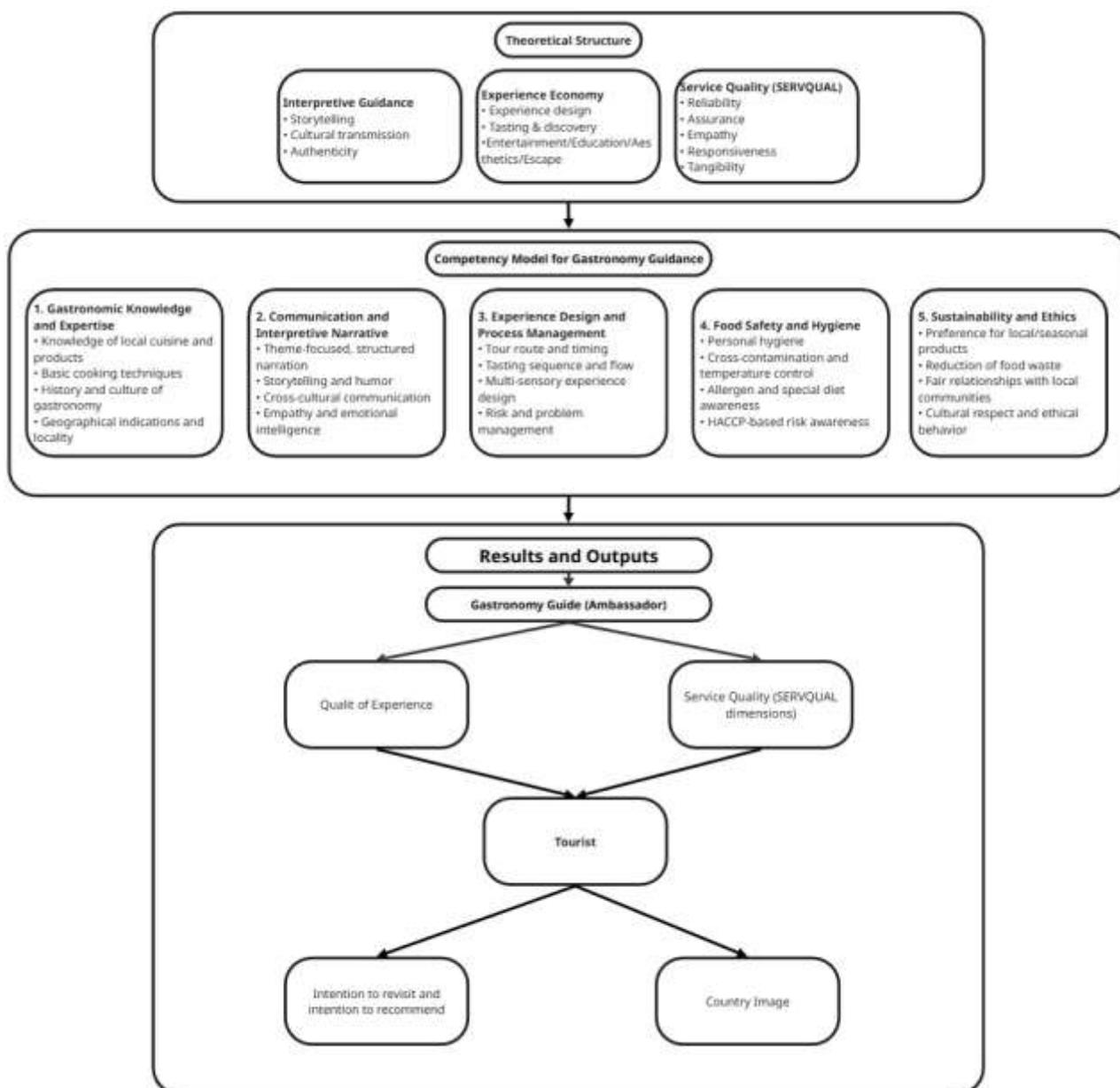
The experience design and process management dimension, consistent with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework, allows gastronomy tours to be designed as memorable experiences that balance entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism. A well-designed food tour or gastronomy route will define how visitors "experience" the country, and contribute to the coding of the destination image as positive, distinct and prestigious. Competence related to food safety and hygiene represents tangible evidence of the care provided to protect visitor health and safety, and reinforces trust both in the country and local businesses.

The sustainability and ethics dimension is critical in developing a national image that respects local communities, takes account of environmental impacts and promotes equitable relationships.

The overall structure of the model clearly indicates the strategic position of gastronomy guides relative to country image and promotion. The competences held by guides do not only increase perceived service and experience quality, which increases tourist satisfaction, revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth communication, but also operationalize the destination's cultural capital, gastronomic heritage and sustainability aspirations on the ground. As such, gastronomy guides may be seen not simply as individuals responsible for running tour programs, but rather as "silent diplomats" on the front lines of gastrodiplomacy and nation branding.

The model developed in this study has also been represented graphically. The "Competency Model for Gastronomy Guiding" illustrated in Figure 1 displays a three-layered holistic structure. At the top of the layers are the theoretical foundations that inform the model; in the middle are the competency dimensions specifically applicable to gastronomy guiding; and at the base of the layers are the outputs produced by the competences from the tourist's perspective (perceived service quality, experience quality, satisfaction and revisit intention). Thus, the figure visually demonstrates a causal relationship between theory and practice, and between practice and outcomes.

Figure 1. Competency Model For Gastronomy Guiding: Theoretical Foundations, Competency Dimensions and Outputs



The model portrays guides as the operators that are responsible for creating gastronomy tours, however they are also positioned as cultural ambassadors and experience designers that create an experience of the local cuisine and culture; therefore, this model outlines how these specific areas of knowledge, skill and attitude can demonstrate gastronomy guiding as a critical role in promoting country images and tourism through various combinations.

Following this model, future studies could look into answering the following research questions:

1. In gastronomy tours, is there a relationship between the level of knowledge and expertise in gastronomy and the level of service quality and experience quality from the visitors?
2. Are the roles that communication and interpretative narrative competences have in developing visitor satisfaction and memorable gastronomic experiences demonstrated and measurable?
3. How do experience design and process management competences develop the total gastronomy tour experience in regards to the Pine and Gilmore's Experience realms?
4. Do the food safety and hygiene competences of the gastronomy guides effect their guests' perception of safety, their trust of the destination and their overall satisfaction with the visit?
5. How do the sustainability and ethics competences of the gastronomy guides produce mediators/moderators in relation to gastronomy authenticity, sustainable destinations and long term tourist loyalty?

This theoretical and conceptual framework will provide the basis in later stages for assessing each competency domain within a structural model, developing hypotheses, and empirically testing the "Competency Model for Gastronomy Guiding".

The competency model of the gastronomy guide is far more than a theoretical model for a discussion framework. It provides a practical path for education, and practice. While providing a competency based curriculum design for educational programs in tourism and gastronomy guidance, the gastronomic knowledge, communication and interpretative narratives, experience design and process management, food safety - hygiene and sustainability- ethical dimensions provide a direct source of reference material for creating professional certifications, performance evaluations, and service standards for professional organizations, trade unions, and government agencies. As such, the competency model of the gastronomy guide is also highly relevant to destination management and gastrodiploacy. These professionals are positioned as cultural ambassadors and "silent diplomats" who promote their respective countries through designing safe, sustainable and ethically responsible tour experiences which demonstrate the local cuisine.

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