



Research Article

Dimensions of tourist satisfaction in cooking class experiences: A thematic analysis of online reviews in Cappadocia

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Abstract

Purpose: With the recent surge in interest in gastronomy, cooking classes have become one of the most popular activities for tourists. In this context, the aim of this study is to examine cooking class experiences.

Design/methodology/approach: User-generated content, a frequently used data source in this field, was utilized, and 508 reviews on cooking classes in Cappadocia were analyzed.

Results: The reviews were subjected to thematic analysis, resulting in a 7-dimensional framework, which includes: staff, culinary learning, cultural experience, food, social and emotional experience, physical environment, and functionality and value.

Discussion: Satisfaction with cooking classes is shaped as a result of co-creation, cultural learning, hospitality, and high levels of interaction as well as the food. Theoretical contributions and practical implications are discussed at the end of the study.

Keywords: Cooking Classes, Cappadocia Region, Dining Satisfaction, Dining Experiences

Introduction

While in the past food was viewed more as a basic necessity, today it has become a key factor in attracting tourists and is increasingly seen as effective tool for destinations to differentiate themselves from others (Richards, 2015). When a region's culinary heritage becomes a brand, it boosts tourism, stimulates commercial activity, and becomes an important element of culinary identity and heritage of the local community (Gündüz et al., 2024). For this reason, an increasing number of destinations are using gastronomy as a marketing tool (Fields, 2002).

The demand for gastronomic experiences is increasing which is mainly caused by the desire to experience intangible cultural heritage and to actively involve in food-related activities (Mariani and Bresciani, 2022). One of the trends gaining popularity in the gastronomy field is cooking classes, which offer an opportunity to better understand the culture of the destination being visited and actively participate in the process (Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2024). Today, cooking classes are offered in many popular tourist destinations, particularly in the homes of residents, allowing tourists to participate in small groups and experience the preparation, cooking, and tasting process.

As tourists are increasingly seeking for memorability, gastronomy experiences including tasting local cuisines and interaction with local culture have gained importance (Purnami et al., 2025). It is noted that identifying the motivations behind tourists' preferences for such experiences and the factors shaping their satisfaction is crucial for creating sustainable destinations and fostering tourist loyalty (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). It is also noted that tourism research now focuses on processes of participation, experiential engagement, multisensory interaction, and active involvement attributes of tourist experiences, rather than treating it merely as static and representative (Aksenova, Cai, and Gebbels, 2022). In recent years, there has been an increase in the relevant literature examining the motivational and experiential factors that shape the cooking class experience (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Suntikul et al., 2020; Yiğit, 2022; Yoo, Park, and Cho, 2022; Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2024). However, it is noted that despite the fact that the importance of cooking classes is acknowledged, the research is still scarce and there is still a need for further studies to examine the issue from different aspects (Atsız et al., 2025). Based on that, this study aimed to explore the factors that shape

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satisfaction with cooking class experiences. Different from the existing research, the study area is Cappadocia Region which can provide implications on how cooking class experiences are shaped within different cultural contexts.

Literature Review

Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy is not limited to simply satisfying the need to eat; it is also a key element that reflects a society's identity, the changes it has undergone throughout the history, and the characteristics of the region where it is situated (Gündüz et al., 2024). Gastronomy is a key attraction that sets a destination apart from others, offering a unique experience, particularly for tourists seeking for culinary experiences (Liutikas, 2023). Within the scope of culinary tourism, a wide range of diverse activities can be organized, including food and beverage themed events, gastronomy routes, visits to production and retail facilities, educational and tasting events, food and beverage museums and exhibitions, and these activities provide a range of benefits, including generating revenue for destinations, developing infrastructure, preserving cultural heritage, improving destination image, increasing community participation, and fostering regional development (Liutikas, 2023).

The importance of gastronomy is not limited to the taste of food; it also plays a significant role in terms of sustainability (Gündüz et al., 2024). In particular, the integration of gastronomy into tourism is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of regional cuisine. Dining experiences gained during a vacation shape tourists' habits by encouraging them to become more actively involved in the experience, and by fostering a strong connection with the local cuisine, which can lead to repeat visits (Di-Clemente, Hernández-Mogollón, and Campón-Cerro, 2020) contributing to the economic sustainability by extension.

Experiential Tourism

The emotional, spiritual, psychological, or cognitive outcomes resulting from the various activities in which individuals participate are referred to as experiences (Ma, Gao, and Scottet, 2017). Pine and Gilmore (2013) argue that the value of the products economies fundamentally offer has shifted over time, and that we are currently experiencing the experience economy. In this context, businesses and destinations have recognized the need to offer customers and visitors unforgettable and personalized experiences, rather than simply providing products designed to meet basic needs, in order to gain a competitive edge. With tourism sector's shift toward the experience economy, destinations are offering tourists memorable experiences by providing emotional, entertaining and authentic experiences, thereby creating a competitive advantage (Yiğit, 2022). The experience economy concept has also led to an acceleration in research on experiences within tourism and hospitality (Yoo et al., 2022).

Experiential tourism has its origins in an experience-focused approach to travel and emphasizes enabling tourists to build deep and meaningful connections with local culture, history, and the environment through some structured activities (Martínez de Carnero Calzada, 2025). Today tourists do not just want to sightsee; they also want to learn new things and actively participate in experiences, and one of the most important aspects of this process is that the experience itself is memorable (Yiğit, 2022).

Şahin and Güzel (2020) explored the impact of destinations offering immersive and participatory experiences on tourist emotions and the creation of memorable experiences and concluded that the emotions evoked by experiential destinations encourage the creation of memorable experiences. Di-Clemente et al. (2020) concluded that experiences featuring practical, sensory, and educational content, beyond those based solely on tasting food, enable tourist participation, and that this plays a significant role in making the experience memorable. They further noted that involvement and memorability lead to positive intentions related to destination. It is also noted that there is a strong link between dining experiences and memory, and that these memories influence the destination's image and play a decisive role in shaping future behavior (Stone, Migacz, and Wolf, 2019).

Cooking Classes

Cooking classes are culinary events that cater to tourists' desire to learn and interact, while also encouraging their active participation and enabling them to co-create the experience (Prayag et al., 2020). These classes operate in many formats such as small independent restaurants offering short-term experiences, classes offered in local home settings and cooking classes integrated with accommodation establishments (Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2024). In such experiences, tourists can learn about local culture through local ingredients, traditional techniques, consumption patterns and cultural practices even if it is for a short span of time (Atsız,

Cifci, and Law, 2022). A key feature that sets cooking classes apart from other culinary events is that these classes offer a multisensory and hands-on experience, allowing participants to deeply engage with local culture and traditions through various senses (Aksenova et al., 2022).

This trend presents new opportunities for the tourism sector, as through cooking classes tourists can connect with the culture and traditions of the region they are visiting, which in turn enhances their sense of attachment to the destination and fosters positive feelings, contributing to the sustainability of both tourism and the local cuisine (Bardolet-Puigdollers and Fusté-Forné, 2023). Such experiences make tourists' perceptions of the destination more dynamic, engaging, and memorable; actively participating in the experience and co-creation further strengthens this perception (Aksenova et al., 2022). Furthermore, Agyeiwaah et al. (2019) concluded that diversifying the experiences offered in cooking classes such as visits to farms and marketplaces and interacting with producers and locals increases tourist satisfaction and consequently destination loyalty.

Richards (2015) analyzed the evolution of the relationship between tourism and gastronomy in recent years and noted that it has evolved in three distinct phases. In the first generation, the producers design the experience, and tourists remain in a passive role. Restaurant experiences can be an example of this. In the second generation, co-creation takes place and producers and tourists jointly shape the experience which indicates a more active participation by tourists. In the third generation, the focus is on community- and relationship-based experiences. The tourist experience is a more inclusive process that involves the local community, tourists and producers. Cooking classes are one of the most prominent examples of this generation (Richards, 2015). Tourists are now fully immersed in the experience and the culture. The research in this field has also shifted from rational approaches to more emotional and hedonic aspects of the experience focusing on the concepts of relation and co-creation (Richards, 2021).

The rise in personalized and experience-driven travel indicates that tourists now seek more authentic and unique experiences and wish to engage more closely with local culture (Ahmed, 2025). As they are focused on local cuisines cooking classes offer authentic experiences. To illustrate, the ritual “Baru gongyang” as part of Korean temple cooking class experience enable tourists to dine in total silence gaining the experience an authentic aspect (Yoo et al., 2022).

Sthapit, Piramanayagam, and Björk (2020) state that memorable local food experiences have various dimensions such as flavor, social aspect, novelty, authenticity, atmosphere, affordability, and interaction with local people. In their study examining tourists' motivations for participating in cooking classes, Agyeiwaah et al. (2019) concluded that factors such as engaging in a fun activity, learning new things, getting to know the destination's culture were the primary drivers. Suntikul et al. (2020) concluded that the most influential motivation to participate in the cooking classes are social and utilitarian needs and most important dimensions shaping the experience are entertainment and escape. Similarly, Akyürek (2021) found that tourists had more intense education and entertainment experience and rather less intense aesthetics and escape experience in cooking classes.

Stone et al. (2018) identified five main dimensions of memorable dining experiences as food and beverages offered, atmosphere/location, dining companions, the dining occasion, and novelty/authenticity of the experience. Although research on cooking classes is still scarce, the empirical evidence put forward that the dimensions of cooking class experience are hospitality of the host, value for money, authenticity, social and cultural interaction, memorability and qualifications of the instructor (Bardolet-Puigdollers and Fusté-Forné, 2023). Kokranikal and Carabelli (2024) concluded that the cooking class experience has four dimensions as involvement, hedonism, local culture and knowledge. Atsız et al. (2022) examined reviews on sharing-economy experiences and concluded that food experiences have four main dimensions as knowledge, authenticity, hospitality and social interaction. Conducting research on Korean Temple food cooking classes, Yoo et al. (2022) found that all the four dimensions of experience as aesthetics, entertainment, escapism, and particularly education are closely related to satisfaction. They further noted that the aesthetics of the place is a strong determinant of cooking class satisfaction.

Methods

The aim of this study is to investigate the satisfaction dimensions of cooking class experiences. To this aim, thematic analysis which is one of the qualitative methods was used. With the advancement of technology and introduction of web 2.0, individuals are now able to create content on the online settings (Atabay and Çizel, 2020) which indicate different implications for different stakeholders. From the customers perspective the increase of platforms where real customers could share their experience can impact their decision and behavior as they are significant indicators of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which made text-mining an important data

collection for tourism research (Atabay and Çizel, 2020). Most previous studies on cooking classes have collected their data directly from participants, however, user-generated content (UGC) on social media offers a different perspective for research (Marine-Roig, Lin, and Llonch-Molina, 2025). This study also utilized UGC as research data. A total of 508 comments of visitors who has participated in a cooking class experience in the Cappadocia Region were collected from Airbnb.com between 1-5 April 2026. Airbnb.com was chosen as it is a reliable platform where user reviews are verified. The Cappadocia Region has been one of the most frequently visited areas in Türkiye in recent years, particularly in the context of cultural tourism. In an effort to diversify and enrich the visitor experience, the number of cooking classes has significantly increased in the region recently. It offers an information-rich setting in this regard. For this reason, it has been selected as the research area. To identify only the aspects related to satisfaction with the cooking class experience, reviews rated 4 and 5 stars have been filtered. The platform has provided all the comments in English; therefore, the comments have been compiled directly in English, and no translation has been performed. The data were derived manually. The comments were transferred to a qualitative data analysis program and went through thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a methodology that is used to determine repeating patterns or “themes”, analyze and interpret them in qualitative data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). It enables researchers to form codes, which are the smallest units that represent the data, and themes that are broader patterns and are formed with the combination of codes (Clarke and Braun, 2017). In doing thematic analysis, the phases suggested by Terry et al. (2017) was followed as: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating codes, 3) developing themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) reporting.

One of the deficits of qualitative analysis is that most of the time it requires some manual or human coding which involves some degree of subjectivity (Neuendorf and Kumar, 2015), and it is generally difficult to assess trustworthiness in qualitative research since there are not certain criteria applied (Curtin and Fossey, 2007). However, there are some measures to increase the reliability and validity of the research. First, it is also stated that the “thick description” method can be used to ensure transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). The study included thick descriptions of the processes and methods employed (Curtin and Fossey, 2007). It is also noted that seeking the opinions of an independent researcher during the research process contributes to establishing credibility, and this method is referred to as “peer debriefing” (Ahmed, 2024). In this context, the opinions of a researcher independent of the study were sought throughout the research process, including data collection, coding, and the identification of themes (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to identify the components that contribute to participant satisfaction in cooking classes, and concluded that satisfaction with cooking class experiences is shaped as a result of some dimensions as: food, culinary learning, cultural experience, staff, social and emotional experience, physical environment, and functionality and value factors as Figure 1 illustrates. In particular, the participatory nature of cooking classes, where participants, in the context of gastronomy, are not merely consumers of what is produced but also contribute to the production process; where the process takes place with the participation of both locals and tourists; where tourists strive to adapt to the local way of life; and where cultural and social bonds are formed, serves as an example of a third-generation gastronomic experience (Richards, 2015). The results of the study are discussed in the following section.

Staff

Food experiences are multi-dimensional and include many components that shape the experience besides the food itself (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). For example, Yiğit (2022) found that hosts’ ability to narrate the local culture as well as teaching how to cook specific dishes is one of the highlights of cooking class experiences in İstanbul. The staff, therefore, is one of the factors that shape dining satisfaction. This study also confirms that attributes related to staff such as kindness, responsiveness, competence are influential in determining cooking class satisfaction. Some reviews regarding staff are as follows:

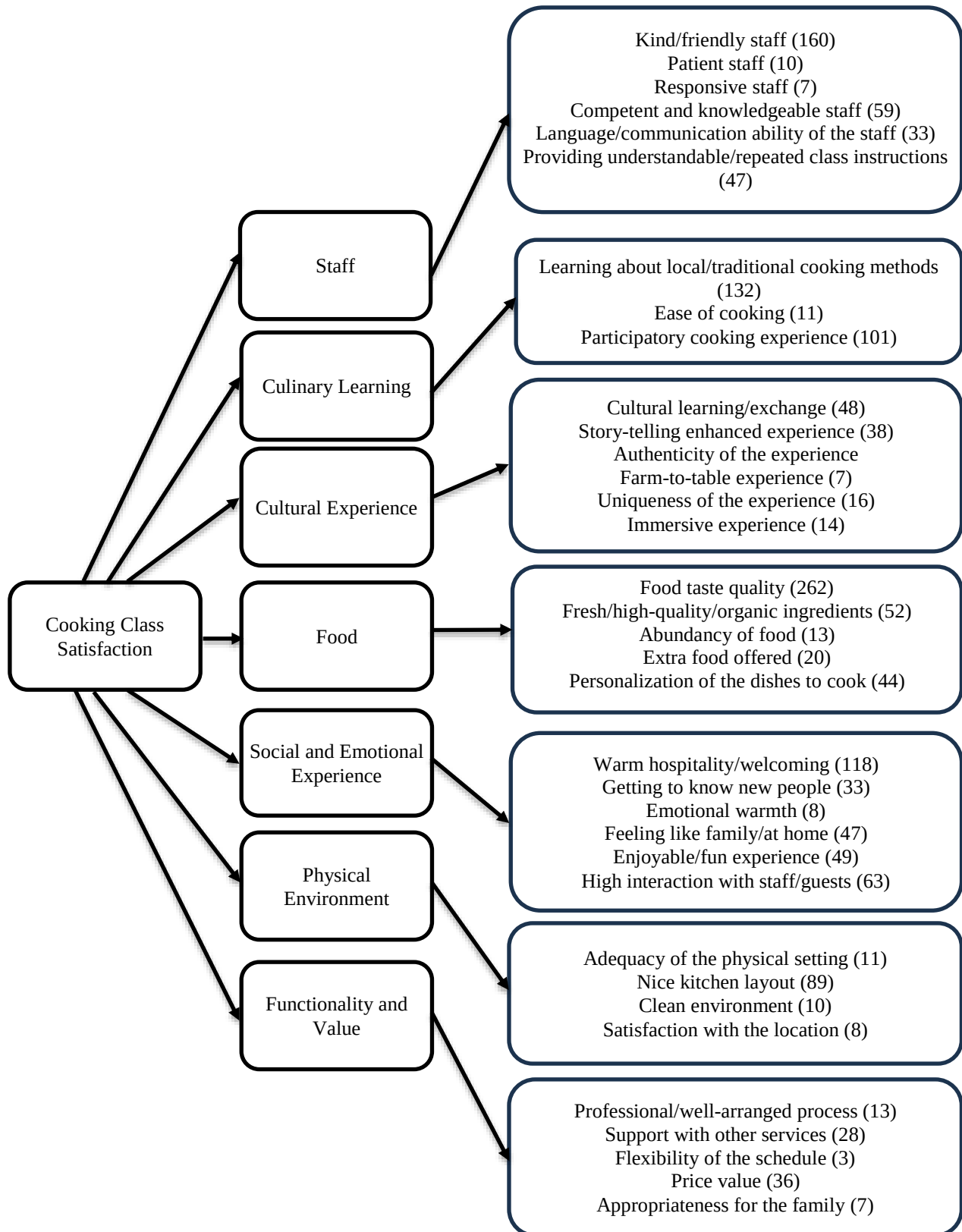
“Hosts are generous and accommodating” (R354)

“The communication was good, they were very responsive to messages and assisted us with transport” (R205)

“The MasterChef was extremely knowledgeable and let us all experience the whole process, and I really enjoyed kneading the dough and making the ravioli” (R124)

“The host and his mother have detailed instructions on the cooking process and we enjoyed the experience and the food” (R403)

Figure 1. Themes and codes shaping cooking class satisfaction



Culinary Learning

It is noted that educational dimension of experiences signifies the process when tourists interact with destination and when they learn about geography, culture and society (Soonsan and Somkai, 2023). As Pine and Gilmore (2013) have also suggested, there has been a shift toward the experience economy, and as a result, today's tourists generally do not want to be merely consumers of a product; they want to be part of the production process. Cooking classes, in this regard, serve as a means to this end and allow tourists to actively participate in shaping their own experience. While the meal consumed functions as a product or service, learning, cultural experiences, and social and emotional experiences can represent the shift toward the experience economy. In a supportive way, this study also found that one of the drivers of satisfaction with cooking classes is their educational aspect. Participants of cooking classes are particularly satisfied with learning about local cuisine and cultural practices. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2022) concluded that all four dimensions of experience, particularly educational dimension, has significant influence on satisfaction. Qian et al. (2023) categorized value co-creation in cooking classes as resources, practices and outcomes. They emphasized the importance of learning dimension stating that cooking classes not only offer the opportunity to learn traditional cuisine and cooking ways, but participants also witness the local culture and have a glimpse of destination identity. Related to this, participants also value involvement in the experience. On this theme, reviewers stated the following:

"We loved learning the cook the dishes the traditional way, and the food was delicious" (R12)

"The class was fun and informative. We got to learn how to make traditional Turkish dishes, meet new people and try out the dishes we made" (R205)

"We prepared 2 dishes which are very traditional to Türkiye and were so simple made with great ingredients from their own farm that turned out like the best of home cooked meals you'll have" (R351)

Cultural Experience

Cooking classes offer a cultural experience through local dishes, ingredients, atmosphere, equipment, and staff (Walter, 2017) and the culture of a destination could be an effective tool for differentiation strategy and gastronomy is an important component of local culture (Yiğit, 2022). The study results also put forward that culture dimension of such experiences is important. Since tourists participating in cooking classes want to be in contact with local people and involve in their daily life, they also seek for authentic experiences in cooking classes (Fan et al., 2017). Cooking classes enable high interaction between tourists and service providers and co-creation functions as a gateway to the authentic cultural experiences (Kokkranikal and Carabelli, 2024). In such experiences, tourists can immerse themselves in a space where they can both experience past and present by getting in touch with a different culture (Walter, 2017). Reviewers also mentioned that they value storytelling accompanied to cooking experiences. On the cultural dimension of cooking class experiences, reviewers stated the following quotes:

"The opportunity to learn about the life of inhabitants of Cappadocia while tasting Turkish cuisine while participating" (R434)

"The host was very knowledgeable and spoke to us in great detail about Turkish culture" (R437)

"It felt like we were being hosted in an actual Turkish home" (R205)

"I had an incredible experience cooking and learning about the stories behind Turkish ingredients" (R33)

"It was a unique experience to be able to cook authentic Turkish dishes with a real Turkish mom and only regional, self-grown organic ingredients" (R417)

Food

Food and tourism are closely related as the food can influence destination choice and contribute to overall satisfaction (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). In line with this, attributes related to gastronomic offerings such as taste quality of food, fresh/organic ingredients, have been frequently mentioned in reviews as positive aspects of the cooking class experiences. Reviewers also frequently expressed their satisfaction with the abundance of the food and food served in addition to the ones they prepared. They stated the following regarding food:

"The dishes we made were both authentic and delicious" (R42)

"Every ingredient used was grown by them or locally sourced and you could taste the difference" (R75)

“You can choose some of the dishes to cook, they are pretty much flexible” (R249)

“We were also able to try their homemade strawberry jam which was really delicious” (R406)

Social and Emotional Experience

Atsız et al. (2025) identified five dimensions of cooking class experience including companionship, socialization, and involvement. Therefore, the social aspect can be of significance particularly in food experiences (Yiğit, 2022). Similarly, Seyitoğlu and Atsız (2024) concluded that the socialization and togetherness dimension is one of the factors that shape the experience, even in online cooking classes. Reviewers noted that this experience offered opportunities to spend time with family and friends, as well as to meet and socialize with new people from the local culture or from different cultures. Reviewers also expressed their delight at the hospitality shown to them and the way the business made them feel like part of the family. They also emphasize the fun/enjoying dimension of the classes they participate. In a similar manner, Kokkranikal and Carabelli (2024) concluded that participants feel excitement about trying something new, and find the process quite enjoyable signifies that these experiences also offer pleasure and enjoyment. The following quotes serve as examples of this.

“It feels like more than just a cooking class because we really felt like we were being welcomed into someone’s home” (R204)

“It was a wonderful experience, and they made us feel like family” (R425)

“I very much recommend this course, it is a great experience to learn about Turkish cooking culture and to get to know other people who cherish delicious food” (R63)

“My parents also had a great deal of fun and we were able to make new friends over our homemade dinner” (R160)

“It was a learning experience with a warm, highly communicative team led by the host’s mum” (R168)

Physical Environment

Aesthetic experience has an important and significant influence on sharing experience (Soonsan and Somkai, 2023). This study also concluded that physical environment/servicescape is an important driver of satisfaction, which is also a dimension of traditional restaurant experiences (Karamustafa and Ülker, 2020). One of the key elements in the design of cooking class environments is to create a space that aligns with the business’s overall purpose, philosophy, and aesthetic vision, and to ensure that visitors perceive these areas as a natural part of the business (Lee et al., 2024). The aesthetics dimension in dining is of importance due to its role in providing a good service and designing a memorable experience (Marković et al., 2021). In this study, reviewers frequently expressed their appreciation with words such as “cosy, comfy, homey, authentic”, as the following quotes also illustrate:

“The location is stunning, warm, and homey!” (R18)

“The class took place in the kitchen/dining area of their cave hotel which was beautiful” (R28)

“His cave house is so nice and the kitchen is beautiful. One big table where you all sit down and help with cooking the food” (R328)

“The place is clean and feels cosy and homey” (R442)

Functionality and Value

In addition, this study identified other factors related to functionality and value, such as effective management of the cooking class process, support for various services (such as transportation), flexibility in the program, providing a service that offers good value for the price, and ensuring a suitable experience for families with children. The following quotes serve as examples of this:

“She even provided thoughtful recommendations for eateries in the area and İstanbul too, for later in our trip” (R1)

“At the end they also helped me get a taxi to go back to my hotel” (R107)

“The price was more than fair for the quality and quantity of food we enjoyed” (R17)

“The pace of the cooking was about right” (R344)

“There was a guy there to translate the process and they were very inclusive of the children, even my 4-year-old who had as much fun as the rest of us making the tiny manti parcels and stuffing the eggplant” (R278)

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Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

Understanding what shapes tourist satisfaction with cooking classes, a gastronomy experience that has been gaining popularity recently, is important as it is crucial for achieving sustainable destination loyalty (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). This study builds on the previous body of knowledge that examined cooking class experience dimensions. To this aim, UGC was utilized and the data was analyzed with thematic analysis. The themes are staff, culinary learning, cultural experience, food, social and emotional experience, physical environment, functionality and value. The model proposes that cooking classes offer an experiential framework that has additional aspects to traditional restaurant experiences.

The hybrid nature of cooking classes offering education, consumption and co-creation is influential in forming satisfaction. The study results reveal the importance of participatory engagement or co-creation in gastronomy experiences. In case of such experiences, tourists go beyond simply seeking food, they desire to immerse themselves in the local culture. Therefore, culturally enriched experiences lead to greater satisfaction. Staff are another factor shaping the experience. The competence of employees in many aspects significantly contributes to participant satisfaction. Related to this is the satisfaction with other participants. Meeting new people from different cultures and high levels of interaction with both participants and employees emerged as important dimensions of the experience. Unlike other studies, the reviews also highlighted attributes such as effective management of the process, support with other services, price value, and an appropriate setting for the children.

Practical Implications

The results can yield some implications for practice for different stakeholders. As staff qualifications are important, it can be recommended to hire competent employees in terms of cooking skills and language abilities. Reviewers indicated in their comments that they value active participation, therefore, the staff can increase satisfaction by going beyond demonstrations and actively involving participants in all stages of the process. To achieve this, providing detailed explanations and outlining all steps make participants feel like a part of the experience. Besides, keeping the number of participants low can increase interaction among individuals, which may contribute to greater satisfaction. Incorporating local dishes, allowing participants to customize their dishes, for example, by offering dietary options, and using high-quality ingredients can also influence participant satisfaction. Lastly, local residents, local settings can be incorporated to such experiences to ensure authenticity.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is subject to all the limitations inherent in qualitative research. First, it relies on UGC only, which cannot be further detailed. Besides, the opinions of non-reviewing participants remain excluded. Second, in qualitative research, the coding and theme development are mostly subjective, therefore, interpretations may change with different researchers. Third, as the data comprises reviews on one destination, the results may not apply to other cultures. Fourth, the online reviews for one service provider were used. Future research can expand the literature in this area by overcoming these limitations.

Ethics Statement: This study was based on the analysis of publicly available online reviews and did not involve the direct participation of human or animal subjects or the collection of data through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethics committee approval was not required for this study.

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