

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN ECUADOR: A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR TOURISM DIVERSIFICATION AND COMPETITIVENESS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourist satisfaction with their trips is increasingly influenced by the quality of their gastronomic experiences. In this context, the relevance of gastronomy in a destination can range from fundamental aspects, such as the basic need for food, to its consideration as an opportunity to delve deeper into the ancestral traditions, history and socio-cultural interactions of that place (Basil & Basil, 2009; López-Guzmán *et al.*, 2017).

Likewise, gastronomy plays a crucial role as an economic driver in various destinations, especially in developing countries (Mgonje *et al.*, 2016). From this perspective, gastronomic tourism can contribute significantly to the revitalization of certain regions, allowing the added value generated by local products to remain within the areas where they are produced. Based on this premise, various studies have addressed the relationship between gastronomy and tourism from three main perspectives: first, the consumer perspective; second, the providers' perspective; and third, the analysis of the socio-economic impacts that this link generates in destinations (Anderson *et al.*, 2017).

2. OBJECTIVE

This research focuses on the motivations associated with gastronomic tourism, specifically the consumption of local products in Ecuador. The objectives of this research are twofold: first, to analyze the different motivational dimensions of tourists interested in Ecuadorian gastronomy; and second, to identify the existence of possible differences based on the socio-demographic profile of tourists. These objectives seek to provide public administrations and private managers with specific recommendations to better satisfy different visitor segments.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is quantitative in nature. To this end, a questionnaire was designed based on previous studies and research. The questionnaire was structured in two main blocks. The first block included questions aimed at analysing the motivation to travel, aspects related to gastronomy during travel, the perceived quality of the culinary experience, and the willingness to visit certain gastronomic destinations. It also included questions to measure variables such as perceived value, motivations and gastronomic experiences, satisfaction and loyalty. The second section focused on collecting sociodemographic information from respondents, such as age, gender, educational level and monthly disposable household income.

The first block of questions was presented using a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 7 being “strongly agree.” The second block of questions was either categorical (gender, educational level, and disposable household income) or open-ended (age).

The fieldwork for this research consisted of administering the questionnaire to a representative sample of both domestic and international tourists interested in gastronomy in Ecuador. The fieldwork was carried out through an online survey, between November 2023 and March 2024. A total of 258 questionnaires were obtained, of which 249 were valid.

The SPSS Statistics v28.0 statistical package was used to process the data. This task was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, the reliability of the data and the normality of its distribution were confirmed to determine whether parametric or non-parametric tests would be used. In the second phase, statistical analyses were performed, including an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) on the different groups of items related to motivation. An analysis was also conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the different sociodemographic profile traits for each dimension of motivation.

4. RESULTS

Sociodemographic profile of the tourists surveyed

The sociodemographic profile of the sample surveyed consists mainly of young women who have completed university studies and whose income level reaches up to \$1,500 per month.

Initial exploration of the data

A first approximation of the descriptive statistical results indicates that motivation for experience, socialization and expanding knowledge about gastronomy in the tourism context is high. This assessment is supported by the consistency of the responses, as the medians of 6 points reflect that at least half of the responses are in the highest scores on the scale.

Determination of components

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.921, well above the limit of 0.6. Bartlett's sphericity test yielded a Chi-square value of 2,526.649, with 91 degrees of freedom and a significance level of less than 0.05. When performing the extraction and rotation in the EFA, three main factors were obtained, which explained 72.453% of the cumulative explained variance.

Motivation Factor 1, which was termed "experience", encompasses items related to escapism, relaxation, enjoyment, experiencing the moment, and changes in the perception of the passage of time during gastronomic tourism. This factor explains 26.47% of the total variance.

Motivation Factor 2, which was labeled "socialization", encompasses items related to conversation before, during and after the experience, both with close acquaintances and strangers, as well as contact with local producers. This factor explains 23.69% of the total variance.

Motivation Factor 3, which was designated "knowledge," encompasses aspects related to intellectual growth through exploring the cuisine of other regions, as well as discovering new flavours to broaden one's culinary horizons. This factor explains 22.29% of the total variance.

Differences by sociodemographic profile

The show that there are no statistically significant differences in terms of gender, education or income when it comes to an interest in gastronomy while travelling. However, the results do show statistically significant differences in terms of age for the factor labeled as 'socialization'. This implies that motivation based on socialisation related to gastronomic experiences while travelling is becoming less important among the younger generations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the relationship between gastronomy and tourism is essential for the development and consolidation of tourist destinations. In this regard, it is necessary to understand the different motivations and perceptions that travellers have when they visit a destination and want to experience its gastronomy. In turn, it is important to analyse these tourists according to their sociodemographic profile in order to better understand the importance of gastronomy and to optimize the management of businesses dedicated to it.

This research concludes that the motivations of tourists interested in gastronomy in Ecuador are highly oriented towards the gastronomic experience, socialisation and expanding their knowledge of local cuisine. In addition, differences were found in the dimension of socialization, favoring older gastronomic tourists compared to younger ones.

The main practical contribution of this research lies in deepening the relationship between gastronomy and the sociodemographic profile of tourists in Ecuador, with the aim of designing tourism and culinary products that more effectively meet their needs, while at the same time ensuring the sustainable management of local gastronomy. Consequently, it would be necessary to strengthen and promote local gastronomy as a tool for competitiveness in each tourist destination, both through innovation in the most typical dishes and in the culinary offering in general.

The main limitation of this research is the time period in which the fieldwork was carried out. As a future line of research, we propose to analyse the existing gastronomic offerings across Ecuador's tourist destinations.