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Promoting Traditional Cuisine as a Cultural Tourism Product: A Local Community's Involvement Approach

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Abstract

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The potential of a destination to offer distinct local foods influences its image and brand, which in turn results in attracting tourists. In addition, it can be considered a tool to promote a given destination. From a sustainable perspective, culinary tourism provides local communities with a range of opportunities for growth in economic, sociocultural, and even ecological dimensions. Local community involvement is essential in any process involving the promotion of local tourism products; therefore, the importance of local community participation is emphasized in this study. To this end, the current study aims to determine how a community can be involved in promoting cuisine as a cultural tourism product. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research applied interviews as a tool to gather the required data. The city of Rasht in Iran was designated as the study area. The study population was specialists and academics in tourism marketing, officials in tourism-related institutions responsible for local tourism development, chefs, and locals working in the local cuisine sector. A content analysis was performed, leading to the extraction of nine main themes, including community-led creative promotional efforts, continuity and preservation of the position by local people, empowering the local community, sustainable development of food tourism emphasizing community involvement, the government's support and providing the required infrastructure, building and maintaining the brand, advertising effort, supply and sale, and research and development.

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Introduction

Gastronomy has recently become an integral element in recognizing a region's culture and lifestyle. As Királ'ová and Hamarneh (2017) argued, "the interest of visitors in food tourism is growing together with interest in culture, traditions, emotions, experiences and creativity" (p. 18). Food tourism at destinations continues to attract a large number of tourists, with eight out of ten tourists being impressed by culinary-related attractions when selecting a destination. Nowadays, gastronomy accounts for 40% of the world's tourism expenditure (Europa Press, 2019; as cited in Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020). Hall et al. (2003, p. 10) defined food (including beverages) tourism as "visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specific locations for which food tasting or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel"; however, "various terms are interchangeably used to refer to food tourism, including culinary tourism, gourmet tourism, and gastronomic tourism" (Ellis et al., 2018; Horng & Tsai, 2010; as cited in Okumus, 2020).

Regarding culinary tourism, the subject of the present study, Choe and Kim (2018) define it as "a food-motivated travel in which the consumption of cuisine is the main motivation" (Wondirad et al., 2021). According to the WFTA (2019) definition, culinary tourism "is the act of traveling for a taste of a place in order to get a sense of place" (WFTA, 2019). The potential of a destination to offer distinct local foods influences its image and brand resulting in attracting tourists. In addition, it can be considered a tool to promote the destination. From a sustainable perspective, culinary tourism provides local communities with a range of opportunities for growth in economic, sociocultural, and even ecological dimensions. The involvement of locals is essential in any effort to promote local tourism products. Consequently, the local community's involvement has been emphasized in the present study. Only locals are considered experts in preparing traditional cuisine, indicating the necessity of their involvement.

On the other hand, traditional cuisine made by local stockholders will be promoted to a larger market, leading to an increase in international tourists. This eventually leads to employment opportunities, income generation, and, in a sense, economic development and social welfare. Furthermore, according to Urry (1990), promoting culinary tourism is effective in attracting tourists' eyes because of its ability to create a strong relationship between product and destination, which is critical for marketing the combination of the two (del Pilar Leal Londoño, 2015).

Iran has a unique position in terms of gastronomy and culinary tourism due to its status as a cultural tourism destination and the existence of diverse subcultures and geographical regions that have led to the development of diverse lifestyles. Given the above, the current study seeks to answer the following question: how can a community promote cuisine as a cultural tourism product? Even though numerous cities and villages in Iran have the potential to attract food tourists, the city of Rasht was selected as the

case study for this study. Rasht is a northern city in Iran located near the Caspian Sea and the center of Gilan province. This historical city has been registered in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network (UCCN) for its intriguing gastronomy. In the following sections, the study examines relevant literature by focusing on theoretical concepts and previous research. The study's methodology is discussed before presenting the findings. Finally, a summary of the findings, their implications and limitations, and recommendations for future research are provided.

Literature review

Food tourism

All activities that use food as a means of connection between people, places, and time can be interpreted as food tourism. Food tourism is deemed an early stimulus for travelers when selecting tourist destinations (Andersson et al., 2017; Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). Concerning the preliminary research, various concepts have been applied interchangeably to indicate the relationship between food and tourism. Culinary tourism is referenced in North American literature, food tourism in Australia and New Zealand, and gastronomy tourism in Europe (Rachão et al., 2019). Culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism, and gourmet tourism are some of the terms used to describe food-based tourism. According to Hall et al. (2003), this classification is primarily based on a tourist's level of food-related interest while traveling. Gourmet tourism, gastronomy tourism, and culinary tourism, for example, are high-interest food tourism archetypes commonly used when the main motivation for traveling is to visit restaurants, wineries, or markets.

In fact, the European Commission was the first to attempt to assess the role of food in geographic patterns, stating that food, gastronomy, and territory are interconnected and emphasizing the importance of developing regional strategies to promote sustainable food tourism (Wondirad et al., 2021). WFTA (2020) categorizes food tourism's historical evolution into three phases. During the first phase, which lasted from 2000 to 2011, food tourism was defined as a distinctive and memorable food and drink experience. In the second phase, food tourism began to rise in tandem with the primary tourism promotional campaigns on digital and traditional media (2012-2018). In the third stage (2018-present), tourism began to be recognized as a composite sector encompassing a wide range of experiences ranging from food and beverage consumption to cookery training courses, cooking schools, and farm visits.

An exchange of culture occurs through food sharing; therefore, learning about a region's cuisine can provide a wealth of information about its culture and way of life. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) stated that local cultures could be absorbed through food/gastronomy and wine tourism because they have become one of tourism's most active and creative aspects (UNWTO, 2017; as cited in Rachão et al., 2019, p. 34). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have linked gastronomy to the creative industries due to the unique relationship between food and culture (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; as cited in Rachão et al., 2019). Per the themes and trends adopted by researchers in previous studies on food tourism, Okumus (2020) conducted a critical review and identified several closely related and overlapping items, including offering unique food and beverage experiences, authenticity, culture and food, destination marketing through food tourism, segmentation of food tourists (foodies), molecular gastronomy and tourism and food tourism and sustainability.

Food tourism and sustainability

According to Tsai and Wang (2017), previous research on food tourism has focused on its significance as an emergent business. Hall and Gössling (2018) observed that food tourism stimulates both the food and agriculture industries. However, Rinaldi (2017) took a broader approach, referring to food tourism as a means of achieving sustainable destination development. Previous studies have rarely adopted a holistic view when addressing food tourism (Okumus, 2020). From an economic standpoint, Bessiere et al. (2013) highlight the potential role of tourism in a destination's change process, both in terms of the trajectories involved in promoting food heritage – by influencing local stakeholders' adaptation strategies – and in terms of tourist demand, by upending current food norms and models. According to Wondirad et al. (2021), several tourism-related studies are conducted in the context of Amhara National Regional State, including studies on tourism development opportunities (Endalkachew et al., 2018), ecotourism development (Sefrin, 2012), the role of community empowerment for sustainable tourism development (Alubele, 2011), and visitor management and sustainable destination management (Kebete & Wondirad, 2019).

As per the resource-based theory, possessing strategic resources offers a company a significant opportunity to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors. (e.g., Barney & Clark, 2007). Mathouraparsad and Maurin (2017) asserted that culinary tourism encourages visitors to stay longer in a destination, and the multiplier effect of increased host-guest transactions is highly advantageous to destinations. Culinary tourism also opens up new opportunities for locations by improving their image and broadening their scope of attractions (López-Guzmán et al., 2011; Suntikul, 2019; as cited in Wondirad et al., 2021). According to Lee et al. (2015), culinary tourism offers several benefits for tourist destinations, such as promoting rural development because it is integrative and less affected by seasonal issues, providing excellent marketing and destination branding opportunities, aiding in the preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage, and providing excellent marketing and destination branding opportunities (Wondirad et al., 2021).

Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez (2008) asserted that it is essential to emphasize the connection between culinary tourism and local and regional development, especially in geographically disadvantaged areas with limited product diversification; however, local development should not be viewed solely in terms of its economic impact. This must be evaluated from a cultural, social, and even ecological standpoint. These considerations can be applied to cuisine if the cuisine is understood to be the study of the relationship between culture and nutrition (see Boniface, 2003; Espeteix, 2007; Petrini, 2007; Scarpato, 2002) rather than simply one of a destination's various economic activities (del Pilar Leal Londoño, 2015).

Slow food tourism (SFT) is a pathway to contribute to locally based agricultural and food practices for sustainable development, food security, social sustainability, and community well-being in the context of a global, technological, and rapidly changing world. Through co-creating the sociability, pleasure, and sharing of bioregional meals in varied ethnic and cultural contexts with local producers, SFT visitors are active participants in ecological, cultural, and heritage conservation (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020). Moreover, several authors (Bessière, 1998; Hall et al., 2003; Hjalager & Richards, 2002) have emphasized culinary ties as a component of local tourist development because food and cuisine serve as a crossroads for production, processing, storage, transportation, cooking, and preparation (Antonioli Corigliano, 2002; as cited in del Pilar Leal Londoño, 2015). As per slow food tourism theory, the underlying concept of culinary tourism is closely intertwined with slow tourism principles via slow food. Slow food, in contrast to fast-paced dining, emphasizes the consumption of regional cuisines and the promotion of sustainability principles in the food production and distribution system (Adeyinka-Oji & Khoo-Lattimore, 2013; Tommy et al., 2017; as cited in Wondirad et al., 2021).

Food Tourism and promotional strategy

Local cuisines are viewed as a significant source of competitive distinction for a location since they serve as a vital cultural expression when other characteristics, such as climate, buildings, and shopping centers, are fundamentally generic (Hjalanger & Richards, 2002). Food tourism marketing research focuses on the image of a destination's food as a unique culinary asset and a building block in promoting tourism to that destination (Boyne & Hall, 2004). Furthermore, according to the UNWTO (2016, p. 15), "88.2 percent of destinations regard cuisine as a strategic aspect in shaping their image and brand." The growing number of existing publications that examine food tourism from a marketing perspective confirms this trend (Rachão et al., 2019). The critical success factors for a food tourism destination, as described by Hiamey et al. (2020), are; perceptions of a destination's local food, intrapersonal factors (individual characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and personality traits), and basic food safety and sanitation protocols.

According to a literature review, numerous tourist locations have attempted to serve food and beverages as the primary destination product to meet the growing demand of tourists (Wondirad et al., 2021). Consequently, numerous case study-based gastronomy and food tourism studies have been conducted. Because the present study emphasizes the potential of the culinary market for local communities, as well as marketing and promotional issues, it focuses on case studies that are relevant to the same field. For example, using a marketing mix strategy, Vakil Alroaia et al. (2019) identified and ranked contributory factors to culinary tourism development in Iran's Khorasan Razavi Province. The findings revealed that among the four marketing mix strategies, price-related factors ranked first, and in terms of sub-criteria related to study dimensions, matching prices to product quality and branding of local food products were respectively identified as the top factors influencing culinary tourism development.

In another research, adopting an image perspective, Rousta and Jamshidi (2020) studied the effect of tourists' local food consumption value on their future behaviors by focusing on their destination food image and their attitudes toward local food. They observed that taste/quality value, health value, price value, emotional value, and prestige value positively affected tourist attitudes toward local food. Considering the demand side and focusing on culinary tourism's customer experience, Kaushal and Yadav (2020) found that customization is the key to a positive customer experience. Therefore, it seems that a successful promotional strategy for the culinary market must consider customization. Before selection, a growing number of food customers conduct extensive research and exert considerable effort (Organ et al., 2015). The destination website and social media can provide important information on local food items, such as their superiority, the advantages of purchasing directly from their producers, and the significance and history of the products, among others.

Due to its multiplicity, intangibility, and dependency on the graphic display of tourism commodities, tourism is deemed more effective for marketing on the web in general (Morgan et al., 2003). The Internet's unique characteristics, such as user-friendliness, affordability, global accessibility, and wealth of information, make it the ideal communication channel for online travelers and destination marketing companies. According to Tso and Law (2005), prospective tourists can quickly assess the perceived value of various destinations and tourism offerings via the Internet (Heung, 2003). Moreover, the content of government tourist websites is essential in developing culinary tourism and shaping the destination's culinary image (Horng & Tsai, 2010).

Food tourism and local community involvement

Despite the growing body of literature, knowledge gaps have been identified, as Nunkoo and Gursoy (2012, p. 243) pointed out that most studies on local residents' support for tourism have been

conducted “in the developed world.” Furthermore, Gursoy (2010, p. 381) agrees that gaining an understanding of residents’ attitudes “is vital for the success and sustainability of any type of tourism development.” Indeed, the sustainability of tourism development can be significantly influenced by the involvement of the local community.

In this context, attitudes or support of local residents or stakeholders toward tourism has been highlighted by various researchers (e.g., Andereck et al., 2005; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). According to research conducted in Indonesia by Telfer (1995), culinary tourism provides the possibility to earn additional income by expanding into the broader agrotourism value chain and offering market opportunities for completed agricultural products. Culinary tourism also supports innovation and stimulates local businesses to generate new tourism offerings (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Suntikul, 2019; as cited in Wondirad et al., 2021).

Methodology

As the present study was an exploratory one in nature, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to conduct the research. Required data were gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Initial codes were extracted after reviewing the transcripts of the interviews. After reaching saturation with coding and recoding all data sources, relevant themes were extracted using the final codes. The sample was selected using a purposive method and the snowball sampling method, and 12 participants were selected based on theoretical saturation. Interviewees were active in the cuisine, food tourism, and tourism marketing, emphasizing those living in the city of Rasht.

Regarding the validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the research, it can be argued that there was an acceptable level of validity because a sample of experts in the relevant fields was interviewed, and the same interviewer conducted all interviews. On the other hand, regarding the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the research, owing to the detailed description of the research process, it can also be argued that the reliability of the research has been largely considered. The sample profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The interviewees' profile

| Code | Gender | Job | Specialty | Education | Experience (years) | Native and Non-native |
|------|--------|---|-------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Female | Consultant for the preparation of tourism plans | Tourism Marketing | Master's | 10 | Non-native |
| 2 | Female | Consultant for the preparation of tourism plans | Urban planning | Master's | 6 | Non-native |
| 3 | Female | Food and beverage service provider | Food and cooking | Master's | 4 | Native |
| 4 | Male | Tour leader | Tourism Marketing | Master's | 17 | Native |
| 5 | Female | Food and beverage service provider | Food and cooking | Bachelor's | 20 | Native |
| 6 | Female | Food and beverage service provider | Food and cooking | Bachelor's | 10 | Native |
| 7 | Male | Tourism marketer | Tourism Marketing | Master's | 15 | Non-native |
| 8 | Male | Food and beverage service provider | Food and cooking | Bachelor's | 8 | Native |
| 9 | Male | Employee of a tourism Institute | Tourism | Master's | 10 | Native |
| 10 | Male | Tour leader | Tourism Marketing | Master's | 12 | Non-native |
| 11 | Male | Tourism marketer | Tourism Marketing | Ph.D. | 15 | Native |
| 12 | Female | Food and beverage service provider | Tourism | Master's | 5 | Native |

Findings

During the coding process, 45 initial codes were identified. After recoding the data, 24 final codes were extracted, allowing for the identification of nine themes. Relevant codes and themes are explained in detail in the sections that follow.

Community-led creative promotional efforts

Concerning the research findings, community-led creative promotional efforts were identified as one of the main themes based on four extracted codes. These codes included: hosting a food festival, participating in international exhibitions, hosting familiarization tours, and training and involving tourists by locals:

“Hosting food festivals and food tourism is effective in attracting tourists. Because the good food they eat at the destination can leave a positive and memorable impression on their mind” (1). “Each city should have local festivals that tourists can visit after arriving and see all the cuisine potential of the area in one place and get to know it” (5). “Without foreign tourists to take pictures and promote our

foods, we have to try to keep up with global markets. International exhibitions are good places to introduce our traditional foods” (6). “Tourism events and cooking workshops participation” (7). “Hosting local native food festivals in parks, museum’s courtyards, and historic streets” (12).

The government’s support and providing the required infrastructure

Another theme identified by extracted codes was the government’s support and providing required infrastructures based on the codes of communication and ties with other tourism sectors, using the capabilities of women, supporting entrepreneurs and investors, and supporting the private sector in funding marketing and advertising.

“Traditional Iranian foods can be introduced to food tourists with the help of tourism officials, activities, and the provision of necessary facilities” (5). “... investment packages should be considered for individuals interested in acting in this field” (11). “To grow this industry and make use of Rasht’s unique food culture, it is important to use the experience and abilities of the natives of each region, especially the native women” (1). “Utilizing the experience and capabilities of the natives of each region, especially the native women, is very important and influential in the growth of this industry and the use of unique capabilities of Rasht food culture.” (1).

Building and maintaining the local brand

Building and maintaining the brand was the main theme identified regarding four codes extracted from interviews. The first code was a variety of plant-based foods for vegetarians. The second code refers to the slow food aspect of traditional dishes:

“Our traditional foods are very organic and play an important role in people’s health so that we can introduce our traditional foods to the world in the form of festivals” (1). “When we talk about fast foods and other kinds of foods, there is an area known as slow food. Interestingly, foods served in Rasht mostly fall under the category of slow food. Since industrial foods are designed to be cooked as quickly as possible, our travelers normally have no experience cooking these foods. As a result, they usually welcome the opportunity to learn how to cook slow foods. Even cooking events were organized for them in the cities of Shiraz and Isfahan. Also, tourists participated in cooking new dishes in mountain climbing. Travelers were intrigued by the homogeneity of the raw materials and inquired as to why raw materials were mixed in such a manner. They were curious about why we mix these ingredients and asked questions such as why do you cook Qormeh-Sabzi¹ with these vegetables? Or will it taste the same if we substitute the vegetables? Cooking these foods arouse their curiosity and inspires their enthusiasm for the experience of cooking back home” (4).

¹ *Ghormeh-sabzi* is a delicious Persian beef and kidney bean stew loaded with greens and fresh herbs such as spinach, cilantro, fenugreek, and parsley.

Emphasis on the quality of raw materials was the third code extracted from the interviews:

“Rasht is well-known for its raw materials. Because of Rasht’s climate and soil fertility, many of its dishes are famous among vegetarians. This initiative of the northerners is well-known, and I have had the pleasure of eating northern cuisine in my travels many times” (4). “Emphasis on primary local ingredients that are distinctive” (11).

Finally, the fourth code refers to *maintaining the brand*. In this regard, some of the interviewees emphasized the organic aspect of the Rasht traditional foods, and others referred to the necessity of supplying these foods in *supermarkets across the country, as well as the necessity of maintaining the quality*:

“Iran’s traditional foods can be branded in the world as a festival since they are mostly organic and can have a significant impact on people’s health” (1). “Branding and its promotion through the food industry will bring some of Rasht’s native foods into the supermarket industry, which will make customers interested in tasting the same food in Rasht city with traditional recipes” (10). “Quality and brand maintenance remain unchanged” (12).

Advertising effort

Advertising effort was another theme based on two codes, including using the capacity of the film and cinema industry and using the capacity of virtual networks.

“Due to the expansion of virtual networks and their availability, these different networks can be used for familiarizing people with various products, including foods and restaurants, and other applications related to food production. For introducing Rasht’s traditional foods, creating virtual channels, web pages, virtual pages on platforms such as Instagram and others can be very helpful” (1). “In particular, when it comes to Rasht, media, in my opinion, plays an important role in introducing the area’s local food. Imagine a person with two million likes and fans making very simple dishes and receiving much attention online. Therefore, this type of presentation is very good for introducing that type of food and also promoting its cooking” (4). “It is similar to many Turkish dishes we see in movies and want to try. If our films are shown at international film festivals, people worldwide will be encouraged to try our traditional foods” (6). “The use of cyberspace influencers and influential people. Those with a large following” (7). “We need to connect to sites and platforms related to tourism. Tourists often show interest in these sites mainly because of their good reputation and reliability” (11). “For example, signing a contract with radio and television and preparing educational and cultural programs, documentaries and comedy in the field of tourism, especially traditional foods” (8).

Continuity and preservation of the position by local people

Three codes, including the continuation of cooking traditional foods by locals, maintaining the position in menus of restaurants and food centers, and continuation of cultivation of and producing raw

materials, led to identifying a theme under the title of continuity and preservation of the position by local people.

“Our traditional foods are very organic” (1). “In Rasht, raw materials are extremely important” (4). “Locals should treat them to traditional food as much as they can promote it in their restaurants or even in their homes when they receive guests. They can participate in local festivals. They should cook traditional unique foods that are not available in other places, and offer them to tourists” (6). “offering local dishes of Rasht (for example, roasted cheese) in a special way and emphasizing its native nature in the menus of all restaurants and cafes” (10).

Supply and Sale

Another theme was supply and sale based on two extracted codes: Providing semi-prepared foods to the market and establishing local food service centers in the city.

“To facilitate participation in international exhibitions and introduce our traditional dishes. Alternatively, even prepare our products at the international level. Semi-prepared foods that we can export, which is important to introduce to others” (6). “Cooking local food and selling it in the main and important markets of the city can also have a significant impact on its introduction” (2). “There should be a street as a food street like in many destinations where all kinds of traditional foods are prepared and offered. All kinds of sweets and food should be prepared, especially in the city’s center where people commute” (3). “In every city, there should be programs in the form of local festivals that tourists can visit after coming to the city and see all the potentials of that area in one place” (5). “We can even have a permanent local food tasting exhibition in Rasht, and restaurants as booths” (7). “In the same way, if possible, on certain days of the week, the tourism marketing companies in other regions can provide the local dishes of Rasht in the form of finger foods for tasting. In this case, people in their own city can experience the good taste of the local dishes of Gilan and become eager to travel to Gilan” (9).

Research and Development

Two codes extracted from *benchmarking* and *market research* led to identifying *research and development* as the third theme.

“Giving special offers to tourists, discounts and incentives” (7). “Creating free virtual and real tours to promote and familiarize the public with scenic areas and local foods of the region” (8). “Imitating successful countries in the field of tourism and food promotion, such as France, Spain, Turkey, and others; for example, Italy is known all over the world for its food” (10). “Encouraging families to use local foods as a value

in society so that these foods remain for generations and do not lose their popularity” (10).

Empowering the local community

According to the initial codes of empowering the local community and emphasis on the empowerment of women, the main theme of empowering the local community was defined.

“Using the experiences and capabilities of the natives of each region, especially the native women, is very important and has a great impact on the growth of this industry and the utilization of the unique capabilities of Iran’s food culture” (1).

Sustainable development of food tourism emphasizing community involvement

Based on attention to the principles of sustainable development and community involvement as the two extracted codes, the main theme of sustainable development of food tourism emphasizing community involvement was identified.

“Development of eco-lodges, eco-friendly accommodations, and appropriate advertising to introduce local foods” (1). “Improving the well-being and economic development of local communities and diversifying the country’s tourist attractions with an emphasis on the available food diversity” (1). “The villages surrounding Rasht are particularly skilled at baking all types of Halwa², which is prepared with local vegetables of the province. Using these opportunities would greatly help our city” (3).

Table 2 outlines the main themes and the related initial and final codes.

² A type of confectionery originating from Persia and widely spread throughout the Middle East.

Table 2. The main themes and related codes

| Theme | Code | Initial Codes | Frequency |
|--|--|--|-----------|
| Community-led creative promotional efforts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding a food festival • Participating in an international exhibition • Holding familiarization tours • Training and involving tourists by locals | Holding a food festival | 3 |
| | | Holding physical tours for domestic and foreign tourists | 3 |
| | | Holding virtual tours | 4 |
| | | Involvement of tourists in cooking traditional foods | 5 |
| | | Cooking courses for local dishes | 4 |
| | | Holding permanent exhibitions of food testing | 4 |
| | | Participating in food tourism events and cooking workshops | 6 |
| The government's support and providing the required infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and ties with other tourism sectors • Using the capabilities of women • Supporting entrepreneurs and investors • Supporting the private sector in funding marketing and advertising | Development of eco-lodges | 3 |
| | | Communication and ties with other tourism sectors | 5 |
| | | using the capabilities of women | 5 |
| | | Supporting entrepreneurs and investors | 4 |
| | | Supporting the private sector in funding marketing and advertising | 3 |
| Building and maintaining the local brand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of plant-based foods for vegetarians • Emphasis on the slow food aspect of traditional dishes • Emphasis on the quality of raw materials • Maintaining the brand | Traditional food branding | 4 |
| | | A variety of plant-based foods for vegetarians | 8 |
| | | Making a distinction | 8 |
| | | Emphasis on the slow food aspect of traditional dishes | 4 |
| | | Emphasis on the quality of raw materials | 5 |
| | | Maintaining the quality | 4 |
| | | Maintaining the brand | 3 |
| Advertising effort | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the capacity of the film and cinema industry • Using the capacity of virtual networks | National media | 2 |
| | | Preparation of TV documentary | 2 |
| | | Advertising in TV series | 2 |
| | | Using the capacity of virtual networks | 6 |
| | | To create a website to introduce regional cuisine | 3 |
| | | Using influencers in cyberspace | 5 |
| | | Connecting with tourism platforms and websites | 2 |
| Continuity and preservation of the position by local people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuation of cooking traditional foods by locals • Maintaining the position in menus of restaurants and food centers • Continuation of cultivation of and producing the raw | Providing guests with traditional foods by local people | 3 |
| | | Serving traditional foods by their traditional names in restaurants and food centers | 3 |
| | | Encouraging families to cook local foods | 3 |
| | | Cultivation of raw materials | 2 |
| Supply and Sale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing semi-prepared foods to the market • Establishing local food service centers in the city | Providing semi-prepared foods in supermarkets | 2 |
| | | Export of traditional semi-prepared foods | 2 |
| | | Establishing food streets in the City of Rasht | 4 |
| | | Establishing local markets | 3 |
| | | Establishing local food stations in the city | 3 |

| Theme | Code | Initial Codes | Frequency |
|---|--|---|-----------|
| Research and Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarking • Market research | Following up on successful destinations in the field of food promotion | 2 |
| | | Market research | 3 |
| | | Identifying market trends | 2 |
| | | Identifying customers | 2 |
| Empowering the local community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering the local community | Emphasis on the empowerment of women | 6 |
| | | Empowering the local community | 6 |
| Sustainable development of food tourism emphasizing community involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to the principles of sustainable development | Attention to the principles of sustainable development in the development of food tourism | 3 |
| | | Participation of the local community in any food tourism plan | 9 |
| | | The local community benefits from the job opportunities | 8 |
| | | Equitable distribution of income from food tourism among the host community | 5 |

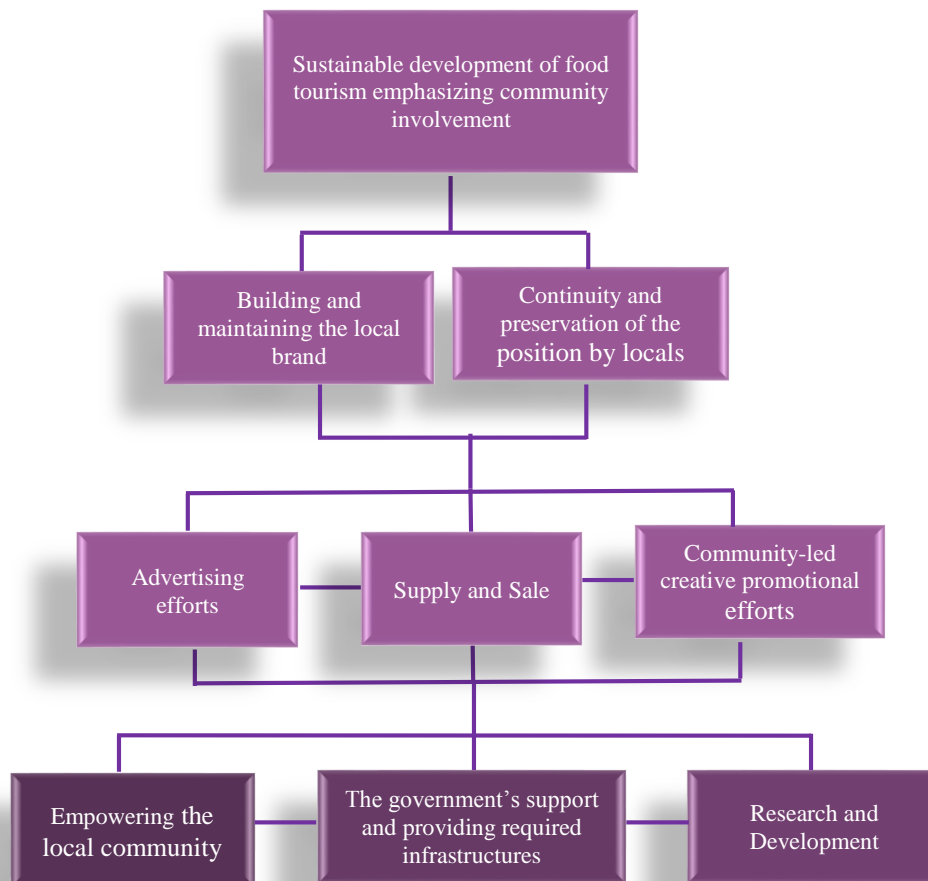


Figure 1. A thematic map of the main themes

Conclusion and Discussion

The current research aimed to study the involvement of the local community in promoting local foods as a tourism product. There are numerous cities and regions with high potential for food tourism around the globe today. They have a diverse range of unique foods due to the special weather conditions and the region's history and cultural characteristics. On the other hand, food tourism is increasingly growing. Food has always been one of the main reasons for leisure trips and significantly impacts tourists' overall experience in other types of tourism.

Today, the participation of the local community is necessary for all aspects of tourism development. To pay attention to the social, cultural, and environmental considerations related to the local community is necessary to achieve sustainable development in the field of food tourism. On the other hand, food is not separate from food providers and hosts. Therefore, food providers and indigenous people play a significant role in this industry. Consequently, any advertising and promotion will not be effective without considering these people and their participation. The research results indicated that creative promotional efforts with the local community's participation could effectively introduce local foods. This effort would involve tourists cooking and serving food in a way that creates a unique and unforgettable experience for them. In addition, organizing familiarization tours can help introduce local foods as tourism products. Because in the study area, there is a variety of plant-based foods that can be important for vegetarians, and because people today, especially in cities, are extremely busy, tourists are interested in experiencing slow food while traveling. Each region, therefore, can assign a brand in this field. Emphasizing the quality of raw materials can also be effective in strengthening this brand.

On the other hand, using the film and cinema industry and the capacity of social networks can be effective in advertising and promoting this tourism product. Today, several TV series and movies consciously and purposefully promote the cultural aspects of a specific region, including food, clothing, attractions, and culture in general. Since these films and series have a wide range of their own audience, they can be effective in introducing local foods. Furthermore, virtual networks, especially popular platforms, can be a suitable platform for promoting local foods. For example, today, many activists in the field of cooking use this capacity to teach, promote and sell local foods through platforms such as Instagram.

Another important issue is the continuation of cooking local food by the local community. The cultivation of raw materials used in preparing these foods and the continuity of cooking is important. On the one hand, due to the migration of people from the villages to the cities and leaving the farming profession, there should be incentives for the new generations to continue cultivating these agricultural products to supply the ingredients of local foods. On the other hand, it is important to continue cooking

these foods. Efforts should be made to preserve this cultural heritage, beginning with the service of locals and extending to the service of guests and the inclusion of local foods on restaurant menus.

Empowering the local community, especially women, has a significant contribution to the continuation and promotion of this sector. One of the fields where women have expert views is food; therefore, empowering them to reveal and apply their traditional art can effectively improve the quality of life of this group, as well as the revival and continuation of local foods. From a supply and sale aspect, emphasis was placed on preparing and selling semi-prepared foods and presenting them in supermarkets or exporting them abroad, allocating special places and streets to sell and offer local foods in the city, and creating food stations for tourists to taste local foods. On the other hand, considering sustainable development principles, including the participation of the local community in projects related to food tourism and established businesses, the fair distribution of income and benefits, the empowerment of the local community, and the preservation of the environment, can contribute to the development of sustainable food tourism in these communities.

What is important here is the government's role in supporting and creating the necessary infrastructure for developing this part of the tourism industry. In this regard, establishing ties with other tourism sectors, supporting entrepreneurs and investors, and especially supporting the private sector to invest in the marketing and promotion of local foods are among the government's actions to realize the development of food tourism. Focusing on the supply side and ignoring tourists is the limitation of the current study. Therefore, one recommendation for researchers would be to consider the demand side of food tourism in future studies.

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