

How To Make an Urban Destination Attractive for Visitors: Evidence from Istanbul

By

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Abstract

The efforts to diversify and extend the tourism season to 12 months continue unabated with new approaches and strategies. This issue is of greater importance for countries where tourism is pivotal to the growth of the economy. One approach to achieve this is through urban tourism and its popularity is increasing rapidly. Although tourism has a significant impact on the Turkish economy, the country is widely known for sea-sand-sun tourism. However, research on how this can be transformed into urban tourism especially from the perspective of cuisines is still needed. This current study focuses on the narratives of tourists visiting Istanbul, Turkey's mega-city as well as an important urban destination. A qualitative research approach is adopted and a document analysis technique is employed in the study. Tripadvisor user entries, commonly used in scientific research, are used as a data source. Data analyses are performed following a three-step analysis procedure with the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. The analysis covers a total of 450 entries. The results of the present study introduce a series of key projections for the scientific literature, practitioners, and administrators.

Keywords: Urban Tourism Destination, Tourist Narratives, Online reviews, TripAdvisor, Istanbul

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation and recent growth of tourism in urban environments have led to a significant increase in demand for urban tourism, and global tourism trends such as increased mobility, a growing middle class, and more affordable transport and accommodation alternatives have stimulated urban tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2018). Currently, urban tourism is an increasingly popular research topic in mass tourism regions where tourism is the core of the economy and in metropolitan areas where tourism is one or more of many development pathways (Brouder and Ioannides, 2014). Despite being an extremely important form of tourism worldwide, urban tourism has received little attention from both tourism practitioners and tourism scholars in the past (Ashworth and Page, 2011). Considering the research conducted, it appears that the focus is generally on urban tourism as a whole or the historical and cultural context of urban tourism; specifically bridges, museums, winter sports and heritage sites (Gao, et al., 2023; Do, et al., 2023; Bichler & Pikkemaat, 2021; Bazuń, & Kwiatkowski, 2020; Brida, Meleddu & Pulina, 2012). However, the role of cuisine in the context of urban tourism is one of the subjects that researchers have not emphasised sufficiently.

Research suggests that the comments and recommendations of individuals who have visited the destination in the past are useful in making a destination attractive for visitors (Aydin, et al., 2020). In addition, it is widely acknowledged that cuisine is a powerful driver of tourist mobility (Aydin, et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). In this respect, this current study unveils the attractiveness of cuisine in the context of urban tourism based on the culinary narratives of tourists visiting Istanbul, one of the leading urban tourism destinations in Turkey. Serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe, Istanbul attracts millions of tourists every year with its long historical past, numerous monuments, historical buildings and unique cultural values. Being a significant value in terms of urban tourism, Istanbul has the appearance of a small Turkey due to the presence of immigrants from all over the country. As cuisine is known to be an influential underpinning criterion in shaping visitors' intentions, the current study focuses on the narratives of tourists with experience with Turkish cuisine in Istanbul, where almost every taste of Turkish cuisine is accessible. In order to examine how urban tourism attracts visitors, online narratives, the leading form of user-generated content that enables tourists to share their experiences in restaurants, were employed. The study indicated that when consumers share their dining experiences, they focus primarily on service, staff, traditional Turkish cuisine and the place quality. The results suggest that these attributes are key to achieving customer satisfaction and encourage recommendation to others and revisit. In this

context, the current study contains a series of remarkable implications for the urban tourism literature, practitioners and decision-makers.

Literature Review

Urban Tourism Attractiveness

Urban tourism and related studies focusing on urban tourist destinations are of increasing interest to practitioners, researchers and policymakers as they seek to understand the phenomenon of tourism within the urban environment (Edwards, Griffin and Hayllar, 2008). However, defining urban tourism as a vague concept that ambiguously blends various activities is essential for any attempt to elaborate the mechanisms governing this activity (Gârbea, 2013). Given the studies conducted over the past four decades, the scope of the concept has not been defined and there is no widely accepted conceptualisation of the phenomenon. In research on urban tourism literature, the approaches of researchers to the subject also make it difficult to provide a specific definition of the notion. Although it is not a new activity, the concept is not clearly defined, and researchers consider it as an economic activity, a multifaceted social phenomenon, and short-term visits to highly populated urban areas (Romero-García, et al., 2019). Urban tourism, which is recognised as an increasingly significant tourism activity on a global scale, fails to identify the elements that constitute a leading attraction for tourists (Brida, Meleddu and Pulina, 2012) and to provide a clear definition of its boundaries, which is related to the variety in the approach of researchers to the subject and its multifaceted nature. Having unique historical, cultural and geographical values of each destination poses a great difficulty in determining these elements and drawing the boundaries of the urban tourism phenomenon. Nevertheless, Vandermeij (1984) proposed a sector-based overview of the elements that characterise urban tourism in the context of outdoor recreation and parks, events and attractions, business and convention, hospitality, accommodation, transport and travel services. Since these sector-based elements cover a wide range, they require to be discussed in depth and each element should be analysed separately.

Urban tourism attractiveness is used to cover all kinds of points of interest that lead tourists from their permanent residence to a destination (Law, 1993). In this context, various factors are considered within the scope of urban tourism attractiveness. These include historical sites (Nasser, 2003), geographical location (Pearce, 2015), climate and weather (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015), urban sports (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021), marketing (Heeley, 2015), activities offered (Crouch, 2011). It is seen that urban tourism, whose primary target group in the past was day-trips,

sightseeing tours, daily excursionists who tended to spend time shopping for entertainment (Jansen-Verbeke, 1988), has been recognised as having a greater potential over time. Nowadays, urban tourism is used as an important means of extending tourism mobility to twelve months and as an important way of providing diversity in tourism.

Law (1993) delineates the primary pull factors in urban destinations through categorizing the components determining a city's attractiveness for visitors into three key elements: primary, secondary, and Conditional. Primary elements are a) cultural facilities (theatre, concert, movies, galleries), b) entertainment facilities (casino, luna park bingo), craftworks, exhibitions, events and festivities, c) physical setting, (historical pattern, monuments, art objects, parks, waterfronts), d) socio-cultural characteristics (liveliness of the place language, local customs, folklore, way of life). Secondary elements, which also support the primary elements, are catering facilities, shopping facilities and markets. Finally, conditional elements are accessibility, parking facilities touristic infrastructure (information bureau, signposts, guides). Secondary elements that support these main elements also promote urban tourism and provide visitors with facilities such as shops, congress areas, accommodation and transportation (Boivin and Tanguay, 2019). Among urban tourism attractions, local/regional foods and beverages are considered as the main attractive factors, while tasting new foods is considered among the push factors in the context of information/education (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021). Regarding the research conducted in this context, the low number of gastronomy-oriented studies focusing on the taste of the city is noteworthy. As in the example given above, in these studies, gastronomy is considered as a latent variable rather than an observed variable. Exploring and savoring destination foods and beverages in an international setting creates a distinctive and memorable culinary experience, potentially fostering a desire among tourists to revisit and highlighting the efficacy of destination food as a novel marketing tool (Okumuş, 2007).

Table 1. Studies on urban tourism attractiveness

Author (year)	Target	Cities	Insights
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Boivin & Tanguay (2019)	Overall city	Québec City and Bordeaux	Public space, urban environment, internet and social, media, urban public areas,
Brida, Meleddu & Pulina (2012)	Archaeology Museum	Bolzano	South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, Improving knowledge
Gao, et al. (2023)	World Heritage Site	China	Inscriptions, protected sites, national holidays
Florido-Benítez, (2023)	Destination marketing organisations' tourism official websites	Around the world	Representative bridges iconic element
Bazuń, & Kwiatkowski (2020)	Bridges	Pragu	Charles Bridge
Keshavarz & Raeisi (2022)	Overall city	Yazd	Monuments and historical sites, public spaces, public parks and gardens, public service, tourism information, museums and galleries, festivals and events, conferences and exhibitions
Do, et al. (2023)	Overall city	Ho Chi Minh	Architectural and Built Environment, Natural, Folklore, Civilization, Sense of Place, Services etc.
Bichler and Pikkemaat (2021)	Urban winter sport	Innsbruck	exciting, knowledge, relaxation, achievement and family; basic assets, urban assets, natural scenery, social events, economic aspects and winter sports activities

Source: Table created by the authors

Urban tourism affects a large number of residents and a wide range of businesses, as well as labor flows, and therefore it is critical to understand the dynamic nature of development pathways (Brouder and Ioannides, 2014). Cuisine, the taste of the city, is one of them. Recent research has focussed heavily on entertainment, sports, shopping and other urban lifestyles in the context of urban tourism although it is clear that studies focusing on urban tourism attractions give little attention to the taste of the city, i.e. food and beverages (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021). From this point of view, this study focuses on the reviews of the cuisine experiences of tourists who have visited Istanbul, which is recognised as an important urban tourism destination worldwide.

Research Method

It is widely recognised that cuisine is a powerful motivator for touristic mobility, and it is emphasised that destination-related reviews and recommendations of visitor experiences provide an influential tool to enhance the attractiveness of a destination (Aydin, et al., 2020; Aydin, et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). This current study is based on the online reviews of visitors to Turkey's megacity, Istanbul, which consist of post-visit culinary experience narratives.

The research data were retrieved from Tripadvisor, a leading online travel and tourism website. The site appears as a laboratory for social science researchers in providing data for different destinations and different experiences in different languages by different users at different times (Burkov and Gorgadze, 2023; Nowacki, et al., 2023; Arslan, 2023; Toker 2019). Accordingly, a total of 450 user reviews until 20.11.2023 to restaurant X¹, which ranked first with the highest rating for Istanbul on Tripadvisor, constituted the data of the study. The data were analysed by following the document analysis procedures. Document analysis in qualitative research includes texts in newspapers or other mass media, files, protocols, institutional documents and web pages (Arslan, 2023; Morgan 2022; Toker, 2022; Mayring 2014; Punch 2009). The coding procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1967) were adopted during the data analysis process (Figure 1).

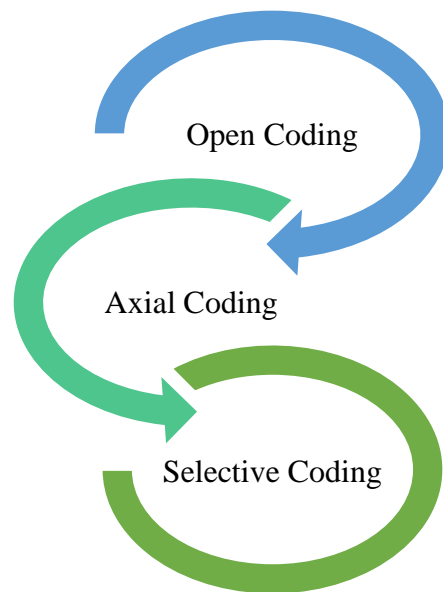


Figure 1. Data analysis process

¹ X is a name given by the authors.

In order to ensure validity and reliability or trustworthiness, Guba and Guba and Lincoln's criteria of audit trail, negative case analysis, thick description and peer debriefing strategies were used (Arslan, 2022).

Findings

Research findings indicate that visitors' dining experiences consist of four main categories, namely service quality, staff, place quality and traditional Turkish cuisine, and seventeen sub-categories related to these categories. The findings also revealed three categories related to these categories: satisfaction, recommendation to others and intention to revisit (Figure 2). It is evident that the last three categories appear as a result of the previous categories.

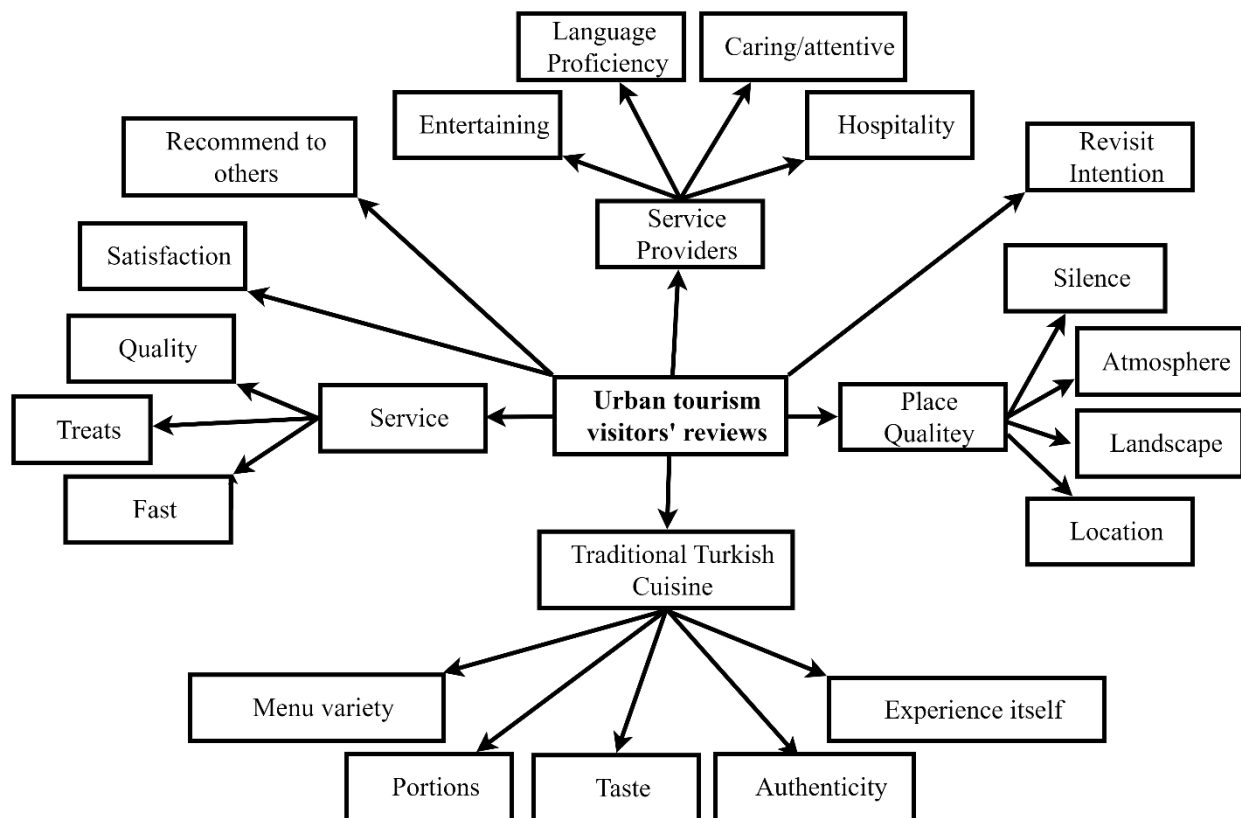


Figure 2. Urban tourism visitors' online reviews

Traditional Turkish Cuisine

Traditional cuisines are broadly known to increase satisfaction and accordingly form the intention to revisit (Aydin, et al., 2021). Research findings reveal that visitors' restaurant evaluations focus on traditional Turkish cuisine in general and in particular on appetisers, kebabs, desserts, salads,

traditional treats foods and beverages. In addition to the taste of testi kebab, which is one of the kebabs, its traditional presentation was among the factors that attracted the attention of the visitors. Visitors also referred to the ratio of sugars and fats in their food and beverages. Regarding the local food, E40 stated "We had Turkish food for the first time and it was a great experience" while E44 said "Good food. You should try the Testi in flames". Authenticity of traditional cuisine was another category that visitors emphasised particularly in their reviews. The kebabs, which are commonly recognised with the Ottoman cuisine, cooked in a pot and served in the pot with a flame show, were appreciated by the visitors. Regarding the authenticity of the traditional dishes, E43 expresses his/her appreciation as "I would definitely recommend the Beef Testi, which wraps the meat in porcelain and served with a fire show!" and E34 stated "We had a dinner of authentic Turkish cuisine, it was great".

Those visitors tasting traditional Turkish cuisine emphasise that they had one of the best experiences in Istanbul due to the restaurant's authentic food, quality service and cultural experience. The category of the experience itself, which consists of the visitors' reviews, includes the following remarks: "It was a great Turkish cuisine experience" (E119). Another visitor stated the following phrases: "Sensational! Great experience, great food!" (E135). In addition to the variety of meat, fish, salads, desserts, appetisers and desserts, the restaurant also serves traditional Turkish dishes and offers different alternatives for vegetarians, including traditional kebab, which attracted the attention of visitors and formed one of the emphasised categories. E106 reviews "everything was excellent! I don't even have words to describe how good my vegetarian kebab was."; E196 described the variety of the menu as "We like the restaurant because it offers both fish and meat options"; E144 added "the wide variety of food and drinks was great". Visitors assessed the taste based on the freshness and cooking quality of food. Adana kebab, Urfa kebab, shish kebab and fish varieties are among the most emphasised traditional Turkish dishes in the taste category, while the appetizers (hummus, tzatziki, aubergines salad, etc.) served with the meals are thought to increase the taste. Traditional Turkish desserts (baklava, Turkish delight, etc.) served at the end of the meals give a different perception of taste. Among the beverages, traditional drinks such as Turkish coffee, Ayran, and turnip juice are highly appreciated by the visitors. E11 expressed his thoughts on traditional Turkish cuisine by sharing "We came here with our tour guide and ordered many traditional appetisers and dinner and it was great!"; E60 shared "The meat was marinated perfectly and had a balanced taste that you would love". Visitor entries demonstrate that they think

there should be a balance between the money they pay and the service they receive. In this regard, E222 posted "the portions were definitely worth the money paid"; similarly, E236 said "the food was much more than I expected".

Service

Restaurant services serve a pivotal role in fulfilling tourists' expectations of destination food (Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán, 2012), visitor reviews also confirm this is so. In the context of the service category, visitors emphasise the qualifications of the service, conceptualised as quality. It is understood that particularly the attitudes of the staff, fast and effective service delivery make the visitors' visits to the restaurant pleasant and therefore make them feel privileged. Visitors describe the quality service provided to them as "the best service during our daily stay" (E1) or "We had a great time for lunch! Good fresh food. Very good service" (E33). Another point emphasised in this category is pre-meal snacks, post-meal desserts, fruit or hot drinks, which are conceptualised as treats and are commonly offered in Turkey and are not reflected in the bill. Research findings reveal that visitors are impressed by the various flavours offered free of charge by the restaurant, such as baklava, tea, Turkish coffee, appetisers, Turkish delight, desserts and apple tea, etc. Visitors expressed the treats offered to them with expressions such as "they gave us free desserts and tea which was a pleasant surprise" (E4) and "I really liked the free baklava and tea" (E35). Another important topic emphasised by the visitors was the speed of the service. In this context, consumers appreciated the fast ordering and fast service and the fast preparation of the meals in their assessments. E8 expressed the fast service as "our orders were prepared in perfect timing and served in a short time". The interaction between the customer and the service provider is argued to have a significant impact on how customers assess the service quality of a restaurant (Jang and Namkung, 2009). The research indicated that the most emphasised issues by the visitors while evaluating the restaurant in the context of staff were being fun, caring/attentive attitude, proficient in languages, and hospitable approach. In general, visitors emphasised that the employees who directly engaged with them were active, attentive, careful, polite, hospitable, professional and excellent service providers. One of the visitors, E3, explained how the service provider provided them with a fun time by sharing, "the waiter was also very nice, he was teaching us new Turkish words and joking with us". Since Istanbul receives a large number of international visitors, the staff in the businesses should be able to speak a language to meet visitors' needs or at

least English. Visitors expressed their appreciation for the language proficiency of the service providers with the following statements: "It is easy to communicate and they speak several languages" (E4). Similar repeated comments of visitors emphasise the importance of friendly welcome. One of the visitors, E10, shared the following about the friendliness of the service providers: "The employees were very friendly, they always had a smile on their faces". Hospitality is prominent in the entries regarding the staff. The hospitality of the staff working in the restaurants and particularly the hospitality of the hosts is appreciated. In addition to the food, the recommendations and warm greetings of the hosts also attracted the interest of the visitors and were appreciated. E7 noted, "We loved the warm welcome from the hosts who recommended their most popular dishes", while E5 said, "The service staff and the manager were really exceptional and made us feel very welcome". In the caring/attentive category, the visitors indicated how active, attentive, professional and wonderful the staff were to them during the service they received. In this regard, E16 stated, "the staff were very caring, everyone was very attentive to us, they have a marvellous staff".

Place Quality

Compared to other tourism activities, urban tourism is carried out in a relatively shorter period of time, a few days or even less than 24 hours. For tourists whose primary purpose is urban tourism attractions, the distance of basic needs such as dining may be important in respect to these attractions. In relation to the sub-category of location, E227 stated "We were looking for a place to eat on our way to the next attraction in Sultanahmet" and E28 stated "[...] it is in a very central location, only a few minutes away from Hagia Sophia and the Bazaar".

Another issue emphasised by the visitors in the context of place quality is whether the place is suitable for the family. In this sub-category, which is conceptualised as family-friendly, visitors who dined at the restaurant with their family and friends mostly mentioned that the amenities offered at the restaurant met their, their family members' and friends' expectations. In this sense, children's menu and tolerance of service providers towards families with children generated comfort and confidence among the visitors. One of the visitors, E131, expressed "we came here together with my whole family, there was also a menu for children, the staff was very attentive, we had a calm and nice time". The Scenery adds additional value to the core attractions of a destination (Thornton, et al., 2016). The research findings also indicate that scenery adds additional value to

visitor dining experiences. One of the most frequently emphasised issues in visitor evaluations focuses on the restaurant's unique view of Istanbul's historical and cultural values, which are among the main urban tourism attractions in the city. E131 describes this issue as "We came for lunch, the terrace was perfect, the view of the Bosphorus and the mosques were beyond marvellous"; E127 says "The view of the Bosphorus and Hagia Sophia looks great".

It has been long known that atmosphere is an important quality criterion affecting service buyers (Kotler, 1973). The atmosphere is one of the categories that visitors frequently emphasise in their dining assessments. The thoughts about the atmosphere were expressed with sentences including the concepts of freshness, ambiance, warmth, decoration, environment, pleasant, cute, cosy, traditional, authentic, and nostalgia. E123, one of the visitors, stated "A beautiful interior with photographs about old Istanbul and Turkey :)" and in a similar way, E129 used the expression "Nice place, nice environment, nicely decorated, the ambiance was marvellous" concerning the atmosphere.

Being noisy does not mean that a restaurant is very bad, and being quiet is excellent, but it is likely to improve the quality of the visitor experience (Spence, 2014). One of the issues emphasised by the visitors who visited Istanbul and evaluated their dining experience was silence. E401, one of the visitors, makes the following statements regarding the silence of the restaurant. "This place is very cosy and not very noisy, it is a cosy place on a quiet street, it has a nice quiet terrace [...]"

Conclusions

Cuisine is widely recognised as a powerful motivational agent for tourist mobility (Aydin, et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). In this study, it is attempted to determine cuisine, an integral part of urban tourism, can attract visitors. This study aims to determine the ways cuisine, an integral part of urban tourism, may enable a destination to be attractive to visitors. It is suggested that the insights of past visitors may provide useful input to increase the attractiveness of a destination (Aydin, et al., 2020). Therefore, in line with this purpose, the current research aims to unveil the narratives of the cuisine experiences of tourists who have visited Istanbul, one of the world's leading urban tourism destinations. For this purpose, Tripadvisor data, which is frequently used in the literature and enables online users to access reviews of users on various topics including cuisine, was used to identify the themes that visitors focused in their post-cuisine experiences (Figure X).

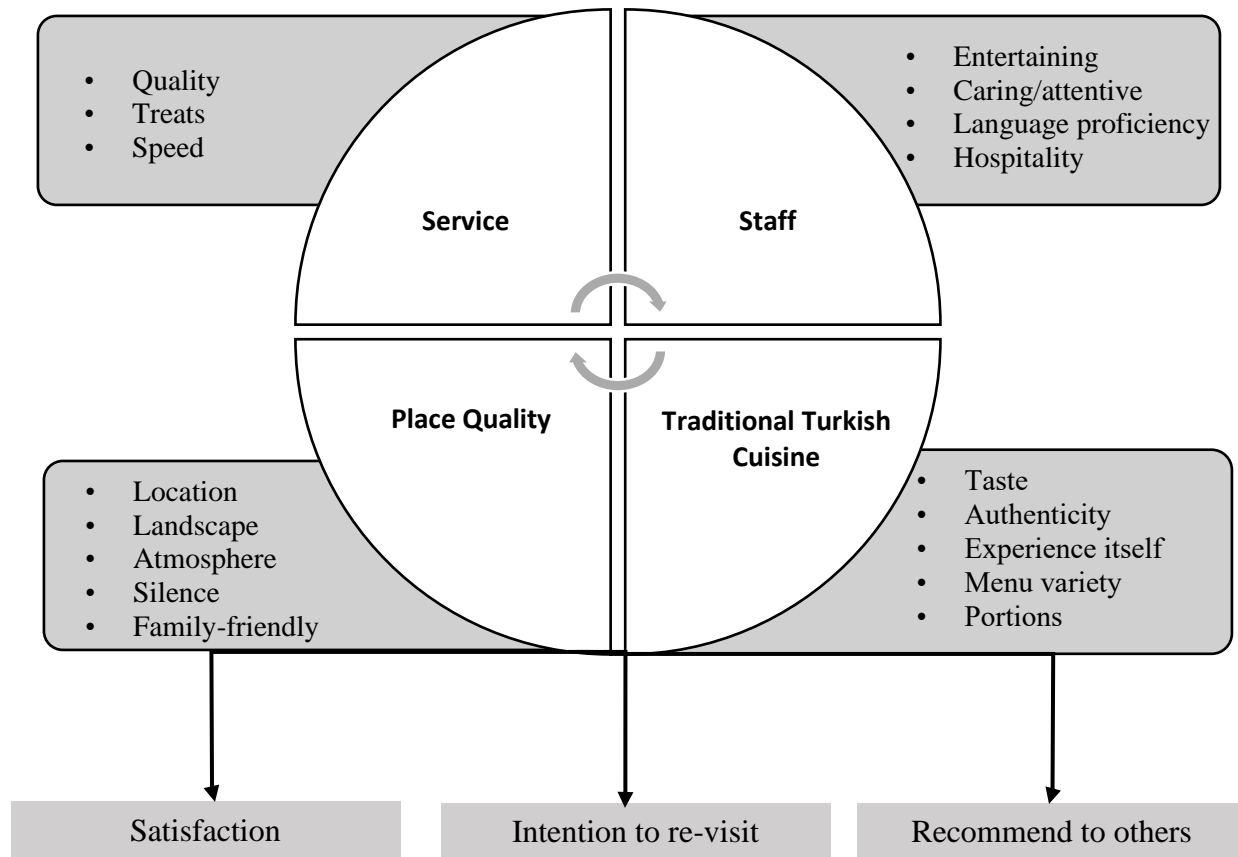


Figure 3. Cuisine experience of urban tourism visitors

As shown in the figure above (Figure 3), the results of the research indicated that there are seven key themes that urban tourism restaurant visitors focus on in their post-cuisine experiences. These themes, which are interconnected and influence each other, include: "traditional Turkish cuisine", "place quality", "service", "staff", "satisfaction", "intention to re-visit" and "recommendation to others". The results also indicated that a favourable fulfilment of the first four themes for visitors was highly likely to result with the last three themes.

Discussion

As described in the previous sections of the study, seven main categories emerged from the online evaluations of urban tourists. These categories revealed that traditional cuisine is of great importance for urban tourism visitors. When referring to traditional cuisine, visitors frequently emphasised locality, authenticity, the experience itself, taste and variety. The results of the current research show that, just as in gastronomy tourism (Cheng, 2023), the desire to tasting what is

traditional in the destinations visited is also prominent for urban tourists. Cheng (2023) emphasises in his study that traditional cuisine attracts tourists because it gives them a series of clues about cultural codes.

In tourism sector, service quality is an important component of quality management (Jang & Ha, 2014). In this context, service was emphasised as a quality criterion for urban tourism visitors. According to them, service quality was determined to consist hospitality, speed and service. Although service quality is an important component of the dining experience, it is by itself not a criterion that can affect the experience (Johns and Pine, 2002). Rather than the fast delivery of the bill to the table after the dining (Becker and Murrmann, 1999), it has been revealed that the fast delivery of orders and the treats before and after the dining are positively affected the visitors.

The quality of the restaurant experience varies between different sales point and dining environments (Johns and Pine, 2002). This can be associated with place quality, which is one of the important conclusions reached in the current study. It is known that the physical quality of the place is one of the issues that visitors are interested in when purchasing services (Jun, et al., 2022). In connection with this, the current research indicated that visitors are interested in the location, scenery, atmosphere, silence and family-friendliness of the place in the context of place quality. It is understood that the current results are similar to other research results in the literature. Urban tourism visitors frequently emphasise the value of dining in an accessible and silent place with a picturesque scenery, in line with these remarks, Quan, Al-Ansi and Han (2021), state that a beautiful environment can stimulate visitors' positive emotions; while crowded areas can mobilise their negative emotions.

Liu and Tse (2018) determined in their research that physical and service environments have an impact on consumers' dining experiences, in addition atmosphere has a strong impact on consumers' emotions, behaviours and attitudes. In view of the above findings, Kotler (1973) draws attention to the fact in some cases the place where the product is sold may be more important than the product, and in some cases the atmosphere may be the product itself. The author underlines that businesses do not give enough attention to the atmosphere.

Research emphasises that staff play a role in the positive outcome of dining experiences for consumers (Johns and Pine, 2002). In some cases, even if the service or place quality is low, it can be argued that employees may save the day. In urban tourism visitor experiences, it is understood

that it is of great importance that staff can communicate with visitors in their own language, provide pleasant moments, and be relevant and hospitable to them. Wu and Gao (2019) confirmed that in addition to the physical environment, service, products and interpersonal interactions affect visitors.

Within the scope of the research, it was understood that satisfaction, recommendation to others and revisit intention emerged as a natural consequence of fulfilling the above criteria appropriately. It is observed that the phrases used by the urban tourism visitors just before expressing their thoughts regarding all three elements cover the fulfilment of the expectations of the traditional cuisine, place quality, service or staff. It has been confirmed in various studies in the gastronomy literature that if these expectations, which generally include restaurant characteristics, are met appropriately, visitors will be positive towards the restaurant and the intention to revisit will be formed in this respect (Jang & Ha, 2014; Thornton, et al., 2016; Liu & Tse, 2018; Jun, et al., 2022). It is understood that almost all the main themes are related to each other, but there is a cause-effect relation between the first four themes and the last three themes.

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