Culinary Experiences and Visitor Satisfaction: Evaluating The Role of Local Cuisine In Varanasi's Tourism Landscape

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Culinary tourism, visitor satisfaction, local food, Varanasi, tourism experience	This study examined the influence of local food experiences on visitor satisfaction in Varanasi. It explored key factors such as taste, authenticity, hygiene, and food presentation, assessing their impact on tourists' overall perception of the destination. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 396 visitors, including both domestic and international tourists. Statistical analysis, including linear regression, was applied to determine the relationship between culinary experiences and satisfaction levels. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation, indicating that enhanced food experiences led to greater visitor satisfaction. The study rejected the null hypothesis, confirming the substantial role of local cuisine in shaping tourism experiences. Demographic analysis provided insights into visitor profiles, highlighting the diverse appeal of Varanasi's culinary heritage. The study underscored the importance of improving food quality, hygiene, and authenticity to strengthen Varanasi's position as a culinary tourism hub. Practical implications were discussed for local vendors, restaurants, and policymakers to enhance the gastronomic appeal of the city. The research emphasized the need for sustainable culinary tourism strategies to enrich visitor engagement and ensure long-term tourism growth in Varanasi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cuisine has evolved over 5,000 years, shaped by diverse cultural influences and regional traditions, and has gained global recognition for its rich flavors, unique ingredients, and distinctive cooking techniques (Kumar & Bakshi, 2021). As culinary tourism continues to emerge as a significant facet of the travel experience, food has become a pivotal element in shaping tourists' perceptions and satisfaction. The role of local cuisine in enhancing destination appeal has been widely acknowledged, with studies demonstrating that food attributes such as taste, variety, value for money, and visual appeal significantly influence tourist experiences (Mak et al., 2012; Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Kumar & Bakshi, 2021). The relationship between cuisine and tourism extends beyond mere consumption, as the sensory and cultural dimensions of food contribute to a destination's attractiveness. Research has highlighted that tourists' perceptions of Indian cuisine improve after experiencing it, reinforcing the role of gastronomy in shaping travel satisfaction (Kumar & Bakshi, 2021). However, concerns regarding service speed and convenience have been noted, necessitating improvements in food accessibility and efficiency. Further research has emphasized that attributes such as fast service, portion size, and affordability contribute significantly to overall tourist contentment, with the aroma, taste, and flavor of traditional dishes enhancing the gastronomic

experience (Kumar & Bakshi, 2023). The promotion of culinary events has been recommended to mitigate neophobia among foreign tourists, fostering greater appreciation for India's diverse food culture. Studies on culinary tourism within India's Golden Triangle Circuit underscore the importance of food image in enhancing a destination's appeal. Key factors such as authenticity, cultural representation, and diversity have been identified as primary contributors to the tourist experience, with health and nutrition emerging as critical considerations (Mehta et al., 2024). Vibrant street food markets and regional specialties have strengthened cultural engagement, while dining aesthetics and signature dishes have added to the allure of culinary tourism. However, hygiene concerns have been identified as a major challenge, necessitating the implementation of enhanced food safety measures. The significance of authentic local cuisine in fostering cultural appreciation has also been explored, with menu innovation and traditional service styles playing crucial roles in shaping positive tourist perceptions (Bakshi et al., 2024). Factors such as portion size, variety, and unique ingredients contribute to culinary satisfaction, with regression analyses confirming that well-curated dining experiences create strong emotional connections with local culture. Cross-regional comparisons have demonstrated the importance of local food as a key differentiator in attracting international tourists, suggesting the need for further research into evolving demographic-based culinary preferences (Bakshi et al., 2024).

Food quality and authenticity have been consistently identified as key determinants of travel satisfaction, with taste, presentation, and nutritional value playing vital roles in shaping tourist perceptions (Mehta et al., 2024). Exploratory factor analyses have highlighted uniqueness and authenticity as stronger predictors of satisfaction than baseline attributes like quality and freshness. Regression analyses confirm that cost, nutritional balance, and variety significantly impact dining experiences, reinforcing the importance of food authenticity for cultural immersion. Additionally, price-sensitive tourists prioritize a balance between affordability and quality, making transparent pricing strategies an essential factor in trust-building (Mehta et al., 2024). Regional cuisine has been identified as a critical element in attracting tourists, with food culture playing a central role in tourism experiences (Gupta et al., 2023). Demographic studies suggest that while age influences tourists' perceptions of local festival food, other demographic factors have minimal impact. Attributes such as aroma, flavor, uniqueness, taste, and variety have been highlighted as primary contributors to satisfaction, whereas health benefits, food presentation, and spice richness have been less influential. Limited awareness and availability of regional dishes in mainstream restaurants present challenges, necessitating promotional strategies such as food festivals and exhibitions to enhance culinary visibility and integrate regional cuisine into tourism marketing (Gupta et al., 2023). Cultural destinations benefit significantly from the integration of food experiences, as evidenced by research on heritage sites such as the Golden Temple and Jallianwala Bagh (Arora et al., 2024). Local cuisine, coupled with cultural performances, enhances visitor engagement and contributes to destination appeal, although underappreciated elements such as museums and eco-tourism have been found to be less attractive. Tourism research employing structured questionnaires and Likert scale analyses has underscored the importance of hospitality and service quality in shaping tourist satisfaction, further emphasizing the need to refine overlooked aspects of cultural tourism (Arora et al., 2024). Food presentation, quality, and nutritional balance have been found to be essential determinants of dining pleasure, with affordability and ingredient freshness playing a significant role in influencing tourist satisfaction (Kanwar et al., 2024). Research confirms that food attributes directly impact satisfaction levels, with periodic menu updates enhancing customer retention. Implementing feedback mechanisms and collaborating with local producers have been recommended strategies for maintaining quality and ensuring sustainable culinary tourism practices (Kanwar et al., 2024). Emerging trends in dietary preferences, such as the growing acceptance of millet-based fast food among students, further reinforce the evolving landscape of culinary tourism (Bakshi et al., 2023). Attributes such as taste, ingredient combinations, convenience, and health benefits significantly influence food choices, with millet-based options aligning with global dietary recommendations. Research highlights the potential for expanding healthy and sustainable food offerings within India's culinary landscape, providing insights for policymakers and food manufacturers aiming to promote traditional and nutritious food alternatives (Bakshi et al., 2023).

Overall, existing literature strongly supports the idea that tourists' perceived food image directly influences their culinary satisfaction and overall travel experiences (Chi et al., 2013). Key attributes such as quality, variety, authenticity, service standards, and value for money play a fundamental role in shaping food image and destination attractiveness (Ab Karim et al., 2011; Nield et al., 2000). The sensory experience of local dishes, immersive dining aesthetics, and exposure to new culinary traditions enrich travel satisfaction and contribute to memorable experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2014). Factors such as food preparation, authenticity, and service speed remain critical determinants of tourist contentment, reinforcing the need for well-curated culinary experiences to maximize visitor satisfaction and enhance India's image as a premier culinary tourism destination (Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009; Updhyay & Sharma, 2014).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review section examined the dynamic relationship between food and tourism, emphasizing its influence on tourist experiences, satisfaction, and destination appeal. It was structured into five interconnected sections that collectively explored the role of cuisine in shaping travel experiences. The first section established food as a vital cultural and experiential element that enhanced a traveller's connection with a destination. Building on this, Cuisine and Culinary Experiences analyzed how tourists engaged with local food through dining, food festivals, and culinary tours, enriching their overall journey. The next section investigated the factors that contributed to a memorable dining experience, such as authenticity, taste, and presentation and how these culinary experiences play a crucial role in shaping tourists' revisit intentions, as positive

encounters with local food often led to destination loyalty and repeat visits. The final section focused on India's diverse culinary heritage and its impact on attracting tourists while assessing its economic significance. Together, these sections provided a cohesive understanding of how food served as both a cultural bridge and a strategic tool in tourism development.

Role of Food in Tourism

The relationship between food and tourism has been widely recognized as an essential aspect of travel experiences. Ab Karim and Chi (2010) emphasized that food plays an integral role in tourism, shaping how travelers perceive and interact with destinations. Over time, the perception and significance of food in tourism have evolved significantly (Morris, 2015). As with lodging, transportation, and attractions, food has been identified as a fundamental component of the tourism experience (Reynolds et al., 1994). Food-related activities not only provide sustenance but also serve as cultural symbols, allowing tourists to immerse themselves in the traditions of the host community (Long, 2013). According to Frochot (2003), food consumption has fulfilled various travel motivations, such as enjoyment, relaxation, and education. Jones et al. (2003) argued that food serves as a representation of the host community's history, culture, and heritage, making it a key cultural element of a destination. Jalis et al. (2009) further reinforced that the culinary aspects of a location enable tourists to experience its authenticity. While food consumption primarily meets a basic physiological need (Smith, 2017), it has also been found to serve as a significant motivator for choosing travel destinations (Tikkanen, 2007). Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2017) highlighted that local food enhances the overall pleasure and satisfaction of travel by fostering a deeper connection with the host culture. Several studies have demonstrated the impact of national cuisines on tourism development. The Italian tourism sector, for instance, has benefited significantly from its renowned culinary offerings, particularly its food and wine (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). Likewise, France has been closely associated with its gastronomy, reinforcing its reputation as a preferred travel destination (Frochot, 2003). The rise in Hong Kong's tourism industry has also been attributed to its diverse and expanding culinary scene (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). Ab Karim (2006) indicated that a destination's culinary reputation and the information available about its food culture play a vital role in shaping tourists' intentions to visit. The study of food tourism has expanded in recent decades, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the significance of local cuisine. Cohen and Avieli (2004) argued that consuming local cuisine provides tourists with a multi-sensory experience, particularly through taste, thereby deepening their engagement with the environment. This experience elevates travelers beyond the status of passive visitors, making food an integral part of their journey. Mitchell and Hall (2006) suggested that regional cuisine is deeply embedded in a nation's cultural, social, environmental, and economic history, thereby contributing to destination competitiveness (Crouch & Ritchie, 1994). Nam and Lee (2011) emphasized the importance of promoting local food as a key attraction for tourists. Dining out and experiencing local cuisine have been widely appreciated by travelers (Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010), as these activities facilitate the dissemination of cultural knowledge and heritage (Ignatov & Smith, 2006).

Cuisine and Culinary Experiences

Tourist experiences, being intangible and subjective, involve sensory engagement influenced by personal emotions, values, and background (Knutson et al., 2009). These experiences are shaped through interactions with products and services, consolidating sensory values across entertainment, education, escape, and aesthetics (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Experiences comprise various sub-elements that take place at different levels and contexts (Youngman & Hadzikadic, 2014). Quan and Wang (2004) categorized food experiences into two dimensions: utilitarian consumption and peak experiences. The latter occurs when basic needs are satisfied and enhanced by unique culinary elements, making the experience more memorable. Huang et al. (2015) argued that local cuisine plays a crucial role in shaping tourist experiences. Studies have indicated that modern tourists increasingly seek hands-on and immersive activities, such as engaging with local food culture (Yusoff et al., 2013). As tourists visit new destinations, their consumption behavior changes, as food is an essential part of the travel experience (Scott & Duncan, 2017). Pullphothong and Sopha (2019) noted that tourists often explore culinary traditions that differ from their usual diets, leading to an enriching cultural encounter. Tsai (2016) found that tourists who engaged with local cuisine in Taiwan developed a stronger attachment to the destination, reinforcing the role of food in fostering cultural connections. In the contemporary travel industry, there has been an increasing demand for transformative and immersive experiences that enable deeper engagement with local communities (Sheldon, 2020). Culinary tourism involves direct interaction with local food culture through communal dining and food production activities (Rachao et al., 2021). Prayag et al. (2020) identified culinary tourism as a form of serious leisure, incorporating skill development, socialization, and recreation. Authenticity seekers, as described by Ozdemir and Seyitoglu (2017), consider local food as an essential aspect of their travel experiences. Authentic food consumption enhances tourists' understanding of the host community, allowing them to engage with cultural heritage (Antón et al., 2019). Research has consistently shown that culinary experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, and repeat visits (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Tsai, 2016).

Cuisine and Culinary Satisfaction

Satisfaction has long been regarded as an emotional reaction or an effective response toward an experience or object. Locke (1976) defined satisfaction as an emotional state resulting from the fulfillment of an expected outcome, which is often shaped by prior expectations regarding quality levels (Ekinci, 2004). Similarly, Rai (2013) described satisfaction as the gratification derived from fulfilling desires and needs. It has been conceptualized as either an emotional or cognitive experience, evaluated

based on what was received in comparison to what was expected. In the context of services, satisfaction is primarily assessed by evaluating experiences and perceived attributes either during or after consumption (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). A satisfied tourist tends to exhibit a higher likelihood of revisiting a destination and recommending it to others (Chen & Chen, 2010). In tourism, food plays a crucial role in shaping visitor satisfaction, and gastronomy often serves as a key motivation for travelers to revisit a location (Rimmington & Yüksel, 1998). Ab Karim & Chi (2010) further reinforced this idea, asserting that satisfaction with a tourism destination is significantly influenced by the regional cuisine. López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares (2012) emphasized that culinary experiences at travel destinations substantially impact tourist satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. The integration of motivation, experience, and satisfaction has positioned cuisine as both a primary and secondary determinant of traveler contentment (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Several scholars have explored the factors contributing to culinary satisfaction. Chi et al. (2013) highlighted that a tourist's perceived food image directly affects their level of satisfaction and overall culinary experience. Numerous studies have identified perceived service quality (Del Chiappa et al., 2017), hygiene (Namin, 2017), health considerations (Choe & Kim, 2018), food preparation methods (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), and authenticity (Sánchez-Cañizares & Castillo-Canalejo, 2015) as key determinants of satisfaction. Hendijani (2016) noted that tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine is closely linked to the cultural heritage of the food and the use of fresh, healthy ingredients. Perez Galvez et al. (2017) indicated that novel food experiences and opportunities for socialization further enhance gastronomic satisfaction. Widjaja et al. (2018) found that satisfaction with culinary experiences significantly contributes to overall destination experience satisfaction, which is often shaped by value for money and the hospitality of service staff. According to Kala & Barthwal (2020), traditional food preparation methods and presentation play a crucial role in enhancing the novelty of a tourist's experience, thereby increasing satisfaction levels. Fitrizal, Elfiswandi, and Sanjaya (2021) emphasized that tourist satisfaction is influenced by the facilities available at the destination, knowledge of local food culture, and the opportunity to engage with novel culinary experiences. Hernández-Rojas & Alcocer (2021) concluded that positive culinary experiences foster tourist loyalty, as satisfaction with food quality, service, and restaurant ambiance significantly contributes to the intention to revisit a destination. Additionally, Showkat, Mehraj, and Qureshi (2021) found that price and food quality, alongside the dining environment, strongly impact satisfaction and tourists' inclination to return.

Indian Cuisine: Culinary Influence, Tourist Satisfaction and Market Potential

Indian cuisine has historically played a crucial role in shaping the country's hospitality and tourism sector, serving as a reflection of its diverse cultural heritage and culinary traditions. Communities across India have developed distinct culinary practices, offering tourists an array of gastronomic experiences such as food trails, cooking demonstrations, restaurant visits, and participation in food festivals (Keshari, 2021). These experiences allowed travelers to engage with local flavors, particularly in outdoor settings, where they could immerse themselves in indigenous cooking techniques and ingredients that were often absent in conventional dining establishments. With the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism industry, assessing market opportunities and challenges became imperative to align with evolving visitor expectations. Indian cuisine for tourists has been broadly classified into North and South Indian categories, each renowned for its unique flavors and dishes (Sethi, 2021). Among the most sought-after culinary offerings, Thali provided a curated selection of regional delicacies in a single meal, allowing tourists to explore a variety of flavors in one sitting. Gol Gappa, known by different names across India, remained a popular street food attraction, drawing visitors with its tangy and spicy appeal. The traditional Punjabi combination of Makki ki roti with Sarson ka saag gained global recognition for its robust flavors, while South Indian Masala Dosa achieved international acclaim, being ranked among the world's most delicious foods. Likewise, Butter Chicken, originating from Moti Mahal in Delhi in 1950, became a global favorite due to its creamy texture and rich tomato-based gravy (Sethi, 2021). The authenticity and quality of Indian cuisine significantly impacted tourist satisfaction and their likelihood of returning to a destination (Pal, 2020). Tourists engaged with culinary experiences not merely for sustenance but as a means of exploring cultural heritage. Studies indicated that while age demographics influenced satisfaction levels, factors such as gender and nationality did not play a major role in shaping culinary experiences. However, the purpose of travel—whether leisure or cultural exploration—substantially affected visitors' perception of regional food (Sharma, Batra, & Kumar, 2020). Despite the widespread appeal of Indian cuisine, several challenges hindered its full potential in culinary tourism. Concerns related to inadequate infrastructure, hygiene, and inconsistent brand perception posed obstacles, especially in metropolitan areas such as Delhi (Kaushal & Yadav, 2020). Addressing these issues through enhanced sanitation practices, organized food tours, and personalized dining experiences could improve India's reputation as a culinary tourism destination. Research in Bengaluru highlighted that tourist demographics, dining ambiance, and regional food heritage collectively shaped their overall experience (Dinakaran & Dwarkanath, 2019). Regional cuisine remained deeply interwoven with cultural identity, positioning food as a key medium for heritage preservation (Awasthi, Dhar, & Lomte, 2020). Each Indian state showcased distinctive culinary traditions influenced by climatic conditions and local dietary preferences (Hoque & Taufique, 2019). The incorporation of unique spices and traditional cooking methods not only enhanced nutritional value but also reinforced the cultural significance of regional dishes. Cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kochi, and Kolkata evolved into major culinary tourism hubs, attracting visitors who prioritized food experiences in their travel plans (Travel Trends, India, 2018). Delhi's Mughal-inspired biryanis and kebabs, Mumbai's vibrant street food culture, Kochi's South Indian specialties, and Kolkata's diverse seafood and Mughlai dishes underscored the multifaceted nature of Indian gastronomy (Travel Trends, India, 2018). Food tours gained popularity in cities like Mumbai, where tourists participated in spice market excursions to

gain insight into the origins and applications of various ingredients (Sarkar, 2017). Observing the preparation of spices and their culinary significance provided travellers with a deeper appreciation of Indian food culture. Additionally, street food emerged as a major attraction due to its affordability, interactive preparation methods, and opportunities for tourists to engage with local vendors (Kumar & Rana, 2017). However, the absence of robust branding and marketing strategies limited global awareness of Indian culinary tourism. Studies suggested that Indian cuisine remained underrepresented in international food directories and promotional campaigns, restricting its visibility among foreign tourists (Singh & Bhoola, 2018). Despite these challenges, the global presence of Indian cuisine continued to expand. Indian food gained popularity in countries such as the United Kingdom, South Korea, Thailand, Japan, Germany, France, and the United States (Shukla, 2019). The adaptation of Indian dishes, such as Chicken Tikka Masala in Britain, exemplified how Indian flavors integrated into international culinary landscapes, fostering multicultural acceptance (Buettner, 2008). Similarly, research conducted in Malaysia demonstrated that South Asians exhibited a strong preference for Indian cuisine due to its authenticity, diversity, and distinctive use of spices (Josiam et al., 2007). Changing food preferences among Indian consumers further underscored the adaptability of Indian cuisine. While international fast-food chains such as McDonald's and Pizza Hut gained traction, they modified their menus to cater to local tastes, reaffirming the enduring influence of traditional Indian culinary preferences (Jaitly, 2003). Globalization and increased accessibility to Indian recipes through digital platforms facilitated the worldwide appreciation of Indian gastronomy (Mangalassary, 2015). Tourists seeking authentic culinary experiences valued the incorporation of local ingredients, traditional preparation techniques, and historical narratives in their meals (Upadhyay & Sharma, 2014). Scholars emphasized that India possessed immense potential as a culinary tourism hotspot, owing to its vast array of food offerings and cultural vibrancy (Sahoo, 2014). Nevertheless, industry stakeholders needed to address infrastructure gaps, enhance sanitation conditions, and implement effective branding initiatives to attract a broader audience (Gattu, 2016). Integrating local cuisine into major cultural events and exhibitions could further solidify India's status as a premier food tourism destination. Positive culinary experiences significantly contributed to tourist satisfaction, leading to word-of-mouth recommendations and increased destination loyalty (Duttagupta, 2013). The inclusion of Indian cuisine among the world's most preferred food choices by global travelers underscored its growing appeal (Hotels.com, 2013).

Objective of the study

This study explored how visitor's experiences with local food in Varanasi influenced their overall satisfaction. It examined the role of culinary experiences in shaping perceptions and enjoyment of the destination. Local food is a vital part of cultural tourism, offering authenticity and a connection to heritage. Factors like taste, authenticity, hygiene, and food presentation were analysed to determine their impact on visitor satisfaction. Understanding these aspects was essential for enhancing culinary tourism and promoting Varanasi as a culinary hub. The study further aimed to provide insights for local food vendors, restaurants, and tourism authorities to improve food quality and appeal. By doing so, it sought to support sustainable tourism, ensuring visitors appreciate Varanasi's rich culinary culture. Using statistical analysis, the study quantified the impact of food experiences, helping stakeholders make informed decisions to enhance visitor engagement and satisfaction with traditional cuisine.

Research Methodology

The research employed a quantitative methodology to analyse the impact of local food experiences on visitor satisfaction in Varanasi. A null hypothesis $H_0 1$ - "There is no significant impact of tourist's experience of local food of Varanasi on their satisfaction level" was framed and tested using linear regression analysis. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data from tourists who had experienced local cuisine during their visit to Varanasi. The survey included questions on key factors such as taste, authenticity, hygiene, presentation, and overall satisfaction. A random sampling technique was used to ensure a diverse representation of domestic and foreign visitors. Data collection was conducted over a specified period, with researchers approaching visitors at popular food markets, restaurants, and cultural sites. The responses were then coded and analysed using statistical software to identify patterns and correlations. Descriptive statistics and inferential analysis, such as regression and correlation tests, were applied to measure the significance of various food-related factors in shaping visitor satisfaction. The findings were interpreted to determine the extent to which culinary experiences influenced tourists' perceptions of Varanasi. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and respondent anonymity, were maintained throughout the study. The methodology ensured reliability and validity, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the role of local cuisine in enhancing the overall tourism experience.

Analysis and Results

The study analysed the demographic profile of visitors to Varanasi based on a sample of 396 respondents. Data was processed using SPSS software (version 26), and frequency and percentage analyses were conducted. The findings revealed that a significant majority, 78.03%, were domestic tourists from various states across India, while 21.96% were foreign visitors. Among Indian tourists, 74.39% hailed from North India, particularly from states such as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Bihar, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, whereas 25.61% came from other regions of the country. Among international visitors, Nepal accounted for the highest proportion at 17.24%, followed by Canada at 13.79% and Italy at 9.19%, with the remaining visitors originating from various other countries.

Regarding gender distribution, the study found that males constituted a larger proportion of visitors at 55.6%, while females

comprised 44.4%. In terms of age, the highest percentage of visitors (39.1%) fell within the 31-45 years' age group. The 19-30 years' category followed closely at 34.8%, while 15.2% were aged between 46 and 60 years. A smaller proportion of visitors (7.6%) were over 60 years old, and only 3.3% were below 18 years. Analysing marital status, the study found that 51.8% of visitors were married, 47.7% were unmarried, and a very small fraction (0.5%) were widowed. In terms of educational background, the largest proportion of visitors (34.3%) had completed postgraduate studies, followed by 24.5% who were graduates. Higher secondary education holders constituted 14.1%, while Ph.D. holders made up 24.2%. A minor percentage (2.8%) possessed other qualifications.

The occupation-wise breakdown showed that private employees formed the largest group at 45.5%, followed by students at 20.2% and government employees at 12.6%. Self-employed individuals and business professionals each accounted for 8.1%, while retirees and homemakers comprised 4.5% and 1.0%, respectively. In terms of income distribution, the highest percentage (27%) of visitors earned below ₹20,000, while 26.5% fell within the ₹20,001-₹35,000 income bracket. Another 16.2% earned between ₹35,001-₹50,000, while those with incomes of ₹50,001-₹65,000 represented 6.6% of the sample. Meanwhile, 23.7% of respondents earned above ₹65,000. Examining the purpose of visits, the study revealed that 38.6% of respondents travelled primarily for tourism, while 21.2% visited for religious purposes. Culinary experiences attracted 19.9% of visitors, followed by educational visits at 16.2%, while 4.0% travelled for other reasons. The frequency of visits indicated that 52.8% were first-time visitors, whereas 24.5% visited annually. Additionally, 5.3% of respondents visited monthly, 11.4% made quarterly trips, and 6.1% had other visit patterns. The duration of stay varied among visitors, with 34.8% staying for just one day and 33.8% spending up to a week in the city. A smaller group (7.1%) stayed for a month, while 11.4% remained in Varanasi for a year. Additionally, 12.9% of visitors had extended stays, possibly due to work, education, or other commitments.

These findings provided valuable insights into the diverse demographic profile of visitors to Varanasi, enhancing the understanding of visiting patterns in the city. This knowledge assisted local DMOs in improving the planning and management of visitor experiences.

After analysing the demographic profile of visitors, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine their satisfaction level based on their experience with the local food of Varanasi. In this analysis, the visitors' experience with the local food served as the independent variable, while their satisfaction level was the dependent variable.
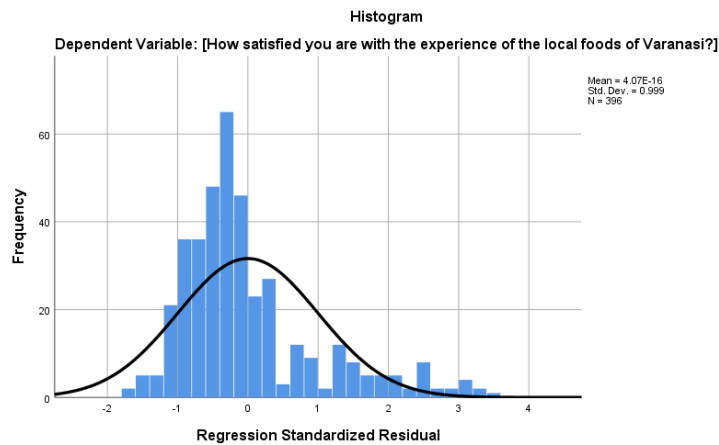
Table 1: Residual statistics for linear regression between experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	1.30	3.65	1.95	.408	396
Residual	-1.687	3.582	.000	1.003	396
Std. Predicted Value	-1.597	4.173	.000	1.000	396
Std. Residual	-1.680	3.568	.000	.999	396

The study of residual statistics (Table 1) for outliers in the preceding table revealed very few outliers in the data points, with the standard residual's minimum value being -1.680 and its maximum value being 3.568.
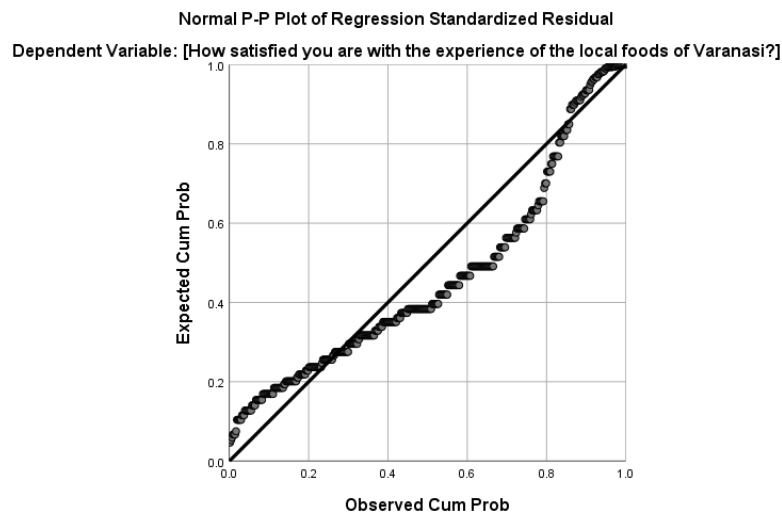
Figure 1: Histogram for Linear Regression between the experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

Histogram

Dependent Variable: [How satisfied you are with the experience of the local foods of Varanasi?]

Mean = 4.07E-16
Std. Dev. = 0.999
N = 396

The bell-shaped and symmetrical histogram (Figure 1) of the regression standard residuals, along with the typical P-P plot (Figure 2), indicated that the residuals were normally distributed. Additionally, the scatterplot (Figure 3) displayed randomly placed dots with a straight-line linear correlation between the variables, while the residuals maintained a fixed delta in the regression model. This suggested that the data appropriately addressed dimensional restrictions such as linearity and homoscedasticity.

Figure 2: Normal P-P plot for Linear Regression between the experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: [How satisfied you are with the experience of the local foods of Varanasi?]

Figure 3 : Scatterplot for Linear Regression between the experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

Scatterplot
Dependent Variable: [How satisfied you are with the experience of the local foods of Varanasi?]
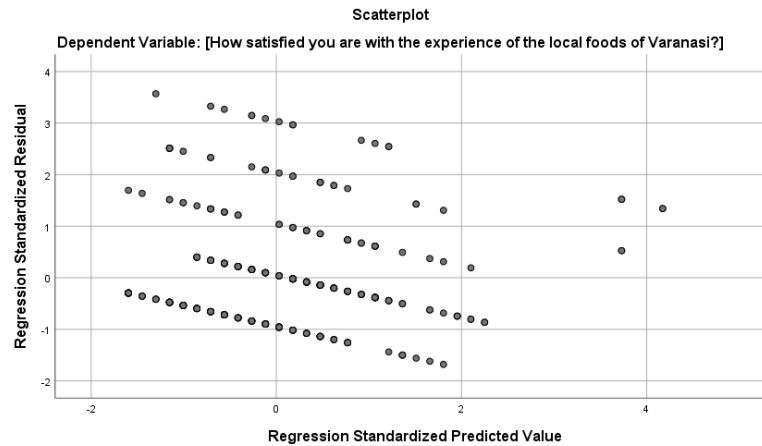
Now, a linear regression was applied to determine the impact of visitor's experience with local foods on their level of satisfaction. Table 2 below shows the regression model equation used for this analysis.

Table 2: Multiple regression model used for analysis

Regression model equation:

Y = a + bX

where:

*Y is the Dependent variable (**level of satisfaction**)*

*X is the independent variable (**experience of visitors with local foods**)*

*a, constant (**coefficient of intercept**) equals the value of Y when the value of X=0,*

*b, the coefficient of X that represents the slope of the regression line (**how much Y changes for each one-unit change in X**)*

Table 3: Model summary for Linear Regression between the experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.377	.142	.140	1.004

It is evident from the table 3 above that the regression model, having R^2 = .142, contained a variable that describes 14.2% of the total variance in the level of satisfaction of visitors from their experience of the local food of Varanasi. The value of F-statistic [$F_{(1, 394)}$ = 65.317, $p < .05$] was significant with p-value = 0.000 (Table 4) which indicated that the model was statistically significant.

Table 4: ANOVA for Linear Regression between the experience of visitors with local foods and their level of satisfaction

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	65.839	1	65.839		
1	Residual	397.151	394	1.008	65.317	.000
	Total	462.990	395			

As can be seen from the table 4 above, the regression model's mean sum of squares value is 65.839, and its residual sum of squares value is 397.151. This suggested that the model was able to explain a considerable amount of variance in determining how visitors' experiences with local cuisine affected their degree of satisfaction.

Table 5: Model summary of the Impact of experience of visitors with local foods on their level of satisfaction

Model		B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	p
1	(Constant)	.572	.178		3.222	.001
	Experience of visitors with the local food of Varanasi	.725	.090	.377	8.082	.000
The test applied at 95% confidence level						

The standardized coefficient beta and t values of the regression model were observed from the above-presented table to ascertain the impact of visitors' experience with local foods on their level of satisfaction. The null hypothesis **H₀1** - "There is no significant impact of tourist's experience of local food of Varanasi on their satisfaction level" was tested at a 95% confidence level. The regression model summary indicated that the constant (intercept) had a B value of 0.572 with a standard error of 0.178. This constant term was statistically significant, with a t-value of 3.222 and a p-value of 0.001, suggesting a baseline level of satisfaction associated with local foods in Varanasi. The primary variable of interest, visitors' experience with local foods, showed a B value of 0.725 with a standard error of 0.090. The standardized coefficient (Beta, β) was 0.377, indicating a moderately positive impact of visitors' experiences on their satisfaction levels. This relationship was highly significant, evidenced by a t-value of 8.082 and a p-value of 0.000. These results suggested that as visitors' experience with local foods increased, their satisfaction levels also increased. Given the significant positive relationship between visitors' experience with local foods and their satisfaction levels, the null hypothesis **(H₀2)** was rejected. The analysis concluded that visitor's experience with the local foods of Varanasi had a substantial and statistically significant impact on their overall satisfaction levels.

3. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that visitors' experiences with local food in Varanasi had a significant and positive impact on their overall satisfaction levels. Statistical analysis, particularly linear regression, demonstrated that as visitors' experiences with local cuisine improved, their satisfaction levels also increased. The findings highlighted that key factors such as taste, authenticity, hygiene, and presentation played a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions of Varanasi's culinary scene. The rejection of the null hypothesis confirmed that local food experiences were a vital component of the overall tourism experience. The study provided empirical evidence supporting the role of food tourism in enhancing destination appeal. Understanding visitor preferences and satisfaction could help in strategizing efforts to improve local food quality and hygiene. These insights were essential for promoting Varanasi as a culinary tourism hub, ensuring sustainable tourism growth, and enriching the overall visitor experience by enhancing the authenticity and appeal of traditional cuisine.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications for various stakeholders in the hospitality

and tourism sector. Theoretically, the study reinforced the growing body of research that highlights the pivotal role of culinary experiences in shaping tourists' overall satisfaction with a destination. It aligned with existing literature on food tourism, emphasizing that local food is not just a supplementary aspect of travel but an integral component that enhances cultural engagement and visitor enjoyment. The study further validated the idea that key attributes such as taste, authenticity, hygiene, and food presentation are crucial in influencing tourist perceptions and satisfaction. By confirming the positive relationship between food experiences and visitor satisfaction, the study contributed to the broader discourse on how culinary tourism can be leveraged as a strategic tool for destination marketing and development.

From a practical standpoint, these findings offer valuable insights for local food vendors, restaurant owners, tourism boards, and policymakers in Varanasi. Local food vendors and restaurateurs could use these insights to refine their offerings by focusing on improving hygiene standards, maintaining the authenticity of traditional recipes, and enhancing the overall dining experience. Given that visitor satisfaction is directly linked to their culinary experiences, businesses that invest in food quality and presentation could gain a competitive advantage, leading to higher customer retention and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Tourism authorities could capitalize on these insights by designing promotional campaigns that highlight Varanasi's rich and diverse culinary heritage, positioning the city as a premier destination for food tourism. Moreover, structured culinary tours, food festivals, and interactive cooking sessions featuring local delicacies could be introduced to further enhance tourist engagement.

Policymakers also have a crucial role to play in ensuring sustainable culinary tourism. The findings suggest that implementing strict hygiene regulations, food safety standards, and training programs for food vendors could improve the overall dining experience for tourists while ensuring health and safety compliance. Additionally, collaboration between tourism stakeholders and local food businesses could lead to the creation of certification programs that recognize high-quality and authentic food experiences, thereby boosting consumer confidence. The study's results highlight the importance of integrating food-based experiences into broader tourism strategies, ensuring that Varanasi not only remains a spiritual and cultural hub but also emerges as a leading destination for culinary tourism. By addressing visitor preferences and enhancing food experiences, the hospitality and tourism sector in Varanasi can create a more immersive, satisfying, and memorable experience for travellers, ultimately contributing to the sustainable growth of the city's tourism industry.

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