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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Tourists' Perceptions and Motivations for Local Food

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### ABSTRACT

Local foods play an influential role in improving the tourism experience in destinations. Local foods can enormously enrich the tourism experience by connecting tourists with the heart and soul of a destination. Past research has identified various perception and motivational factors that support local foods' purchase intentions, but only from a consumer point of view. As the demand for local foods in tourist destinations is gaining more and more importance year after year, this study investigates the influence of those perceptions and motivational factors on purchasing local foods in a tourism destination. A survey was conducted among 470 US tourists who have visited destinations and tasted or purchased local foods in the last three years. Regarding the perception of local foods, the study's findings show that factors like freshness, trust and transparency, preservatives free, and better nutrition are highly reported. Regarding the motivations to buy local foods, the study findings show that factors like supporting the local farmers, enhancing sustainable agriculture, increasing local revenue, and reducing carbon emissions were highly reported. The findings of this study will provide a holistic experience for the tourists that allows them to immerse themselves in the destination's food culture and support the local economy and community. By effectively developing and promoting the destination's local foods by highlighting and promoting the highly rated perception and motivational factors, the destination can attract more food enthusiasts and curious tourists seeking authentic food and cultural experiences.

### KEYWORDS

Local community, local farmers, local food, motivational factors, sustainability, tourists' perception

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### 1. Introduction

Food production practices and trends have undergone considerable structural changes in the last four decades. Current-day consumers demand greater trust and transparency in the supply chain because the distances between the place of production and consumption have grown larger and become increasingly non-transparent. In this scenario, it is evident that there is a greater demand and acceptance for local foods. Local food is produced within a short distance of where it is consumed. Local, regional, or traditional foods are dishes and ingredients native to a specific geographic area or culture (Feenstra, 1997; Low & Vogel, 2011). These foods are often closely tied to the region's local climate, agriculture, and culinary traditions. They are typically produced and consumed within a relatively small area, minimizing the need for extensive transportation and preserving the unique flavors and characteristics of the area. Unlike large-scale production and supermarket entities, it is often associated with a social structure and regional distribution (Feldmann & Hamn, 2015; Hobbs, 2020).

Local food is significant and offers several benefits encompassing environmental, economic, social, and personal benefits (e.g., reduced environmental impact, support for local economy, preservation of rural landscapes, freshness and taste, cultural and

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culinary heritage, biodiversity conservation, food security and resilience, community building, health benefits, transparency and accountability, responsible resource management, promotion of sustainable practices, and connection to nature) (Bene, 2020; Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016; Coelho et al., 2018; Feldmann & Hamn, 2015). Local food systems offer a way to build stronger, more resilient communities while reducing the negative impacts of industrialized agriculture and long-distance food transport. Consumers can donate to a healthier environment and a thriving local economy and preserve cultural and culinary traditions by choosing local foods. While local food has countless benefits, it is essential to recognize that not all regions can produce all the foods needed to sustain their populations year-round. Therefore, a balance between supporting local food systems and recognizing the value of global trade and access to diverse foods is essential for a well-rounded approach to food consumption (Berti & Mulligan, 2016; Skallerud & Wien, 2019).

### **1.1 Perception of local foods**

Perception is organizing, identifying, and interpreting sensory information to represent and comprehend the presented information or environment. Perception in consumer research refers to how individuals interpret and make sense of their environment's information, including products, brands, advertisements, packaging, and more (Baby et al., 2023; Choe & Kim, 2018; Troy & Kerry, 2010). Perception plays a crucial role in consumer behavior as it influences how consumers perceive, evaluate, and ultimately decide about products and services. Various psychological and cognitive processes shape consumer perception, and researchers often study these processes (e.g., hedonic and utilitarian perception) to understand how consumers process and respond to diverse marketing stimuli (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016; Feldmann & Hamn, 2015).

Consumers' perceptions of local foods vary widely based on their beliefs, values, and experiences. Past research in consumer behavior shows that there are several common perceptions towards local foods that are often shared by consumers (e.g., freshness, trust and authenticity, superior taste and quality, health, and nutrition) (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017; Schäufele & Hamm, 2017). It is essential to note that perceptions of local foods can vary based on regional and cultural contexts. Additionally, individual experiences, marketing strategies, and storytelling around local products can influence consumers' perceptions and preferences. Understanding how consumers perceive local food can guide marketing strategies, policy decisions, and efforts to strengthen local food systems (Aprile et al., 2016; Feldmann & Hamn, 2015).

### **1.2 Motivations to buy local foods**

Consumer motivations refer to the underlying reasons, desires, and needs that drive individuals to make specific purchasing decisions and engage in certain behaviors. Understanding these motivations is vital for businesses and marketers to create effective strategies that align with consumer values and preferences (Ozaki & Sevastyanova, 2011). Consumer motivations vary widely based on cultural, personal values, lifestyle, and socio-economic context (e.g., functional needs, belonging and social interaction, environmental and ethical concerns, health and well-being, and cultural hedonic enjoyment). By understanding what drives consumer behavior, businesses can tailor their offerings and messaging to better meet the needs and desires of their target audience (Sook Kwon et al., 2014).

Consumers are motivated to buy local foods for various reasons, each influenced by personal values, beliefs, lifestyle choices, and external factors. Past research in consumer behavior shows that several common motivational factors aid in buying local foods (e.g., support for the local economy, connection to farmers and producers, environmental concerns, food safety, cultural identity, health and nutrition, community building, ethical considerations, food sovereignty, resilience, and food security) (Aprile et al., 2016; Blake et al., 2010; Bryla, 2016; Feldmann & Hamn, 2015; Megick et al., 2012). Understanding these motivations can help farmers, producers, and marketers effectively target and communicate with their target audience. By understanding these motivations, producers and marketers can tailor their messaging, product offerings, and engagement strategies to effectively reach and resonate with consumers drawn to local foods' benefits.

### **1.3 Local foods and tourism growth**

Tourists today have a wide variety of available destinations, and DMOs and destination promoters are competing against other destinations to attract more and more visitors to their destinations. They adopt different methods to differentiate and give uniqueness to the tourists visiting their destinations (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Sengel et al., 2015). In this scenario, and with limited resources and investment, the best method to adopt, proven in different parts of the world, is to promote and highlight local food products and related experiences. Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen (2016) claim that local food holds much potential in attracting travelers and contributing to the overall tourist experience, indicating marketing potential for hospitality industries, tourism businesses, and regional development.

Local foods can play a significant role in driving tourism growth in a destination. Initiatives like the promotion of culinary tourism, stressing uniqueness and authentic experiences, upholding sustainability, destination branding, tourism product diversification, and community engagement are examples of some of the common initiatives adopted by the DMOs and destination marketers to connect the local foods with tourism development (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Green & Dougherty, 2014; Sengel et al., 2015). Thus, local foods can sweeten the tourism experience, support the local economy, foster sustainability, and contribute to a destination's

unique identity and branding. By promoting local foods, destinations can attract tourists and foster sustainable growth (Andersson et al., 2017; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen 2016; Gheorghe et al., 2014).

From the above-mentioned proven factors, local foods can catalyze tourism growth. Past research has identified various perception and motivational factors that support local foods' purchase intentions, but only from a consumer point of view. As the demand for local foods in tourist destinations is gaining more and more importance year after year, it is essential to investigate the tourist perception and motivation for supporting local foods. Analyzing these factors enables us to identify the highly preferred perception and motivational factors. So, this study investigates the influence of those perceptions and motivational factors on purchasing local foods in a tourism destination. This study has two main objectives: (1) to analyze and rank the tourist perception factors that support the purchase of local foods and (2) to analyze and rank the tourist motivation factors that support the purchase of local foods.

**2. Methods and Results**

The study examines the perception and motivation to buy local foods in tourist destinations. This study's questionnaire for data collection was designed by adopting and adapting the relevant previous studies. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to agree (5) strongly. The perception related to local foods was measured through eight items, which were recorded under health benefits (local foods are safe to eat, local foods have better nutrition, local foods are healthy), quality attributes (local foods are free from preservatives, local foods taste better, local foods are freshly made), and attachment motives (local foods have high trust and transparency, local foods are authentic) (Arsil & Bruwer, 2014; Fan et al., 2019; Sook Kwon et al., 2014). The tourist motivational factors regarding buying local foods were measured through eight items which were recorded under environmental factors (purchasing local foods is environmentally friendly, purchasing local foods enhances sustainable agriculture, purchasing local foods reduces carbon emissions) and economic and supporting factors (purchasing local foods supports the local economy, purchasing local foods enhance connection between land and culture, purchasing local foods supports the local farmers, purchasing local foods brings the community together, purchasing local foods increases the revenue of the local economy) (Bianchi, 2017; Bimbo, 2021; Lea & Worsley, 2008; Molinario et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

The population of this study was defined as tourists over eighteen years old who purchased or tasted local foods in a tourist destination in the United States in the last three years. This study used an online survey company to collect the data. The company built a cooperative system with Survey Sampling International (SSI) to obtain appropriate samples to reflect the research population. The minimum required number of samples for this study was chosen by applying the Soper (2018) a priori sample size calculator. The minimum sample size recommended for the study was a 95 % confidence level, and the 5% margin of error was 390. In the initial data collection stage and applying the necessary screening conditions, eligibility, and response rate, 470 samples were chosen for the analysis. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and reliability tests of the measured items.

The demographic profile of the survey respondents is included in Table 1. Half of the respondents were males (51%), and most were between 45 and 54 years old (23%). Regarding income, most respondents belong to the income group of \$50,001 - \$75,000 (35%).

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents

Respondent Profile	Categories	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	240	51
	Female	221	47
	Non-binary/ Third gender	4	1
	Prefer not to say	5	1
Age	18 – 24 years	57	12
	25 – 34 years	88	19
	35 – 44 years	95	20
	45 – 54 years	108	23
	55 – 64 years	88	19
	65 years +	34	7
Education	High school	87	19
	Some college/ No degree	109	23
	Associate degree	79	17

	Bachelor's degree	167	35
	Graduate or Professional degree	28	6
Annual Income	Less than \$ 25,000	34	7
	\$ 25,001 - \$ 50,000	87	20
	\$ 50,001 - \$ 75,000	165	35
	\$ 75,001 - \$100,000	124	26
	\$ 100,001 - \$ 150,000	24	5
	\$ 150,001 - \$ 200,000	20	4
	\$ 200,001 and more	16	3

The internal consistency of the items used in this study generated Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha$  value, and the constructs' scores were reported to be more than 0.70, which is the accepted limit for social science research (Vaske et al., 2017). The ranking of the perception and motivational factors is included in Table 2. Regarding the perception of local foods, the study's findings show that factors like freshness, trust and transparency, preservatives free, and better nutrition are highly reported. Regarding the motivations to buy local foods, the study findings show that factors like supporting the local farmers, enhancing sustainable agriculture, increasing local revenue, and reducing carbon emissions were highly reported.

**Table 2.** Ranking of perception and motivation factors (Highest to lowest ranks)

Tourist Perception	Mean <sup>a</sup>	Tourist Motivation	Mean <sup>a</sup>
Freshly made	4.22	Supports the local farmers	4.31
High trust and transparency	4.17	Enhance sustainable agriculture	4.12
Free from preservatives	4.11	Increases the local revenue	4.10
Has better nutrition	4.08	Reduce carbon emissions	4.08
Tastes better	3.96	Supports the local economy	4.02
It is healthy	3.84	Connecting land and culture	3.88
It is authentic	3.76	Environmentally friendly	3.78
Safe to eat	3.66	Brings the community together	3.71

<sup>a</sup> Measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "5 = Strongly agree".  
Tourist Perception ( $\alpha = 0.877$ ) and Tourist Motivation ( $\alpha = 0.823$ )

**Table 3.** Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation of the construct.

Construct	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
Health benefits	3.86	1.01	1.00				
Quality attributes	4.09	1.09	0.56	1.00			
Attachment motives	3.96	1.12	0.59	0.48	1.00		
Environmental factors	4.00	1.06	0.65	0.55	0.46	1.00	
Economic and supporting factors	4.07	1.06	0.65	0.55	0.46	0.45	1.00

### 3. Conclusion

This study examines the tourist perception and motivation factors that support the purchase of local foods in tourism destinations. The findings of this study reveal that the tourists highly reported the perception factors like freshness, trust and transparency, preservatives free, and better nutrition and motivation factors like supporting the local farmers, enhancing sustainable agriculture, increasing local revenue, and reducing carbon emissions. The factors analyzed have a mixed presence from the construct used to collect the data (health benefits, quality attributes, attachment motives, environmental factors, economic and supporting factors).

The implications of this study are more likely to be of interest to anyone involved in local food production, distribution, retailing, marketing, and legislation, especially in tourism-related destinations. The destination that highlights local foods or has a food culture that evolved with the support of local foods or highly promotes food tourism should concentrate on the top-ranked perception and motivation factors that aid in tourism development. By highlighting their local cuisine, destinations can create a more memorable and meaningful tourist experience, increasing visitation and positive economic impact.

Promoting local foods can have a significant impact on tourism growth and development. Some strategies and ways local food promotion can contribute to the tourism industry's growth by stressing the highly rated perception and motivation factors identified in this study. (1) Culinary festivals and events (by organizing food festivals, farmers' markets, and culinary events that

showcase the region's local foods. These events attract both locals and tourists) (2) Food tours and experiences (by developing guided food tours that take tourists to local markets, restaurants, and food producers. These tours will provide an immersive experience and an opportunity to interact with local chefs and food artisans) (3) Cooking classes and workshops (by offering cooking classes that teach visitors how to prepare traditional local dishes and this hands-on experience not only introduces them to the cuisine but also encourages them to recreate these dishes at home, extending the impact beyond their visit) (4) Collaborations with local restaurants (by partnering with local restaurants to create menus that feature authentic local dishes made from locally sourced ingredients and this collaboration supports local businesses and gives tourists a chance to enjoy a variety of traditional flavors) (5) Promotion through social media (by utilizing social media platforms to share visually appealing content about local foods and encouraging visitors to share their own experiences using dedicated hashtags, creating a buzz, and attracting more attention to the destination). By incorporating these strategies and initiatives, destinations can effectively promote local foods and create a thriving culinary tourism scene. This, in turn, leads to increased visitor numbers, longer stays, higher spending, and a positive impact on the overall tourism industry and local economy.

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