

INTERACTION OF FOOD GEOGRAPHY AND GASTRONOMY TOURISM: A STUDY ON GASTRONOMY DESTINATIONS IN TÜRKİYE

Önder Yayla⁸
Semra Günay⁹

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the interaction between gastronomy tourism and food geography in Turkey. Gastronomy tourism holds significance in preserving local cultural values, fostering sustainable economic development, and enhancing the international recognition of destinations. The study seeks to contribute to the strengthening of local gastronomy identities and the support of tourism policies through sustainable strategies. A qualitative research method, specifically the document analysis technique, was employed. The analysis of the documents was conducted using content analysis, with Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar—cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network—selected as the study sample. Analyses based on various documents cover themes such as gastronomy tourism strategies, the impact of local food production on tourism, the economic contributions of geographically indicated products, and the preservation of cultural heritage. The findings reveal the decisive role of food geography in gastronomy tourism and its contribution to promoting local cuisines at an international level. The study presents recommendations for strengthening gastronomy tourism policies of local administrations, utilizing geographical indications effectively, and fostering the sustainable development of gastronomy tourism. By comprehensively evaluating the economic, cultural, and social impacts of gastronomy tourism, this research provides significant contributions to the literature.

Key Words: Food geography, Gastronomi tourism, Gastronomi destinations, Türkiye,

INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy tourism, as a strategic component of both cultural and economic development, plays a significant role in promoting tourist destinations globally by highlighting local values and strengthening regional economic dynamics (Küçükkömürler et al., 2019). This strategic role is particularly critical for introducing local gastronomic events and geographically indicated products to international markets, thereby enabling the unique cultural heritage of the region to reach broader audiences (Brisson, 2012). The integration of local flavors with the tourism sector not only enhances the touristic appeal of destinations but also facilitates the preservation of local cultural heritage and its transfer to future generations (Özdemir & Dülger

⁸Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, Kadirli Faculty of Applied Sciences Türkiye, onder.yayla@gmail.com

⁹Anadolu Üniversitesi, Tourism Faculty, Türkiye, semragunay@anadolu.edu.tr

Altiner, 2019). In this context, gastronomy tourism offers significant opportunities for countries in terms of the sustainability of cultural values, regional development, and international recognition (Işkın, Şengel & Genç, 2017).

Food geography provides a robust framework for understanding the deep interconnections between local food production and tourism. Additionally, it enables the development of unique marketing strategies for the tourism sector by analyzing how agricultural practices and environmental factors shape local culinary cultures (Kivela & Crotts, 2005). Therefore, the gastronomic identities shaped by the geographical conditions of gastronomy destinations attract tourists and increase the competitiveness of these destinations. Local food production is a cornerstone of a destination's gastronomic identity. This identity encompasses not only the recipes of traditional dishes but also the sourcing of ingredients from local resources and the support of sustainable agricultural practices.

Turkey, with its rich culinary heritage and geographical diversity, stands out as a country capable of maximizing its gastronomy tourism potential (Sürücüoğlu et al., 2001; Yayla & Aktaş, 2017). Regional differences, such as the meat-based cuisine of Eastern Anatolia, the olive oil-focused culinary culture of the Aegean region, and the seafood and corn-based flavors of the Black Sea region (Yayla, 2019), provide tangible examples of this potential. To better understand Turkey's gastronomy tourism potential, the geographical and cultural characteristics of each region should be analyzed in detail. In Eastern Anatolia, the harsh climate shapes its meat-centric cuisine, while the Mediterranean climate of the Aegean region fosters the development of olive and herb-based dishes. These differences enable each region to acquire a distinctive gastronomic identity.

This study aims to analyze the interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism in specific gastronomy destinations in Turkey, highlighting its contributions to the preservation of cultural heritage and the tourism sector. In this context, the cities of Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar, which are included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, serve as exemplary cases in the field of gastronomy tourism. The initiatives conducted in these cities play a crucial role in promoting local cuisines on national and international levels and in developing sustainable tourism strategies. The research makes significant contributions to determining tourism policies and developing sustainable destination strategies. Furthermore, understanding the economic and social impacts of gastronomy tourism on local communities will enable more effective and inclusive efforts in this field.

Food Geography and Gastronomy Tourism

Food geography is an interdisciplinary field that examines the environmental, economic, and social factors shaping a region's agricultural capacity and local culinary culture. This field encompasses a wide range of elements, from local agricultural methods to climatic conditions, soil structure, and societal traditions, all of which directly influence local culinary habits. Food geography analyzes not only the physical geographic factors affecting local cuisine but also the cultural, social, and economic implications of these interactions. Therefore, food geography is essential for defining and sustainably promoting a destination's gastronomic identity (Yayla, 2019). Another critical factor in ensuring the national and international recognition of local gastronomic elements is the integration of food geography with the tourism sector. This integration forms the foundation of gastronomy tourism and plays a significant role in enhancing the competitiveness of destinations. Processes such as the production, distribution, and consumption of local foods, as well as their transformation into gastronomic experiences, lie at the core of food geography's scope.

Gastronomy tourism is a type of tourism based on unique cultural experiences, where local culinary elements are integrated with the tourism sector and used in destination marketing (Hall & Mitchell, 2002). It holds significant potential for preserving, promoting, and contributing to the sustainable economic development of local cuisines (Kearns & Philo, 1993). Presenting gastronomy products that reflect a region's cultural values to tourists not only strengthens the unique identity of the destination but also provides meaningful contributions to the local economy (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2015). In this context, gastronomy tourism contributes not only to local economies but also to regional development and international recognition processes.

The interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism is not limited to economic benefits. It also plays a crucial role in preserving local identity, promoting cultural values, and passing them on to future generations. For example, geographically indicated products serve as essential components of gastronomy tourism, reinforcing local culinary identity (Yayla, Ekincek & Günay Aktaş, 2018). Promoting geographically indicated products in international markets increases a destination's appeal in terms of gastronomy tourism while also enhancing the economic and cultural value of these products.

Turkey stands out as a country offering extensive opportunities for gastronomy tourism due to its geographical structure and agricultural diversity (Türkoğlu & Kozak, 2015). A wide variety of flavors reflecting the diversity of Turkish cuisine attract significant tourist interest across the country. The different culinary cultures within Turkey (Halıcı, 2009) place the country in a unique position on the global stage

in terms of gastronomy tourism potential. Examining the culinary identities of various regions in Turkey offers a valuable opportunity to better understand the contribution of gastronomy tourism to local development (Kan, 2011). The analytical framework provided by food geography serves as a strategic tool in determining sustainable tourism policies for destinations.

Developing gastronomy tourism sustainably contributes not only to economic growth but also to improving the quality of life of local communities and enhancing the international recognition of destinations. In countries like Turkey, which are rich in culinary culture, the synergistic interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism provides a unique competitive advantage for the tourism sector. The interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism supports both the economic development and the cultural heritage of a destination in a sustainable manner. In this regard, it is essential for local administrations and policymakers to develop strategic plans that integrate food geography and gastronomy tourism to ensure the long-term success of destinations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to evaluate the interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism in selected gastronomy destinations in Turkey. A total of 47 documents were examined, and the data obtained from these documents were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis is a method that enables the systematic examination of data and the emergence of main themes. During this process, data related to gastronomy tourism and food geography obtained from written sources were analyzed.

The study population consists of Turkey's 81 provinces. Using purposive sampling, the cities of Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar, which are included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network under the Gastronomy category, were selected as the sample. These cities are among Turkey's leading destinations in gastronomy tourism and serve as models for the integration of local culinary cultures into the tourism sector. This sample was deemed suitable for a thorough examination of the interaction between gastronomy tourism and food geography.

The documents analyzed in the study were sourced from various entities, including tourism ministries, local administrations, non-governmental organizations, industry reports, academic articles, and UNESCO reports. These documents contained data covering thematic areas such as gastronomy tourism strategies, the impact of local food production on tourism, and the economic contributions of geographically indicated products. The content analysis process was conducted in four stages:

- i. ***Data Collection:*** A total of 47 documents were examined, and the data obtained from these documents were compiled. These documents were based on literature reviews and analyses of sectoral reports to understand the relationship between gastronomy tourism and food geography.
- ii. ***Coding and Theme Identification:*** The data obtained from the documents were thematically coded, resulting in four main themes:
 - ***Gastronomy Tourism Strategies:*** This theme covers the methods and practices used by destinations to develop gastronomy tourism. Strategies developed by local administrations and tourism stakeholders were analyzed under this heading.
 - ***Impact of Local Food Production on Tourism:*** The effects of local agricultural and food production methods on the touristic appeal of destinations and the sustainability of gastronomy tourism were examined.
 - ***Economic Contributions of Geographically Indicated Products:*** The economic benefits of geographically indicated products and their role in enhancing the brand value of tourist destinations were explored under this theme.
 - ***Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage:*** The effects of gastronomy tourism on the preservation of local cuisines and their promotion on the international stage were analyzed within this theme.
- iii. ***Data Analysis:*** Once the coding process was completed, the data collected under each theme were analyzed comparatively.
- iv. ***Interpretation of Results:*** The findings obtained from the themes were interpreted by the researchers to understand the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of the interaction between gastronomy tourism and food geography.

FINDINGS

The content analysis of 47 documents in the study revealed the interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism under four main themes: gastronomy tourism strategies, the impact of local food production on tourism, the economic contributions of geographically indicated products, and the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. The findings related to each theme are presented below.

Findings on Gastronomy Tourism Strategies

In the context of gastronomy tourism strategies, it was observed that the selected destinations in Turkey have developed effective methods to promote their local cuisines. Particularly, the gastronomy tourism policies of Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar—cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network—have yielded successful results. Local festivals and events have played a significant role in this success. For example, the International Gastronomy Festival held in Gaziantep not only promoted the local cuisine but also attracted substantial tourist interest. Hatay’s “Table of Civilizations” concept offers visitors unique experiences by combining local culinary culture with historical and cultural values. Additionally, social media and digital marketing were identified as crucial tools in promoting geographically indicated products, effectively capturing the attention of younger tourist groups.

Findings on the Impact of Local Food Production on Tourism

When examining the impact of local food production on tourism, it was found that Turkey's rich agricultural potential strengthens the gastronomic identity of its destinations. The production of spices and baklava in Gaziantep forms the foundation of the region’s unique gastronomic identity, while olive and olive oil production in Hatay contributes to the sustainability of the region's culinary culture. In Afyonkarahisar, products such as sucuk (spiced sausage), kaymak (clotted cream), and poppy seeds significantly impact the local food economy. These products not only serve as attractions for tourists but also bolster the economic well-being of local producers.

Findings on the Economic Contributions of Geographically Indicated Products

The study also highlighted the economic contributions of geographically indicated products. These products enhance the brand value of destinations while providing economic benefits to local producers. Gaziantep’s geographically indicated baklava generates substantial economic value in both national and international markets. Furthermore, Gaziantep was identified as Turkey's leading city in geographical indication awareness, boasting the highest number of geographically indicated products in the country. Afyonkarahisar’s sucuk and kaymak attract more tourists to the region, and their promotion at international gastronomy events significantly contributes to the local economy. Similarly, traditional dishes from Hatay, such as tepsi kebabı, simit, yogurt, tomato paste, and künefe, have been preserved through geographical indication and promoted internationally, increasing the region's touristic appeal and generating economic gains.

Findings on the Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage

It was determined that gastronomy tourism significantly contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. After Hatay gained the status of a UNESCO Gastronomy City, the international recognition of its local dishes increased, with greater emphasis placed on traditional recipes. In Gaziantep, the preservation of traditional cooking techniques and their teaching in restaurants and local culinary schools serve as an example of cultural sustainability. Local food festivals in Afyonkarahisar, featuring competitions and workshops, attract tourists while encouraging the local community to take pride in their cultural heritage. These processes enable the preservation of local culinary identities and their use as tools for economic development.

CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the interaction between food geography and gastronomy tourism in selected gastronomy destinations in Turkey, analyzing its economic, cultural, and social dimensions. The findings demonstrate that food geography shapes a destination's gastronomic identity, which can be promoted nationally and internationally through gastronomy tourism. The integration of local culinary elements into tourism marketing strategies not only enhances the competitiveness of destinations but also supports regional development. Turkey's rich gastronomic diversity offers immense potential for the development of sustainable tourism policies.

According to the results, gastronomy tourism strategies implemented in cities like Gaziantep, Hatay, and Afyonkarahisar have played crucial roles in increasing the recognition of these destinations both nationally and internationally. The impacts of local food production on tourism and the economic contributions of geographically indicated products have supported not only regional development but also the preservation of local cultural heritage. These findings highlight the multidimensional effects of gastronomy tourism and underscore the need for more effective policy implementation in this field.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations have been developed:

- Collaboration between local administrations and tourism stakeholders should be established to enhance gastronomy tourism strategies.
- The processes for registering geographical indications should be expedited, and incentives for local producers should be increased.

- International promotion of gastronomy destinations should be achieved through digital marketing and social media campaigns.
- Environmentally friendly agricultural practices should be encouraged to ensure the sustainability of local food production.
- Education and awareness programs focusing on gastronomy tourism should be organized.
- International gastronomy festivals and events should be hosted to enhance the brand value of destinations.
- New gastronomy routes should be created to showcase Turkey's gastronomic diversity across different regions.
- Academic research on gastronomy tourism and food geography should be promoted.

Future studies can examine the interaction between gastronomy tourism and food geography from a broader perspective, enabling more in-depth analyses in these fields. Comparative studies exploring the gastronomic richness of Turkey's diverse regions can provide detailed insights into how local culinary cultures are shaped by geographical and environmental factors. Additionally, research analyzing the economic, social, and cultural impacts of gastronomy tourism could evaluate the positive and negative aspects of this tourism type on local communities in a more comprehensive manner.

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