

The Understanding of Food Literacy in the Field of Tourism

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Abstract

While a significant portion of the world struggles with the challenges that come with being overweight, another large portion of the world searches for authentic cuisine that will make their holidays a memorable experience. This is where the importance of the concept of food literacy comes into play. It is necessary to reach and influence large communities to raise awareness of the society about food and nutrition. The purpose of this study is to uncover food literacy awareness and the meaning assigned to it in the tourism community by using a semi-structured interview form. The findings reveal that tourism stakeholders have a misunderstanding of food literacy. People who have heard this phrase previously are almost entirely wrong about its definition, but those who haven't heard it before can roughly anticipate its subheadings. However, all the participants believed that having detailed information about food and nutrition is essential.

Keywords: *Food consumption, food literacy, tourism*

Turizm Alanında Gıda Okuryazarlığı Anlayışı

Öz

Dünyanın önemli bir kısmı aşırı kilolu olmanın getirdiği zorluklarla mücadele ederken, dünyanın bir başka büyük kısmı da tatillerini unutulmaz bir deneyim haline getirecek otantik mutfağı arıyor. İşte burada gıda okuryazarlığı kavramının önemi devreye giriyor. Toplumunu gıda ve beslenme konusunda bilinçlendirmek için geniş kitlelere ulaşmak ve onları etkilemek gerektiği açıktır. Bu nedenle, önemli turizm paydaşlarını içeren bir örneklem grubuyla çalışarak konuyu tümevarımcı bir yaklaşım ile ele almak büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, turizm camiasında

gıda okuryazarlığı farkındalığını ve ona yüklenen anlamı yarı yapılandırılmış bir görüşme formu kullanarak ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bulgular, turizm paydaşlarının gıda okuryazarlığını yanlış anladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu kavramı daha önce duyanlar, tanımı konusunda neredeyse tamamen yanılmaktadır; ancak daha önce duymamış olduğunu ifade edenler bu kavramın alt başlıklarını kabaca tahmin edebilmiştir. Ancak tüm katılımcılar, gıda ve beslenme hakkında detaylı bilgiye sahip olmanın gerekli olduğu konusunda hemfikirdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gıda tüketimi, gıda okuryazarlığı, turizm*

Introduction

Considering the mortality rates in the world, it is seen that one out of every five people dies due to poor dietary habits (Murray, 2019). Although eating habits do not always lead to death, it is obvious that they significantly reduce the quality of life of people. Malnutrition can result in cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, and overweight (Rosas, Pimenta, Isabel and Schwarzer, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the obesity rate increased 3 times between 1975 and 2016 and the overweight rate is nearly 2 billion people in adults who are 18 or over (WHO, 2020). Lack of information can be predicted as one of the factors that have an impact on poor entry on this subject. In this context, health literacy, food literacy, and nutrition literacy concepts are frequently mentioned in recent years. According to Velardo (2015), health literacy means the knowledge and the usage of health-related information, while food literacy and nutrition literacy are defined as effective weapons to protect public health.

Although there is no consensus on the definition of food literacy in the literature, this concept simply means having knowledge about food (process, origin, ingredients, etc.) and acting accordingly (Durmuş, Balcı, Oral and Sonkaya, 2018). It is well known that knowledge of healthy foods affects a person's behaviour through healthy eating motivation (Miller and Cassidy, 2012). For this very reason, the importance of people who have an impact on large

masses of people to be food literate stands out. Although there are many ways to reach large masses, it is an undeniable fact that tourism professionals are one of those who appeal to the masses and influence them due to the high participation in tourism. It is known that nearly 1.5 billion people participated in the tourism movement in the last year before the pandemic (UNWTO, 2019). In this sector, where billions of people travel every year, the issue of food consumption happens to be very important. These tourists are in constant consumption during their travels, when they arrive at their destinations, at their hotels, restaurants, and during their shopping. In this consumption, they always need advice because they are outside of the environment, they usually live in. In this context, the knowledge level of tourist guides, tourism operators, and all other tourism employees about food literacy is quite important. And it should not be forgotten that food is an important part of a tourist's choice of destination (Frolova, Rogach and Ryabova, 2020).

In this study, it was aimed to measure the awareness of academicians who train tourism personnel, graduate students who take tourism education at a high level, and various tourism professionals to the concept of food literacy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to understand the thoughts of tourism professionals about food literacy, who are believed to have an impact on large masses (Wirawan,

Wirawan, Kurniasari and Merati, 2020). The study is unique in that it examines the concept of food literacy, which has not yet been reconciled in tourism literature.

Food and Tourism

Food has an important place in the tourism sector as well as being the biological needs of people. Food issues in tourism as a tourist phenomenon can be studied in many contexts socioculturally (Aslimoski and Gerasimoski, 2012). In a study investigating the food consumption motivations of tourists, 14 different factors were found. These are: “authentic experience, prestige, cultural knowledge, health concern, assurance, convenience, price/value, novelty, variety, familiarity, eating habit, sensory pleasure, social pleasure, and contextual pleasure” (Mak, Lumbers, Eves and Chang, 2013). Authentic experience and cultural knowledge refer to local food and food which shows the local culture of the destination, prestige is about finding the chance to eat unique and famous food, health concern and assurance are under the obligatory heading and they refer to being sure what to eat and knowing about the ingredients, convenient is named to emphasize they wouldn't want to pay more than the food are worth, novelty and variety are for the people seeking for new kinds of food and the other aspects are aiming for pleasure (Mak, Lumbers, Eves and Chang, 2013).

Aslimoski and Gerasimoski (2012) mentioned in their study that there are different expectations while traveling and some tourists' core motivation in a destination can be food and nutrition. Food and nutrition-related products and services offered to visitors during vacation also affect tourists' enjoyment and duration of stay. In this case, it can easily be said that if the expectations are covered, the tourists get satisfied, but it is seen that it is not always in this way. In some cases, being a vegetarian creates

instability in participating in the tourism movement. The reason for this may be the lack of awareness of visitors with different eating habits, which are seen as minorities, and the lack of appropriate menus everywhere (Huang, Chen, Lu and Shen, 2019). The food knowledge of the companies and their attention is quite important in this issue. A tourist mostly has in mind the food he or she has eaten before and is prone to. The underlying reason for this is that they know better what its ingredients are and how it is prepared. In this context, when the tourists see that specially prepared and presented food is presented to them with a special subscription, their holiday can turn into a unique experience (Aslimoski and Gerasimoski, 2012). Therefore, some people can get nervous about tasting local food. Sometimes, even though they know that it is not healthy, people may prefer fast food to meals they have never tasted before. A study conducted on a group of students traveling from China to England shows that these people prefer global food companies in their food preferences (Yen, Cappellini, Wang and Nguyen, 2018). Going after these (so-called junk food) can release crucial health issues. There is also a small link between globalization and tourism, which develops at an uncontrolled pace day by day, can lead to income inequalities and this can force people to change their eating habits with affordable and unhealthy foods. Although it is not argued in the study that tourism is exactly the reason for this, it depends on the attitudes of individuals and societies (Leatherman and Goodman, 2005).

Food also has a lot to do with culture. Hearing the local music in the restaurant, seeing the art on the walls, and learning about the architectural structure of the restaurant can all signify a lot to a tourist in a cultural sense (Aslimoski and Gerasimoski, 2012). Tourists now have new interests and as a result, new types of tourism

are emerging. One of the issues that tourists are starting to demand is the requests related to food and nutrition. In tourism destinations that can be named as developed tourism destinations, special interest groups are offered tours under the name of culinary tourism. The content of these tours can be quite interesting. Here, not only tasting but also participating in the preparation stages of the guests are provided to have this authentic experience. They buy products from local vendors and dine at the area's famous restaurants. In addition, we have the chance to see and taste products unique to that culture, which will enable them to get to know that culture (Aslimoski and Gerasimoski, 2012). It is seen in the present literature that people who are seeking for nice food and health-related tourism, open new doors to the sector. For example, in the simplest terms, olive oil tourism has developed in recent years and the reason for this is the motivation of people to experience healthy food (Hwang and Quadri-Felitti, 2021). To reconcile tourism with food, you don't even need to monitor people or quantify their effects. Even the nutritional habits of animals living in regions with high tourism can change. Some animals suffer how tourists feed them (Abrantes, Brunschweiler and Barnett, 2018), but on the other hand, the movement they have to do improves their fitness (Norkaew et al., 2019). In tourism, where even the health of animals is affected, it becomes very important for people to be conscious and knowledgeable. In this context, the importance of the concept of food literacy comes to the fore in this field as in other fields.

Food Literacy

Food-related issues have started to be raised more and more in our contemporary society. The only reason for this is that it is not only the calories and nutrients needed by the human body, but also it is one of the basic building blocks of culture and society (Gartaula, Patel, Shukla and

Devkota, 2020). People want to learn about the ingredients of the food they eat, where it comes from, and their cultural characteristics. Literacy, which is seen in many areas, is also included in the subject of food in this context (Gartaula et. al., 2020). Kohls (1960) is perhaps one of the first researchers to use the concept of food literacy in history. His perspective was mostly on the marketing strategies of restaurants and understanding the wishes of the customers. As with every concept, food literacy has changed a lot over the years. It is also possible to call them development rather than change because every new concept continues by adding something to it, not contrary to the previous ones. In the last decades, the concept of food literacy has been defined by researchers in different ways. Some put forward food literacy is the ability of a person to acquire information about food and nutrition and to apply them in order to lead a healthy life (Kolasa, Perry, Harris and Shovelin, 2001). Where some other studies more emphasize the skills to prepare healthy and tasty meals starting from their own family (Thomas and Irwin, 2011). Two experts who examined past studies and worked on the subject for many years, made a neat definition of food literacy as follows:

Food literacy is the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time. It is composed of a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills, and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat food to meet needs and determine intake (Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014, p. 54).

While they were putting forward components of food literacy as plan and manage, select, prepare, and eat, Cullen, Hatch, Martin, Higgins and Sheppard (2015) brought forward the term as an intersection of community food security and individual food skills. They stated that all this

cluster constitutes health and wellbeing. In this list of components, community food securities subheadings are “local food system, programs, access, availability, affordability” and the individual food skills subheadings are “knowledge, access, values, beliefs, and culture” (Cullen et al., 2015, p. 143).

It has been frequently emphasized in the past literature that the fewer people know about food, the more neophobia they have. In their study on local food consumption, Kim, Eves, and Scarles (2013) drew attention to the importance of food neophobia and food involvement in personality traits specific to food-related situations. In the motivational characteristics, it was emphasized that the factors of “cultural experience, interpersonal relationship, excitement, health concern, and sensory appeal” (Kim, Eves and Scarles, 2013, p. 484) were effective in consuming local foods. While some people hesitate to try the local food abroad in case health issues popped out, usually the global fast foods are most probably worst in terms of this subject. Also, it is shown in a former study that local food is usually freshly produced and served, and this is much more likely to satisfy customer health concerns (Kim, Eves and Scarles, 2013). In a study conducted in Yucatan, it was stated that although tourism brought welfare and job opportunities to the local people, it was obvious that it caused a lot of damage to public health and the environment (Leatherman, and Goodman, 2005). In this study, it is aimed to emphasize the importance of the food literacy knowledge of the tourism employees, and anyone related to tourism. This issue is seen as the missing piece of the tourism puzzle where various research has been done on this subject.

Methodology

This research covers the concept of food literacy, which is seen as a distant subject for tourism. Although this concept has been defined many

times in the current literature, the evaluation of the perspectives of staff, students, or even academicians related to tourism has been ignored. Creswell (2017) states that qualitative research focuses on learning the meaning that the participants attribute to the phenomenon, not the researcher or the authors in the literature. He likens research to draw a general picture of the underlying problem or thought. Precisely from this point of view, a qualitative research method was used to understand and reveal how the concept is perceived in the tourism sector and whether there is a general knowledge about this subject.

In the study, a semi-structured interview form consisting of 5 questions was prepared by inspiring from the question range of the previous studies and adding to them (McNamara, Mena, Neptune and Parsons, 2021; Ronto, Ball, Pendergast and Harris, 2016; Rosas, Pimenta, Leal and Schwarzer, 2019). Here, the thoughts formed in the minds of the participants with the concept of food literacy and the relationship between food and tourism are examined. Tourism professionals, tourism academics, and tourism graduate students were selected as the samples, as they have been trained in tourism for a long time and may have heard of different concepts. The study was prepared in accordance with the ethical principles, and it is approved by Aksaray University Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 2022/01-03) on 22 February 2022. In studies like this, purposeful sampling, one of the improbable sampling types, is used when the researcher aims to understand and explore a concept, topic, or event from the perspective of the participants (Patton, 2002). Because of the implementation of a curfew due to the COVID-19 measures in the country where the study was conducted, the data collection process was carried out online. The consent of all interviewees who would contribute to the study was obtained and the study

was ethically tested and approved by the board. The qualitative data analysis program MAXQ-DA 2018 was used to see similar and different opinions together and to make a detailed analysis. The opinions of the participants were first translated into English and then translated into the language in which the interview was made by a different author and translation was provided. This process was also done while creating codes and themes, and opinions were received by experts in their field. A similar one of these checks is a pilot test conducted with 10 different people in order to measure the comprehensibility of the questions before starting the study.

Results

Interviews were conducted with 19 different people in the study. The sample consists of 9 women and 10 men. In interviews with almost half the sex ratio, the age scale of the participants is 22 to 49. Except for a high school graduate who is a tourism staff, all other participants have a postgraduate level. Among the academic participants of tourism, 5 are academicians and 6 are students. Those working in the tourism sector consist of 3 people working in the hotel business, 3 tour guides, 1 travel agency employee, and 1 cabin crew. Before analyzing the answers given, it was deemed necessary to create a word cloud in order to look at the event from a wider window and to perceive the general view of the participants. The word cloud is as in Figure 1.

Figure 1. General word cloud of the study



When talking about food literacy, and the importance of tourism personnel being food literate, the first expressions in the mind of participants were “content, quality, culture, information, knowledge, service, and experience.” Most of these words became codes and themes when the readings are detailed. Also, it won’t be wrong to say these are some of the ingredients of the food literacy domains.

Food and Tourism

Rather than asking the participants directly about the more detailed concept of food literacy, it was more appropriate to start with a soft question such as how you reconcile tourism and food issues. People travel to participate in the tourism movement. To embark on this trip, they need financial means, free time, and most importantly, a motivation that drives them. As it is frequently mentioned in the literature, one of the most important of these motivations is food consumption. This consumption can be to taste local foods, to keep fit while on vacation, or just to fill one’s stomach. The pattern derived from the responses of our participant audience, who are intertwined with the tourism sector, reveals the connections between the two concepts more clearly. It is possible to analyse the views resulting from the coding of the transcripts under four themes: cultural expectations, essential needs, gastronomic requirements, and economic factors.

Cultural Needs

It was emphasized that the way to get to know the people living in the destinations and to satisfy the sense of curiosity we involuntarily develop towards them is to consume local foods. Participants put forward the link between tourism and food as follows:

“The number of individuals whose motivation to travel is based on discovering and experien-

cing the eating and drinking habits of different cultures is increasing day by day” (Participant 7).

“As much as we are curious about the touristic places, history, and culture of a place, we also want to experience different foods and flavours” (Participant 1).

Raising the bar a little further, participant 18 highlights the following feature in tourists’ travel motivations.

“Recently, the desire to experience the local food and beverages of the destinations comes at the top of the travel motivations of domestic and foreign tourists” (Participant 18).

Essential Needs

Food and beverage are mostly founded as an obligatory need of human beings. This issue won’t change even though a person is on a vacation. Participants strongly indicated this fact in different words.

“One of the compulsory needs of individuals who go out of their places of residence for various reasons and participate in activities that constitute the basis of tourism is food and beverage” (Participant 19).

“When a person travels for tourism, he must also fill his stomach. Because eating is a physical need” (Participant 12).

“Food is a basic need; it is our first need wherever we are” (Participant 9).

Gastronomic Requirements

People besides seeing the beauties of the destinations, day by day their expectations about having a nice quality meal increase. While participant 17 emphasizes *“The quality of the food service offered will also have positive effects on the person engaged in tourism activi-*

ties” (Participant 17), participant 18 highlights more specific areas as *“...attend food festivals, taste olive oil, and wine, attend cooking classes, and visit vineyards” (Participant 18).* One other thought explains the situation by supporting this idea with the emerging education system in this field.

“The concept of gastronomy tourism became popular, gastronomy tours serving the mentioned motivation increased and schools were established at high school, associate degree, undergraduate and graduate levels aiming to train competent personnel within this field. All these show that there is a growing, popular, and important connection between the concepts of tourism and food.” (Participant 7).

Economic Factors

A large part of the economic income of some countries is provided by tourism, which is called flueless industry. It is also important to market and diversifies the tourism product well in order to increase tourism inputs. These thoughts poured out of the tongue with these sentences:

“Food is an important factor in diversifying tourism products” (Participant 15).

“...the concept of food is a great source of income for tourism” (Participant 16).

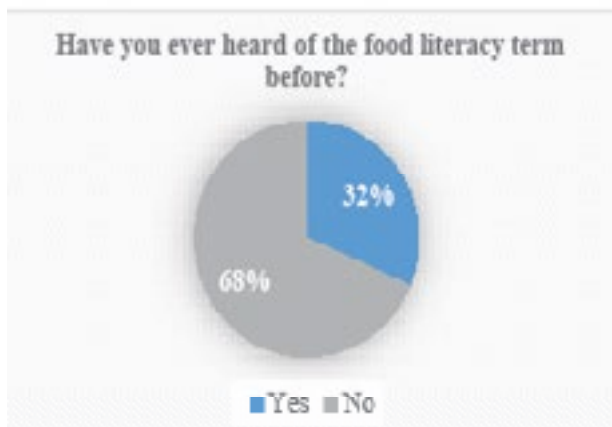
“This contribution also develops the region or nation where the tourism activity is carried out, both economically and in terms of advertising” (Participant 8).

Food Literacy

In the interviews held with the employees, academicians, and graduate students related to the tourism sector, it was determined that everyone, without exception, associated tourism, and food under different topics. At this point, the issue of whether the sample had never heard of the concept of food literacy gained importance.

Findings on familiarity with the concept of food literacy are as in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Familiarity with the concept of food literacy



Although it is known that the importance of food in tourism is high, it is understood that the concept of food literacy is a little new to tourism with 68% of the answers. For this very reason, when presenting the results, opinions and expressions about food literacy will be divided into those who have heard of the concept before and those who have heard it for the first time.

Those Who Have Not Heard of Food Literacy

Surprisingly, it is seen that people who told that they heard the concept for the first time in their lives knew the subject more deeply and even gave features that fit some of the definitions in the literature. The words in Figure 3 were spoken by those who had never heard of this term before.

Some of the definitions of food literacy that appeared in the minds of the participants who haven't yet heard the term are as follows.

"...to know the details such as production, functioning, presentation, seasoning and service in different cultures" (Participant 8).

"...to be able to master the terminology of the contents written on the food products" (Participant 16).

"...researching whether the foods we produce are healthy or not." (Participant 3).

"...the content (ingredient) of the food" (Participant 17).

Those Who Have Heard of Food Literacy

When the comments of those who know about this concept, which relatively few people know, are examined, they can only refer to three of the codes given in the previous section, far from a comprehensive definition. The resulting themes can be listed as research, label reading, health issues.

"Reading and critical evaluation of the articles about Food and Nutrition are the first statements that come to my mind" (Participant 18).

"It can be considered as a detailed examination of the foods we eat and drink and transferring this information to other people" (Participant 4).

"To do research about products, cuisine type and history. In short, to research and read about food and have knowledge about it (Participant 5).

"Knowing the terms indicating the content of the product information, reading it, something like the product MSDS" (Participant 14).

"Knowing the food additives, codes and ingredients on packaged foods" (Participant 13).

"...nutrition, agriculture, organic, health" (Participant 19).

Basically, it can be said that knowledge part is an essential part of food literacy and people who are in the tourism sector are asked how they are collecting information about food-related issues. Mostly it is seen that participants tend to collect information from the internet and social media. The other sources they use, which or not that relevant are publications, verbal sources, tv, and other tourism employees.

Figure 3. Those who have not heard of food literacy



Possible Benefits of Being a Food Literate Tourism Worker

This part of the results is very crucial in terms of giving an idea to measure the necessity of the study. Participants who are related to tourism think that it will provide various advantages for people who will work in this field to be food literate. The most notable finding is that the quality will increase. They explain this situation in the following terms:

“Businesses that have detailed information about the nutritional values and nutrition of foods may plan the menu more effectively” (Participant 18).

“In order to provide quality service, it is of great importance that employees have sufficient and accurate information and can transfer this information appropriately, especially in work environments such as the tourism sector, where customers and employees have to be in constant interaction. A tourist group who has travelled to get to know and experience different foods and beverages will be able to obtain correct information about the foods, and management by people with up-to-date literature will increase tourist satisfaction and thus increase the popularity of the current destination day by day.” (Participant 7)

“As in everything else, being conscious about food and doing research leads us to good quality food. The fact that tourists are looking for quality, requires tourism businesses to be high quality” (Participant 5).

Knowledge has also been frequently emphasized as what reveals the quality and even as the element that plays a mediating role in customer satisfaction. Apart from this, it was emphasized that the issue has special importance for ensuring customer health. They emphasized it in their own words as:

“Because, thanks to food literacy, food and products that threaten human health are prevented from being included in the menus. In this way, the satisfaction of the tourist increases and the health of the tourists is also protected” (Participant 18).

“Tourists with allergic reactions know what they consume as content” (Participant 14).

“Informing about food or hygiene” (Participant 10).

And finally, it has been suggested that being food literate will contribute to the sector economically. Lastly, they expressed their opinions on the economic effects as follows:

“This increases the product range and marketing diversity. It is also expected to make an economic contribution” (Participant 8).

“These advantages are the reduction of the costs of the enterprises and the prevention of waste” (Participant 18).

Conclusion

The feedback from the participants in this research, which set out to see if there is a place for healthy eating, knowing about foods and nutrients, and having information about them in tourism, reveal how important this issue is. To be clear, none of the tourism sector employees interviewed can confidently define the concept of food literacy. The fact that at the beginning of the study, the researcher found almost no studies in the literature that associated food literacy with tourism, explains this situation. The main result of the study is that tourism professionals find this issue very important, but at the same time they do not have detailed information about it. The best thing to do in this regard is to increase the courses related to food and nutrition during tourism education and to ensure that each tourism personnel graduates as a food literate. In addition, food literacy trainings can be provided through certificate programs, which can put job-seeking tourism graduates one step ahead in the sector. It is suggested that researchers who plan to work by reconciling these two issues in the future should also examine the issue from the perspective of tourists.

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