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## Experiences gained through absorption of and immersion in destinations' food event - case evidence from Finnish travellers

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## **Experiences Gained through Absorption of and Immersion in Destinations' Food Events**

### **– Case Evidence from Finnish Travellers**

A destination's foodscape comprises various food events. It invites travellers to gain experiences by staying passive and absorbing information or participating in the events in a multisensory and immersive manner. This study aims to explore the various roles of travellers at their destinations' food events and the importance of the basic human senses for travellers' food experiences. The empirical data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire distributed to Finnish travellers at the MATKA Nordic Travel Fair in Helsinki. The empirical findings validate previous studies claiming that food and eating experiences at destinations contribute to travel satisfaction. The findings also show that experiences are gained through the absorption of and immersion in destinations' food events. Both provide experience value to travellers. In addition, the findings have implications for destinations' marketing organisations in showing that a destination's foodscape can and should combine different types of food events.

Keywords: absorption, experiences, food events, immersion, sensual stimulation



## INTRODUCTION

People's daily activities greatly change during vacations and holidays away from home. Nevertheless, as one of the basic human needs, eating remains a vital part of travellers' daily routines. Thus, travellers' experience change according to the types of foods and drinks consumed and the place and time of consumption.

In their recent study, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019) hold that travellers typically consume food at various events. These situations vary according to the environment, whether these are organised or non-organised, the participants at the event and whether the participants are travellers or residents. Food experiences emerge in organised environments, such as hotel areas, bars and farms, which are particularly staged as tourism attractions and intended for travellers (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). On the contrary, other organised places, such as retail stores, market squares and food markets, are established to serve primarily the needs of local inhabitants. Experiences also evolve in non-organised environments, which are mostly used by travellers (e.g. accessible beaches and streets) and locals (e.g. at residents' homes and remote and inaccessible [for tourists] beaches, streets and roadsides).

The experiences are driven by contemporary travellers' interest in what food various destinations can provide, such as local ingredients, flavours and food products and traditional but exotic dishes (e.g. Long, 2010). Previous studies that focus on food experiences reveal that travellers' personal interests and motivations in regard to food affect their experiences with food during their holidays abroad (e.g. Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016a; 2016b). Research also shows that travellers greatly desire experiencing changes to one's everyday life, which destinations' food responds to (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016a; 2016b; Richards, 2002). Hence, participation in destinations' food events allows food experiences to evolve

(Long, 2010). Some of these experiences are common, whereas some are extraordinary to a certain extent (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016b). Regardless, a destination's culture and unique cuisine may trigger travellers' travel motivation and determine their destination choice (e.g. Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Boniface, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Kivela & Crofts, 2005; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009). Although past research does not provide evidence of the difference between various food events' contribution to food experiences, the importance of a destination's foodscape and its various food events are well acknowledged in the literature. That is, past research shows how food experiences contribute to travel satisfaction, revisit intentions and a holistic travel experience and holistic travel experience (e.g. Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017a; 2017b; Kim et al., 2011; Neild, Kozak, & LeGrys, 2000).

This study focuses on a destination's foodscape, which comprises various food events. The study is based on two basic premises. First, the study is based on the idea that travellers may play various roles at destinations' food events. These events contribute to the traveller's experiences, which may vary according to whether the traveller participates actively or passively in an event. According to the idea by Pine and Gilmore (1999), travellers may take part in events by playing various roles. That is, the traveller may take a passive role and absorb information or take an active, participatory role and immerse him/herself in a food event (Caru & Cova, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Yet, this issue has received little scholarly attention within the research on travellers' food experiences. Second, the study is based on the notion that destinations' events stimulate the basic senses of humans, which ideally contribute to good food experiences. Related to that past research has contributed with insights into the internal or intrinsic aspects of food, such as food's locality and traditionality. Many studies show how these aspects are essential features of a destination's food culture and cuisine as the contemporary traveller perceives that these food aspects contribute to good experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016b; Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher,

2007; Quan & Wang, 2004). The recent concept of gastrophysics holds that food experiences are also composed of such aspects as the colour of the crockery on which food is served, the weight of the cutlery and the sound and lighting at the event where food is consumed (Spence, 2018). Indeed, research within a given foodscape, dinescape and platescape supports the importance of the external aspects of food and the idea that basic senses affect food experiences (Cummins & Macintyre, 2002; Mikkelsen, 2011; Ryu, 2005; Sobal & Wansink, 2007). Various food events engage travellers in different manners, and it can be assumed that the basic senses are stimulated particularly in food encounters which are immersive. Yet, the external or extrinsic aspects of food that most likely also contribute to travellers' food experiences have received less scholarly attention.

The previous discussion implies that human-related aspects and foods' external aspects need careful attention as they also influence travellers' food experiences. Hence, an interesting question is, are all the stimulated senses important for food experiences, including in cases where the traveller takes a passive role by observing a food event? To answer this question, the present research takes a case study approach and explores the various roles of travellers at destinations' food events and the importance of humans' basic senses in travellers' food experiences. The case evidence is gathered from among Finnish travellers. The study investigates the following:

- 1) How destinations' food events affect travel intention
- 2) How a traveller's role relates to events that contribute to their food and eating experiences
- 3) How a traveller's role relates to humans' basic senses that affect travellers' food experiences at various events
- 4) How destinations' food events add to travel satisfaction

## **EXPERIENCES LIVED THROUGH ABSORPTION AND IMMERSION**

A destination's food culture and unique cuisines are made of local ingredients, flavours and food products as well as traditional but exotic dishes. Such characteristics are acknowledged within the field of gastronomy, which stresses not only food culture and uniqueness but also highlights the role of traditions, food preparation and cooking as well as rules and norms related to eating and drinking (Santich, 2004; Hegarty & O'Mahony, 2001). Sims (2009) specifies that destinations – whether entire countries or local areas – are identified by their gastronomy. Indeed, tourism destinations are identified by their gastronomy and attached to unique dishes; for example, Greece is identified by feta cheese and colourful salads, Japan is known for sushi and Britain is attached to fish and chips.

The food culture and unique cuisine contribute to the appeal of a destination's foodscape and its various events. These events allow experiences to evolve, some of which are common, whereas others are extraordinary to a certain extent (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016b). As they vary from everyday experiences at home, a destination's foodscape and associated events are able to attract the attention of various types of travellers. Although food events such as farms and food markets may originally have started to serve the needs of local inhabitants, the fact is that the various events at destinations are increasingly acknowledged as essential tourist attractions (de Jong & Varley, 2017; Frisby & Getz, 1989; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012). These events have transformed from basic community service encounters to tourism attractions, which also provide means for destinations to develop (Getz, 1997).

The various events at destinations and travellers' participation in and connection to them provide various options, one being that not all travellers are involved and committed and wish to be active in an event (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017b).

Pine and Gilmore (1999) explain how consumers can take different positions on service encounters. They have suggested that participation can be categorised into active and passive participation. Firstly, a traveller may participate passively and thus does not affect the event. In such cases, the traveller is rather an observer at the event. For example, the traveller may watch farm and food demonstrations at a food market from a distance or just pass by (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Secondly, the traveller may participate actively at an event by actively creating or co-creating an event, for example, by eating local dishes and tasting local ingredients and products (Kauppinen-Räsänen, Gummerus, Lehtola, 2013; Organ, et al., 2015). In these scenarios, the traveller personally affects the event compared with passive participation, where the traveller does not directly affect the event. Pine and Gilmore (1999) have also asserted that experiences can be described based on how the traveller connects to the event. These dimensions are defined as follows. Absorption means ‘occupying a person’s attention by bringing the experience into the mind’, and immersion is ‘becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 31). Hence, the traveller can either absorb or immerse him/herself in the event. Travellers observing a food event absorb the event, whereas those living the event with all their basic senses are immersed in the event. Therefore, absorption implies taking an interest in an event, whereas immersion means merging deeply within the event.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined four types of experiences based on the four aspects, referring to these experiences as realms having different combinations of passive–active participation and absorption–immersion experiences (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The four dimensions of an experience (modified from Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 30)

INSERT FIGURE HERE

Firstly, as a form of entertainment, an experience implies that the traveller's participation is rather passive and that the experience 'goes into the customer' (Mossberg, 2015). Secondly, the traveller's connection to an event is considered an absorptive experience. An absorptive connection to an event is also suggested for educational experiences, such as culinary tours, in which the traveller is expected to be active. Thirdly, escapist experiences, such as a cooking class, involve active participation and immersion, and the customer 'goes into the experience' (Mossberg, 2015). Fourthly, aesthetic experience implies a passive participation though the traveller may be immersed in the event.

Memorable experiences and those that affect behaviour encompass all the aspects of the four realms (Stone, et al., 2018). It is also noteworthy that travellers are part of an event and serve as one of the cues affecting other travellers' experiences even if they play a passive role at the event (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008).

## **METHOD**

A quantitative research approach was applied for empirical analysis. In addition, this study employed a survey research method using a self-administered questionnaire.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data used for this study were collected through a questionnaire distributed to people visiting the MATKA Nordic Travel Fair, an annual travel fair in Helsinki, Finland (MATKA Nordic

Travel Fair, 2017). This fair attracts visitors of different ages and genders from all over Finland. People visit the travel fair to obtain the latest information, inspiration and special offers. The authors of this study are interested in Finnish tourists' travel behaviour and food experiences within tourism. Thus, the fair was considered a suitable place to reach respondents who are in a mood to travel and are looking for travel information (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017a).

The questionnaire used in this study was developed and tested for validity and reliability by Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016a, 2016b). In the current chapter, the study takes a case study approach in which the unit of analysis is the Finnish traveller (e.g. Yin, 2009), which here is considered as the case. The results from two sections of a lengthy questionnaire are reported in this chapter. The first section was used to measure the respondents' demographic profile (gender, age, marital status and educational level), travel behaviour (in terms of number of annual national and international holiday trips), travel companion and perceived travel experience ('How experienced are you as a traveller?'). Two questions were asked to monitor the respondents' general interest in food and determine whether food is a motive for travelling. In addition, two questions were also used to measure whether expected good and different food experiences would influence the respondent's destination choice. Finally, one question was asked to determine whether food and eating at travel destinations add value to the traveller's travel experiences. For these questions, the respondents were given a four-point Likert scale (from 1 = not at all to 4 = extremely) from which to gauge their answers (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017b).

The second section of the questionnaire showed different items that may influence the respondents' food experiences at destinations. Their answers are provided on a four-point Likert scale (from 1 = not at all to 4 = extremely). Eleven items specified as food events were used to measure the influence of different eating encounters of two main categories, namely immersive and absorptive. Six food and eating encounters were defined as immersive as they

are characterised by presence and doing, while five encounters were defined as absorptive as they are characterised by feeling and learning (Mossberg, 2015).

The sample profile, that is, the demographics of the respondents, was identified using frequency analysis. An independent sample t-test, correlation analysis, and analysis of variances were conducted to examine the significant differences in factors that influence food experiences at destinations with a focus on the relevance of the basic senses in immersive and absorptive experiences.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Sample profile**

The respondents' demographic profile portrays a sample of middle-aged individuals (mean age 45 years) with travel histories matching that of the Finnish population, that is, two national and two international vacation trips annually (Statistics Finland) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of the sample

<b>Sample profile (n = 243)</b>		
Gender	Women	200 (82.3%)
	Men	43 (17.7%)
Age	Mean age	45.68 (s = 15.17)
Social status	Unmarried	75 (31.5%)
	Married	136 (57.1%)
	Other	27 (11.3%)
Education	Elementary school	21 (8.7%)
	High school/vocational	122 (50.4%)
	University	99 (40.9%)
Number of annual domestic leisure trips	1	34 (14.0%)
	2	122 (50.2%)
	3	52 (21.4%)
	4	35 (14.4%)
Number of annual international leisure trips	1	16 (6.6%)
	2	163 (67.1%)
	3	52 (21.4%)
	4	12 (4.9%)

Furthermore, the sample matches the visitor characteristics of the MATKA Nordic Travel Fair (2017). However, compared with Statistics Finland, the data are partially biased as women are overrepresented in the sample (Statistic Finland, 2020).

The results presented in Table 2 document the importance of food and travel experiences for Finnish travellers.

**Table 2.** Food as a motive for travelling and experiences

<b>Food as a motive for travelling and experiences</b>	Mean	Std Dev.
How important is food for the success of your trip?	2.56	0.781
How important is food as a motive for travelling?	2.73	0.834
How important are good food experiences for your destination choice?	2.58	0.816
How important are different food experiences for your destination choice?	2.48	0.768
Do food experiences add value to travel experiences?	3.05	0.723

At a destination, food can be experienced in an active–immersive manner as the tourist is participating in the consumption processes or in a passive–absorptive way by experiencing the food at a distance. Nevertheless, good food and eating experiences, whether active or

passive, emerge in immersion and absorption processes in various destinations' food events, as shown in Table 3. Furthermore, immersive ( $p = 0.000$ ) and absorptive ( $p = 0.000$ ) food encounters add positively to overall travel satisfaction.

**Table 3.** Places where good food and eating experiences emerge on a destination

<b>Places where good food and eating experiences emerge</b>		
<b>Immersion</b>	Mean	Std Dev
Hotel restaurants	2.23	0.837
Market squares	2.38	0.818
Home of locals	2.15	0.958
Streets	2.24	0.883
Food markets	2.14	0.844
Hiking tours	2.25	0.848
<b>Absorption</b>		
Food and ingredients sold at markets	2.28	0.826
Food and ingredients sold on street	2.22	0.835
Food and ingredients sold in stores	2.43	0.769
Food and ingredients sold at farms	2.27	0.866
Food and ingredients sold alongside roads in the countryside	1.96	0.874

The importance of the basic senses for food experiences at destinations and the figures presented in Table 4 provide evidence that food experiences are multisensorial experiences. However, the Pearson correlation analysis shows that 'taste' does not significantly add value to food and eating experiences in all encounters (underlined figures = non-significant).

**Table 4.** Food encounters and the basic senses

	<b>Senses for food experiences</b>							
	<b>Smell</b>		<b>Vision</b>		<b>Touch</b>		<b>Taste</b>	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
	2.86	0.781	0.95	0.781	2.37	0.925	3.04	0.764
<b>Correlations</b>								
<b>Immersive events</b>								
When eating in hotel restaurants	0.324**		0.351**		0.311**		0.153*	
When eating at market squares	0.349**		0.242**		0.386**		0.306**	
When eating in the home of locals	0.201**		0.139*		0.378**		<u>0.081</u>	
When eating street foods	0.214**		0.155*		0.251**		0.187**	
When eating at food markets	0.208**		0.141*		0.290**		<u>0.097</u>	
When eating on hiking tours	0.329**		0.171**		0.321**		0.146*	
<b>Absorptive events</b>								
Food and ingredients sold at markets	0.298**		0.180**		0.303**		0.165*	
Food and ingredients sold on streets	0.268**		0.206**		0.318**		0.180**	
Food and ingredients sold in stores	0.271**		0.291**		0.259**		0.252**	

Food and ingredients sold at farms	0.312**	0.255**	0.382**	<u>0.131</u>
Food and ingredients sold alongside roads in the countryside	0.234**	0.135*	0.330**	<u>0.049</u>

\*\* = significant at the 0.01 level. \* = significant at the 0.05 level

Based on the traveller's level of interest in food (motive for travelling), they were grouped into three categories. Firstly, the findings show that some tourists (referred to as 'foodies') find destination food experiences to be a very strong motive for traveling. These foodies are essentially driven by the destination's food culture and local cuisine. Secondly, the findings imply that other travellers (referred to as 'casual foodies') are moderately interested in food. Thirdly, a percentage of the travellers (referred as 'survivors') do not pay much attention to food. They eat mainly to boost their energy. Lastly, the findings of a one-way analysis of variance revealed that foodies find greater pleasure in all types of food events – immersive and absorptive – and that there is also a significant difference between the casual foodies and survivors based on compared mean differences (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Food events that interests different groups of travellers

Two types of food events	Three groups of travellers					
	Survivors		Causal foodies		Foodies	
Immersive events	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
	1.967	0.531	2.254	0.629	2.831	0.626
	<b>Survivors</b>		0.286**		0.664**	
	<b>Causal foodies</b>				0.377**	
Absorptive events	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
	1.932	0.551	2.284	0.666	2.686	0.728
	<b>Survivors</b>		0.351**		0.758**	
	<b>Causal foodies</b>				0.402**	

\*\* = significant at the 0.01 level. \* = significant at the 0.05 level

The three groups of travellers were also analysed for differences in demographic characteristics and travel behaviour, but no significant differences are to be reported.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study analyses various food encounters that are valuable for Finnish travellers using a self-administered questionnaire distributed at the biggest tourism fair in the Nordic countries. The study focuses on destinations' foodscapes, which comprise various types of food events. These events can be categorised based on the environment, whether organised or non-organised, and the participants, whether travellers or residents. The events are established to allow travellers to gain experiences by staying passive and absorbing information or participating in the events in a multisensory and immersive manner.

This study aims to explore the various roles of travellers at a destination's food events and the importance of the basic human senses for travellers' food experiences. Firstly, the empirical findings presented in this study validate previous studies claiming that destinations' food trigger travel motivation (e.g. Boniface, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Kivela & Crofts, 2005; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009). The findings also support past studies in that travellers have a great interest in positive experiences and that they desire change from their normal routine during their travels (e.g. Richards, 2002). Hence, the study found that expected good and different food experiences affect destination choice (e.g. Boniface, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Kivela & Crofts, 2005; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009). Furthermore, the findings also show that food experiences contribute to travellers' holistic travel satisfaction (e.g. Kim et al., 2011; Neild, Kozak, & LeGrys, 2000).

Secondly, the findings show that experiences are gained through absorption of and immersion in destinations' food events. The findings show evidence that absorptive and immersive food encounters add value to travellers' food experiences. Using the framework of Pine and Gilmore (1999), the present study holds that various food events invite the travellers

to either actively participate in the co-creation of food experiences, that is, to become immersed in the event, or passively reflect on the event through absorption.

Thirdly, the findings assert that food experiences emerge from multisensory emotional stimulation. Therefore, all the basic senses are relevant to a food experience. However, destinations are composed of food events where other basic senses are more important than taste. For example, taste was not significantly important when eating street food and food in marketplaces and when the traveller is watching how foods and ingredients are sold at farms on the countryside. Thus, the finding supports the notion that food experiences are multidimensional, where stimulation is derived through multiple senses, not only through taste.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

To conclude, the study implies that destination marketing organisations (DMOs) should recognise that food experiences are universal and cannot be explained through demographic variables only. Furthermore, destinations' foodscapes can and should combine different types of food events to signal to DMOs that a destination's foodscape deserves to be perceived from a holistic perspective. For company and food event managers, the findings give reason to focus on the assortment of food experiences offered and flexibility in the service offering. To be able to meet the expectations of travellers who want to enjoy the food experience in either an absorptive or immersive mode, insight into customer segmentation is needed. Not only that, but the service processes of the food events have to be in their interaction reflexive and adaptable in case, during the process, a customer switches from an absorptive to an immersive mode or vice versa.

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