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Gastro-tourism as an alternative form of tourism: the case of Athens

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Abstract: Gastronomy is increasingly recognised as an important cultural and economic resource, strengthening destination planning and local development. The objective of this study was to analyse gender differences in tourist perceptions of restaurant characteristics in Athens. As a case of urban gastro-tourism, the methodology was applied to a quantitative survey of international visitors to measure perceptions of local food and service, physical environment, prices, innovation, and socialising. The results indicated significant gender-based variations in how these attributes were valued, with women placing greater emphasis on authenticity and men on pricing. These findings are discussed in relation to destination management strategies aimed at improving tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and economic resilience. The conclusion suggests that incorporating gender-sensitive planning into gastronomic tourism can enhance the competitiveness of urban destinations and support sustainable local development.

Keywords: gastro-tourism; gastronomy; urban tourism; gender differences; tourist satisfaction

El turismo gastronómico como forma alternativa de turismo: el caso de Atenas

Resumen: La gastronomía se reconoce cada vez más como un importante recurso cultural y económico que refuerza la planificación de destinos y el desarrollo local. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las diferencias de género en las percepciones de los turistas sobre las características de los restaurantes de Atenas. Como caso de gastroturismo urbano, la metodología se aplicó a una encuesta cuantitativa con visitantes internacionales para medir las percepciones de la comida y el servicio locales, el entorno físico, los precios, la innovación y la socialización. Los resultados indicaron variaciones significativas en función del género a la hora de valorar estos atributos: las mujeres otorgaron mayor importancia a la autenticidad y los hombres a los precios. Estos hallazgos se analizan en relación con las estrategias de gestión de destinos para mejorar la satisfacción de los turistas, su fidelidad y su resiliencia económica. La conclusión sugiere incorporar una planificación sensible al género en el turismo gastronómico con el fin de mejorar la competitividad de los destinos urbanos y apoyar el desarrollo local sostenible.

Palabras Clave: gastroturismo; gastronomía; turismo urbano; diferencias de género; satisfacción turística

1. INTRODUCTION

An alternative form of travel, gastronomy tourism gives visitors the chance to experience new things, learn about local cuisines, meet people from different cultures, and discover new tastes (Kovalenko et al., 2023). Tourist destination planning in the 21st century has moved from the past focus on infrastructure, commercial expansion, and marketing in the 20th century, because it expanded to include various concepts from sustainability to cultural creativity, so the evaluation of existing strategies became harder (Sarantakou, 2023). The physical locations containing resources serve as the basis for destination classification by analyzing geographical characteristics and climate elements together with local distinctive features (Coccossis & Tsartas, 2019). The perspective examining destinations as entire tourism packages classifies them through multiple variables that encompass their market evolution patterns and service quality levels with visiting length and industry specialization (Tsartas & Sarantakou, 2022).

Advancing destination planning processes, including alternative forms - such as gastro-tourism - necessitates an understanding of the potential roles and interactions among the principal governance actors — the public sector (State), the private sector (business stakeholders), and civil society (social groups) — to support more effective and inclusive territorial governance (Gonçalves, 2020). Although the COVID-19 crisis has revealed significant vulnerabilities in tourism-dependent regions and countries' such as Spain, particularly in regions like the Canary Islands, this disruption should be reframed as an opportunity to rebuild tourism (González-Morales et al., 2022), a perspective equally relevant to integrating gastro-tourism into sustainable destination planning in Athens.

Tourism has developed into a major business sector in Greece, with its major enterprises sharing the market alongside numerous household and small-scale establishments (Sarantakou & Terkenli, 2021) that includes local gastronomic service providers. Gastronomy stands as a cultural heritage, which has become a vital aspect of tourism experiences (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Tourism destinations are becoming more desired each year because visitors seek their unique eating traditions and cooking customs (Hjalager, 2002).

Research demonstrates that people engage in food tourism because they want authentic culinary encounters as well as an experience of cultural identity through food and various social and leisure activities

that revolve around eating (Kim et al., 2009b). Studies of traveler gastronomic behavior examine eating-related attitudes and motives alongside pleasure elements as described by Pérez-Priego et al. (2019).

The restaurant industry is essential in food tourism because it delivers distinctive food encounters while enhancing the authenticity of dining experiences and serves as the main tool for destination promotion (Okumus, 2020). Chen and Peng (2018) presented through their research that traditional eating establishments depend on regional cuisine to draw visitors to their establishments. A memorable dining experience includes authentic place settings with food enjoyment as well as local ingredient usage and cultural food preservation (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Lopez-Guzman & Sancez-Canizares, 2012; López-Guzmán, et al., 2017). The literature presents visitors value Food & Service quality together with Physical Environment and Prices and Socializing in forming their satisfaction and loyalty toward places, along with other related factors (Bae et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2009; Levy, 2010; Ryu & Han, 2010). Kala (2020) investigated the association between local restaurants, customer service quality, dining atmosphere, and food selection.

According to Hernández-Rojas and Huete Alcocer (2021), visitor satisfaction regarding local destination cuisine increases their loyalty to the region. Consumer satisfaction and the likelihood of returning to restaurants increase when the restaurant characteristics reach a high level (El-Adly & Eid, 2016; Han & Hyun, 2017). Previous studies contain minimal research that investigates traveler gender differences related to their vacation food perspectives. The performed results establish variations between male and female participants in the realm of culinary food tourism engagement. The results presented by Kim et al. (2009a), Mak et al. (2012), and Okumus et al. (2021) present mixed results on male-female different approaches. Consequently, it becomes necessary to determine restaurant attributes that signify local cuisine alongside their effect on genders. The results could enhance our knowledge about the way men and women perceive their divergent perspectives and associate factors.

Food presents substantial opportunities for enhancing visitor satisfaction and loyalty to Greece, yet research addressing these visitor consumption complexities remains insufficient (Lazaridis et al., 2021). The local food sector of contemporary Greece continues to expand, which demonstrates both the economic changes and population trends (Matalas & Lazaridis, 2023). Greece and the city of Athens remain insufficiently researched (Lazaridis et al., 2021). The research field needs additional studies because tourism stakeholders in Greece have evolving goals and emerging requirements. This study evaluated the effects of restaurant attributes on traveler satisfaction and loyalty regarding Athens and explored potential gender-related differences, to help both the culinary sector and its strategic planning and development.

Research is limited for the link between gastronomic tourist attraction significance and restaurant features influence on destination satisfaction and loyalty, particularly for males and females. Destination planners need to comprehend these elements because this knowledge enables them to create services and products matching various tourist tastes, thereby making the destination more attractive. This study focuses on Athens, Greece, a well-established tourist destination with a rich culinary heritage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tourism Destination Planning

A tourism destination succeeds when it delivers exceptional, distinctive experiences that match the preferences of various tourist groups (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). According to Dwyer and Kim (2003) basic elements and resources, function together with attractors to establish unique features that distinguish one destination from others.

Local cuisine has emerged as a key factor in attracting gastronomy tourists, largely because it offers a genuine connection to the cultural and culinary identity of a destination. Within the destination planning theory, the food-centered experiences may provide the opportunity to travelers to engage, with a sense of place in a meaningful way (Hjalager, 2002; Quan & Wang, 2004). And this can be connected with the suggestions by Pine and Gilmore (1999) that what modern travelers value most are not tangible products but unique and memorable experiences. In this context, local culinary offerings may serve as a powerful medium through which destinations can offer authenticity.

Gastronomy, plays a pivotal role in the scope of cultural tourism and authenticity of cultural expressions, Richards (2011) mentions, is often what makes people take an interest in the related cultural expressions like food as well as the brands promoting them. It is because culinary traditions offer more than sustenance; they narrate stories, reflect heritage, and connect people to the real life of locals.

Yet the development of gastronomy tourism cannot be separated from a broader sustainability concern. As Sharpley (2009) emphasizes destinations must find a balance among economic growth, environmental preservation, and social well-being. A sustainable model for gastronomy tourism therefore must rely on engaging local food providers, preserving traditional cooking practices, and eliminating the ecological footprint of tourism activities (Matalas & Lazaridis, 2023). Following these principles, gastronomy tourism has the potential to sustain long-term destination competitiveness and the well-being of local communities.

2.2. Tourists' sociodemographic characteristics of gastronomical experiences

Food interaction experiences between visitors and their environment may depend on gender factors. Research on behavior shows that women show greater interest than men do when enjoying local cuisine while vacationing, according to both Ignatov and Smith (2006) and Kim et al. (2009a). Cost awareness combined with a desire to taste non-standard agricultural items defines how female tourists approach their dining choices (Mitchell & Hall, 2003). According to Kim et al. (2009a), age serves with gender and education as essential demographic characteristics directing vacationers to choose local food, although women tend to search for and study local foods more actively when traveling. Visitor food assessment behaviors show dependence on three key social and demographic characteristics Mak et al. (2012). According to Movahed et al. (2020), women achieve higher tourism satisfaction through independent behavior and proactive tourism involvement, yet there are no differences in their reactions to local culture or their information-seeking behavior between both genders. The research by Okumus et al. (2021) presented that age, along with gender and education status, serves as critical factors for engaging with local gastronomy.

2.3. Restaurant attributes

Restaurants maintain an essential position regarding engagement with gastronomy in destinations by their visitors. Tourists' comments often emphasized restaurant atmosphere, staff friendliness, and emotional tone of the place, often more than ingredients, preparation methods, or local authenticity. This highlights the contextual and relational nature of gastronomy tourism experiences (Ramírez-Gutiérrez, D., Santana-Talavera, A., & Fernández-Betancort, H., 2020).

Research has identified restaurant features that clients value most when dining. Schroeder (1985) assessed eight dining elements that included food quality and service standards and menu ranges and environment quality along with cost structure and cleanliness standards and tastes and nutritional values of food. Filiatrault and Ritchie (1988) evaluated different preference characteristics with food variety and pricing in addition to food quality and service standards and venue choices. Doi (1992) argued through his research that people base their dining decisions on food portions and serving quality, facility selection, cost, and geographic position. Researchers, together with restaurant management teams, utilize the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman et al., 1988), although Cronin and Taylor (1992) along with Van Dyke et al. (1997), identify multiple restrictions within this measure. Ryu and Jang (2008) established DINESCAPE as a model having six basic elements regarding facility design, atmosphere, illumination, dining setup, and service personnel for conducting physical environment assessments.

Studies present that Food & Service, Physical Environment, Prices and Socializing establish fundamental components that produce desired outcomes for travelers (Bae et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2009; Ryu & Han, 2010). The research considered previous studies regarding restaurant features while adopting the framework from Liu and Tse (2018).

2.4. Food and service

Intentions for restaurant re-visits primarily depend on food quality regardless of the restaurant concept (Fu & Parks, 2001). Research indicates that the selection range and unique ingredients with traditional cooking approaches that showcase local origin elements in food quality form its core aspects (Carins et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2012; Ozdemir & Caliskan, 2015). Excellent restaurant service brings beneficial effects that enhance dining satisfaction for every restaurant client. How customers rate the overall quality is influenced by the quality of service (Jalilvand et al., 2017; Lai, 2015).

2.5. The social interaction

Social interaction, in the context of culinary tourism, relates to how much a dining experience encourages people to connect—whether that's visitors engaging with locals or simply sharing a moment with others at the table. This idea has been the focus of several tourism studies, particularly those looking at guest-staff dynamics and interactions between restaurant patrons (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Solnet, 2007; Wu, 2007).

There's also considerable research pointing to the importance of social elements in customer service. These aspects can shape how travelers behave, from how they perceive a place to how they talk about it afterward. The restaurant industry, in particular, has been central to this line of inquiry. The concept of the social servicescape—essentially, the social atmosphere created during service interactions—has been found to influence word-of-mouth in a significant way (Line et al., 2018).

Positive relationships between restaurants and their customers don't just happen by chance. As Hanks et al. (2017) suggest, factors like a person's orientation toward consumer culture and the desire for social recognition often shape dynamics. And it's not just the staff who influence the experience—other diners can also play a role. Personal interactions with both groups have been shown to leave a lasting impression (Fakharyan et al., 2014; Levy, 2010; Song et al., 2018).

Interestingly, in urban areas, traditional food establishments often serve a deeper purpose. They aren't only places to eat but also important community spaces where relationships can form and local culture is kept alive through everyday encounters (Hernández-Rojas & Huete Alcocer, 2021).

2.6. The physical environment

Every element that surrounds guest service belongs to the physical dining environment, which incorporates decorative items, architectural designs, music, and external characteristics. The positive dining experience that customers pursue leads them to value their dining environment, according to Kim et al. (2009a) and Yuksel et al. (2010). Restaurant quality perception for consumers depends fundamentally on cleanliness and atmosphere uniqueness together with environment quality and supporting features, which constitute ambiance, according to Adam et al. (2015), while generating satisfaction (Wu & Ko, 2013).

2.7. The prices

Behaviors that influence the purchasing choices of consumers maintain strong links to price mechanisms that research has already examined. Multiple organizational elements that affect service-based customer conduct exist, according to Keaveney (1995), and price stands out as the most crucial component. Customers view pricing as a vital element that transforms service quality relationships with consumer fulfillment at food service establishments, according to Caruana et al. (2000). The findings by Ryu and Han (2010) presented that customers feel more satisfied with their dining experience when prices seem fair because this factor influences the connection between food quality and their dining satisfaction.

2.8. Innovation

Tuomi et al. (2021) identified output, process-based, and experiential & systemic processes as the three innovation categories in their study. Hjalager (2010) identified process, product, and management innovations alongside institutional and process innovations in the tourist industry. Americans between 18 and 29 years of age spend more time at dining places when restaurants provide free wireless internet service, according to Jeon et al. (2019). Evidence from Pyanikova et al. (2020) demonstrates how digital menus as well as online reservation systems increased their value. Following COVID-19, the food industry adopted technology, resulting in business enhancement alongside fast resource development and business expansion (Hjalager, 2022).

2.9. The Effect of Restaurant Attributes on Satisfaction & Loyalty

Quan and Wang (2004) claimed that local restaurants provide experiences and elements that leads tourists to have satisfaction with their journeys. Tourists experience overall changes in their journey because of restaurant facilities, as Pendergast (2006) stated. Nield et al. (2000) presented that food quality constitutes the primary aspect that improves dining experiences in their study on local dining establishments. Namkung and Jang (2007) support the findings of Sulek and Hensley (2004), indicating that food exercises a major impact

on dining choices (2004). Jang et al. (2009), along with Ryu and Han (2010) agree that restaurant patrons evaluate dining experiences through food quality alongside restaurant exterior design and staff relationships in the restaurant business.

Tourists predominantly decide to return to a facility based on how well it provides hospitality services with high-quality ingredients (Ottenbacher et al., 2016). Consumers develop strong regional loyalty when they experience traditional restaurants serving local food selections in tourist sites (Chen Q. and Huang R, 2019). Tourists find satisfaction in traditional meals of their vacation experiences, which leads to stronger restaurant loyalty during their travel at destinations (Hernández-Rojas & Huete Alcocer, 2021).

Following the previous analysis, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1. The restaurant attributes affect positively the women visitors' satisfaction with the destination.

H2. The restaurant attributes affect positively the male visitors' satisfaction with the destination.

H3. The restaurant attributes affect positively the male visitors' loyalty to the destination concerning Greek food.

H4. The restaurant attributes affect positively the women visitors' loyalty to the destination concerning Greek food.

3. METHODOLOGY

A total of 640 tourists from different countries who visited Athens answered a questionnaire with three main axes concerning their satisfaction with the restaurants of Athens, their satisfaction with Athens as a culinary destination, and their loyalty towards Greek food. The sample was collected with a convenience sampling method, and a pilot survey had previously been carried out with 18 people to ensure the understanding of the questions, increasing the level of reliability and validity of the survey (Finn et al., 2000). The frequency of engagement with food-related experiences of tourists was measured on a five-point Likert scale with lower values expressing low engagement with food-related experiences and greater values expressing high engagement with food-related experiences (from "1" corresponding to "Never" to "5" corresponding to "More than five times"). The degree of agreement on various attitudes related to restaurant attributes was also measured on a five-point Likert scale, with lower values expressing disagreement and greater values agreeing, 1 equal to Strongly Disagree to 5 equal to Strongly Agree.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient is used to measure reliability (Cronbach, 1951). All the analyses were gender-oriented, i.e., focusing on revealing differences between males and females as regards their attitude toward restaurant attributes (Local Food & Service, Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, and Innovation). Following this perspective, descriptive statistics were calculated, as well as frequency tables, and suitable figures were presented separately for males and females (Bersimis et al., 2022).

In addition, to explore differences between mean values in the replies of the respondents as regards gender, a t-test was performed (Bersimis et al., 2022). The five restaurant attributes (Local Food and Service, Environment, Socializing, Prices, and Innovation) were highlighted via principal components analysis applying Varimax as a rotation method, and the extraction threshold was based on the Kaiser criterion of unit eigenvalue (Cureton & D'Agostino, 1993). Finally, four multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to explore whether the restaurant attributes affect satisfaction from Athens and loyalty as regards Greek food (Cohen et al., 2003). The statistical significance level was at 0.05.

4. RESULTS

Regarding demographic features of the sample, 54.5% consisted of women, and most respondents were young adults, with 89.4% between the ages of 18 and 44. Furthermore, a significant proportion of travelers were well-educated, with 88.6% possessing a university degree. Concerning their income, slightly over half of the participants (52.8%) reported earning as much as 30,000 euros. The largest percentage of the people who took part (51.6%) were from five European nations: France (23.0%), Germany (11.7%), the United Kingdom (7.7%), Italy (7.0%), and Cyprus (2.2%). However, a notable proportion (13.3%) of the respondents were from the USA. Most respondents were employed (43.8%), with students being the next largest group (20.5%) (Table 1).

The frequency of engagement with food-related experiences of the tourists is presented in Figure 1, separately by gender (in ascending order). Specifically, in first place is Greek cuisine for both genders (female: 3.48 & male: 3.31), followed by the Grill, souvlaki, and yeros small eateries (female: 2.81 & male: 2.75), and the rest of the food-related experiences follow with much lower average values. At this point, it should be emphasized that the above averages of the food-related experiences were relatively low because the tourists' corresponding average length of stay in Athens was short (3-4 nights). The important finding is that the options with traditional eateries serving Greek food, which are essentially the "trademarks" of the local cuisine of Athens, are clearly in the first two places with a big difference from the rest of the food-related experiences. In addition, in all food-related experiences presented in Figure 1, females had a greater degree of engagement than males. Furthermore, the difference in frequency of engagement with food-related experiences between males and females was considered statistically significant in the items "Greek fast-food eateries", "Vegan, vegetarian, organic restaurants", "cooking lesson/ workshop" and "by delivery / take away" (p-value < 0.05).

Table 1. Tourists' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics analysis by gender

Characteristic	Categories	Gender	
		Male	Female
Age	18-24	71 (24.6%)	95 (27.2%)
	25-34	140 (48.4%)	167 (47.9%)
	35-44	43 (14.9%)	54 (15.5%)
	45-54	24 (8.3%)	17 (4.9%)
	Over 54	11 (3.8%)	16 (4.6%)
Education	High school	23 (8.0%)	33 (9.5%)
	Technical training	11 (3.8%)	15 (4.3%)
	University / College	142 (49.1%)	160 (45.8%)
	Msc / PhD	112 (38.8%)	138 (39.5%)
	Other	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.9%)
Annual income (€)	<12.000€	54 (18.7%)	93 (26.6%)
	12.000 – 20.000€	39 (13.5%)	56 (16.0%)
	20.001 – 30.000€	42 (14.5%)	53 (15.2%)
	30.001 – 40.000€	39 (13.5%)	40 (11.5%)
	40.001 – 55.000€	25 (8.6%)	40 (11.5%)
	55.001 - 70.000€	21 (7.3%)	33 (9.5%)
	>70.001€	69 (23.9%)	34 (9.7%)
Permanent residence	U.S.A.	35 (12.1%)	49 (14.0%)
	U.K.	26 (9.0%)	23 (6.6%)
	Cyprus	7 (2.4%)	7 (2.0%)
	Germany	36 (12.5%)	39 (11.2%)
	France	66 (22.8%)	81 (23.2%)
	Italy	19 (6.6%)	26 (7.4%)
	Australia	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.9%)
	Turkey	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)
	Other	100 (34.6%)	120 (34.6%)
Profession / working status	Employee	133 (46.0%)	145 (41.5%)
	Senior Executive	21 (7.3%)	14 (4.0%)
	Civil servant	7 (2.4%)	9 (2.6%)
	Entrepreneur	14 (4.8%)	20 (5.7%)
	Self-employed/ Freelancer	16 (5.5%)	23 (6.6%)
	Academic	11 (3.8%)	21 (6.0%)
	Student	52 (18.0%)	79 (22.6%)
	Pensioner	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)
	Farmer	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)
	Housewife/house husband	2 (0.7%)	10 (2.9%)
	Currently without work	4 (1.4%)	4 (1.4%)
	Other	27 (9.3%)	21 (6.0%)
Household	Alone	43 (14.9%)	58 (16.6%)
	With spouse / life partner	161 (55.7%)	180 (51.6%)
	With spouse and children	27 (9.3%)	42 (12.0%)

Characteristic	Categories	Gender	
	With other adults	54 (18.7%)	55 (15.8%)
	With children	1 (0.3%)	6 (1.7%)
	Other	2 (0.7%)	8 (2.3%)

Two separate principal component analyses (PCA) were performed, one for female and one for male tourists (Table 2). Bartlett's test of sphericity, both for women (1437.361, $p < 0.01$) and men (1323.925, $p < 0.01$), highlighted that initial data were suitable for performing PCA, as well as Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin, both for women (0.849) and men (0.824), had adequately high value, expressing reliable results from PCA (Carver & Nash, 2011).

Figure 1. Respondents' frequency of engagement with food-related experiences

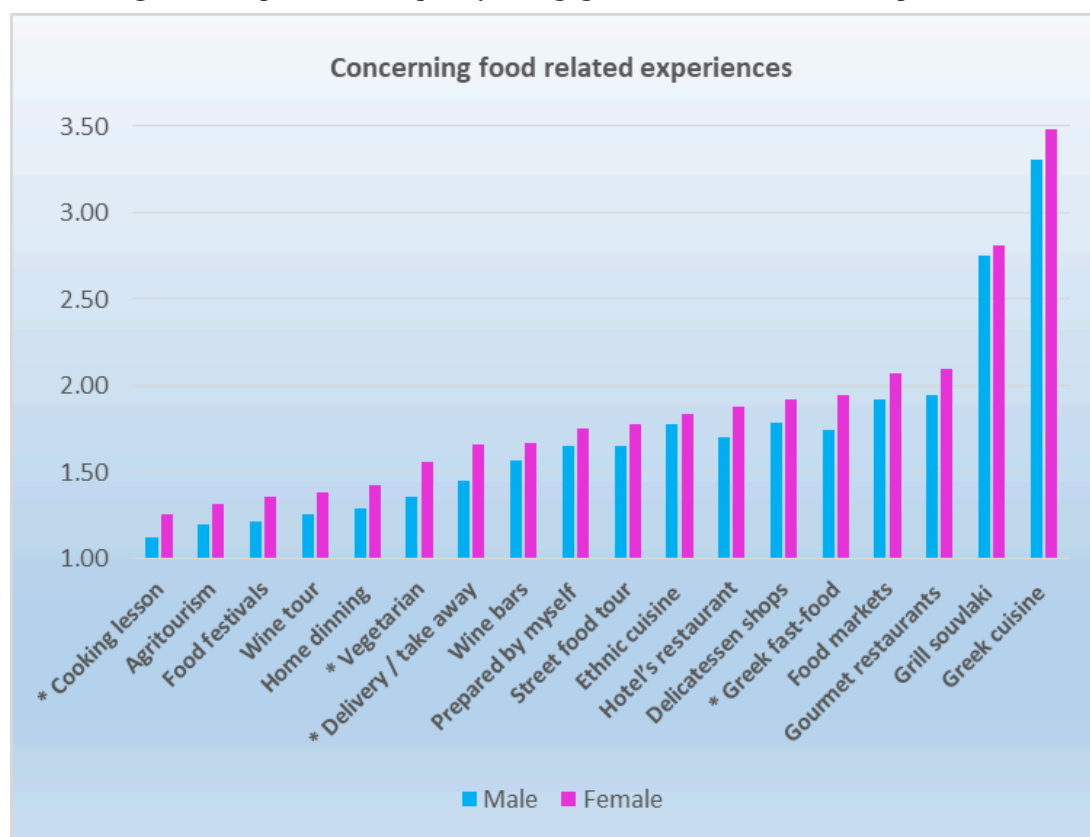


Table 2. Principal Components Analysis results by gender

PCA metrics	Female	Male
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	1437.361 ($p < 0.01$)	1323.925 ($p < 0.01$)
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.849	0.824

In the case of women, the five Principal Components (PCs) extracted from the 19 initial variables explained 65.42% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.888 (Cureton & D'Agostino, 1993). The first PC, named "Local Food & Service" corresponded to most of the variance (34.98%), having a reliability index of 0.841. The second PC named "Prices" corresponded to 10.08% of the variance, having a reliability index of 0.866. In addition, the third PC, named "Socializing," corresponded to 7.84% of the total

variance, having a reliability index of 0.744. The next PC, named “Physical Environment” corresponded to 6.80% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.794. Finally, the fifth PC, named “Innovation,” accounted for 5.73% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.731 (Table 3).

Table 3. Variance explained & Reliability per Principal Components Analysis’ for females

Principal Components	Variance explained	Reliability
PC1: "Local Food & Service"	34.979	0.841
PC2: "Prices"	10.075	0.866
PC3: "Socializing"	7.836	0.744
PC4: "Physical environment"	6.801	0.794
PC5: "Innovation"	5.728	0.731
Total	65.419	0.888

In the case of men, the five principal components (PCs) extracted from the 19 initial variables explained 67.22% of the total variance, with a reliability index of 0.873 (Cureton & D’Agostino, 1993). The first PC, named “Local Food & Service,” corresponded to most of the variance (32.82%), having a reliability index of 0.830. The second PC, named “Physical environment,” corresponded to 11.43% of the variance, having a reliability index of 0.780. In addition, the third PC, named “Prices,” corresponded to 10.31% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.871. The next PC, named “Innovation,” corresponded to 7.51% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.762. Finally, the fifth PC, named “Socializing,” accounted for 5.15% of the total variance, having a reliability index of 0.749 (Table 4).

Table 4. Variance explained & Reliability per Principal Components Analysis’ for males

Principal Components	Variance explained	Reliability
PC1: "Local Food & Service"	32.823	0.830
PC2: "Physical environment "	11.430	0.780
PC3: "Prices "	10.305	0.871
PC4: "Innovation"	7.508	0.762
PC5: "Socializing"	5.152	0.749
Total	67.218	0.873

The first principal component, for both genders, was "Local Food & Service", which means that both men and women give great importance to this restaurant attribute. The second principal component for women was "Prices," while for men, principal component "Prices" was in third place (with approximately the same percentage of explained variance). In addition, the third principal component for women was "Socializing", while for men, the principal component "Socializing" was in last place. Furthermore, the fourth principal component for women was "Physical environment," while for men, principal component "Physical environment" was in second place (with approximately twice as many percentages of explained variance). Finally, the third principal component for women was "Innovation", while for men, principal component "Innovation" was in fourth place.

The attitude of tourists towards the initial questions that make up the aforementioned five principal components—restaurant attributes (Local Food and Service, Socializing, Physical Environment, Prices, and Innovation) in Athenian restaurants—are analyzed below in figures 2 to 5, by gender, in ascending order

according to their average value. In the principal component, «Local Food and Service», both genders had the highest level of agreement in the statement «Restaurants in Athens have good & authentic taste» (female: 4.05 & male: 3.99) and the lowest level of agreement in the statement «Restaurants in Athens have unique cooking methods» (female: 3.55 & male: 3.49) expressing relative agreement (Figure 2). Also, males and females had a common position in the attitudes expressed by the initial variables that make up the attribute «Local Food and Service» as no statistically significant difference was detected in any item.

In the principal component, «Prices» both genders had the highest level of agreement in the statement «Food prices are reasonable» (female: 3.94 & male: 3.95) and the lowest level of agreement in the statement «Beverage prices are reasonable» (female: 3.79 & male: 3.78), expressing relative agreement (Figure 3). In addition, men and women had a common position in the attitudes expressed by the statements «In Athens's restaurants, prices of food are reasonable» and «In Athens's restaurants, prices of beverages are reasonable» as no statistically significant difference was detected in any item. On the contrary, in attitude expressed by the statement «In Athens's restaurant's prices are value for money» men had a greater mean value (3.93) compared to women (3.87) ($t=-2.031$, $p=0.043$).

Figure 2. Respondents' level of agreement in "Local Food and Service" statements by gender

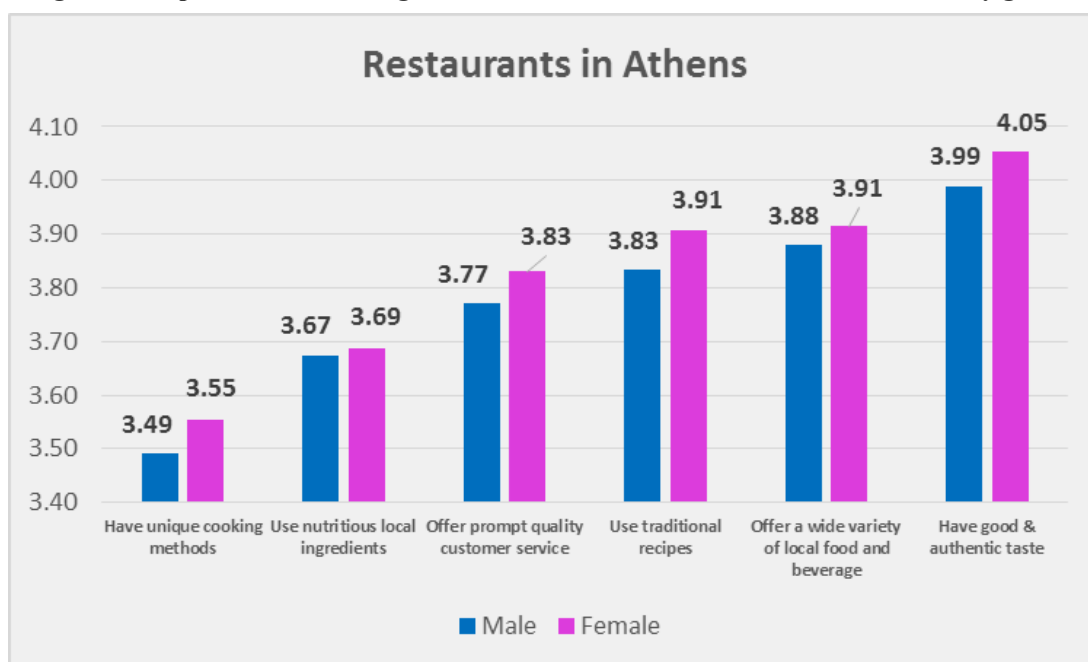
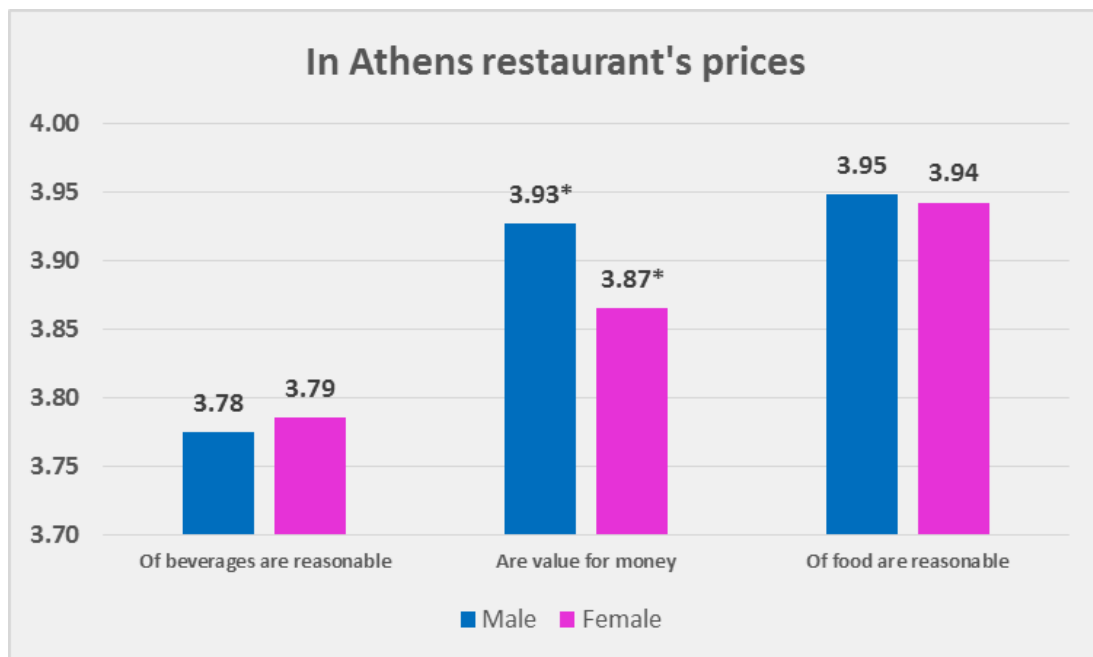


Figure 3. Respondents' level of agreement in "Prices" statements by gender



Note: (*) the corresponding level of agreement between males and females was statistically different

In the principal component, «socializing» both genders had the highest level of agreement in the statement «I enjoyed local people's & customers friendliness & hospitality» (female: 4.00 & male: 3.97) and the lowest level of agreement in the statement «I experienced a different way of enjoying food compared to home» (female: 3.73 & male: 3.76), expressing relative agreement once again (Figure 4). Also, men and women had a common position in the attitudes expressed by the initial variables that make up the attribute «Socializing» as no statistically significant difference was detected in any item.

In the principal component, «Physical Environment» both genders had the highest level of agreement in the statement «The atmosphere reflected the local culture» (female: 4.06 & male: 3.95) and the lowest level of agreement in the statement «Cleanliness, hygiene & safety was satisfying» (female: 3.89 & male: 3.73), expressing relative agreement (Figure 5). In addition, men and women had a common position in the attitudes expressed by the statements «Accessibility was satisfying» and «The atmosphere reflected the local culture» as no statistically significant difference was detected. On the contrary, in attitudes expressed by the statements «Cleanliness, hygiene & safety was satisfying» and «The servicescape reflected local culture» males had a lower mean value (3.73 and 3.81 correspondingly) compared to females (3.89 and 3.96 correspondingly) ($t=2.463$, $p=0.014$ and $t=2.325$, $p=0.020$ correspondingly).

Figure 4. Respondents' level of agreement in "Socializing" statements by gender

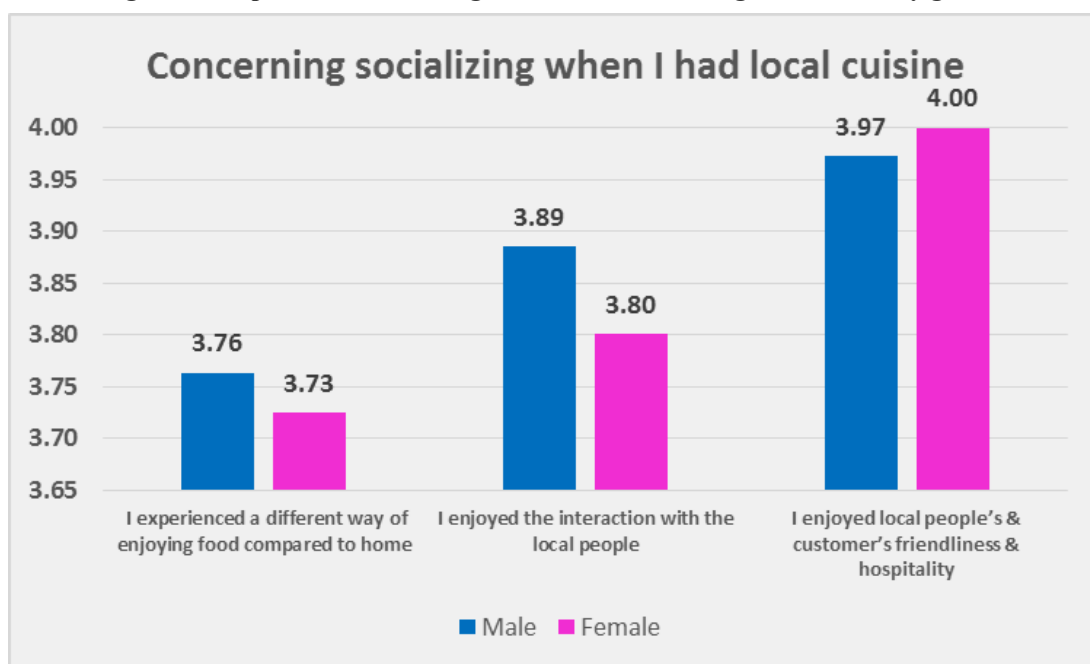
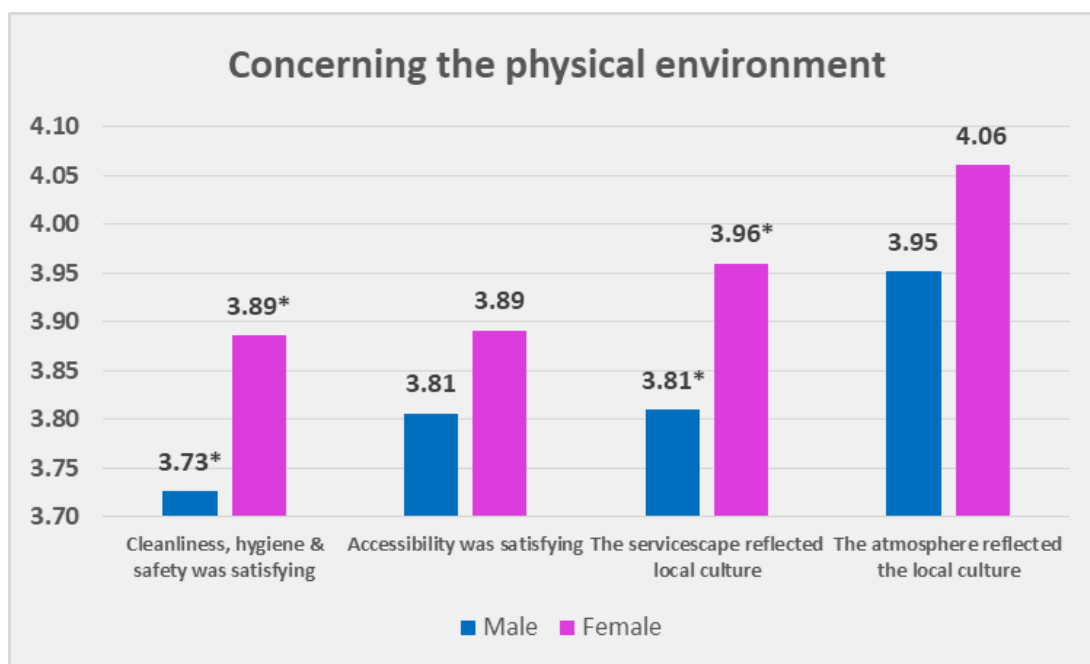


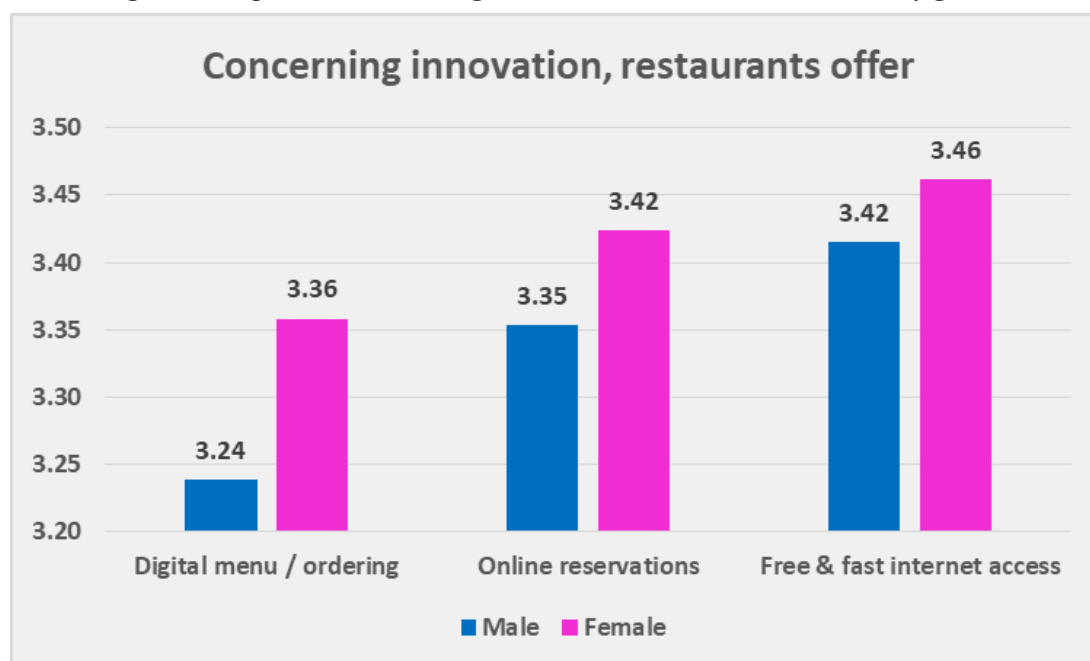
Figure 5. Respondents' level of agreement in "Physical Environment" statements by gender



Note: (*) the corresponding level of agreement between males and females was statistically different

In the principal component, «Innovation» both genders had the highest level of agreement in the statement «Free & fast internet access» (female: 3.46 & male: 3.42) and the lowest level of agreement in the statement «Digital menu/ordering» (female: 3.36 & male: 3.24), expressing relative agreement (Figure 6). Also, men and women had a common position in the attitudes expressed by the initial variables that make up the attribute «Innovation», as no statistically significant difference was detected in any item.

Figure 6. Respondents' level of agreement in "Innovation" statements by gender



Note: (*) the corresponding level of agreement between males and females was statistically different

Importantly, for all initial variables that make up attributes «Local Food and Service,» «Prices,» «Socializing,» «Physical Environment,» and «Innovation,» the mean values are greater than the median of the scales used, thus expressing moderate to strong agreement. Subsequently, tables 5 to 12 list the results of linear regressions with dependent variables satisfaction and loyalty, as well as, Local food and Service, Prices, Social Interaction, Physical Environment, and Innovation as predictors, separately for men and women. As regards satisfaction, in the case of women, explanatory variables explain 43.9% of satisfaction's variability, and the corresponding linear model is considered significant (Table 5).

Table 5. Linear regression model evaluation criteria for satisfaction in the case of female visitors

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Durbin Watson	ANOVA (F(5,165) - p value)
0.663	0.439	0.422	1.901	25.860 (p<0.001)

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

Note: Predictors: (Constant), Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, Local Food and Service, Innovation

In the case of female visitors, all explanatory variables affect satisfaction positively, therefore, the H1 hypothesis is accepted (Table 6).

Table 6. Coefficients of multiple linear regression model for satisfaction in the case of female visitors

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction	Coefficients (B)	t	P value
Constant	3.985	97.716	<0.001
Local Food and Service	0.272	6.645	<0.001
Prices	0.208	5.075	<0.001
Social Interaction	0.139	3.409	0.001
Physical Environment	0.247	6.046	<0.001
Innovation	0.137	3.350	0.001

In the case of men, explanatory variables explain 48.1% of satisfaction variability, and the corresponding linear model is considered significant (Table 7).

Table 7. Linear regression model evaluation criteria for satisfaction in the case of male visitors

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Durbin Watson	ANOVA (F(4,143) - p value)
0.694	0.481	0.467	2.000	33.198 (p<0.001)

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

Note: Predictors: (Constant), Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, Local Food and Service, Innovation

Predictors: (Constant), Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, Local Food and Service, Innovation
Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

In the case of male visitors, all explanatory variables affect satisfaction positively, therefore, the H2 hypothesis is accepted (Table 8). The difference, in the case of women, is that innovation is not a significant predictor of satisfaction (p-value = 0.077>0.05).

Table 8. Coefficients of multiple linear regression model for satisfaction in the case of male visitors

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction	Coefficients (B)	t	P value
Constant	3.990	110.288	<0.001
Local Food and Service	0.332	9.150	<0.001
Physical Environment	0.140	3.843	<0.001
Prices	0.155	4.271	<0.001
Innovation	0.065	1.783	0.077>0.05
Social Interaction	0.154	4.253	<0.001

As regards loyalty, in the case of women, explanatory variables explain 40.8% of loyalty's variability, and the corresponding linear model is considered significant (Table 9).

Table 9. Linear regression model evaluation criteria for loyalty in the case of female visitors

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Durbin Watson	ANOVA (F(5,165) - p value)
0.639	0.408	0.390	1.962	22.763 (p<0.001)

Dependent Variable: loyalty

Note: Predictors: (Constant), Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, Local Food and Service, Innovation

In the case of female visitors, all explanatory variables affect loyalty positively, therefore, the H3 hypothesis is accepted (Table 10). Innovation is not a significant predictor of loyalty (p-value = 0.315>0.05).

Table 10. Coefficients of multiple linear regression model for loyalty in the case of female visitors

Dependent Variable: loyalty	Coefficients (B)	t	P value
Constant	4.137	105.005	<0.001
Local Food and Service	0.202	5.101	<0.001
Prices	0.179	4.534	<0.001
Social Interaction	0.270	6.831	<0.001
Physical Environment	0.175	4.422	<0.001
Innovation	0.040	1.008	0.315>0.05

In the case of men, explanatory variables explain 26.8% of loyalty variability, and the corresponding linear model is considered significant (Table 11).

Table 11. Linear regression model evaluation criteria for loyalty in the case of male visitors

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Durbin Watson	ANOVA (F (5,142) - p value)
0.518	0.268	0.242	1.711	10.397 (p<0.001)

Dependent Variable: loyalty

Note: Predictors: (Constant), Physical Environment, Socializing, Prices, Local Food and Service, Innovation

All explanatory variables affect loyalty positively, therefore, the H4 hypothesis is accepted, in the case of male visitors (Table 12). Similarly, in the case of women, also for men, Innovation is not a significant predictor of loyalty (p-value = 0.286>0.05). The previous linear regression models are considered adequate as the assumptions for their application are ascertained. Specifically, the regressions' residuals are normally distributed, residuals are independent as the Durbin-Watson value showed (Tables 5, 7, 9 & 11) and the assumption of homoscedasticity is relatively not violated.

Table 12. Coefficients of multiple linear regression model for loyalty in the case of male visitors

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction	Coefficients (B)	t	P value
Constant	3.986	74.379	<0.001
Local Food and Service	0.219	4.071	<0.001
Physical Environment	0.211	3.916	<0.001
Prices	0.117	2.171	0.032<0.05
Innovation	0.058	1.071	0.286 >0.05
Social Interaction	0.203	3.771	<0.001

The research of Kovalenko et al. (2023) examined the impact of gastronomic experiences on tourists' satisfaction and destination branding. The findings suggested that positive culinary experiences significantly influence tourists' overall satisfaction and their perception of a destination's brand, highlighting the importance of incorporating gastronomy into destination planning. The influence of gastronomic tourism on tourism destination planning and especially its image, which is a crucial component of visitor satisfaction and loyalty, has been extensively researched (Moreira et al., 2025). According to the study of Tovmasyan (2019), the key finding is that gastronomy may boost travel, and nations with a rich culinary history should assess it and include it into their planning by creating a regional or national culinary brand and having a strategy for the growth of gastronomic tourism.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research produce valuable implications for planning at tourism destinations that choose to focus on gastronomy tourism and beneficial information about restaurant qualities that affect visitor satisfaction and loyalty. The purpose of this research was to analyze if restaurant attributes in Athens have distinct effects on satisfaction and loyalty based on tourist gender. The data shows which aspects affect visitor satisfaction levels and destination loyalty behavior for the Athenian gastronomic offerings. The principal component analysis showed that both male and female tourists considered "Local Food and Service" to be the essential aspect that represented cuisine authenticity, quality, and service standards. Existing studies back the findings that food quality creates customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Carins et al., 2020; Fu & Parks, 2001; Jin et al., 2012; Ozdemir & Caliskan, 2015).

Results showed males preferred the Physical environment as their main priority rather than females, who focused on Prices. Studies document the distinctions between gender preferences on the dining activity (Hanks et al., 2017; Hernández-Rojas & Huete Alcocer, 2021). The Socializing factor held the top position for female tourists based on the study results, yet male tourists placed it fifth. Women appear to locate their dining satisfaction within social interactions with both staff and clients at the restaurant above what men typically find enjoyable. The Innovation factor received the fifth position in importance according to female tourists who participated, while male tourists placed it at position four. The research implies that gender differences exist concerning restaurant features, yet both genders place higher value on conventional items like food quality, service quality, and environment. Both restaurant attributes and their impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty received validation through regression analysis studies. The only exception for male and female tourists was the Innovation factor when measuring their satisfaction levels. The total dining experience consists of many different dimensions, which must receive attention to build positive customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Researchers can use the study to understand which factors drive tourist satisfaction and loyalty toward restaurants in Athens. Female tourists show some gender-based preference variations at restaurants, but they share similar core influences, including food quality, service standards, atmosphere ambiance, and sociability, that shape their dining experience. The destination of Athens should include in the planning to invest effort in enhancing dining quality elements because this leads directly to improved satisfaction levels among customers. Restaurant businesses at tourist locations may also adopt micro-level strategies in their plans to leverage this consumer understanding to build menus that create satisfaction by meeting the evolving preferences of diverse visitors.

Restaurants that tailor their menus based on customer gender may result in higher levels of tourist satisfaction levels. Through guidance about food service and dining experience development, DMOs could facilitate restaurant connection with customers and build higher customer loyalty systems, which lead to positive reviews. Organizations that take steps for customer satisfaction by offering dietary choices and personalized food options should communicate their care for their customers. Successful marketing outcomes for destination restaurants come from messages designed to match the unique interests of their male and female visitors. Such planning helps restaurants develop sites that create attraction and promise the delivery of satisfying experiences to maintain long-term client relationships.

The limitations of the research concern the timing, in the summer high season, and the location, focusing in the center of Athens, a city with many faces. The research findings suggest business aspects of including gender-focused plans and optimizing essential features that enable visitors to connect with local food traditions. Destination stakeholders may apply this research toward creating valuable culinary offerings, which will boost total destination value. Future studies may add cultural differences, sustainability practices, and technology-driven aspects to the research on how these elements affect destination planning particularly for gastronomy tourism as a niche market.

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Notes

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