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Understanding Travel Agencies Attitudes Towards Gastronomy Tourism and Food Tours: The Case of Izmir Turkey[*]

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Abstract

This study considers that travel agencies can be active builders in food tourism destinations. This paper develops and validates a scale to measure the the attitude of travel agencies towards gastronomy tourism and food tours, labeled as support to gastronomy tourism (SGT). Study identified 6 dimensions and 33 initial items through an extensive literature review. Then an exploratory factor analysis was applied to filter the items. The results provided empirical support for a 29-item and six-dimension solution to the SGT scale which consisted of gastronomy tourism knowledge (GTK); approach to gastronomy tourism (AGT); perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism (PPIGT); perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism (PPEGT); perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism (PNEGT) and support to gastronomy tourism (SGT) through confirmatory factor analysis. This study contributes to the gastronomy tourism development by revisiting the role of travel agencies. For practical implications, the findings call attention to the importance of provision of knowledge and guidance from authorities as well as the necessity of individual efforts of agency owners to foster the development of gastronomy.

Keywords: Travel agency, gastronomy tourism, tourism product differentiation

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1. Introduction

In order for tourism to develop in a region, many components such as infrastructure and attractions must support each other. One of these components is whether travel agencies support the development of tourism. The support provided by travel agencies to tourism plays a key role in the development of tourism and

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can affect this development positively or negatively. It is stated in the literature that tourism decisions are not shaped according to the socio-economic conditions of the region and society, but generally according to current tourism trends, the attitudes of non-governmental organizations and local governments (Hall, 1994; Klenosky and Gitelson, 1998; Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 1999; Trunfio et al., 2006; Marin-Pantelescu et al., 2019). Although travel agencies are not the only ones who take and direct tourism decisions, they are the party that feels the negative effects of these decisions most strongly. However, for the sustainability of tourism projects, the support of travel agencies to tourism and the continuity of this support are important for local governments, decision makers and business circles. Because this support provides important information on creating tourism strategies, service and product development. This becomes more important in the context of the development of food tourism, where the contribution of travel agencies is a prerequisite. The World Tourism Organization states that there are changes in the interests and expectations of tourists, and tourists choose their travel types and places accordingly (Almuhrzi and Al-Azri, 2019). For these tourists, the historical values, natural beauties and especially the local culture of the places they visit are important selection factors. Therefore, gastronomy tourism becomes a center of attraction for these new types of tourists, the relationship between food and tourism begins naturally, and many cities that were not previously touristic become attraction points for tourism after becoming food cities. What is important at this stage is whether travel agencies want tourism to develop in the region. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the perceptions and attitudes of travel agencies in İzmir towards gastronomy tourism and their support for gastronomy tourism. It is important to learn the perceptions and attitudes of travel agencies towards this type of tourism in cities that focus on gastronomy tourism in Turkey and in the world, to implement the right tourism policies and to receive the support of travel agencies in this regard. It is anticipated that the results of this research will provide clues to the tourism planners of potential cities that want to participate in gastronomy tourism, in the policies of the Ministry of Tourism and related affiliates regarding the development of gastronomic tourism, about the support of travel agencies which are the primary addresses of gastronomy tour applications to tourism.

2. Theoretical Background

The organization of a successful travel necessitates highly specialized knowledge and finely cultivated technical skills. There is need for structured discipline to blend communication and human relations skills with technical proficiency. This is the domain of the travel intermediaries, namely, tour operators and travel agencies to plan and execute travel arrangements (Foster, 1990: 9). They follow closely the trends in the tourism industry or keep a record of what the customer wants and highlight the intended part of the existing images rather than switching markets they execute their operations (Reimer, 1990: 501). This way they make a significant impact on potential buyers (Da Silva et al., 2018: 94). Besides the basic services they provide to travellers such as bookings, ticket arrangements, guiding etc. their industrial magnitude and operational decisions have the power to highlight certain regions (Clerides et al., 2008: 373). They valorize the tourism

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resources in the region, increasing the quality of local products and services, the range of services offered and cooperation between several st[1]akeholders by improving existing offers as well as creating new ones (Paştiu et al., 2014: 329). Destination features should be communicated to potential segments as products by the suppliers one of which is the travel industry

Although the advent of internet and travel booking websites offer alternative products for travellers to arrange all the necessary services individually without the need to go through tour operators, travel intermediaries are still an important part of tourism distribution channel in many countries including Turkey as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of Travel Agencies in Turkey
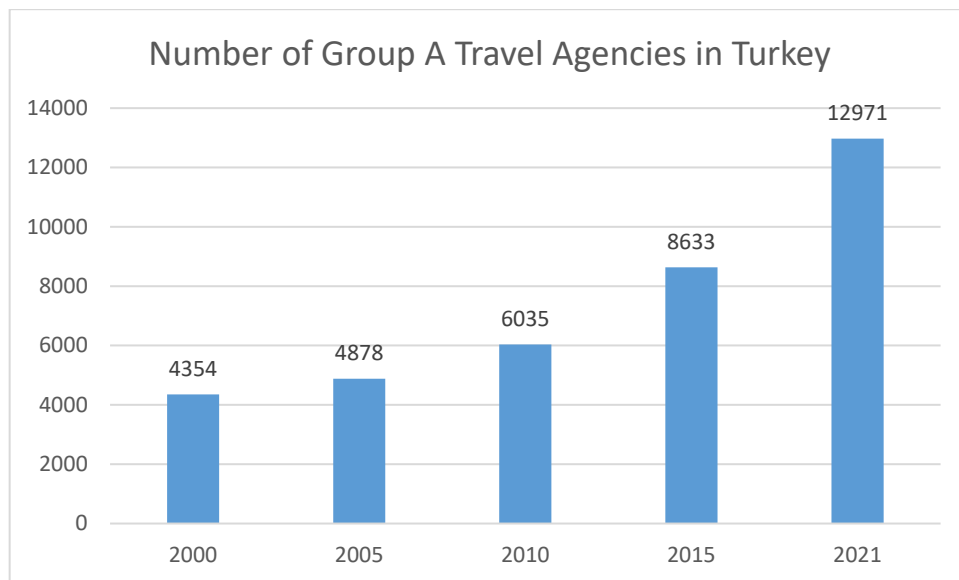
Source: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2022.

Package tours encourage the development of destinations as they increase their attractiveness to visitors (Clerides et al.,2008; Mısırlı, 2010). The benefits of package tour designs allow tourists to leverage multiple features to create their own destination experiences (Sharma 2006; Singh, 2008; Thirumaran, 2016). To attract customers, tour operators and travel agencies thus must come up with innovative approaches (Ćavlek, 2013; Liao and Chuang, 2020). That's why they are beginning to package experiences that have not been offered previously, including creative products that encourage tourists to actively take part in experiences. What makes packages attractive by tourists is that travel becomes easier and more convenient, so they are a crucial element of the destination product. More importantly package tours make visits more reasonable and safer (Kanellou, 2000; Puri and Chand, 2009). It's also a way to visit multiple places over short periods along with reliable

and convenient services. Sometimes the commodification of package tours may have an insidious effect on destinations, such as standardizing culture which lack clear identities (Curtin and Busby, 1999). So, they should pay attention to relative importance of various attributes of package tour experiences. It's evident that different travel options and attractions create varied demands. For example, for those seeking escape to nature, features such as crowded city bazaars, mega shopping malls, and night life may not be appealing. Food is one of the distinguishing elements of tourism destinations that is used in creative ways to attract almost every segment in tourism market. Engaging food or dining activities along with the uniqueness of other major tourism products is gradually receiving attention among the tour operators. Tour operators especially those who directly deal with international tourists increase their marketing strategies in promoting the local gastronomy products and incorporate dining activities in addition to the existing ones (Yusoff et al, 2013: 463).

Tour operators's survival heavily depends on maintaining competitive prices and ensuring the best quality in their services. They buy products in bulk to achieve competitive prices and make agreements with well-known hotel chains and prestigious airlines to achieve the best quality. While it is easier for big tour operators to generate huge economies of scale; smaller operators should differentiate themselves by offering specialized services in the market (Ioannides, 1998: 142). The only authorized category of travel agencies to create tours for sale is the Group A in Turkey, functioning as tour operators. Table 1 summarizes all types of travel agencies within the city of İzmir provincial administrative boundaries.

Table 1. Number of Travel Agencies in terms of Group Classification in İzmir

Group	Number	%
A	522	98.50
B	-	-
C	8	1.50
Total	530	100

Source: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2022.

Food has long been acknowledged as a powerful tool for promoting and positioning a resort. The quest and enjoyment of one-of-a-kind and memorable food and beverage experiences is quickly becoming an important part of travellers' trip plans. As a result, more destinations are emphasizing food as a primary tourism offering to captivate more tourists. Gastronomy tourism is one of the niche market segments in the tourism scene. Although gastronomy tourism is widely spoken by scholars, industry experts, media and the public; food tours are either rare or

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complementary of cultural tours. There is a scarcity of research on travel agencies' contribution to gastronomic tour development in the literature. The research tries to fill this gap in the field by revealing their actual offers, perceptions and approach to support gastronomy tourism

3. Research Methodology

The first method used in this study is the survey technique, which is one of the quantitative research methods to identify the contribution of travel agencies' in the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir. While investigating whether a support is present or not, mediating variables such as perceived positive effects of gastronomic tourism and perceived negative effects of gastronomic tourism were added to the model. SPSS 24 and AMOS 23 programs were used in performing the analyses. The hypotheses formed for the objectives of the research were analyzed by structural equation modeling.

A quantitative approach was adopted in this study and a questionnaire was used as a measurement tool. The survey was applied to travel agencies in İzmir between June and September 2021. The first part consists of questions developed to acquire information about the agencies and their actual plans, offers, activities and initiatives about gastronomy tourism, depicted on Figure 2:

Figure 2. Travel Agencies' and Gastronomy Tourism
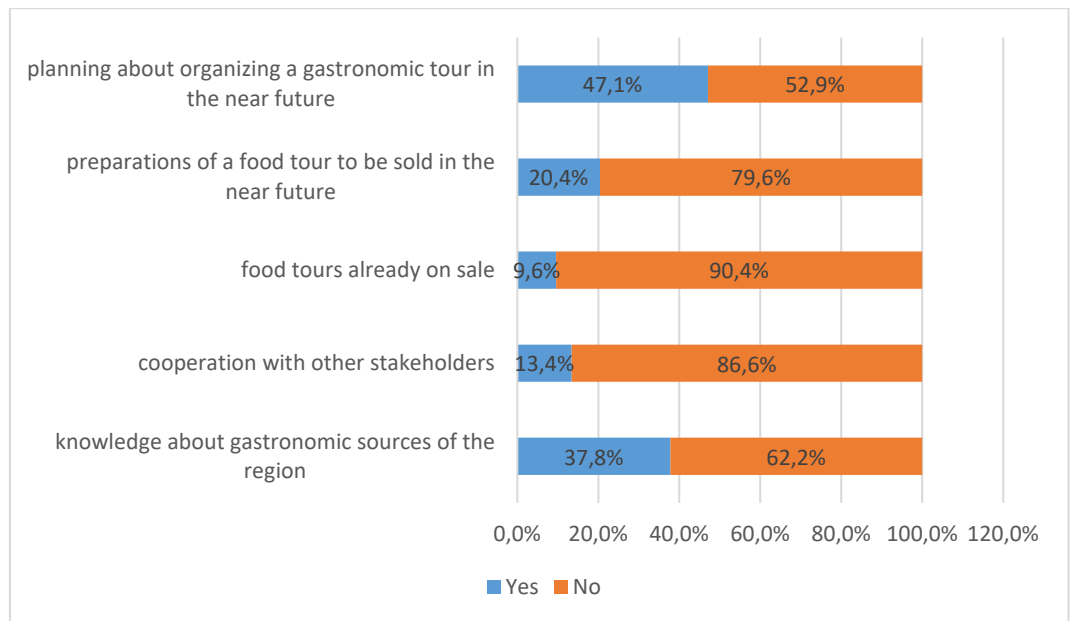
Source: Compiled by the authors

In the second part of the questionnaire, which was prepared as a five-point Likert (1- I strongly disagree … 5- I completely agree), there were 33 propositions measuring the theoretical structure put forward in the research.
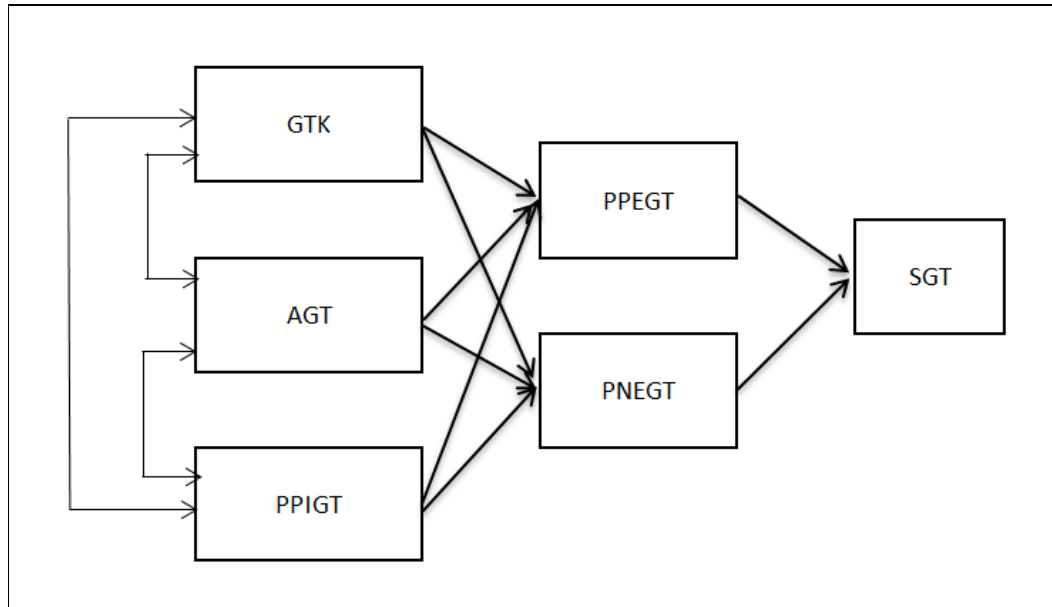
The universe of the research consists of A Group travel agencies operating in Izmir. Due to time and cost constraints, the study area could not be handled to cover all the travel agencies in İzmir and was limited to agencies with a high business volume in the city center. It was applied on the sample thought to represent the universe in this region. According to the 2020 data of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies, the number of Group A travel agencies in Izmir, where the study will be implemented, is 257. A questionnaire was applied to 157 agencies which were selected by using purposive sampling method. The main purpose here was to survey those with higher volüme of business in the city center district area.

In the analysis of the data obtained from the research; in order to determine whether the measurement tool consists of sub-dimensions and to determine the suitability of the items it includes for the scale; first explanatory and then confirmatory factor analysis was performed. Structural Equation Model (SEM) was used to determine the causality relationship between latent variables. YEM consists of two parts. First, the measurement model applied by linking observed variables to latent variables with confirmatory factor analysis; The second is the structural model.

Before applying factor analysis within the scope of the research, the suitability of the data for analysis was tested. Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) test was used to measure sample adequacy, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between variables. The KMO value was calculated as 0.882 and the research sample was determined to be sufficient (Alpar 2011: 286). As a result of the examination of the Bartlett test, it was seen that there were significantly high relations between the variables (X2=3301.787 and p=0.000), and it was decided that the data set was suitable for factor analysis (Kalaycı 2014).

As a result of the Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) carried out in order to establish the determinants of Gastronomy Tourism support and their sub-dimensions, 33 expressions used in the measurement tool were included in the analysis. (Şencan 2005: 128) six factors were obtained. The first factor was named Support for Gastronomy Tourism (SGT). Then, respectively; Approach to Gastronomy Tourism (AGT), Perceived Power to Impact Gastronomy Tourism (PPIGT), Perceived Negative Effects of Gastronomy Tourism (PNEGT, Perceived Positive Effects of Gastronomy Tourism (PPEGT), Gastronomy Tourism Information (GTK).

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Figure 3. Path Diagram for the Research

Source: Compiled by the authors

The measurement model was examined to assess convergence and discriminant validity, and the structural model was examined to investigate the strength and direction of the relationships between constructs. At this stage, the goodness-of-fit indexes, which show the suitability of the entire measurement model, should be examined. The fit of the measurement model was tested using the LISREL program, and it was determined that the model was within acceptable limits with the help of the calculated fit criteria.

Table 2. Model Fit Statistics of the Research

Goodness-of-fit Measures	Good Fit Values	Results of the study
Chi-Square Fit Test x^2/df	"$0<x^2/df<3$"	1.864
GFI	*"$0.85 \leq GFI \leq 1.00$"*	0.894
RMSEA	*"$0.05 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.08$"*	0.074
AGFI	*"$0.85 \leq AGFI \leq 1.00$"*	0.854
CFI	*"$0.90 \leq CFI \leq 0.97$"*	0.903
NFI	*"$0.90 \leq NFI \leq 0.95$"*	0.915
IFI	*"$0.90 \leq IFI \leq 0.95$"*	0.905
TLI	*"$0.90 \leq TLI \leq 0.95$"*	0.988

Source: Şener et al., 2019; Erkorkmaz et al., 2013; Cangür, 2012; West et al., 2012

As the error covariances of the sixth, eighth and nineteenth statements in the questionnaire were found to be high as a result of CFA, it was found appropriate to be removed from the model and the model was retested. As the error covariances of the second, fourth, twenty-second and thirty-second statements in the questionnaire were found to be high as a result of CFA, it was found appropriate to be removed from the model and the model was retested. Factors belonging to the research model, standard loads and total explained variance values are given in Table 3:

Table 3. SEM Results for the Research Model

Statements	Factors					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
SGT: Support to Gastronomy Tourism						
SGT1: We think that we will benefit from gastronomy tourism to differentiate our agency	0,869					
SGT2: We think that gastronomic tourism will increase the number of our customers	0,869					
SGT3: We think that gastronomic tourism will be an opportunity for new business connections	0,845					
SGT4: We think that we will gain economic benefits from the development of gastronomy tourism in İzmir	0,839					
SGT5: Gastronomy tourism contributes significantly to İzmir's tourism revenues	0,723					
SGT6: Gastronomy tourism has the potential to be an important tourism product for our travel agency	0,653					
SGT7: We support more gastronomic tourists to come to İzmir	0,645					
SGT8: We support the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir	0,524					
AGT: Approach to Gastronomy Tourism						
AGT1: Gastronomy tours increase the quality of tourism in Izmir		0,752				
AGT2: Gastronomy tours positively affect the image of Izmir		0,747				
AGT3: We would be pleased if İzmir is mentioned with gastronomic tourism		0,708				
AGT4: We want agencies to organize gastronomic tours in Izmir		0,653				
AGT5: It is important in terms of product differentiation and offering alternatives		0,601				
PPIGT: Perceived Power to Impact Gastronomy Tourism						
PPIGT1: Travel agencies are the most effective channel in gastronomic product diversification in İzmir			0,766			
PPIGT2: Travel agencies take an active role in the promotion of gastronomic tourism			0,760			
PPIGT3: It is possible for the gastronomic tourism to reach large masses through agency activities			0,752			
PPIGT4: Gastronomic tourism in İzmir will develop with agency activities			0,697			
PNEGT: Perceived Negative Effects of Gastronomy Tourism						
PNEGT1: It is risky as it is a new product				0,797		
PNEGT2: It is a difficult product to apply				0,697		
PNEGT3: Demand is uncertain.				0,658		
PNEGT4: It is not applicable to mass marketing				0,630		
PNEGT5: Gastronomy product is expensive				0,579		
PNEGT6: The number of experts in this field is insufficient				0,575		
PPEGT: Perceived Positive Effects of Gastronomy Tourism						
PPEGT1: It is a year-round marketable product					0,682	
PPEGT2: It meets the needs and expectations of today's tourists					0,671	
PPEGT3: It provides high income per person					0,600	
GTK: Gastronomy Tourism Knowledge						
GTK1: Gastronomy tourism is a type of tourism that is on the rise in İzmir						0,769
GTK2: Gastronomy tourism is a popular type of tourism in Izmir and its surroundings						0,738
GTK3: Gastronomy tourism may be the primary reason to visit İzmir and its surroundings						0,679
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .882 Bartlett's Test of Sphericity; X²= 3301.787; p=0.000				Total Explained Variance: 68,812		

Source: Compiled by the authors

Hypotheses that were developed for the model was tested with "Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)" before which "validity and reliability" were confirmed and "exploratory" and "confirmatory factor analysis" were performed within the scope of the research. The research hypotheses of the theoretical model are listed below:

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H1. "There is a relationship between perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism and support to gastronomy tourism."

H2. "There is a relationship between perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism and support to gastronomy tourism"

H3. "There is a relationship between perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism and perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism"

H4. "There is a relationship between gastronomy tourism knowledge and perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism"

H5. "There is a relationship between approach to gastronomy tourism and perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism"

H6. "There is a relationship between gastronomy tourism knowledge and perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism"

H7. "There is a relationship between perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism and perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism"

H8. "There is a relationship between approach to gastronomy tourism and perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism"

Figure 4. Path Diagram for the Structural Equation Model
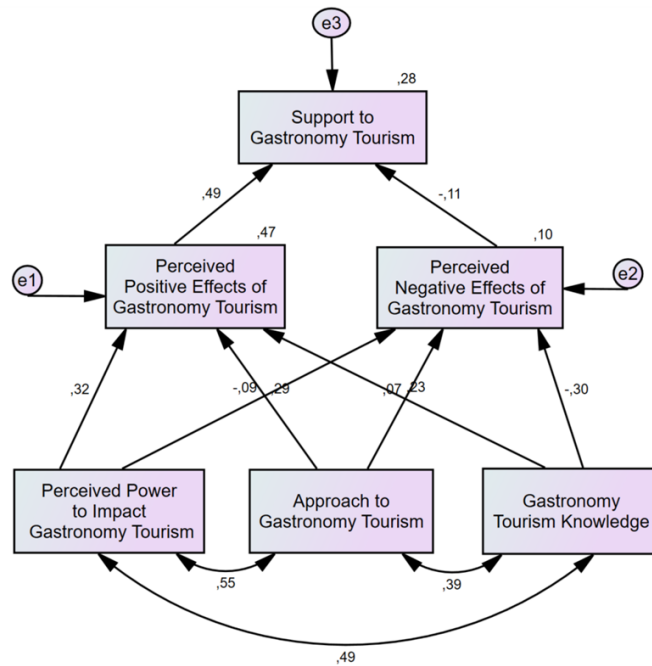
Source: Compiled by the authors

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4. Findings

The results of SEM analysis are shown on Table 4 and indicate that travel agencies give support to gastronomy tourism development at the level of thought but they are insufficient in contribution in practice. Travel agencies with a positive attitude towards the development of gastronomic tourism also support the development of tourism but interestingly those with a negative attitude don't unsupport either. The study of Carlisle et al. (2013) also supports this finding as they found out that optimizaton of benefits in the development and management of tourism, institutional support for innovation, generation of localised knowledge contributes to an enhanced approach to destination development.

While gastronomy tourism knowledge, approach to gastronomy tourism and perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism development has a significant effect on perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism; only gastronomy tourism knowledge has a significant effect on perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism whereas perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism development and approach to gastronomy tourism had no direct effect on perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism. Study of Budenau (2005) also stated that the flow of information is often inadequate and thus, stressed the crucial role and importance of tour operators in influencing how the tourist market can evolve towards more responsible practices and products.

Table 4. Structural Equation Model Path Coefficients and Significance Level

Path	Estimate	Standardized Estimate	Standard Error	CR	R^2	p	Result
SGT<-PPEGT	1,308	,495	,182	7,171	,28	***	Accepted
SGT <- PNEGT	-0,165	-0,115	0,099	-1,660		,097	Rejected
PPEGT<-PPIGT	,243	,322	,056	4,320	,47	***	Accepted
PPEGT <- GTK	,196	,231	,057	3,418		***	Accepted
PPEGT <-AGT	,240	,292	,058	4,132		***	Accepted
PNEGT<-GTK	-,466	-,299	,137	-3,397	,10	***	Accepted
PNEGT <- PPIGT	-,119	-,085	,135	-,881		,378	Rejected
PNEGT <- AGT	,101	,067	,139	,724		,469	Rejected

Source: Compiled by the authors

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5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The production of a competitive tourism product that can best suit the demands and expectations of tourists is critical for the industry's development on an escalating and continous basis. To be able to attract more tourists to destinations, tourism offerings should not only be differentiated but diversified as well. Newer tourism offers should place a greater emphasis on knowing local values as a potential and valuable alternative to mass tourism. Travel agencies should develop strategies to create value for individual tourists as a response to the growing interest for alternative types of tourism in which conservation and sustainability matter. Specializing in new tourism markets can be a good start and approach for destination development since it can lead to the launch of unique products and services. These services and products may help to reduce consumer apathy and also help promote the destination. As a result, such methods and strategies should be thought about and handled through appropriate regulations and planning, as well as analyzing and selecting appealing tourism elements. Place planning and design, as well as route and experience design, are all part of destination development. At this stage, industry and tourism-related organizations should collaborate to produce high-quality travel experiences and incorporate them into future content creation and policy formulation activities. All of these initiatives will help to provide value and encourage visitors to return. The package tour industry, in particular, appears to be stepping up its efforts in this area. Gastronomy tourism is one of the greatest forms of tourism for pleasure-seeking, hedonistic-minded travelers that of which travel experts are increasingly emphasizing experiential aspects through tourist engagement. To match the demands of travelers seeking unique and unforgettable experiences, new tour concepts are required. As a result, the tourism industry should offer previously unavailable trip packages, as well as services and products that allow tourists to co-create experiences.

Food should not be overlooked as a key or, more commonly, a supporting attraction by destinations. By properly marketing their resources and attractions, destinations can gradually increase their appeal. To achieve this objective, food tourism must first be developed, then packaged, positioned, and promoted so that it becomes an important and appealing attraction in a destination, all of which are primary tasks of travel agents in the tourist industry in the whole tourism system. For this reason, the aim of the research has been defined as to investigate the relationship between the perceptions and attitudes of travel agencies towards the development of gastronomy tourism and gastronomy tours in İzmir and their support for gastronomy tourism. For this purpose, the support of travel agencies to gastronomy tourism; perceived positive and negative effects of gastronomy tourism were tested through a structural model with the help of several variables such as gastronomic tourism knowledge, perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism, and approach to gastronomy tourism. Following conclusions can be drawn from the results:

Although travel intermediaries around the world are becoming more and more niche in their offerings as tourists become less interested in look-alike tour

packages, a survey of travel agencies and their offerings in İzmir revealed that only a small percentage of them offer gastronomic tours and that they are also unaware of the region's gastronomic sources. In today's tourism market where competition is intense, the effort of destinations to create their own unique products in order to differentiate from others is a rising trend and local cuisine is a unique resource as a marketing tool. Since the gastronomic richness of a region in destination marketing activities represents cultural identity, cultural experience, communication and sharing, it has the capacity to affect a large number of tourists.

Another outcome obtained from this research is related to travel agencies' interaction with tourism authorities in terms of having a project, training and / or cooperation to develop gastronomic tourism in İzmir. According to the research findings, there is a lack of stakeholder collaboration and partnership for the creation and implementation of gastronomy tours. This finding can be examined in more detail in the context of stakeholder relationships, and study can be expanded. It is an important finding in terms of contribution to the literature. Travel agencies often believe that host governments is the major responsible to enable destination development but it is a collective effort that results in sustainable policies and practices.

According to the study, it is seen that there is no research on travel agencies' contribution to gastronomy tourism development in Turkish tourism literature. One of the necessities to create awareness and draw attention to gastronomy tourism development is to provide more academic support to the field. In this respect, the proliferation of studies in gastronomy tourism development with travel agencies' support will contribute to tourism literature.

According to the findings of the study, travel agencies support the development of gastronomy tourism as well as perceiving themselves as one of the most effective channels in gastronomic product diversification in İzmir and also believe that gastronomic tourism will develop with agency activities and reach masses through them. Yet only a small percentage of the agencies have a gastronomic tour currently on sale indicating a poor contribution to gastronomy tourism development. This points out to a need for more travel agencies to be specialized in gastronomic tourism rather than the traditional mass types of holidays.

The reason of food not being promoted as a primary or secondary attraction may be due to the lack of awareness about potential attractivenes of cuisine culture and knowledge about local and regional food sources. As a result, the next step in the research was to consult specialists in the field to assemble data on culinary resources in İzmir and its environs as a starting point for tour creation. Finally, an example tour itinerary was developed to provide inspiration for travel agencies interested in gastronomy tourism and to assist them in developing their own offerings.

The research underlines the present structure of travel agencies in Izmir on gastronomic tourism. Future studies may reveal why specialization in this field has not been realized until today or investigate the demand potential. It should be researched whether gastronomy tour developments were applied in different cities

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or not. The execution of food tours should also be controlled. It is very important whether there are travel agencies who have the consciousness to develop food tours or not. After all these processes are taken into account, the effects of gastronomy tourism development will appear more accurately and clearly. It is also expected that findings of this research will draw attention to the importance of gastronomy tourism potential in İzmir and contribute to the increase of similar studies. It is considered that the studies to be conducted with larger samples would be more beneficial to both the agencies at the nationwide level and the literature in terms of developing and applying the food tours. It can also be ensured that other stakeholders take a more active role in the development of gastronomic tourism together with travel agencies. Researches can be conducted in which the opinions of other stakeholders other than travel agencies are also sought. The outputs of this thesis can be functional to develop a new research idea and model in the field of gastronomy tourism development for further research.

There are several limitations in the current research that should be considered as caveats. The limitations of this study are the lack of gastronomy tours offered by travel agencies in İzmir or agencies that are specialized in gastronomy tourism and also the scarcity of similar research to compare the results with. The dearth of statistics or studies related to actual number of food tourists to the city of İzmir can be listed as another limitation. And finally, this research was limited to travel agencies in downtown area of İzmir. Given the tourism industry's ongoing expansion and diversity, as well as the fact that it is always evolving; doing research and identifying solutions based on the findings is critical. As a result, the scientific approach presented in this research makes a significant contribution to clarifying some theoretical and practical aspects of the gastronomy tourism development in the context of travel agencies, and it also serves as the foundation for future tourism research studies that will be adapted to new tourism trends and future consumers.

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