Menu Differentiation Strategy as a Culinary Tourism Attraction: A Qualitative Descriptive Approach

Satrio Nata Mulia¹, Fanji Lesmana², Annisa Ramadhanty³

¹,³ Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
² Polijati Polytechnic, Purwakarta
Corresponding author: satrio.nata.fis@um.ac.id, fanjilesmana@polijati.ac.id, annisardt.fis@um.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of the culinary tourism industry has generated intense competition and increasing product homogeneity, compelling food and beverage (F&B) businesses to formulate effective menu differentiation strategies in order to create distinctive value propositions. This study aims to describe the forms of menu differentiation strategies and analyze their role in enhancing tourist attraction in Bandung and Malang. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, this research explores the essence of tourists' lived experiences through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and triangulation using digital perception analysis derived from Google Reviews and social media platforms. The findings indicate that effective menu differentiation integrates three interrelated dimensions: physical aspects (uniqueness of taste and ingredients), interactional aspects (service quality and hospitality), and emotional aspects (historical and cultural narratives embedded in the menu). Google Reviews function as an objective performance mirror that validates service consistency, while social media operates as a platform for social identity construction and visual storytelling, particularly among Generation Z consumers. The study concludes that the success of differentiation strategies depends significantly on businesses' ability to transform menu uniqueness into shareable digital content, thereby creating memorable gastronomic experiences and strengthening tourist loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary growth of the tourism industry is closely associated with increasing public consumption of food as a medium for acquiring new experiences and enjoyment. Food consumption is no longer limited to fulfilling biological needs; rather, it reflects the pursuit of experiential pleasure (fun of food) and identity formation. Tourism activities have increasingly been perceived as a basic necessity, supported by more affordable travel costs and improved accessibility across socio-economic segments.

This transformation has generated a behavioral shift among tourists. First, the search for experience and identity has become central to consumption patterns. Dining activities now represent processes of constructing memorable and culturally meaningful experiences. Second, gastronomy has emerged as a primary travel motivation, as evidenced by the growing trend of gastronomic tourism in which visitors travel specifically to experience authentic local cuisine. Third, the expansion of culinary tourism is driven by a lifestyle orientation that prioritizes strong emotional memories and social sharing after dining experiences. In urban centers such as Bandung, the proliferation of aesthetic cafés and the Work From Café (WFC) phenomenon illustrates how culinary spaces have become extensions of social media-driven lifestyles.

International Journal of Business, Law, and Education
E-ISSN : 2747-1506
Publisher: IJBLE Scientifis Publications Community Inc.

Volume 7, Number 1, 2026
https://ijble.com/index.php/journal/index

From an economic perspective, the culinary subsector represents the largest contributor to Indonesia's creative economy, accounting for approximately 41.40% of the national creative economy GDP in 2016. Despite this growth, the food and beverage industry faces significant challenges, particularly intense competition and product homogeneity. In such an environment, businesses must develop differentiation strategies to remain competitive. Differentiation entails designing meaningful distinctions that create superior perceived value in consumers' minds.

The menu functions as a strategic communication instrument that shapes consumer decision-making (Bowen & Morris, 1995). It also serves as a marketing and price control tool within F&B operations (McCall & Lynn, 2008; Mills & Thomas, 2008). However, consumers evaluate dining establishments not only based on food quality but also on service excellence and overall experiential value (Sejagad et al., 2024). Therefore, sustainable competitiveness requires balancing authenticity preservation with creative innovation that responds to digital market trends and evolving lifestyle demands.

Empirically, Bandung and Malang present distinctive differentiation patterns. Bandung is widely recognized for its urban creativity and youth-oriented lifestyle, emphasizing contemporary product innovation and aesthetic presentation. In contrast, Malang and its surrounding areas prioritize authenticity and historical narratives to construct emotionally resonant gastronomic experiences. These contextual differences highlight the need for an in-depth qualitative exploration to understand internal business adaptations and experiential meanings that quantitative measures cannot adequately capture.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What forms of menu differentiation strategies are implemented by culinary businesses? and (2) How do these strategies contribute to enhancing tourist attraction? Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on tourism service marketing and differentiation strategies. Practically, it offers insights for culinary entrepreneurs and tourism stakeholders in designing competitive and sustainable strategies.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design using a phenomenological method. Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences. In this context, the research explores tourists' subjective experiences in interacting with differentiated culinary offerings.

Rather than focusing on quantitative indicators such as visitor numbers, this approach emphasizes the essence of experiential meaning—examining how menu differentiation generates memorable impressions that foster loyalty and revisit intention. Culinary tourism is conceptualized not merely as food consumption but as an experiential process involving sensory, social, and emotional dimensions.

Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Observation enabled researchers to directly examine operational practices, service interactions, and spatial aesthetics. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore tourists' experiential interpretations and managerial perspectives regarding differentiation strategies. Visual documentation supported contextual analysis of physical presentation and branding elements.

Digital perception data derived from Google Reviews and social media platforms were utilized as triangulation instruments to validate field findings. These platforms function as objective performance indicators, providing longitudinal and transparent records of consumer experiences.

Google Reviews allow verification of service consistency and operational standards beyond isolated observational moments. Social media content—both official brand posts and user-generated content—validates aesthetic positioning and narrative construction. The integration of primary data (interviews and observations) with secondary digital data enhances the credibility and robustness of the qualitative analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that menu differentiation operates as a strategic transformation in which food becomes a medium for cultural experience, identity formation, and multisensory engagement. Consumers perceive higher value when differentiation is meaningfully constructed, thereby reinforcing loyalty and competitive distinction.

1. Google Reviews as an Objective Performance Mirror

Google Reviews provide transparent evaluations of service quality and operational consistency. The analysis indicates three primary functions:

a. **Transparency and Credibility** – Reviews serve as publicly accessible benchmarks for evaluating performance.

b. **Identification of Strengths and Weaknesses** – Businesses utilize reviews to detect operational gaps and service inconsistencies.

c. **Validation of Brand Claims** – Online feedback determines whether advertised positioning aligns with actual consumer experiences.

2. Social Media and Social Identity Construction

On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, culinary tourism extends beyond food consumption toward identity affirmation. Three key patterns emerge:

a. **Identity Projection** – Sharing aesthetically appealing menus and interiors facilitates self-image construction among Generation Z.

b. **Visual Storytelling** – Narratives concerning founders, historical origins, or rare ingredients generate emotional engagement.

c. **Influencer Endorsement** – Recommendations from Key Opinion Leaders significantly influence revisit intention and perceived credibility.

3. Digital Perception and Competitive Advantage

Businesses that strategically integrate digital perception into differentiation strategies demonstrate enhanced competitiveness. Menu uniqueness becomes effective when translated into shareable digital narratives. Real-time feedback enables adaptive innovation aligned with evolving consumer preferences.

Discussion

The evolution of culinary tourism reflects a structural shift from functional consumption to experiential and symbolic engagement. Gastronomy now functions as a primary travel motivator and strategic destination asset. Menu differentiation in this study is structured around three interconnected dimensions: product uniqueness, service interaction, and emotional narrative. These dimensions collectively generate experiential value that influences loyalty and brand attachment.

International Journal of Business, Law, and Education
Publisher: IJBLE Scientifics Publications Community Inc.

Volume 7, Number 1, 2026
https://ijble.com/index.php/journal/index

Operationally, differentiation aligns with menu engineering principles emphasizing profitability and popularity. However, contemporary application requires integration with digital sentiment analysis to capture real-time consumer perception. Online reputation management thus becomes a critical component of strategic positioning, as electronic word-of-mouth significantly influences trust and purchase intention.

Social media further operates as a symbolic arena for lifestyle expression, particularly among younger demographics. Effective differentiation must therefore be translated into compelling visual and narrative content to amplify engagement and positive electronic word-of-mouth.

The comparative contexts of Bandung and Malang illustrate that sustainable differentiation must be rooted in local cultural capital. Bandung emphasizes creative urban innovation, while Malang leverages historical authenticity. Differentiation grounded in local identity is more resilient and less susceptible to imitation.

Overall, the findings indicate that competitive advantage in contemporary culinary tourism emerges from the integration of sensory quality, service excellence, emotional storytelling, and digital validation. This integrated approach may be conceptualized as a digitalized experiential gastronomy strategy, in which experiences are co-created offline and amplified through online narratives.

CONCLUSION

Digital perception data transform subjective experiential insights into verifiable behavioral patterns, strengthening the evidentiary foundation of strategic positioning. Google Reviews and social media serve as triangulation instruments that validate the alignment between operational standards and consumer experiences.

Menu differentiation proves most effective when uniqueness is strategically translated into communicative and shareable digital content. Such integration enhances destination attractiveness and stimulates both domestic and international tourist interest.

Nevertheless, the study was conducted within a relatively limited observation period, restricting long-term trend analysis. Future research should employ longitudinal designs spanning at least one year to capture market dynamics more comprehensively. Expanding the geographical scope beyond Bandung and Malang would also enhance generalizability and comparative insight.

Acknowledgment

Reference

Bowen, J. T.,& Morris, A. J. (1995). Menu design: Can menus sell?. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 7(4), 4-9.

Buhalis, D., & Leung, R. (2023). Smart hospitality and tourism analytics: Managing data-driven competitiveness. *Tourism Management Perspectives, 45*, 101053. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101053

Ellis, A., Park, E., Kim, S., & Yeoman, I. (2021). What is food tourism? A systematic review. *Tourism Management, 68*, 250–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.03.025

Filieri, R., Raguseo, E., & Vitari, C. (2022). What moderates the influence of online reviews on restaurant patronage? The role of review usefulness and reviewer credibility. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 102*, 103137. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103137

Hall, C. M., Sharples, L., Mitchell, R., Cambourne, B., & Macionis, N. (2003). Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets. Routledge. (Ini adalah buku referensi wajib).

Hjalager, A. M., & Richards, G. (Eds.). (2002). Tourism and Gastronomy. London: Routledge.

J. Joko, R. Hurriyati. (2020). Proceedings of the 3rd Global Conference On Business, Management, and Entrepreneurship (GCBME 2018). Atlantis Press. Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research

Kim, J., & Lee, J. (2023). Authenticity and emotional attachment in food tourism experiences. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 55*, 123–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.02.004

Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B. (2021). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism Management, 82*, 104197. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104197

Long, L. M. (Ed.). (2004). Culinary Tourism. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.

Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2022). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 22*(1), 1–15.

Putu, B., Susila, E., Nugraha, S., Komunitas, A., & Bali, M. (2021). Kuta-Bali. Dalam Journal of Applied Management and Accounting Science (JAMAS) (Vol. 3, Nomor 1).

Quan, S., & Wang, N. (2004). "Towards a structural model of the tourist experience: An illustration from food experiences in tourism". Tourism Management, 25(3), 297-305.

Sejagad, B. B., Trisna, M. A. T., & Hidayat, S. (2024). Analisis kepuasan pelanggan mie Gacoan. GEMILANG: Jurnal Manajemen dan Akuntansi, 4(2), 316–326.

Suhartanto, D., Dean, D., Ismail, T. A. T., & Sundari, R. (2022). Tourist experience in culinary tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research, 47*(4), 456–470.

United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2022). *Global report on food tourism*.

Wahyudi, K. A., Sinaga, F., Amir, F. L., & Parwati, K. S. M. (2024). Upaya peningkatan popularitas dan profitabilitas menu makanan dengan metode menu engineering. *Jurnal Ilmiah Pariwisata dan Bisnis, 3*(6), 882–893.

We Are Social. (2024). *Digital 2024: Indonesia*. We Are Social & Meltwater.

Wolf, E. (2002). Culinary Tourism: A Tasty Economic Proposition. Portland: International Culinary Tourism Association.

Yeoman, I., & McMahon-Beattie, U. (2022). The future of food tourism. *Journal of Tourism Futures, 8*(3), 289–302.