Unveiling the Attractiveness of Urban Destinations in the Context of Cuisine

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Abstract

The efforts to diversify and extend the tourism season to 12 months continue unabated with new approaches and strategies. This issue is of greater importance for countries where tourism is pivotal to the growth of the economy. One approach to achieve this is through urban tourism and its popularity is increasing rapidly. Although tourism has a significant impact on the Turkish economy, the country is widely known for sea-sand-sun tourism. However, research on how this can be transformed into urban tourism especially from the perspective of cuisines is still needed. This current study focuses on the narratives of tourists visiting Istanbul, Turkey's mega-city as well as an important urban destination. A qualitative research approach is adopted, and a document analysis technique is employed in the study. Tripadvisor user entries, commonly used in scientific research, are used as a data source. Data analyses are performed following a three-step analysis procedure with the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. The analysis covers a total of 450 entries. The results of the present study introduce a series of key projections for the scientific literature, practitioners, and administrators.

Keywords: *Urban Tourism Destination; Tourist Narratives; Online reviews; TripAdvisor; Istanbul*

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation and recent growth of tourism in urban environments have led to a significant increase in demand for urban tourism, and global tourism trends such as increased mobility, a growing middle class, and more affordable transport and accommodation alternatives have stimulated urban tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2018). Currently, urban tourism has become an increasingly popular research topic in mass tourism literature and areas where tourism is the core of the economy and one or more of many development pathways (Brouder and Ioannides, 2014). Despite being an extremely important form of tourism worldwide, urban tourism has received little attention from both tourism practitioners and scholars in the past (Ashworth and Page, 2011; Keshavarz and Raeisi, 2022). Looking at existing literature, it appears that the focus is generally on urban tourism as a whole or the historical and cultural context of urban tourism; specifically bridges, museums, winter sports and heritage sites (Gao, et al., 2023; Do, et al., 2023; Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021; Bazuń, and Kwiatkowski, 2020; Brida, Meleddu and Pulina, 2012). Additionally, the role of cuisine in the context of urban tourism has not received considerable attention in extant literature.

Research suggests that the comments and recommendations of individuals who have visited a destination are useful in making a destination attractive for visitors (Aydin et al., 2020). In addition, it is widely acknowledged that cuisine is a powerful driver of tourist mobility (Aydin

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et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). In this respect, this current study unveils the attractiveness of cuisine in the context of urban tourism based on the culinary narratives of tourists visiting Istanbul, one of the leading urban tourism destinations in Turkey. Serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe, Istanbul attracts millions of tourists every year with its impressive historical past, monuments, historical buildings, and unique cultural values. Being a significant value in terms of urban tourism, Istanbul can be considered as colorful and therefore, recognized as small Turkey due to the presence of immigrants in the city. As cuisine is known to be an influential factor in shaping visitors' intentions, the current study focuses on the narratives of tourists in Istanbul with an exposure to Turkish cuisine. To examine how urban tourism attracts visitors, online narratives, the leading form of user-generated content that enables tourists to share their experiences in restaurants, were employed. The study indicated that when consumers share their dining experiences, they focus primarily on service, staff, traditional Turkish cuisine and the place quality. These attributes are key to achieving customer satisfaction and enable customers to make recommendations to others. In this context, the current study contains a series of remarkable implications for the urban tourism literature, practitioners and decision-makers.

Literature Review

Urban Tourism Attractiveness

Urban tourism and related studies focusing on urban tourist destinations are of increasing interest to practitioners, researchers and policymakers as they seek to understand the phenomenon of tourism within the urban environment (Edwards, Griffin and Hayllar, 2008). Given the studies conducted over the past four decades, the scope of the concept has not been defined and there is no widely accepted conceptualisation of the phenomenon. In the literature on urban tourism, the approaches of researchers to the subject also make it difficult to provide a specific definition of the notion. Although it is not a new activity, the concept is not clearly defined, consequently leading to a diverse definition from researchers. Some consider it as an economic activity, a multifaceted social phenomenon, whereas others see it as a short-term visit to highly populated urban areas (Romero-García, et al., 2019). Urban tourism, which is recognised as an increasingly significant tourism activity on a global scale, fails to identify the elements that constitute a leading attraction for tourists (Brida, Meleddu and Pulina, 2012) and to provide a clear definition of its boundaries, which is related to the variety in the approach of researchers to the subject and its multifaceted nature. Having unique historical, cultural and geographical values of each destination possess a great difficulty in determining these elements and drawing the boundaries of the urban tourism phenomenon. Nevertheless, Vandermey (1984) proposed a sector-based overview of the elements that characterise urban tourism in the context of outdoor recreation and parks, events and attractions, business and convention, hospitality, accommodation, transport and travel services. Since these sector-based elements have a wider scope, there is a need for them to be discussed in depth and each element analysed separately.

Urban tourism attractiveness covers all kinds of points of interest that lead tourists from their permanent residence to a destination (Law, 1993). In this context, various factors are considered within the scope of urban tourism attractiveness. These include historical sites (Nasser, 2003), geographical location (Pearce, 2015), climate and weather (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015), urban sports (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021), marketing (Heeley, 2015),

activities offered (Crouch, 2011). It is seen that urban tourism, whose primary target group in the past was daytrips, sightseeing tours, and daily excursionists spent time shopping for entertainment (Jansen-Verbeke, 1988), has been recognised as having a greater potential over time. Nowadays, urban tourism is used as an important means of extending tourism mobility to twelve months and a way of providing diversity in tourism.

Law (1993) delineates the primary pull factors in urban destinations by categorizing the determinants of a city's attractiveness for visitors into three key elements: primary, secondary, and conditional. Primary elements include a) cultural facilities (theatre, concert, movies, galleries); b) entertainment facilities (casino, luna park bingo), craftworks, exhibitions, events and festivities; c) physical setting, (historical pattern, monuments, art objects, parks, waterfronts), and d) socio-cultural characteristics (liveliness of the place language, local customs, folklore, way of life). Secondary elements, which provides support to the primary elements, encompass catering facilities, shopping facilities and markets. Lastly, conditional elements include accessibility, parking, touristic infrastructure (information bureau, signposts, guides). Secondary elements that support these main elements also promote urban tourism and provide visitors with facilities such as shops, congress areas, accommodation, and transportation (Boivin and Tanguay, 2019). Among urban tourism attractions, local/regional foods and beverages are considered as the main attractive factors, while tasting new foods is considered among the push factors in the context of information/education (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021). Regarding the research conducted in this context, the low number of gastronomy-oriented studies focusing on the taste of city is noteworthy. Exploring and savoring destination foods and beverages in an international setting creates a distinctive and memorable culinary experience, potentially fostering a desire among tourists to revisit. This highlights the efficacy of destination food as a novel marketing tool (Okumuş, 2007).

Table 1. Studies on urban tourism attractiveness

| Author (year)	Target	Cities	Insights
Do, et al. (2023)	Overall city	Ho Chi Minh	Architectural and Built Environment, Natural, Folklore, Civilization, Sense of Place, Services etc.
Florido-Benítez, (2023)	Destination marketing organisations' tourism official websites	Around the world	Representative bridges iconic element
Gao, et al. (2023)	World Heritage Site	China	Inscriptions, protected sites, national holidays
Keshavarz and Raeisi (2022)	Overall city	Yazd	Monuments and historical sites, public spaces, public parks and gardens, public service, tourism information, museums and galleries, festivals and events, conferences and exhibitions
Bichler and Pikkemaat (2021)	Urban winter sport	Innsbruck	exciting, knowledge, relaxation, achievement and family; basic assets, urban assets, natural scenery, social events, economic aspects and winter sports activities
Bazuń, and Kwiatkowski (2020)	Bridges	Pragu	Charles Bridge
Boivin and Tanguay (2019)	Overall city	Québec City and Bordeaux	Public space, urban environment, internet and social, media, urban public areas,
Brida, Meleddu and Pulina (2012)	Archaeology Museum	Bolzano	South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, Improving knowledge

Source: Own work

Urban tourism affects a large number of residents and a wide range of businesses, as well as labor flows, and therefore it is critical to understand the dynamic nature of development pathways (Brouder and Ioannides, 2014). Cuisine, the taste of city, is one of them. Recent research has focused heavily on entertainment, sports, shopping and other urban lifestyles in the context of urban tourism although it is clear that studies focusing on urban tourism attractions give little attention to the taste of city, i.e. food and beverages (Bichler and Pikkemaat, 2021). Due to this, current study focuses on the reviews of the cuisine experiences of tourists who have visited Istanbul.

Research Method

It is widely recognised that cuisine is a powerful motivator for touristic mobility, and it is emphasised that destination-related reviews and recommendations of visitor experiences provide an influential tool to enhance the attractiveness of a destination (Aydin et al., 2020; Aydin et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). This current study is based on the online reviews of visitors to Turkey's megacity, Istanbul, which consist of post-visit culinary experience narratives. Due to this, a qualitative method was employed in this study.

The research data were retrieved from Tripadvisor, a leading online travel and tourism website. The site acts as a hub for social science researchers in retrieving data from travelers to different destinations with different experiences in different languages (Burkov and Gorgadze, 2023; Nowacki, et al., 2023; Arslan, 2023; Toker 2019). Therefore, a total of 450 user reviews until 20.11.2023 on restaurant X, which is considered the best in the city, were obtained from Tripadvisor. The data were analysed by following the document analysis procedures. Document analysis in qualitative research includes texts in newspapers or other mass media, files, protocols, institutional documents and web pages (Arslan, 2023; Morgan 2022; Toker, 2022; Mayring 2014; Punch 2009). The coding procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1967) were adopted during the data analysis process (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Data analysis process
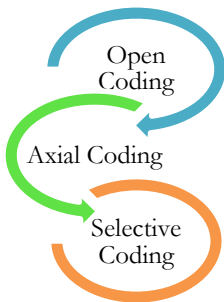
In order to ensure validity and reliability or trustworthiness, Guba and Guba and Lincoln's criteria of audit trail, negative case analysis, thick description and peer debriefing strategies were used (Arslan, 2022).
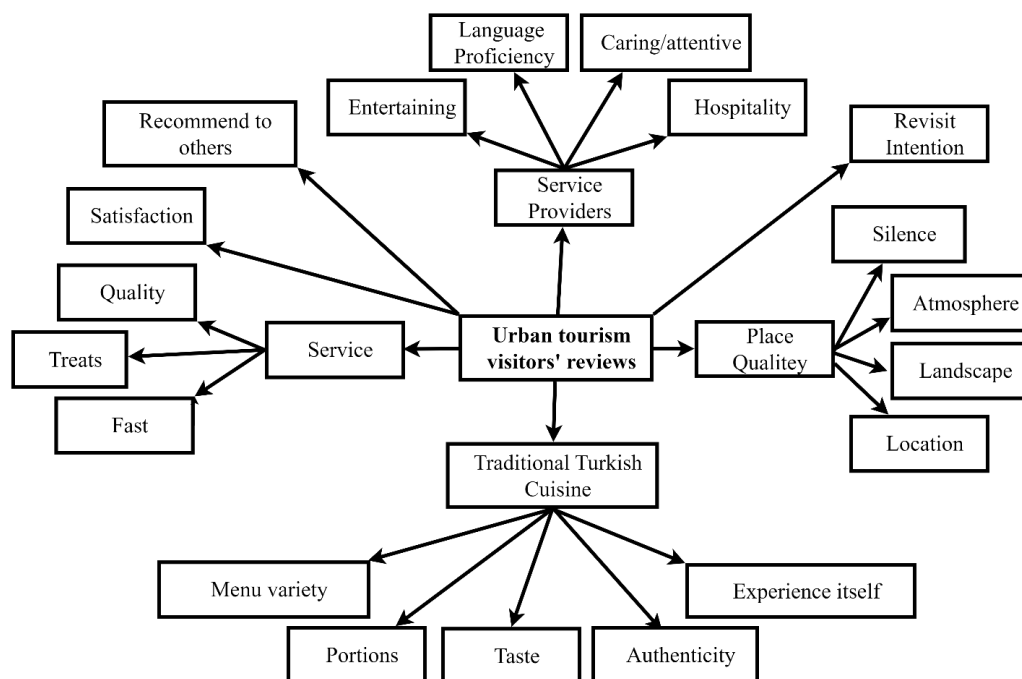
Findings

Research findings indicate that visitors' dining experiences consist of four main categories, namely service quality, staff, place quality and traditional Turkish cuisine, and seventeen sub-categories under each of the categories. The findings further revealed three categories related

to these categories: satisfaction, recommendation to others and intention to revisit (Figure 2). It is evident that the last three categories appear because of the previous categories.

Figure 2. Urban tourism visitors' online reviews

Traditional Turkish Cuisine

Traditional cuisines are broadly known to increase satisfaction and accordingly form the intention to revisit (Aydin et al., 2021). Research findings reveal that visitors' restaurant evaluations focus on traditional Turkish cuisine in general and on appetisers, kebabs, desserts, salads, traditional treats foods and beverages. In addition to the taste of testi kebab, which is one of the best kebabs, its traditional presentation was among the factors that attracted the attention of the visitors. Visitors also mentioned the ratio of sugars and fats in their food and beverages. Regarding the local food, E40 stated "We had Turkish food for the first time, and it was a great experience" while E44 said "Good food. You should try the Testi in flames". Authenticity of traditional cuisine was another category that visitors emphasised particularly in their reviews. The kebabs, which are commonly recognised as the Ottoman cuisine, cooked in a pot, and served in the pot with a flame show, were appreciated by the visitors. Regarding the authenticity of the traditional dishes, E43 felt appreciative by stating that "I would definitely recommend the Beef Testi, which wraps the meat in porcelain and served with a fire show!" and E34 stated "We had a dinner of authentic Turkish cuisine, it was great".

Those visitors tasting traditional Turkish cuisine highlighted that they had one of the best experiences in Istanbul due to the restaurant's authentic food, quality service and cultural experience. The category of the experience itself, which consists of the visitors' reviews, includes the following remarks: "It was a great Turkish cuisine experience" (E119). Another

visitor stated the following phrases: "Sensational! Great experience, great food!" (E135). In addition to the variety of meat, fish, salads, desserts, appetisers, and desserts, the restaurant also serves traditional Turkish dishes and offers different alternatives for vegans, including the traditional kebab, which attracted the attention of visitors. E106 said "everything was excellent! I don't even have words to describe how good my vegetarian kebab was."; E196 described the variety of the menu as "We like the restaurant because it offers both fish and meat options"; E144 added "the wide variety of food and drinks was great". Visitors assessed the taste based on the freshness and quality of cooking the food. Adana kebab, Urfa kebab, shish kebab and fish varieties are among the most discussed traditional Turkish dishes in the taste category, while the appetizers (hummus, tzatziki, aubergines salad, etc.) served with the meals are thought to increase the taste. Traditional Turkish desserts (baklava, Turkish delight, etc.) served at the end of the meals enhance the value and taste. Among the beverages, traditional drinks such as Turkish coffee, Ayran, and turnip juice are highly appreciated by the visitors. E11 expressed his thoughts on traditional Turkish cuisine by sharing "We came here with our tour guide and ordered many traditional appetizers and dinner, and it was great!". E60 shared "The meat was marinated perfectly and had a balanced taste that you would love". Visitor entries demonstrate that they think there should be a balance between the money they pay and the service they receive. In this regard, E222 posted "the portions were definitely worth the money paid"; similarly, E236 said "the food was much more than I expected".

Service

Restaurant services serve a pivotal role in fulfilling tourists' expectations of destination food (Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán, 2012), visitor reviews also confirm this. In the context of the service category, visitors' reviews were conceptualized as the qualifications of the service. It is understood that particularly the attitudes of the staff, fast and effective service delivery make the visitors' visits to the restaurant pleasant and therefore make them feel privileged. Visitors described the quality of service provided to them as "the best service during our daily stay" (E1) or "We had a great time for lunch! Good fresh food. Very good service" (E33). Another point expressed in this category is pre-meal snacks, post-meal desserts, fruit, or hot drinks (often known as treats in Turkey). The research findings revealed that visitors are impressed by the various flavours such as baklava, tea, Turkish coffee, appetisers, Turkish delight, desserts, and apple tea, etc. offered free of charge by the restaurant. Visitors expressed their delight in the treats and stated that "they gave us free desserts and tea which was a pleasant surprise" (E4) and "I really liked the free baklava and tea" (E35). Another important element featured in the reviews of the visitors was the speed of the service. In this context, consumers appreciated the fast ordering and fast service and the fast preparation of the meals in their assessments. E8 expressed the fast service as "our orders were prepared in perfect timing and served in a short time". The interaction between the customer and the service provider has been argued to possess a significant impact on how customers assess the service quality of a restaurant (Jang and Namkung, 2009). The research further found that the most aforementioned issues highlighted by the visitors while evaluating the restaurant in the context of staff were fun, caring/attentive attitude, proficient in languages, and hospitable approach. In general, the visitors expressed that the employees who directly engaged with them were active, attentive, careful, polite, hospitable, professional, and excellent service providers. One of the visitors, E3, explained how one service provider entertained them by stating that "the waiter was also very nice, he was teaching us new Turkish

words and joking with us". Since Istanbul receives many international visitors, the staff of restaurants must be able to speak different languages, at least, English. The visitors appreciated the language proficiency of the service providers by stating that: "It is easy to communicate and they speak several languages" (E4). The visitors also expressed the significance of friendly welcoming. One of the visitors, E10, shared the following about the friendliness of the service providers: "The employees were very friendly, they always had a smile on their faces". The visitors highly appreciated the hospitality of the staff working in the restaurants. In addition to the food, the recommendations and warm greetings of the staff also attracted the interest of the visitors and were appreciated. E7 noted "We loved the warm welcome from the hosts who recommended their most popular dishes", while E5 said, "The service staff and the manager were really exceptional and made us feel very welcome". In the caring/attentive category, the visitors indicated how active, attentive, professional, and wonderful the staff were to them during the service they received. In this regard, E16 stated, "the staff were very caring, everyone was very attentive to us, they have a marvelous staff".

Place Quality

Compared to other tourism activities, urban tourism is carried out in a relatively shorter period, a few days or even less than 24 hours. For tourists whose primary purpose is urban tourism attractions, access to basic needs such as dining may be important in respect to these attractions. In relation to the sub-category of location, E227 stated "We were looking for a place to eat on our way to the next attraction in Sultanahmet" and E28 stated "[...] it is in a very central location, only a few minutes away from Hagia Sophia and the Bazaar".

Another issue stressed by the visitors in the context of place quality is whether the place is suitable for the family. In this sub-category, family-friendly, visitors who dined at the restaurant with their family and friends mostly mentioned that the amenities offered at the restaurant met their family members' and friends' expectations. In this sense, children's menu, and tolerance of service providers towards families with children generated comfort and confidence among the visitors. One of the visitors, E131, expressed "we came here together with my whole family, there was also a menu for children, the staff was very attentive, we had a calm and nice time". Additionally, the scenery provides additional value to the core attractions of a destination (Thornton et al., 2016). The research findings also indicated that scenery adds additional value to visitor dining experiences. One of the most frequently highlighted issues in visitor evaluations focuses on the restaurant's unique reflection of Istanbul's historical and cultural values, which are among the main urban tourism attractions in the city. E131 describes this issue as "We came for lunch, the terrace was perfect, the view of the Bosphorus and the mosques were beyond marvelous"; E127 says "The view of the Bosphorus and Hagia Sophia looks great".

It has been long known that atmosphere is an important quality factor affecting service buyers (Kotler, 1973). The atmosphere is one of the categories that visitors frequently emphasise in their dining assessments. The thoughts about the atmosphere were expressed in statements such as freshness, ambiance, warmth, decoration, environment, pleasant, cute, cosy, traditional, authentic, and nostalgia. E123, one of the visitors, stated "A beautiful interior with photographs about old Istanbul and Turkey :)" and similarly, E129 used the expression "Nice place, nice environment, nicely decorated, the ambiance was marvellous" concerning the atmosphere.

Being noisy does not mean that a restaurant is very bad, but quietness is mostly preferable and likely to enhance the quality of the visitor experience (Spence, 2014). One of the issues emphasised by the visitors who visited Istanbul and evaluated their dining experience was quietness. E401, one of the visitors, makes the following statements regarding the silence of the restaurant. "This place is very cosy and not very noisy, it is a cosy place on a quiet street, it has a nice quiet terrace [...]".

Discussion

As discussed, seven categories emerged from the online reviews of urban tourists. These categories revealed that traditional cuisine is of great importance for urban tourism visitors. When referring to traditional cuisine, visitors frequently accentuated locality, authenticity, the experience itself, taste, and variety. The results of the study show that, just as in gastronomy tourism (Cheng, 2023), the desire to tasting what is traditional in the destinations visited is also prominent for urban tourists. Cheng (2023) emphasised that traditional cuisine attracts tourists because it gives them a series of clues about cultural codes.

In tourism sector, service quality is an important component of quality management (Jang and Ha, 2014). According to them, service quality is largely dependent on hospitality, speed, and service. Although service quality is an important component of the dining experience, it is by itself not a criterion that can affect the experience (Johns and Pine, 2002). Rather than the fast delivery of the bill to the table after the dining (Becker and Murrmann, 1999), it has been revealed that fast delivery of orders and the treats before and after the main food positively influences the visitors.

The quality of the restaurant experience varies between different sales point and dining environments (Johns and Pine, 2002). This can be associated with place quality, which is one of the important conclusions reached in the current study. Jun et al. (2022) stressed that the physical quality of the place that attracts visitors. In consistent with other research results (e.g., Jun et al., 2022; Quan, Al-Ansi and Han, 2021), this study indicated that location, scenery, atmosphere, silence, and family-friendliness of a restaurant attract visitors. According to the results, urban tourism visitors prefer dining in an easily accessible and silent place with a picturesque scenery. The result in the study coincides with that of Quan, Al-Ansi and Han (2021), which stated that a beautiful environment can stimulate visitors' positive emotions; while crowded areas can mobilise their negative emotions.

Liu and Tse (2018) confirmed the impact of physical, service environments and atmosphere on consumers' dining experiences, emotions, behaviours, and attitudes. Considering the findings, Kotler (1973) draws attention to the fact in some cases the place where the product is sold, and its atmosphere may be more important than the product. Existing studies (e.g., Johns and Pine, 2002) highlighted that staff play a role in the positive outcome of dining experiences for consumers. In some cases, even if the service or place quality is low, it can be argued that employees may save the day. In urban tourism visitor experiences, it is understood that it is of great importance that staff can communicate with visitors in diverse languages, provide pleasant moments, and be relevant and hospitable to them. Wu and Gao (2019) confirmed that in addition to the physical environment, service, products, and interpersonal interactions affect visitors' experiences.

In this study, it was found that satisfaction, recommendation to others and revisit intention emerged as a natural consequence of influencing visitor experiences within the context of urban tourism. It is observed that the phrases used by urban tourism visitors just before expressing their thoughts regarding all three elements cover the fulfilment of expectations of traditional cuisine, place quality, service, or staff. It has been confirmed in various studies in the gastronomy literature that if these expectations, which generally include restaurant characteristics, are met appropriately, visitors will be positive towards the restaurant and the intention to revisit will be formed in this respect (Jang and Ha, 2014; Thornton, et al., 2016; Liu and Tse, 2018; Jun, et al., 2022). It is understood that almost all the main themes are related to each other, but there is a cause-effect relation between the first four themes and the last three themes.

Conclusion

Cuisine is widely recognised as a powerful motivational agent for tourist mobility (Aydin et al., 2022; Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). This study, therefore, aimed at determining the ways cuisine, an integral part of urban tourism, can enable a destination to be attractive to visitors. It is suggested that the insights of previous visitors may provide useful input to increase the attractiveness of a destination (Aydin et al., 2020). In line with this purpose, the current research aims to unveil the narratives of the cuisine experiences of tourists who have visited Istanbul, one of the world's leading urban tourism destinations. For this purpose, Tripadvisor data, which is frequently used in the literature and enables online users to access reviews of users on various topics including cuisine, was used to identify the themes for the study (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Cuisine experience of urban tourism visitors
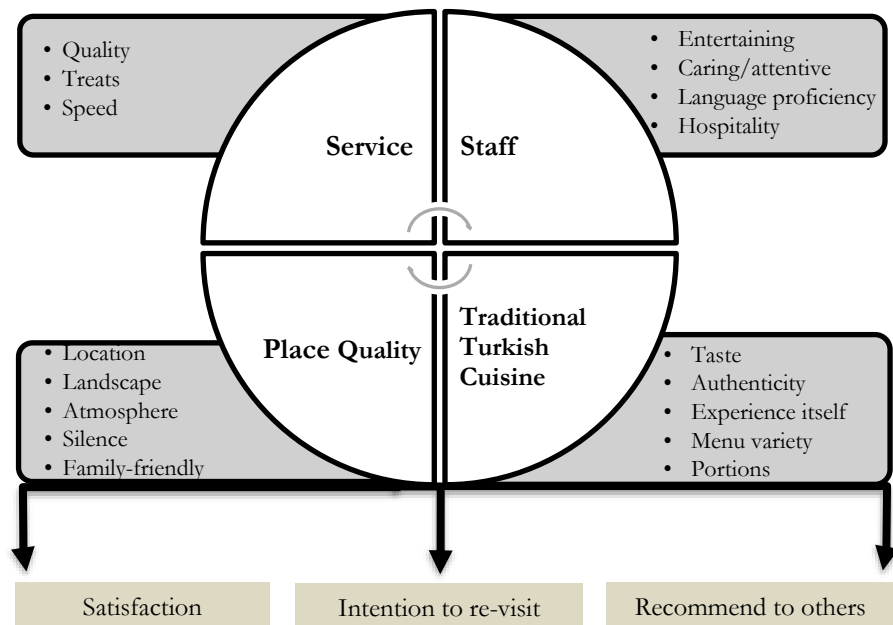
As shown in the figure above (see Fig. 3), the results of the research indicated that there are seven key themes that urban tourism restaurant visitors focus on in their post-cuisine experiences. These themes, which are interconnected and influence each other, include: "traditional Turkish cuisine", "place quality", "service", "staff", "satisfaction", "intention to revisit" and "recommendation to others". The results also indicated that a favourable fulfilment of the first four themes for visitors was highly likely to result with the last three themes.

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