

**INTERPRETIVE MANAGEMENT AS THE MISSING LINK
BETWEEN GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL
AWARENESS OF TOURISTS: EVIDENCE FROM SAMARKAND
AND BUKHARA**

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Abstract. This paper examines the gap between the consumption of local cuisine and the acquisition of cultural knowledge by tourists in the historic cities of Uzbekistan. Drawing on a quantitative survey (n=100), the study establishes that gastronomic experience does not statistically predict cultural awareness ($R^2 = 0.003$; $F = 0.301$; $p = 0.584$). The author argues for the introduction of an interpretive management system for gastronomy as a mechanism for converting consumer experience into cultural education for tourists.

Keywords: gastronomy tourism, interpretive management, cultural heritage, dastarkhan, Samarkand, Bukhara, intangible heritage.

Introduction

Under the UNESCO Convention (2003), gastronomy is recognised as part of intangible cultural heritage; Uzbek plov was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List in 2016. The National Tourism Development Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2023-2026 identifies gastronomy as one of the priority directions for diversification. However, despite the richness of the culinary tradition - a synthesis of Persian, Turkic, Mongolian and Arab influences

shaped along the Great Silk Road - the integration of gastronomy into the tourism product remains fragmentary. The present study aims to identify the factors that prevent gastronomic experience from becoming a source of cultural awareness, and to justify a managerial solution to this problem.

Materials and methods

A cross-sectional descriptive design was used within a positivist paradigm. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (20 items across four constructs: travel motivation, gastronomic experience, cultural awareness, satisfaction). The sample comprised 100 tourists in Samarkand and Bukhara (June-September 2025), recruited by convenience sampling. Internal consistency of the instrument reached Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$. Analysis was conducted in SPSS 29 using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and linear regression.

Results

The mean scores of the key questionnaire items reveal a systematic pattern: items reflecting general impressions of the cuisine receive scores in the range of $M = 3.54$ - 3.57 , while items requiring substantive cultural context (dastarkhan ritual, historical memory embedded in the dish) fall to $M = 3.18$ - 3.33 (Table 1).

Table 1 - Mean scores of key questionnaire items across the constructs "Gastronomic Experience" and "Cultural Awareness" (n = 100)

Item	Item wording	Construct	M	SD
Q4	Gastronomy as a way to learn about culture	Motivation	3.57	1.217

Q13	Learned much about Uzbek culinary culture	Cultural awareness	3.55	1.058
Q9	Culturally meaningful food presentation	Gastronomic experience	3.54	1.218
Q1	Food as travel motivation	Motivation	3.33	1.215
Q8	Authenticity of served dishes	Gastronomic experience	3.33	1.240
Q11	History and culture reflected in cuisine	Cultural awareness	3.33	1.223
Q10	Dastarkhan and tea ceremony	Gastronomic experience	3.18	1.140

Regression analysis (H1) confirms the lack of a statistically significant relationship: gastronomic experience explains only 0.3% of the variance in cultural awareness ($R^2 = 0.003$; $\beta = 0.055$; $t = 0.549$; $p = 0.584$). In other words, the deeper the cultural layer of an item, the lower the tourist's score - which indicates a managerial rather than a substantive deficit.

Discussion

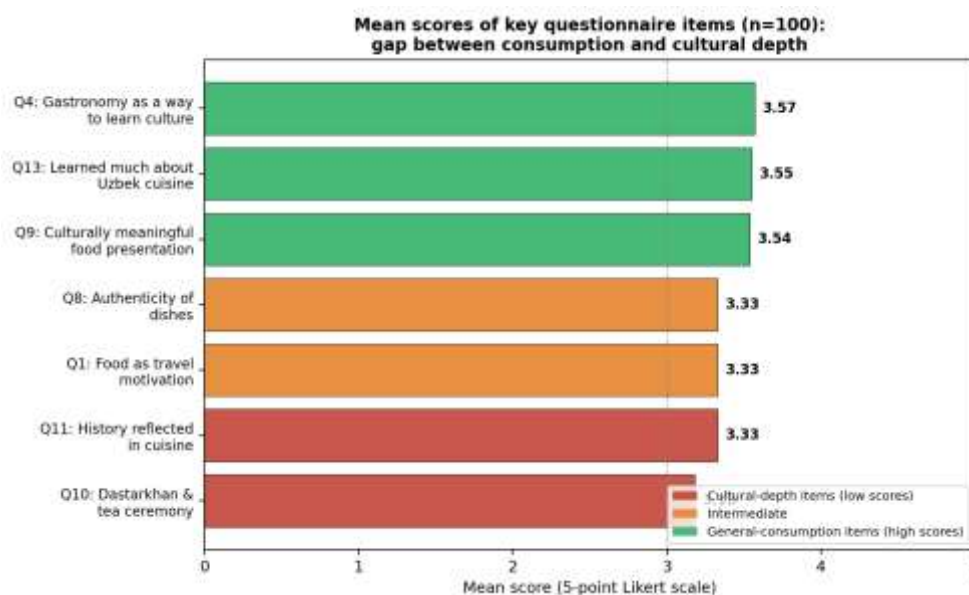


Figure 1 - Mean scores of key questionnaire items: the gap between consumption and cultural depth

The gap identified in Figure 1 reflects not a lack of tourist interest but the absence of a "cultural mediator" - an interpretive infrastructure. Drawing on Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy model and Slocum and Everett's (2010) food-storytelling concept, the author formulates the concept of interpretive management as a combination of three components: (1) certification of culinary guides, with a mandatory Silk Road history module; (2) ritualised presentations (plov-shows, non ceremony, tea ceremony) with an embedded narrative; (3) bilingual interpretive materials in chaikhanas and family-run restaurants. International experience from Italy, Japan and Spain shows that it is precisely this mediating infrastructure that turns food into a "cultural text".

Conclusion

The deficit in the cultural value of Uzbek gastronomy in the eyes of the tourist is managerial rather than substantive: the product exists, but it is not "read". The introduction of an interpretive management system is capable of enhancing the cultural and educational function of gastronomy without

compromising its authenticity. The results are recommended for consideration in the implementation of the National Tourism Development Strategy 2023-2026.

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