

South African Domestic Tourists and Local Foods: Measuring the Four Dimensions of the Experience Economy

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Abstract: Despite South Africa adopting a new democratic dispensation 31 years ago, the country remains burdened by inequality, unemployment and other social and economic struggles. The South African White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa calls for leveraging tourism to drive environmental preservation, cultural enrichment, and economic progress. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to develop local food tourism. The aim of this research was to establish the effect of local food and food-related experiences on local tourists' experiences. Even though the four classic Experience Economy dimensions proposed by Pine and Gilmore, namely Entertainment, Education, Escapism and Aesthetics, were applied, the researchers took note of the newly added Entrepreneurial dimension by Chirakranont and Sunanta. Data was collected during December 2024; of the 276 valid responses, 97.5% indicated that they always/sometimes search for local foods when travelling locally. The Sweet-spot effect was not identified for any of the respondents, nor did any of the four dimensions achieve a score close to five on the 5-point Likert scale for Agreement. There appears to be a missed opportunity, as the lower-than-ideal experience dimension results of the EE model indicated that local food entrepreneurs are still not capitalising on their niche local foods and offerings.

Keywords: Heritage food, Indigenous ingredients, Domestic tourists, Food tourism, Experience economy

1. Introduction and Background

Global domestic and local tourism is estimated to be worth around USD 1,670.32 billion (Grand-View-Research 2022). In 2023, South Africa recorded 38 million domestic trips with an estimated value of R121 billion (South-African-Tourism 2024). This figure represents the Experience Economy, where value is created through the consumption of resources (Oh et al. 2007). Food plays a significant role in both leisure and business tourism (Sengel et al. 2015), with tourists reportedly spending up to one-third of their vacation expenditure on food and beverages (Kim et al. 2009). Tourists are willing to pay more for unique and unforgettable experiences (Şeker and Unur 2022), including food (Lang et al. 2014), benefiting rural and non-urban communities by tapping into these economic possibilities. However, the contribution of local foods to local tourism has not been quantified in the South African context.

The purpose of this research is to understand the value of local food and food-related tourism experiences for local tourists in terms of the four Experience Economy dimensions. The study provides an overview of local South African tourists, the concept of local food, and the Experience Economy model (EE model) while illustrating how local food tourism aligns with Experience Economy dimensions. By understanding these findings, local food entrepreneurs and tourism suppliers can better develop, amend and communicate their local food offerings to experience-seeking tourists. This research is justified by the economic benefits of local tourist engagement with local foods, such as employment, retention of local expenditure, increased brand awareness of a South African Culinary Identity, and celebration of heritage foods and culture. Furthermore, the emphasis on local and regional food has the potential to strengthen links between local food producers and consumers, which could counterbalance the dominance of the global food sector (Sidali et al. 2015).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Local Food

A clear, unambiguous definition of the concept of local food does not exist, and meanings vary widely (Granvik et al. 2017). It is an ever-evolving concept, often differently interpreted by activists, governmental entities, and researchers (Brune et al. 2023). These authors define local food as "foods that are produced, commercialised and consumed in a particular locality, either at a regional or provincial level, but not as broadly as originating from country level". Although local food appears to have geographical associations, there is no agreement about the distance between production and consumption (Martinez 2010). Feldmann and Hamm (2015) found that apart from a location dimension, for consumers, the concept of 'local food' may entail aspects like political

boundaries and special criteria (such as brand names) and could even encompass emotional and/or ethical dimensions.

Regional food differs from local food in that, while production and processing should be local, sales can take place in a different location (Granvik et al. 2017). On the other hand, traditional food emphasises the linkage between the territory of origin – i.e., the provenance of the raw materials – and the area where processing occurs, specifically applying a processing technique developed locally through tradition over time (Galli 2018). International examples of such quality schemes for traditional foods include Geographical Indications (GIs), Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) or Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs) (Galli 2018). South Africa offers a multitude of local foods, resulting from its multicultural society, where each culture or ethnicity has its own heritage or ethnic food and food practices (Reddy and van Dam 2020).

Researchers Almansouri et al. (2021) identified three dimensions from literature that dominate within a specific food classification, namely legacy, people and place:

- **traditional food** - legacy and place dimensions dominate;
- **ethnic food** - people and legacy dimensions dominate;
- **local food** – place dimension dominates;
- **heritage food** – legacy, place, and people dimensions dominate.

As consumers may not be conversant with the specificities of the term ‘local food’ (Feldmann and Hamm 2015), “a business declaration on a common definition of local food is not needed as long as the individual actors are transparent with their definition” (Granvik et al. 2017). Consequently, this research adopted Ghanem's (2019) definition of local food, which considers food to be local regardless of its categorisation as regional, traditional, cultural or heritage foods of the specific country.

2.2 Local Tourism

Local tourism involves the development and promotion of tourism activities focusing on cultural, historical and natural attractions, including various forms such as culinary, rural and domestic tourism. Local tourism attained importance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to counteract the decline in international tourism (Mzobe et al. 2022). Emerging economies prioritise local tourism development, often based on ‘place-based’ development strategies (Mgabhi et al. 2024, Rogerson and Rogerson 2019). Local tourism development is crucial for local economic development, with the responsibility for implementing economic growth and developmental strategies often falling to small-town municipalities (Rogerson and Rogerson 2019). Local tourism development provides significant opportunities for community empowerment and economic growth (Ramukumba 2019). These tourism activities contribute to strengthening and enhancing cultural preservation and community identity. South-African-Tourism (2023) reports that South Africa’s tourism sector generated \$9 billion in revenue in 2022, supporting about 1.5 million job opportunities and contributing to local economic activities (Bain 2024). Local tourism, therefore, plays a vital role in enhancing local economic development and supporting employment opportunities.

Culinary tourism can be leveraged by small towns to achieve economic growth, preserve culinary heritage, and contribute to local identity. This can be done by offering local tourists opportunities to experience local cuisine and various food-related activities, events and experiences. Such initiatives generate revenue for local businesses (Bain 2024) and support the foodservice industry in both cities and small towns where local food is available, providing a unique ‘place-based’ food experience. Culinary tourism contributes to job creation, increases the demand for local ingredients, creates sustainable income for local economies, and enhances community identity and cultural pride (Bain 2024).

Although local food experiences are an integral component of local tourism, challenges in terms of affordability and marketing remain pressing. Therefore, the Experience Economy analysis (Özdemir and Polat 2021) offers an ideal framework for local food tourism offerings and could assist destinations to design better food experiences and stimulate interest in local travel.

2.3 Experience Economy

Tourists seeking memorable experiences often purchase items including local foods, which they combine with their own time and skills to create a “consumption set for the experience” (Andersson 2007). The local food industry provides input that tourists can transform into experiences, but for this to be successful it should address and fit the tourists’ needs at a specific time.

The EE model, initially proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) as “an emerging paradigm for enhancing business performance across a wide range of industries, including tourism and hospitality” (Oh et al. 2007), is applied to understand experiential product offerings. It includes four types of experiences – education, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics – each contributing uniquely to create an optimal tourist experience (Leung et al. 2023), also referred to as the ‘sweet spot’.

For this research, the four dimensions of the EE model were used to explore the subjective mental states perceived by local South African tourists and their interaction with local foods. These were:

- **Education experience:** This dimension involves seeking experiences facilitating knowledge and learning. Tourists interactively learn through mind and body engagement, which increases positive responses (Leung et al. 2023). Skills and knowledge are improved through active participation and absorption, such as attending a hands-on cooking class focused on local foods (Oh et al. 2007).
- **Entertainment experience:** Through passive absorption, tourists can enjoy activities and interact in an environment that improves positive feelings and reduces stress (Leung et al. 2023). For example, local tourists may passively observe a local food cooking demonstration or indigenous food discussion (Oh et al. 2007).
- **Escapism experience:** This dimension refers to the level at which tourists immerse themselves in an environment, putting aside unpleasant thoughts and detaching from their daily routine through novel experiences (Leung et al. 2023). This could include visiting a specific local food destination such as exploring mampoer in the Groot Marico (Hyslop 2012), and orchestrating an escapist experience by taking the role of ‘mixologist’ to create mampoer-based cocktails (Oh et al. 2007).
- **Aesthetic experience:** The aesthetic experience implies the overall atmospheric or environmental setting, such as the physical surroundings, décor, product displays and other elements that evoke a positive mood in the tourist (Leung et al. 2023). Local tourists may enjoy being in the destination environment, such as visiting one of the iconic South African West Coast beach restaurants offering seafood barbeques (Oh et al. 2007).

In Figure 1 below, the x-axis shows different levels of participation from passive participation (characterised by the entertainment and aesthetic dimension), while the education and escapism dimension align with active participation. In other words, local tourists passively participating in local food by watching a local cooking show will not directly affect the performance of local businesses. Conversely, active local tourists will directly impact the performance of local food establishments through their experiences. On the y-axis, the absorption/immersion axis, local tourists typically ‘absorb’ entertainment and educational offerings of a local food destination and ‘immerse’ themselves in the local food environment, resulting in aesthetic or escapism experiences. Absorption in this context means that the local food experience occupies the mind of the local tourist, while immersion implies that the local tourist physically partakes in the local food (Oh et al. 2007).

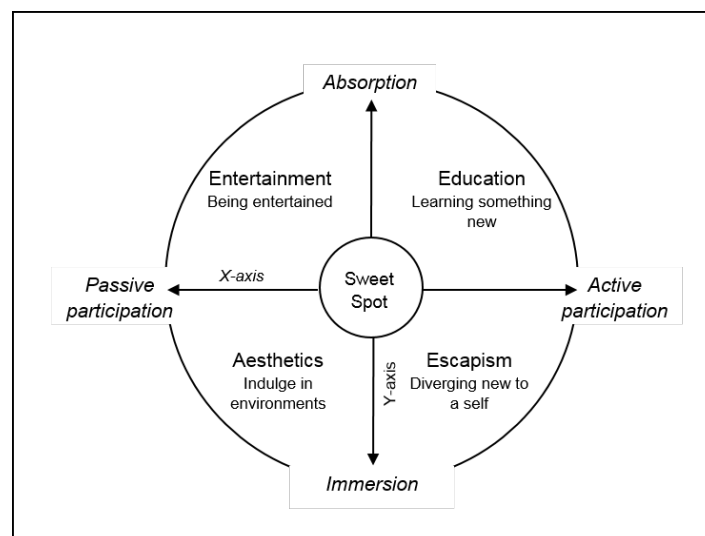


Figure 1: The Experience Economy Dimensions (adapted from Oh et al. 2007)

Similarly, Chirakranont and Sunanta (2021) applied the EE model to Craft Beer festivals in Thailand and found that all four dimensions were successfully met during the festival via music, artists, competitions, brewing

classes, beer tasting, beer ambassadors, and other festival goers. The organiser created sufficient opportunities for festival-goers to engage holistically with the experience. However, they identified and proposed a fifth dimension to the model, Entrepreneur Experience. They found that engagement with the business owner significantly and positively impacted the total experience. In another study conducted in Thisted, a rural region in the north-western part of Denmark (Arthur 2008), the EE model was applied to understand how the rural food industry could achieve competitive advantages in an experience economy. Other food-related research applying the EE model includes measuring the culinary experience of tourists through the case of Hue cuisine in Vietnam (Hoang 2023) and examining the nature of experiential consumption underlying restaurants and Peer-to-Peer (P2P) dining services (Mhlanga 2024).

3. Methodology

The EE model developed and refined by Oh et al. (2007), Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012), Pine and Gilmore (2011), and Coetzee (2015) was adapted to determine and explain local tourists' experiences of local food and to quantify the value local tourists attribute to the four traditional Experience Economy dimensions. This scale was applied using an electronic questionnaire on local food experiences, made available to local South African tourists through Qualtrics. The survey was piloted (n=10) in November 2024 to detect errors before being shared with a larger group of South African local tourists. The electronic survey included demographic criteria to ensure participation by South African residents living and travelling locally. Section two recorded personal travelling tendencies, while section three asked respondents to rate the dimensions of the Experience Economy based on a recent food experience while travelling. This section was guided by dissonance theory (Festinger 1962) to establish the value of local food experienced by local travellers. The Experience Economy was selected as a suitable methodology as it enables the identification of the role and value of culinary activities as memorable and engaging experiences that enhance tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness. It provides additional value to the data collected as the value of the culinary tourism experience is emphasised. Furthermore, this methodology allows for the integration of educational, escapist, aesthetic, and entertainment dimensions of the culinary tourism experience, promoting a deeper connection with the destination. As a methodology proposed by Pine and Gilmore, the EE model enhances the appeal of culinary tourism whilst simultaneously meeting the growing consumer demand for authentic and immersive experiences.

This study aims to address the main research question: "What is the effect of local food and food-related experiences on the tourist experience using the EE model?". More specifically, to measure the effects of consuming food and food-related experiences in terms of Entertainment, Education, Escapism and Aesthetics.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and Analysis of Moment Structures software were used to analyse the data. The adapted scale was validated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and descriptive analyses and ANOVA were used to guide comparisons between different demographic groups. Data was collected during December 2024 for 16 days resulting in 276 valid and complete responses after data cleaning and screening.

4. Results

The sample comprised 75 males and 199 females, comprising 1 person from the Silent Gen, 56 Boomers, 94 Gen X'ers, 90 Millennials and 35 Gen Z. Regarding education level, 60.9% indicated an undergraduate qualification and 39.1% had postgraduate qualifications. In addition, 87.7% of the sample travelled locally for recreational purposes in the last three years, 11.2% travelled less than once per year locally, 18.8% travelled once annually, 25.7% twice per year, 19.6% three times per year and 24.9% four or more times per year. 6.5% of respondents travelled locally for business only, 56.9% for pleasure only, and 36.6% for both business and pleasure. 51.8% indicated that they always seek out local foods on their local travels, 45.7% indicated that they sometimes seek out local foods, and 2.5% never seek out local foods.

In order to understand their local travelling and local food preferences and tendencies, respondents had to choose responses from a 5-point Likert Scale (5 = Strongly Agree) for 27 unique statements. A strong preference (mean > 4) towards food experiences during their travels was noted, and many respondents indicated that they read up on places to eat before travelling (m = 4.17). However, fewer respondents agreed that they plan their dining experiences prior to departure (m = 3.45). Most respondents considered *food* a special interest as they '*consider myself a foodie*' (m = 3.87) and '*follow foodies*' on social media (m = 3.62), yet few were concerned with the accessibility and availability of local foods. The study was based on remembering tourism events, and while most respondents strongly agreed that they do recall the foods they ate (m = 4.29), it should be noted that within memory research, individuals' ability to vividly recall trip details, sensory details and emotional details

(Kim et al. 2022) is acknowledged. However, in tourism research, memory is often positively biased, as explained by the “rosy view phenomenon” by Cho (2022) and Mitchell et al. (1997).

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Figure 2, Table 1) was performed on the EE model. The initial model included 4 latent constructs, each measured by 6 observed indicators. Item 18.5 showed a low loading and low reliability and was removed for further analyses - the wording of item 18.5 was found to be confusing since the word ‘pretty’ can be interpreted as ‘beautiful’ or ‘a lot’ (many) in South African English, making the phrase ‘pretty bland’ an oxymoron. Fit indices indicated acceptable fit: $\chi^2(df) = 709.076 (224)$, $p = 0.000$, $\chi^2/df = 3.166$, CFI = 0.909, TLI = 0.888, RMSEA = 0.089. Construct validity was proven by higher than 0.63 loading on 12 indicators and higher than 0.80 on the other 12 indicators. Reliability analysis shows high internal reliability with Cronbach’s Alpha (Table 2) for all four factors above 0.860. Therefore, the adapted EE scale is validated in the current setting.

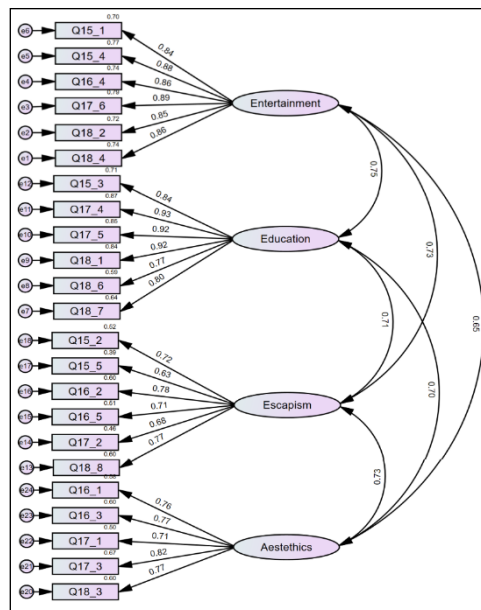


Figure 2: CFA on the EE model

Table 1: Descriptive Values of the Experience Economy Dimensions

		Entertainment	Education	Escapism	Aesthetics
N	Valid	275	275	275	276
	Missing	1	1	1	0
Mean		3.8042	3.7636	3.5279	4.1239
Median		4.0	3.83	3.50	4.20
Mode		5.00	5.00	3.00	5.00
Std. Deviation		0.90650	0.93519	0.86569	0.78375
Std. Error of mean		0.05466	0.05639	0.05220	0.04718
Variance		0.822	0.875	0.749	0.614

Respondents were requested to recall a specific food experience and assess their experience using the EE model. These experiences included cooking with friends or celebrities; visiting craft distilleries, wine, cheese and honey farms; foraging for marula fruits and mopani worms; catching fish, crayfish and mussels with local fishermen, and a cooking course hosted by an indigenous Khoi lady. Theoretically, the experiences were a good representation of the four dimensions. However, Aesthetics was the most prominent dimension within local food experiences ($m = 4.12$). This is expected, as many business owners endeavour to create dining environments which enhance the food and create an ambience as a backdrop to the food experience. This confirms the aesthetics dimension that emerged from similar studies by Haller et al. (2021), Coetzee (2015) and Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012). The Entertainment dimension ($m = 3.80$) (Table 1) was lower than expected for the tourism industry, whose main purpose is to host and entertain customers and shows potential for improved

food experiences. The Education dimension ($m = 3.76$) also scored low for food experiences that would inherently be educational since travelling and experiencing local food items could easily be a learning experience. Coetzee (2015) reported a similar result ($m = 3.78$). Escapism ($m = 3.53$) can be described as the sense of losing your persona in the experience. Food experiences are often immersive and need active participation involving seeing, smelling, touching and tasting food items. Engaging all the senses during a food experience could easily lead to escapist moments, especially since many of the foods referred to by respondents are heritage foods that could well evoke memories and nostalgia. However, the mean indicates that not many food experiences stimulated a feeling of escapism within participants. Overall, this indicates that these dimensions are not well catered for in local food experiences.

Table 2: Factor loadings

Item nr		N	Mean	Σ	Variance	Cronbach Alpha	CFA factor loadings
Entertainment							
16.4	I really enjoyed watching what others were doing	276	3.964	0.960	0.922	α = 0.946	.86
15.4	Watching activities of others was very entertaining	275	3.847	1.028	1.057		.88
15.1	Activities of others were fun to watch	276	3.844	0.962	0.925		.84
17.6	What others did was interesting to watch	276	3.801	1.048	1.098		.89
18.4	Watching others perform was captivating	276	3.688	1.057	1.117		.86
18.2	Activities of others were amusing to watch	276	3.685	1.064	1.133		.85
Education							
18.7	The experience stimulated my curiosity to learn new things	276	3.899	1.008	1.015	α = 0.946	.80
17.5	The experience has made me more knowledgeable	276	3.895	1.013	1.025		.92
17.4	I learned a lot	276	3.855	1.038	1.077		.93
15.3	The experience was highly educational to me	275	3.811	1.081	1.168		.84
18.1	It was a real learning experience	276	3.775	1.086	1.178		.92
18.6	The experience really enhanced my skills	276	3.333	1.094	1.198		.77
Escapism							
16.5	I totally forgot about my daily routine	276	3.986	1.068	1.142	α = 0.860	.71
15.2	I felt I was in a different world	276	3.728	1.073	1.151		.72
16.2	I felt like I was living in a different time or place	276	3.663	1.111	1.235		.78
18.8	I completely escaped from reality	276	3.493	1.117	1.247		.77
17.2	The experience here let me imagine being someone else	276	3.308	1.198	1.436		.68
15.5	I felt I played a different character here	275	3.011	1.198	1.434		.63
Aesthetics							
18.3	Just being there was very pleasant	276	4.395	0.831	0.691	α = 0.872	.77
16.1	The setting provided pleasure to my senses	276	4.301	0.934	0.873		.76
17.3	The setting was very attractive	276	4.116	0.973	0.947		.82
16.3	I really felt a sense of harmony	276	3.949	0.997	0.994		.77
17.1	The setting really showed attention to design detail	276	3.859	1.068	1.140		.71

ANOVAs were conducted to compare the effects of demographic characteristics on the Experience Economy dimensions. There is a significant difference between how different generational groups experienced the Aesthetics and Escapism dimensions. Generation Z experienced Escapism and Aesthetics more prominently than older generations. *“Reading up”* before the departure was a significant indicator of how the four dimensions were experienced, improving the prominence of the dimensions, particularly Entertainment, with between 0.66 and 1.2 Likert scale points. Those who considered themselves to be a *“foodie”* indicated at least a 1-point increase on the 5-point Likert scale in the experiences for Entertainment ($m = 4.08$), with a mean difference of 1.325, Education ($m = 4.094$) with a mean difference of 1.493, and Aesthetics ($m = 4.402$) with a mean difference of 1.002, ($p < 0.005$) while those who were *“willing to try new foods”*, scored Entertainment 1.654 points ($p = 0.002$) higher than those who strongly disagreed with the statement. *“Being curious about other cultures’ food”*, *“wanting to choose local food when traveling”*, *“being intentional about trying new foods”*, *“reading food related articles”*, and *“wanting to eat where the locals eat”* all showed significant ANOVA’s with Entertainment and Education showing an increase of at least 1.00 ($p < 0.005$) Likert scale point over those who strongly disagreed with these statements.

5. Discussion

The value of local tourists gaining satisfaction from their engagement with local food cannot be underestimated. Stimulating new business and ensuring returning business depends on tourists engaging in unforgettable experiences. Stakeholders wishing to gain a competitive edge must offer the best experiences to local tourists. Arthur (2008) proposed using the EE model to this end. It is, therefore, essential that stakeholders gain a thorough understanding of the connection between local food offerings and local tourist satisfaction and how the dimensions of the EE can affect their success. The aim of this research was to examine the dimensions affecting the ‘sweet-spot’ concept (Figure 1), or more accurately, the association between local tourists’ experiences around local food and their engagement in four specific dimensions of the Experience Economy (Saiful Nizam et al. 2024). The effects of consuming food and food-related experiences in terms of Entertainment, Education, Escapism and Aesthetics were measured using the EE model. Results indicated that there is a missed opportunity for business owners in food services. The lower-than-ideal experience dimensions indicate that local food experience providers do not fully realise or capitalise on their niche local foods or offerings. The Sweet-spot effect was not achieved for any of the respondents, and neither did any of the four dimensions achieve a score close to five on the 5-point Likert scale for Agreement, indicating that all dimensions were lacking during the local food experience. In measuring the contribution of each dimension to the total experience, the Aesthetics dimension scored the highest, although it too can be improved. The strong preference towards food experiences during local travels may imply that local tourists consume, enjoy, buy and remember local foods during their local travels regardless of the purpose of travel. This signals that the EE dimensions are equally important for all types of local tourists. Being intentional and curious about local foods resulted in local tourists reporting improved experiences and the intention to return. Therefore, local food businesses and entrepreneurs should re-evaluate their local food offerings and intentionally add, design and market experiences that are more Educational, Entertaining and Escaping from daily life.

6. Conclusion and Further Research

Anyone in the food chain dealing with local food in South Africa should take note that a massive 97.5% of the sample indicated that they always/sometimes search for local foods when travelling locally. In a country like South Africa, burdened by inequality, unemployment and many other social and economic struggles, it is important to develop local food tourism. This corresponds with recommendations in the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa, which calls for “leveraging tourism to drive environmental preservation, cultural enrichment, and economic progress” (Desai and Bezuidenhout 2024). Care should be taken to balance the challenges and opportunities associated with aspects like quality, culture and price to create a unique local tourist experience. Local tourists want social interactions and quality time when participating in local tourist experiences (Christou and Pericleous 2023). Communities stewarding local foods should be encouraged and supported to create tourism experiences around their local foods, and this research provides valuable information to drive meaningful change in these contexts. The dimensions of the Experience Economy model, with the added Entrepreneur element from Chirakranont and Sunanta (2021), are useful to guide the creation and development of local food offerings. Furthermore, this research offers stakeholders in the local tourism and local food chains, such as destination marketers, policymakers, local food entrepreneurs, local food suppliers and many others, valuable insights into the nature, scope and value of South African local food experiences for local tourists.

Finally, Oh et al. (2007) indicated that the model “awaits further validations across different consumption situations and staged experiences”. This research offers an academic contribution to the validated application of the measuring model regarding local foods.

Future research may include a larger, more demographically representative South African population sample, as well as qualitative research to establish finer nuances regarding the four Experience Economy dimensions that are important to local tourists in relation to local foods.

Ethics: Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, University of Pretoria, number NAS134/2019.

Limitations: No limitations.

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