

BEYOND DIRECTIONS: HOW TOUR GUIDES SHAPE CULTURAL INTERPRETATION AND VISITOR ENGAGEMENT AT CULINARY FESTIVALS

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Tour guides, Culinary festivals, Cultural interpretation, Visitor engagement, Event tourism.	Culinary festivals have increasingly emerged as important platforms for cultural tourism, offering visitors opportunities to engage with local heritage through food-based experiences. However, limited attention has been given to the role of tour guides in shaping cultural interpretation and visitor engagement within culinary festival settings. This study aims to examine how tour guides influence visitors' cultural understanding and engagement at the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving tour guides, festival visitors, and event organizers. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to guiding practices and visitor experiences. The findings reveal that tour guides play a significant role as cultural interpreters, storytellers, and experience curators by contextualizing local culinary heritage through interpretive narratives and interactive communication. These practices enhance visitors' cultural appreciation, emotional connection, and overall engagement with the festival experience. This study contributes to tourism and event management literature by extending the understanding of tour guides' roles in culinary festival contexts and provides practical insights for festival organizers and destination managers in designing culturally meaningful and engaging culinary tourism experiences.
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INTRODUCTION

Culinary festivals have emerged as important cultural tourism events that not only stimulate local economies but also promote cultural heritage, identity, and community pride (Triyana & Farag, 2025). These events attract diverse visitors who seek both sensory and interpretive experiences, making the role of human mediators—especially tour guides—central to shaping how visitors understand and engage with the festival content. While much of the tourism literature emphasizes festival attributes and visitor motivations, the specific function of tour guides in cultural interpretation and visitor engagement within culinary festival contexts remains underexplored.

Tour guides have traditionally been viewed as providers of logistical information and destination facts. However, their role is increasingly understood as communicative mediators who facilitate deeper understanding and connection between visitors and cultural meanings embedded in local food practices (Weiler & Walker, 2014). In the hospitality and tourism field, Weiler and Walker (2014) conceptualize tour guides not merely as commentators but as experience brokers who enhance visitor comprehension, empathy, and engagement by mediating cultural narratives beyond logistical direction and description. Their interactive communication strategies help visitors construct meaningful tourism experiences and enrich overall satisfaction (Weiler & Walker, 2014).

Supporting this reconceptualization, research on interpretive guiding indicates that interpersonal cultural interpretation has a significant impact on visitors' perceptions of cultural values. For example, guided interpretation at heritage sites has been empirically shown to increase visitors' depth of understanding compared to non-guided experiences, underscoring the importance of human-led interpretation in tourism settings (Sun et al., 2020). Similarly, studies on guided experiences emphasize that interpretive narratives such as storytelling about local history, social customs, and food traditions play a critical role in facilitating *cultural engagement* and *learning*, which are key dimensions of memorable tourism experiences.

Moreover, tour guides function as cultural mediators who foster interpersonal engagement and emotional resonance. This role is particularly relevant in culinary festivals where intangible heritage such as food norms, cooking rituals, and communal values is interwoven with sensory experiences. Guides who can interpret these aspects

help visitors appreciate not only the tastes but also the *cultural contexts* and *meanings* behind local culinary offerings.

Despite the recognized importance of interpreters in tourism, there is a notable gap in empirical research examining how tour guides influence visitor engagement specifically within the culinary festival environment. This gap presents an opportunity to expand theoretical frameworks of *cultural tourism* and *visitor experience* by investigating how tour guides contribute to cultural interpretation and engagement at food festivals. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine how tour guides facilitate cultural understanding and visitor engagement in the context of culinary festivals, contributing to both academic literature and practical applications in event and tourism management.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore how tour guides shape cultural interpretation and visitor engagement at culinary festivals. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and social interactions constructed between tour guides and visitors within a specific event context. The case study design enables the examination of guiding practices in their real-life setting, providing rich contextual insights into the interpretive role of tour guides during culinary festivals.

This research was conducted at the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta, a well-known culinary event that showcases traditional and iconic local food heritage and attracts diverse domestic and international visitors. The festival was selected purposively due to its strong cultural narratives, the presence of organized guiding or interpretive activities, and its relevance as a representative setting for examining cultural interpretation and visitor engagement in culinary festival tourism. Participants consisted of tour guides, festival visitors, and event organizers who were directly involved in or experienced guided culinary activities at the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience aligned with the research objectives, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved.



Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to ensure methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perspectives on guiding strategies, cultural interpretation, and visitor engagement, while participant observation allowed the researcher to directly examine guide–visitor interactions, communication styles, and engagement behaviors throughout the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta. In addition, document analysis of festival programs, guiding materials, and promotional content was undertaken to contextualize the narratives and cultural messages conveyed by tour guides during the event.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure, involving iterative coding and theme development to identify patterns related to cultural interpretation and visitor engagement. The analysis process was supported by qualitative data analysis software to enhance systematic coding and transparency. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria through data triangulation, member checking, and thick description. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and using the data solely for academic research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that tour guides play a pivotal role in shaping cultural interpretation and visitor engagement at the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta. Analysis of interview data, participant observations, and document reviews indicates that tour guides function beyond their traditional logistical role, acting instead as cultural mediators, storytellers, and experience facilitators. These roles significantly influence how visitors perceive, understand, and emotionally connect with local culinary heritage.

Tour Guides as Cultural Interpreters

The findings demonstrate that tour guides actively interpret culinary heritage by contextualizing food within historical, social, and cultural narratives. Guides frequently explained the origins of traditional dishes, the symbolism behind ingredients, and the historical relevance of vendors who have sustained culinary traditions across generations. This interpretive role enhanced visitors' cultural understanding and appreciation of local gastronomy, transforming food consumption into a meaningful cultural experience.



This finding aligns with the interpretive guiding theory proposed by Weiler and Walker (2014), who argue that tour guides act as communicative mediators that translate complex cultural meanings into accessible narratives for visitors. Similarly, Sun et al. (2020) found that guided interpretation significantly enhances visitors' perceived cultural value and understanding compared to unguided experiences. In the context of the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta, guides enabled visitors to engage with intangible cultural heritage, reinforcing the importance of human interpretation in food-based tourism settings.

Enhancing Visitor Engagement Through Storytelling and Interaction

Another key finding indicates that tour guides significantly influence visitor engagement through interactive communication and storytelling techniques. Observational data revealed that guides employed humor, personal anecdotes, and dialogic questioning to encourage visitor participation. These interactions fostered emotional engagement and sustained attention, resulting in longer visitor dwell time and deeper involvement in festival activities.

This supports the experience economy framework by Pine and Gilmore (1999), which emphasizes that memorable experiences are co-created through active participation rather than passive consumption. Tour guides facilitated this co-creation process by engaging visitors cognitively and emotionally. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2012) suggest that meaningful interaction and emotional involvement are critical components of memorable tourism experiences, which ultimately influence visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The findings of this study confirm that guided storytelling at culinary festivals strengthens experiential value and visitor engagement.

Tour Guides as Experience Curators

The findings also reveal that tour guides curate visitor experiences by structuring food exploration routes, recommending iconic dishes, and managing visitor flow. This curatorial role helped visitors navigate the crowded festival environment efficiently while maximizing exposure to culturally significant culinary offerings. Visitors reported that guided tours reduced uncertainty and enhanced comfort, allowing them to focus on enjoyment and learning.

This role resonates with Cohen's (1985) conceptualization of tour guides as pathfinders and mentors who shape tourist experiences through selection and

interpretation. In event-based tourism contexts, guides contribute to experience design by aligning visitor expectations with event narratives (Getz & Page, 2016). At the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta, guides effectively bridged event programming and visitor experience, highlighting their strategic importance in festival management.

Strengthening Emotional Connection and Cultural Appreciation

The study further found that tour guides foster emotional connections between visitors and local food culture. By sharing stories about family-run vendors, culinary heritage preservation, and cultural identity, guides evoked empathy and emotional resonance. Visitors expressed a stronger sense of cultural appreciation and respect for local traditions after participating in guided activities.

This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of emotional engagement in cultural tourism (Richards, 2018). Emotional storytelling enhances authenticity perception and deepens visitors' connection to local culture. Moreover, Moscardo (1996) highlights that interpretive communication encourages mindful engagement, leading to more meaningful and reflective tourism experiences. The presence of tour guides at culinary festivals thus contributes not only to enjoyment but also to cultural sustainability.

Implications for Culinary Festival and Tourism Management

The findings suggest that tour guides are a strategic asset in culinary festival tourism. Their ability to interpret culture, engage visitors, and curate experiences enhances overall festival quality and visitor satisfaction. This supports the argument that human-mediated interpretation remains essential despite the growing availability of digital information tools. In line with Getz and Page (2016), integrating professional tour guides into festival planning can strengthen event branding, visitor experience, and destination image.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends existing tourism and event management literature by situating tour guides within culinary festival contexts, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Practically, the findings highlight the need for guide training programs that emphasize storytelling, cultural interpretation, and visitor engagement skills to maximize experiential outcomes at culinary festivals.



CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of tour guides in shaping cultural interpretation and visitor engagement at culinary festivals, using the Festival Kuliner Legendaris Jakarta as an empirical context. The findings demonstrate that tour guides function far beyond their conventional role as providers of directions and logistical information. Instead, they act as cultural interpreters, storytellers, and experience curators who mediate the relationship between visitors and local culinary heritage.

Through interpretive storytelling and interactive communication, tour guides enhance visitors' cultural understanding, emotional connection, and overall engagement with festival experiences. By contextualizing food within historical, social, and cultural narratives, guides transform culinary consumption into meaningful cultural encounters. These findings reinforce existing tourism theories that emphasize the importance of human-mediated interpretation in creating memorable and engaging tourism experiences, particularly within event-based and gastronomic tourism settings.

The study also contributes to event and tourism management literature by extending the conceptualization of tour guides into the domain of culinary festivals, an area that remains underexplored. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that integrating trained tour guides into culinary festival planning and management can significantly enhance visitor satisfaction, strengthen cultural appreciation, and support sustainable culinary tourism. Event organizers and destination managers are therefore encouraged to invest in guide training programs that focus on cultural interpretation, storytelling, and visitor engagement skills.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single festival context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt comparative or mixed-method approaches across different cultural settings to further examine the role of tour guides in diverse culinary festival environments. Overall, this study underscores the enduring importance of human interaction in tourism experiences, reaffirming that tour guides remain vital actors in shaping culturally meaningful and engaging culinary festival tourism.



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