EXTENDED ABSTRACT

GASTRONOMIC TOURIST EXPERIENCES BASED ON COCOA: TOURIST RATINGS IN SANTO DOMINGO (DOMINICAN REPUBLIC), A WORLD HERITAGE DESTINATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gastronomic tourism is a key component of tourism activity, as a large part of tourists' spending is spent on food (Nareutharadhol and Gebsombut, 2020). Local gastronomy has emerged as a key factor for visitor satisfaction and loyalty, driving the differentiation of tourist destinations (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023; Karagöz and Uysal, 2022). Destinations such as Spain have developed tourism products around foods such as wine, cheese and olive oil (Fernandez Portela and Pardo Abad, 2020; Fusté-Forné and Mundet i Cerdan, 2021; Sánchez Martínez and Ortega Ruiz, 2016), while others promote gastronomic routes to traditional markets (Crespi-Vallbona and Dimitrovski, 2016). This approach is included in gastronomic tourism, considered a driver of regional development (Larrosa Rocamora et al., 2023).

In the Dominican Republic, cocoa has gained prominence with the creation of tourist products and experiences such as the "Sendero del Cacao" and "Kah Kow Experiences", both offering sensorial and cultural immersion around cocoa. The latter, highlighted by TripAdvisor (2024), is one of the main attractions of Santo Domingo, consolidating itself as a benchmark for culinary tourism in the Colonial Zone.

2. OBJECTIVES

This study seeks to determine tourists' assessment of cocoa-centered tourism experiences and their relationship with image assessment, satisfaction, and loyalty to a destination. According to previous analyses conducted by the researchers of this study, this

represents the first effort to evaluate cocoa-related tourism experiences and their tourist importance for a destination. In addition, research on gastronomic products in cities declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has been pointed out as relevant for cultural preservation and the promotion of sustainable development (Lima et al., 2023), and in this context, cocoa has not yet been sufficiently explored.

3. METHODOLOGY

For data collection, a questionnaire was designed based on previous research. Items related to the cocoa-based culinary experience were adapted from Liu and Tse (2018), while those related to cognitive, affective, and global image were taken from Dolnicar and Grün (2012), Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020), and Huete-Alcocer and Hernandez-Rojas (2022). Satisfaction measurement was based on Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016), and loyalty items were adapted from Moral-Cuadra et al. (2023). A five-point Likert scale was used, and sociodemographic variables were collected. The questionnaire was reviewed by expert academics and translated into English. Subsequently, a pre-test was conducted with 20 tourists to ensure the clarity of the items.

Data were obtained from tourists who participated in the "Kah Kow Experiences" in Santo Domingo, through surveys conducted in the areas surrounding the experience. Simple random sampling was applied, excluding residents and hikers. Data collection was carried out between January and March 2024, obtaining 453 valid surveys. The required sample size, calculated with G*Power, was 146 respondents, which was greatly exceeded. To minimize common method bias, anonymity was guaranteed and Harman's one-factor test was applied, which indicated an explained variance of 21.587%.

Data analysis was carried out in two phases: sociodemographic analysis and descriptive analysis of the items, considering mean, standard deviation, kurtosis and asymmetry. Since the data did not present normality, Spearman's correlation was used to evaluate relationships between variables. In addition, the reliability of the items was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha. All analyses were performed using SPSS version 29.

4. RESULTS

Tourists have highly rated the products tasted (4.53) and the service received (4.64), indicating that there is a positive experience with cocoa-based culinary offerings and, therefore, highlighting the importance of local gastronomy as an attractive factor of tourism in the city of Santo Domingo. Therefore, gastronomic tourism can attract those tourists interested, primarily, in gastronomy and, secondarily, those seeking an integrated cultural experience (Vlachou and Savvinopoulou, 2022; Zvirbule et al., 2023). The high scores on the cocoa-based culinary experience could reflect this trend, but it also highlights the effectiveness of Santo Domingo in offering an authentic and quality culinary experience.

On the other hand, tourists perceive a good quality-price ratio in both accommodation and restaurants (4.54 and 4.59 respectively) and highlight the friendliness and hospitality of local residents (4.49). These factors could contribute to the cognitive image of the

destination, which is essential for future visitors' decisions (Luo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the affective image, which reflects emotional responses to the destination, has received the highest ratings (4.70), with particular emphasis on how beautiful, fun and exciting visitors find Santo Domingo (4.75, 4.77, 4.57, respectively). This suggests that the affective image can directly influence overall satisfaction and intention to recommend or revisit the destination (Marques *et al*., 2021). Finally, the overall image of the destination is also very positive (4.54), indicating that the combination of tangible and intangible attributes of the destination, in this case Santo Domingo, strengthens its reputation as a valuable tourist destination (Qiu, 2023).

Regarding satisfaction with the destination, tourists are satisfied with their decision to visit Santo Domingo (4.23) and with local gastronomic products (4.54) (Table 2). According to Mohamed et al. (2020), these results could be relevant to understand the impact of culinary experiences on visitor satisfaction. On the other hand, loyalty expressed through the intention to return and recommend the destination is high (4.64), this being a key indicator of success for marketing strategies (Jeong and Kim, 2020) and the development of local tourism products (Hernández-Rojas et al., 2021).

The results of the Spearman correlation show that the cocoa-based culinary experience is significantly related to cognitive, affective and global perceptions of the destination image. Item EC1 (attractiveness of the cocoa establishment/product) is moderately correlated with the perception of local hospitality (IC3) with a coefficient of 0.432, suggesting that positive experiences in cocoa establishments are associated with a higher perception of local friendliness (Kim et al., 2020; Prayag et al., 2020). Opinions about the products tasted (EC2) and the service received (EC3) also have moderate correlations with the perception of value for money in accommodations (IC1) and restaurants (IC2), but less so with the usefulness of tourist services (IC4).

In the affective dimension, the strongest correlations are observed between the cocoa-based culinary experience (especially EC1 and EC3) and the emotions of fun (IA2) and excitement (IA3), implying that positive culinary experiences generate pleasant emotions related to entertainment at the destination (Sthapit *et al*., 2020). However, perceived beauty (IA1) is less influenced by these experiences, highlighting the importance of other factors, such as visual or historical elements (Suna and Alvarez, 2021). Regarding the overall image, a quality culinary service (EC3) is strongly related to a positive perception of the destination (IG1, IG3). This indicates that improvements in the quality of the culinary service can strengthen the overall image of a tourist destination. The culinary experience with cocoa is, therefore, a key element for the tourist image of Santo Domingo, influencing both before and during the trip.

Spearman correlation coefficients between the items of the cocoa-based culinary experience and the variables of satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination Santo Domingo show significant relationships. Item EC1, which assesses the attraction power of cocoa establishments, has a high positive correlation with all satisfaction items, with ST4 (0.452) standing out, which measures overall satisfaction with the destination. This suggests that the attraction of culinary establishments is a key factor in tourist satisfaction (Carvache-Franco *et al*., 2021; Mora et al., 2021). On the other hand, EC2, which assesses the opinion on the products tasted, although positive, has a low correlation with

ST2 (0.192), indicating a moderate impact on overall satisfaction. EC3, which measures the service received, presents higher correlations with ST3 (0.463) and ST4 (0.452), evidencing the importance of quality service in overall satisfaction (Hernández-Mogollón *et al*., 2020). Regarding loyalty, EC1, EC2 and EC3 have moderate correlations with LY1 (intention to return) and LY2 (propensity to recommend the destination), but low or negative correlations with LY3, which assesses the recommendation of cocoa products. This suggests that the culinary experience improves overall loyalty to the destination but does not necessarily promote the recommendation of specific products (Huete-Alcocer *et al*., 2021; Mora *et al*., 2021).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Culinary experiences based on cocoa in Santo Domingo have attracted high interest among tourists, with 80.1% of participants planning to visit these attractions before their trip. These culinary experiences are positively correlated with destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty. Furthermore, specific experiences with cocoa have been shown to influence both emotional and cognitive perceptions of destination image. This study expands the Spanish-language literature on gastronomic tourism, being the first research focused on experiences derived from cocoa. The results confirm the correlation between such experiences and the affective, cognitive, and global dimensions of destination image, as well as overall tourist satisfaction. However, loyalty to the destination does not always imply the specific recommendation of cocoa products.

On a practical level, the results highlight the importance of developing high-quality culinary products and improving the perception of service in Santo Domingo, to strengthen the image of the destination. It is also crucial to implement marketing strategies that highlight the history of cocoa in the country. Limitations of the study include a predominantly local sample and the exclusion of non-English speaking tourists. It is recommended to validate the findings with a more diverse sample and adapt the study to a longitudinal approach to examine tourist behaviour in different seasons.