

FOOD AS A TOURISM ATTRACTION: FOOD TOURISM POLICY ANALYZING IN IRAN

Comida como Atração Turística: Política de Turismo Gastronômico
Analisado o Irã

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ABSTRACT

Food tourism is one of the creative branches of tourism which plays a substantial role in sustainable development. Iran's capacities for developing food tourism have attracted the attention of tourism stakeholders towards this field. Policies were formed in line with its improvement. This paper aims to analyze the food tourism policy in Iran. The policy triangle was used to conduct a qualitative analysis on policy. The total population under the study included various stakeholders of food tourism policy as well as the policy documents. The entire credible documents were analyzed at the first stage rather than carrying out sampling. In the second stage, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with food tourism stakeholders. Results show that factors such as food culture and decreased national income have paved the way for focusing on food tourism. Policies such as global registration of Iranian foods and branding certain cities as creative food cities were implemented to develop food tourism in Iran. Despite preparing a set of strategies to develop food tourism, a unified approach to involve this branch of tourism in the agenda there has never been tried. Given the rich culture of Iranian foods' great ability, it is proposed that associated officials carry out coordinated and comprehensive planning to develop food tourism in Iran.

KEYWORDS

Food Tourism; Food Policy; Tourism Policy; Tourist Attraction; Iran.

RESUMO

O turismo gastronômico é um ramo do turismo criativos, que desempenha papel substancial no desenvolvimento sustentável. As capacidades do Irã para desenvolver o turismo gastronômico têm atraído a atenção de stakeholders do campo turístico, políticas sendo montadas para seu

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aprimoramento. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a política de turismo gastronômico no Irã. Utiliza-se a triangulação para conduzir a análise qualitativa da política desenvolvida. Em vez de se proceder a um estudo por amostragem, priorizou-se o universo dos vários interessados na política de turismo gastronômico, bem como os documentos dessa política. Todos os documentos validados foram analisados na primeira etapa. Na segunda etapa foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas em profundidade com os participantes. Os resultados mostram que fatores como a cultura alimentar e a diminuição da renda nacional abriram o caminho para o foco no turismo gastronômico. Políticas como as de registro total de alimentos iranianos e a indicação de algumas localidades como cidades criativas em gastronomia foram implementadas para desenvolver o turismo no Irã. Apesar de preparar um conjunto de estratégias para desenvolver o turismo gastronômico, não houve uma abordagem unificada para envolver este segmento turístico na agenda. Dada a riqueza cultural das práticas alimentares iraniana, propõe-se que as autoridades do campo desenvolvam um planejamento coordenado e abrangente para desenvolver o turismo gastronômico no Irã.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Turismo Gastronômico; Política de Alimentos; Política de Turismo; Atrativo Turístico, Irã.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a broad and complex industry that can contribute to the development and stability of countries (Janowski et al., 2021). Regarding the vastness and variety of cultures, this industry can provide new ways to create added value. Tourism policymakers worldwide make annual attempts to add newer sectors to their respective tourism industries (Guo et al., 2019). Food is a blend of a country's climate, history, culture, and preferences for contemporary visitors. It is more than simply an item to give the energy necessary by the human body (Andersson et al., 2017). Food is a means to make connections with the host culture which is as valuable as a guidebook to curious tourists (Boesen et al., 2017). Food results in an intimate bond between tourists and the host society's history and culture (Muangasame & Park, 2019). Food is a common language and like any other human language used to communicate, share feelings, affections, and excitement (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020). Today, eating at restaurants has turned into one of the tourists' activities during their stay at their destinations (Hall, 2020). Moreover, tasting new and unconventional tastes is a part of the adventures experienced by tourists in their travels (Stone et al., 2019).

Experiencing fresh and delicious tastes is attractive to the extent that it becomes the sole reason behind certain tourists' return to a particular destination (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Meanwhile, it becomes the main reason for choosing a destination for others. Food tourism is shaped based

upon such a sense of curiosity and interest (Maurer, 2019). There were several different terms used to describe the combination of food activities and tourism such as 'food tourism' (Ellis et al., 2018), 'culinary tourism' (Testa et al., 2019), 'gastronomic tourism' (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019) and 'tasting tourism' (Dorofeeva, 2018). The mutual point among all types of tourism and its most comprehensive definition involves exploring unique foods and beverages to enjoy them in nearby and distant regions (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Food tourism is a means for countries to enhance their powers in tourism attraction (Mei et al., 2017). Besides, food tourism is considered a manifestation of traditional values utilized in today's tourism development (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2018). This type of tourism leads to local economic development and contributes to employment, especially for women (Rachão et al., 2019). As a result, food tourism can play a role in branding and increasing demands for tourism destinations whilst conserving local traditions and social diversities (Star et al., 2020).

To familiarize the global tastes with tastes of their dishes and foods, many countries have turned to years of planning and marketing (S. Kim et al., 2018). Today, countries such as Italy and France are well-known tourists who intend to experience the foods of these countries as a part of their journey (Na & Cho, 2020). Given its rich history, culture, and arts, Iran is hosting numerous tourists from all over the world each year (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). The opportunity to sample Iranian foods and drinks is an important part of many visitors' visits to the nation, drawing the attention of policymakers to this component as a tourist attraction (Esmaeilzadeh, 2020). This study aims to analyze the food tourism policy in Iran. In the first section, the current food tourism literature is reviewed by research conducted in this field. The method used to collect the data is then presented. The results of the study are then described according to the framework used. Finally, the most important findings of the study are discussed and concluded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food as the first human need not only meets physical needs, but also provides opportunities to improve social relationships, learning and belonging (Mei et al., 2017). Food as an cultural phenomenon plays an important role to represent human relations and in the field of tourism can be used as a means for intercultural interactions (Maurer, 2019). As a result, food tourism has gotten more attention than in the past, and today's visitors spend a significant portion of their journey learning about the local cuisine (Stone et al., 2019). Food tourism takes shape when food becomes one of the most important reasons to travel to a destination. Food tourism

is one of the types of cultural tourism that can become a good attraction for tourists to visit and leave good memories of the host community in the tourist's mind (Okumus et al., 2021). Differences in using ingredients, food preparation methods, cooking styles, and food preservation methods in different countries are part of their original and traditional culture. In fact, local food and drink have become a vital travel need [need to eat], as an important part of the local culture that attracts tourists (Hiamey et al., 2021). Regarding that food tourism occupies a large part of the tourism industry, there is no comprehensive accepted definition for it.

Food tourism, on the other hand, is defined by Alonso and colleagues as “visiting destinations whose primary motivation for travel is an interest in an ethnicity's, nation's, or region's cooking, which may include eating and drinking, learning about food production processes, buying food and drink, or attending local cooking classes” (Duarte Alonso et al., 2021, p. 6). Food tourism allows tourists to use all five senses [sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch] to enjoy their experiences (Baimuratova et al., 2021). Eating and drinking make for a memorable travel experience, and tourists pay for cultural products by eating and drinking at the destination (Taheri et al., 2021). Food tourists are people whose main motivation for traveling is to experience local food products. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), more than a third of tourism spending is spent on food (Prince, 2022). The share of the food and beverage sector in the turnover and employment of the tourism industry varies from 12 to 49 percent depending on the purpose of the trip (Tiago et al., 2021). In other words, food and drink are important resources in the economy, culture and sustainability of tourist destinations that can be a strong potential for diversification of destinations (Hall, 2020).

Most countries of the world have introduced special foods as national food to revive the traditional food culture and expanding tourism to the people of the world (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2018). This is one of the key implementations of tourism policy. In fact, tourism policy is a set of discourses, decisions, and practices driven by governments, sometimes in collaboration with private or social actors, with the intention to achieve diverse objectives related to tourism (Andersson et al., 2017). Food tourism policy is a subset of tourism policy concerned with the role of food in tourism development and its different economic and social aspects (Esmaeilzadeh, 2020).

Numerous studies have examined the effect of food tourism on components such as economics, culture, and development. For example Quigley et al. by historically reviewing food tourism

development in Ireland during 10 years showed how the 2008 economic depression made policymakers shift focus to food tourism as a source of sustainable income (Quigley et al., 2019). Privitera et al. also showed that food tourism played a major role to improve the economy and promote the local dishes in Romania and Italy (Privitera et al., 2018). Other researchers have examined the role of food tourism in infrastructure, cultural, and human development. Everett *et al.* reviewed the role of food tourism in protecting and developing local identities with the recreation of villages, agricultural diversity, and the generation of close relationships between production and consumption within the urban area. They found a positive correlation between the increase in the level of attachment to food tourism, protecting and developing regional identity, and environmental sustainability (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Vázquez-Medina et al. reviewed the role of women in improving food tourism in Mexico and showed that food tourism resulted in a decrease in the sexual gap in the country and an increased number of job opportunities (Vázquez-Medina & Medina, 2020).

By reviewing the impact of the earthquake in 2016 that occurred in the rural area on the west of New Zealand and its negative impact on food tourism in the regions, Fountain et al. recommended that innovations such as the increase in the agricultural product's diversity and improvement of transportation by road and train can be performed to improve this branch of tourism (Fountain et al., 2020). Besides, by reviewing the effects of food tourism in Oman, Enzenbacher in his/her study shows that this branch of tourism not only has resulted in permanent local revenues but also shifts the focus toward Oman's food culture resulting in new job opportunities and an increase in the number of tourists' duration of stay (Enzenbacher, 2019). However, there hasn't always been a favorable link between culture and tourism, and various studies have looked at the harmful influence of food tourism on social class food culture. For example, Jong et al. in their post-structuralist studies have shown that how policy discourses privilege the middle class via food tourism and marginalize particular foods positioned as working class (De Jong & Varley, 2017).

Some researchers have focused their attention on the strategies to promote food tourism. Chang et al. introduced novelty and food innovation along with food festivals as factors that make the revisit from possible tourism destination (Chang et al., 2018). Henderson reviewed the role of food streets within countries in the southeast of Asia such as Singapore and considered them effective factors to attract tourists (Henderson, 2019). Surveying with tourist of 9 countries, Stone et al. found that food tours are one of the most attractive parts of tourists'

journey and will positively impact their satisfaction of the journey and chance of revisit from the previous destination (Stone et al., 2019). Tsai et al. reviewed the effect of branding of food tourism destination on the increased number of tourists in Taiwan and offered practical strategies to improve this branch of tourism (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Dahiya et al. reviewed the role of the website in food tourism branding in their study and provided recommendations on how to improve internet advertisements in this branch of tourism (Dahiya & Duggal, 2020). Ranteallo et al. reviewed the impact of photo and video sharing social media such as Instagram in sharing the food tourists' experience and claimed that image and video are a more effective form of created content in attracting food tourists (Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2017).

Fusté-Forné (2020) reviewed the role of 'cheese' as one of the tourism attractions in Catalonia and showed that villagers brought about the development of food tourism in these local regions by being creative and innovative in the production of milk and cheese. Moreover, Folgado-Fernández et al. evaluated the role of 'olive oil' in improving food tourism in Spain and introduce it as one of the strategies to protect food local culture and improve tourism within rural areas (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019). Besides, Kiráľová et al. studied the role of local drinks in the Czech Republic to improve food tourism and claimed that special drinks in this region are significant factors in the growth of small and medium-sized food startups and the protection of local culture (Kiráľová & Hamarneh, 2017). Restaurants have always been in the spotlight of tourists and some researchers have studied their role in the development of food tourism. Meneguel et al. reviewed the restaurants' role in developing food tourism and found that adding local dishes into the restaurant menu will increase the chance of tourists' revisit from the tourism destination (de Albuquerque Meneguel et al., 2019). Moreover, Bertan studies the role of restaurants rating in improving the quality of offered foods and found that factors such as hiring international cooks and cooking local dishes have a significant impact on attracting food tourists (Bertan, 2020).

IRAN AND FOOD TOURISM

Iran is one of the tourist destinations in the Middle East and its tourist attractions are so many that it provides enough motivation to visit almost every taste (Park et al., 2019). Among Asian countries, Iran has one of the most unique ways of cooking (Torabi Farsani et al., 2018). For many years, traditional food in Iran is not only influenced by the food culture of neighboring countries, but also very obviously, their food culture has also affected itself (Izadi, 2015). Iran

can be an attractive destination for tourists due to its different ethnicities with diverse cultures and food identities (MovAhed et al., 2020). Historical documents show that Iranian food is four thousand years old (Amir & Saman, 2018). Iran currently has one of the richest food cultures in the world; So that about 2200 types of food and 109 drinks and all kinds of sweets and bread were identified in it (Esmaeilzadeh, 2020). Iran is a style of slow food compared to fast food and in Iranian culture, the longer the process of cooking a food, the higher nutritional and cultural value of that food (Payandeh et al., 2020).

In Iran, regarding the diversity of climate and local cultures, a variety of foods and cooking methods can be seen in the preparation of food (Sarvar et al., 2017). This variety of food attracts the attention of tourists either in daily life or on special occasions such as Nowruz. The most famous cities in Iran that are of interest to tourists because of their food are Rasht, Shiraz, Mashhad, Yazd, Bushehr, Isfahan, Kermanshah, and Tabriz [Fig. 1]. Among them, Rasht and Kermanshah are included in the list of creative food cities of Unesco. The most delicious dishes that usually attract the attention of foreign tourists are Khoresh ghormeh sabzi, Khoresh fesenjan, Baghali polo, Chicken kebab, Abgoosht, Zerehshk polo, beryan, Tahchin, and Cutlet (Payandeh et al., 2020). Considering these capacities, in recent years, sporadic measures were taken by the government and the private sector to promote food tourism in Iran.

Figure 1. Map of Iran and its famous cities



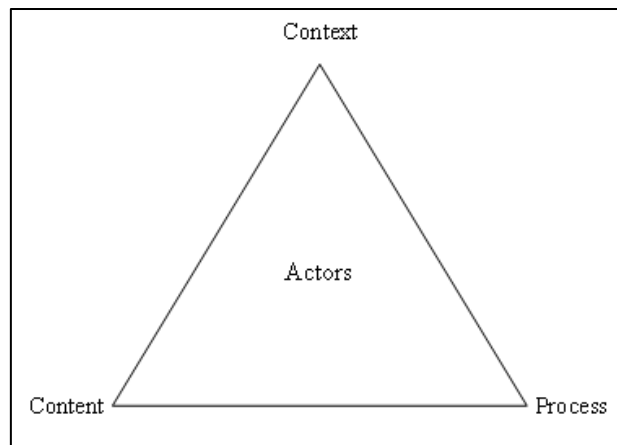
METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method is employed in this study to analyze the current condition of food tourism in Iran along with its related policies. The present study was a policy analysis study that was conducted retrospectively. Policy Analysis is a technique used in public administration such as tourism policy to examine and evaluate the available options to implement the goals of laws and elected officials (Knoepfel et al., 2007). It was defined as the process of "determining which of various policies will achieve a given set of goals in light of the relations between the policies and the goals" (Browne et al., 2019, p. 1038). There are many frameworks for policy analysis. One of the most famous in tourism policy analysis is the *policy triangle framework* (Mallinson et al., 2018). This framework, which is mainly recommended for use in developing countries, is used to analyze the problem and find ways to deal with it, and can be used to analyze how a set of different factors are involved in a problem or cause it to persist (O'Brien et al., 2020). To analyze food tourism policy, the policy triangle was used and the also this framework was used to express the findings of the study.

Study conceptual framework - As Fig. 2 demonstrates, the policy triangle entails three dimensions of process, content, and context with the actors at the center of the triangle (O'Brien et al., 2020).

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Figure 2. Walt and Gilson's policy triangle framework



This framework shows how the aforementioned dimensions interact with each other to shape and implement a policy (Doshmangir et al., 2019). Since our focus in this study was on the context, content, process, and actors of food tourism policy formation in Iran, policy triangle framework was served to analyze the current condition of food tourism using the data collected

from the two initial stages. In the policy triangle framework, (1) 'context' is a set of systematic factors that shape politics or affect it. (2) 'Content' is a set of planned goals and measures that realizes the policy. (3) 'Process' is a set of performed measures and activities to implement a policy, and the policymaking process includes setting an agenda, formulating, implementing, and evaluating. At last, (4) 'actors' are a set of individuals, groups, and organizations that are involved or affected by the implementation process (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Data collection - Data collection was done between February and August 2019, and conducted using two sources: (i) existing related documents and content; (ii) semi-structured interviews with tourists and experts.

Documents' assessment - The entire credible documents were analyzed at the first stage rather than carrying out sampling. Documentations related to food tourism including upstream documents, laws, regulations, reports, articles, news, and speeches with were identified by reviewing the references. The documents were collected from relevant centers, institutions, organizations, and websites and then, data were extracted from these sources. Overall, 176 documents were investigated which are listed in Table 1.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews - In the second stage, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with food tourism stakeholders in three groups: (1) *Level one stakeholders*: high-ranking experts, professionals, and managers in the field of food tourism; (2) *Level two stakeholders*: Hotel owners, travel agency managers, tour guides, restaurant managers, cooks, and tourism entrepreneurs; (3) *Level three stakeholders*: Tourists.

Considering the diverse knowledge and insights of the stakeholders, separate interview protocols were designed for all three groups using the comments of the research team and concerning the elements of the policy triangle. The examined population included the stakeholders of food tourism and the key figures related to this field were identified and selected by investigating the present document review and using the guidance of professors. Group one and two stakeholders were selected via purposive sampling while group three stakeholders (tourists) were identified via simple sampling. At the next stage, snowball sampling was used to continue the process of participant selection; accordingly, those who were chosen for interviews introduced other individuals as well.

Following the necessary interview arrangements, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted revolving around questions. The interview protocol consisted of 12 questions. The interviewees were first asked questions about the four components of the policy triangle [context, content, process, and actors]. For example, in their view, what is the content of food tourism policy in Iran? Who are the actors? What processes have taken place to shape food tourism policy in Iran? Then, based on each interviewee's skill and experience, more specific questions were asked about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of food tourism policy in Iran. The interviewees were given the freedom to respond to the questions in any manner they wished. The stakeholders were asked more specific questions during interviews considering their field of activities. Interviews with tourists were conducted in Isfahan's hotels and tourist sites, and interviews with group one and two stakeholders were conducted at their workplaces. Data collection was carried out until theoretical saturation was reached.

Overall, interviews were conducted with 49 individuals consisting of 9 group one stakeholders, 13 group two stakeholders, and 27 tourists whose specifications are listed in Table 2. Before conducting the interviews, participants were given codes instead of their actual names and were informed about the purposes of the study, data collection, recording method, and information confidentiality. In addition to notetaking, interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder with the consent of the participants. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to provide their contact information so that they could be contacted at the subsequent stages of the study.

Data management and analysis - Transcribed interviews were inserted into MAXQDA software [Version 10, Berlin, Germany] immediately after each interview. The coding process and data analysis were carried out separately for each level of stakeholders to enable providing independent reports on data obtained from each group. Audio files were accurately transcribed and then, read several times. Then, open, and axial coding was carried out. Content analysis method was used to extract data from documents and interviews, so that all sources and text of interviews were coded in the form of categories related to the dimensions of the policy triangle framework. At the first stage, i.e. open coding, key ideas, and main themes were identified, extracted, and coded. At the next stage, conceptually similar codes were classified and integrated (axial coding). A research team member coded a section of interviews' transcriptions without informing the main coder. Then, both groups of codes were compared to ensure

equality among results and coordination between the collected data. Documents and interviews were coded separately so that each could be reported independently. Then, resulting codes were pooled together to provide a common perspective on the subject.

Table 1. Specifications of examined documents

Document Type	Quantity
Laws, Requirements, and Approvals	13
Instructions and Regulations	10
Published contents from newspapers and websites	107
Reports	19
Academic Papers	27
Total	176

Table 2. Interview participants' details

Group	Title	Number of Individuals	Total
One	University Professor	2	8
	Head of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization	1	
	CEO of Tourism Bank	1	
	Head of Tourism in the Chamber of Commerce	1	
	Member of Parliament's Tourism Fraction	1	
	Tourism Development Manager of Isfahan Municipality	1	
	General Manager of Tourism and Cultural Heritage Research Office	1	
	Tourism Deputy of Isfahan Cultural Heritage Office	1	
Two	Tour Guide	2	14
	Taster	1	
	Food Journalist	1	
	Hotel Manager	2	
	Chef	1	
	Tourism Expert	2	
	Travel Agency Manager	2	
	Food Tourism Startup Manager	1	
	Restaurant Manager	1	
Three	Domestic Tourist	21	27

	International Tourist	6	
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Data trustworthiness - To improve data consistency and to avoid potential bias, a second researcher recoded and reanalyzed half of the documents and interviews (randomly selected from different sectors) independently. The generated themes and sub-themes and potential differences were then compared and discussed to reach a consensus on the final codes and themes. Details such as participant's names and/or organizations they represented were kept anonymized for confidentiality. Participant's quotes were used to illustrate meaning in emerging themes in the results section.

RESULTS

Based on the conceptual framework of the study and data analyzed, the results of this study can be categorized into four sections, by elements of the policy triangle, as follows:

Contextual Factors to Shape Food Tourism Policy in Iran - In the policy triangle framework, 'context' is a set of systematic factors that shape politics or affect it. The first policy in the field of food tourism began in the late 1980s with the holding of food festivals under the title Sofreh Irani where tourism activists introduced the special food of their city. So far, more than twenty editions of this festival have been held. (Sarvar et al., 2017). Influential contextual factors in the formation of food tourism policy in Iran can be categorized into 4 groups that are shown in table 3. The first group was political factors that include upstream goals of tourism, changes within the governments and executive managers, and changes within international relations.

When the 11th government came to power, Iran was subject to a vast number of international sanctions and oil revenues were decreased significantly. For this reason, raising revenue from other parts of the economy became significantly important. Hence, improving the Tourism Industry entered the government's agendas since it can lead to economic growth and share a positive image of Iran to peoples around the world. (Head of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization).

The second group was cultural factors that are divided into two subgroups: food culture and public culture.

Iranian cuisine is composed of various dishes. Some research states that thousands of foods and drinks are made by different Iranian families... On the other hand, cultural and ethnic diversity along with Iranian peoples' hospitality can be influential factors to attract tourists. (University Professor)

The third group was Infrastructure factors which are divided into three subgroups: economic viability, tourism infrastructures, and active private sectors.

Truth is Iran became one of the cheapest travel destinations due to low value of its currency, compared to other countries, and this issue can be influential in improving tourism. Moreover, Iran is relatively safe and hence it is one of the factors that makes Iran an attractive tourism destination... However, we are lacking civil and welfare infrastructures in comparison to countries within the region. (Tour Guide)

The fourth group was climate factors that are divided into two subgroups: suitable climate and geographical zone.

In comparison to countries in the region and around the world, Iran has its four-season weather and a superior geographical zone to reach any geographical location within the Middle East. (Tourism Deputy of Isfahan Cultural Heritage Office)

Table 3. Influential contextual factors in the formation of food tourism policy in Iran

Main themes	Sub-themes	Main codes
Politics	Understanding upstream goals of tourism	Achieving set goals of tourism as specified in Vision Policy for the next 20 years, third to sixth development plans, general policies as specified by Supreme Leader of Iran, and comprehensive plans for Iran's tourism development.
	Changes within the governments and executive managers	Managers replace (Government of Rouhani) and support exclusively from tourism. Transforming cultural heritage, handicrafts, and tourism organizations into a ministry. Use tourism for creating a positive image of Iran.
	Changes within international relations	Reduction in government revenue as a result of sanctions and the need to generate revenue from tourism. improve foreign relations after 'The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' and increased number of tourists entering Iran.
Culture	Food culture	High diversity of dishes. Food style similar to East Asian cuisine.
	Public culture	Cultural and ethnic diversity. Cultural openness and hospitality mindset.
Infrastructure	Economic viability	Cheapest travel destinations due to low value of Iran's currency.
	Tourism infrastructure	High security
	Active private sector	Private sector interest in tourism activities and investments Diverse food industries.
Climate	Suitable climate	Four-season climate.
	Suitable geographical zone	Suitable geographical location in the Middle East.

Processes of Food Tourism Policy in Iran - In the framework of policy triangle, 'process' is a set of performed measures and activities to implement a policy, and the policymaking process includes setting an agenda, formulating, implementing, and evaluating. However, these stages

don't follow a certain trend and also, don't occur continuously. Results of the current research show that the food tourism policy in Iran hasn't followed a consistent trend and it is not followed as a set of purposeful policies.

No consistent planning was done to develop food tourism within Iran. Disperse works were carried out in this field in the late 80s mostly due to governments' observations and sectional developments. Yet, respective policymakers don't pay attention to food tourism as a serious matter. (Member of Parliament's Tourism Fraction)

Processes that are involved in the formation of food tourism policy in Iran can be divided into four groups that are shown in table 4. The first group was administrative policies which can be categorized into four subgroups: formation of instructions, arranging seminars and food festivals, and notification and education.

Until now, different policies were executed to improve food tourism in Iran, from planning for different food festivals and introducing food tourism capacity in a variety of media to providing regulation for standardizing places where food is prepared and served. (Food Journalist)

The findings of our study show that food festivals are pursued more seriously than other policies and are held annually at the provincial and national levels. The first group was R & D that can be categorized into four subgroups: utilizing the experience of developed countries, studying in the field of food tourism capacity, and developing infrastructure.

Proper works were carried out to identify the capacity of food tourism. Identifying and collecting Iran local foods into the Atlas of Iran foods is one of the works that can be a suitable guide for all activists within the tourism industry. (General Manager of Tourism and Cultural Heritage Research Office)

Atlas of Iranian Food is a comprehensive encyclopedia of foods and beverages of different regions of Iran, which introduces the background, variety, methods of preparation, benefits, and compatibility of foods with the vast geography of Iran. Using the Food Atlas, the effect of geographical location on people's food can be examined better and more deeply to understand the roots of food traditions. The third group was motivational plans that can be categorized into two subgroups: motivating the private sector and branding in the field of food tourism.

There were many struggles to involve the city of Rasht as the Creative Food city into the lists of world heritage sites. Also, involving Iranian food into List of Intangible Heritage in Iran was one of the struggles of branding Iran as one of the food tourism destinations. (Food Journalist)

The fourth group includes control and mentoring that can be categorized into two subgroups: incentives and food quality control.

Proper incentives, e.g., granting loans to encourage the private sector to enter food tourism and create food tours, has been considered. (Hotel Manager)

Although financial incentives play an important role in encouraging the private sector to engage in food tourism, more creative incentives can be applied by drawing on the experiences of other countries. Extensive bureaucracy and cumbersome regulations in the field of food monitoring have made the private sector reluctant to invest in food tourism.

Table 4. Processes of Food Tourism Policy in Iran

Main themes	Sub-themes	Main codes
Executive policies	The individuals or groups in charge will be determined	An exclusive team for creative tourism (including food tourism) will be established Establishment of Food Tourism Policy Council
	Preparation of instructions	Preparing the regulations for standardizing places where food is prepared and served Preparation of regulations for arranging local food festivals Arranging meetings with Food Industry for food product branding
	To arrange Seminars and food festivals	To arrange national festival of Iranian dishes during several periods To arrange the first festival of international dishes To arrange the first familiarization trip of Iranian dishes
	Notification and education	To establish a course of food tourism for tour guides The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting should prepare different movies and documentaries about local foods Local food culture must be reflected in the printed and non-printed media
Research and Development	To utilize experiences of developed countries	To send cooks to international food events To establish international cooking festivals in Iran for two periods
	To study in the field of food tourism capacity	To identify and collect Iran local foods in the form of Atlas of Iran foods
	To develop infrastructures	To develop residences for ecotourism where local foods will be served. To transform free-trade zones into food tourism centers
Motivational plans	Motivating the private sector	To offer incentives to restaurants and other food-serving places to add local foods to their menu To encourage travel agencies to arrange food tours
	Branding in the field of food tourism	Registration of Rasht and kermanshah as a creative food cities in the UNESCO list in 2015 and 2021 Registration of 38 foods in the list of intangible heritage of Iran Registration of 4 foods in the UNESCO World Heritage List
Control and mentoring	Incentives	To formulate incentives for private sector
	Food quality control	To control food quality in places where food is prepared

Food Tourism Policy Actors in Iran - In the policy triangle framework, ‘actors’ are a set of individuals, groups, and organizations that are involved or affected by the implementation process. Food tourism in Iran has a very diverse range from the stakeholders who all interact with each other to contribute to the dynamism of this fledgling industry. Some are policy nature and some are executive nature. Some operate at the local and regional levels and others at the national level. In our study, Food tourism policy actors in Iran are categorized into four groups that are shown in Table 5. The first group includes policymakers and legislators.

Supreme agencies of Iran can play a major role in improving food tourism with legislations and approving aiding rules. Among these organizations, the Iranian Parliament is playing the most significant role compared to others. ...city councils along with municipalities can create integrated plans to attract food tourists into their cities. (Member of Parliament’s Tourism Fraction)

The second group includes administrative agencies, e.g., state-owned organizations, public administrative agencies, and private organizations.

Since the matter of legislation has governmental nature, government, and its subsets, exclusively Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, play key roles in planning and developing food tourism. (University Professor)

The third group includes education and control organizations and agencies, and the fourth group includes aiding organizations.

Table 5. Food Tourism Policy Actors in Iran

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Main codes
Policymakers and legislators	Legislative organizations	The Expediency Discernment Council of the System, Planning and Budget Organization, Supreme Council of Management and Economic Planning, and Executive Vice President
	Policymaking organizations	The Islamic Consultative Assembly and City Council
Administrative agencies	Government agencies and ministries	Ministry of Cultural Heritage, The Iranian Department of Environment, Forests and Range Organization, Provincial Government, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Civil Aviation Organization, and World Free Zones Organization
	Public administrative organizations	Municipalities, Transportation Companies (by Train, Airplane, and Road), Companies Under the Control of Governance Agencies
	Private Sector	food industries, hotel owners, residences for ecotourism, travel service agencies, restaurant owners and places where food services are offered, tour guides, and private entertainment facilities
Education and control	Organizations charged with monitoring	Judicial System of Iran, Police and Security organizations
	Organizations charged with education	Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Ministry of Science, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, and Media

	Non-Governmental Organization	Assembly of Tour Guides, Tourism Establishments, Non-Governmental Organizations to Protect Historical and Cultural Place, and Corporations of Hotels and Travel Agencies
Aiding organizations	To support the promotion of the food tourism industry in Iran	Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, News Agencies, and Press
	To support investor's private sector	Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Development Banks, Chamber of Commerce, and Public Sector Unions

Food Tourism Policy Content in Iran - 'Content' is a set of planned goals and measures that realizes the policy. Food Tourism Policy Content in Iran is categorized into 2 groups that are shown in Table 6. The first group was the goals of food tourism policy divided into the following subgroups: economy, society-culture, and environment.

Not only food tourism can improve economic stability but also decrease the unemployment rate at the local level and prevent many connected social crimes... Besides, since cooking is considered women's art, women's employment rate will increase, and it will pave the way for flourishing their skills. (Tourist)

The second groups were measures that were taken in the public and private sector.

Among the activities performed to improve food tourism in Iran, the following can be named: utilizing international experienced by inviting cooks and people experienced in food tourism and arranging food tours. (Travel Agency Manager)

Table 6. Food Tourism Policy Content in Iran

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Main codes
Food tourism goals	Improving the socio-economic situation	To create inclusive growth and economic stability To provide suitable jobs and locally empowering women in the field of food tourism.
	Promoting food culture	To honor and protect the diversity and identity of Iranian dishes as intangible heritage. To use food as diplomatic means to create understanding between cultures.
	Environmental protection	To move toward sustainable development goals. To protect the environment and prevent climate changes.
Taken Measures	Public sector	To arrange food festivals and specialized cooking courses. To prepare rating system of restaurants. Identifying local foods and notifying in different available forms. To develop tourism infrastructures. To utilize international experiences by inviting cooks and people experienced in food tourism and arranging food tours.
		To arrange food tours by travel agencies.

	Private Sector	<p>To introduce local food attractions by tasters</p> <p>To develop residences for ecotourism where local foods will be served.</p> <p>To develop food tourism forums on social media platforms</p> <p>To introduce local foods in the form of the brochure in several hotels</p>
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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims analyze food tourism policy in Iran, in which various factors have been and are involved. We divided these factors into four categories: actors, content, context, and process, according to the policy analysis triangle. Based on the total evidence obtained during this study, it seems that the food tourism policy in Iran has not yet taken a full and satisfactory form. According to the findings of this study, the most important government institution in tourism policy in Iran is the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, but the existence of a diverse and wide range of actors in this field and lack of coordination between them has caused that measures taken in the field of food tourism remain limited. *"The diversity of executive and regulatory bodies in the public sector and actors active in the private sector has led many of the strategies adopted to promote food tourism to have a top-down approach and not be implemented properly."* (Hotel manager)

In this regard, Boesen et al. (2017), by examining local food networks and their cooperation with tourism activists, one of the reasons for the failure of these networks is the multiplicity of multiple actors in the field of tourism and their disparity with each other Hribar et al. (2021), by examining the role of stakeholders in the creation and management of food tourism, propose three models of cooperation to reduce conflicts between them. The findings of our study show that food tourism has not yet been considered as an important branch of tourism in Iran. In terms of the content of this policy (promoting food tourism in Iran), critics point to the lack of prioritized goals as one of the main weaknesses. *"So far, food tourism has not emerged as a branch of tourism that can create jobs and boost local businesses. Each government manager in the field of tourism has his own approach and has acted cross-sectionally."* (University professor)

Consistent with the findings of our study, Quigley et al., Examining the formation of food tourism in Ireland from 2009 to 2019, found that one of the main obstacles to promoting this type of tourism has been the constant change of managers (Quigley et al., 2019).

Other weaknesses in the content of this policy include the policy's continual modification of rules, the presence of restrictive legislation in the area of food tourism, and the government's excessive supervision of food tourism operations. *"There are so many restrictive rules and regulations in the field of tourism that we are sometimes disappointed with food tourism tours. Government institutions often restrict them instead of encouraging the private sector."* (Travel Agency Manager) Sabatier considers the following six conditions necessary if they are to be applied to the implementation of any policy: (1) Objectives that are clear and consistent with logic. (2) Existence of a strong theory that determines specific measures to achieve the mentioned goals. (3) Full support and compliance of executive agents. (4) Capable and committed managers. (5) Full support from legislators and stakeholders. (6) No change in economic and social conditions and continuation of political support (Sabatier, 2019).

In designing the food tourism promotion policy in Iran, important stakeholders such as tour guides and travel agencies have had a weak participation and therefore do not have enough motivation to implement this plan. Insufficient government funding for food tourism has left measures in this field only cross-cutting incentives and lack sufficient stability. *"Unfortunately, Iranian food is not yet known not only nationally but also internationally, and the weakness of marketing in the field of food tourism is strongly felt."* (Tourist guide) The tourists who were questioned in our research complained about the poor quality of the meal, its lack of authenticity, and its expensive pricing. *"When I travel to a place, I like to eat local food there and get to know the culture there, while in many cases I come across repetitive and non-original food."* (Tourist) Roustae et al. By examining the factors affecting the re-visit of food tourists to the city of Shiraz, respectively, the values of quality, health, locality, and food prices as the most important factors of interest to tourists (Roustae & Jamshidi, 2020).

The contextual factors influencing the formation of food tourism were classified into four categories: political, cultural, infrastructural, and climatic. The findings of our study show that the change of government and the victory of President Rouhani has played an important role in food tourism. Improving Iran's foreign relations with the world after Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA] and upgrading the Tourism Organization to the Ministry of Tourism has provided the necessary grounds for the prosperity of food tourism in Iran since 2015. *"The Rouhani government has always had a favorable view of tourism and has used it as a way to create a positive image of Iran in the minds of tourists."* (Member of Parliament) Seyfi et al. (2019), by analyzing the content of research published in the field of tourism in Iran over the

past 10 years, found that after the nuclear deal and the reduction of sanctions, the number of research articles has been steadily increasing. Iran's rich food culture is also a factor in paying attention to food tourism, but the findings of our study show that not much effort has been made to identify local food and marketing for them. Kim et al. Examined the effective use of digital marketing in West Texas food tourism using content analysis, and found this type of marketing to be more effective than other methods in attracting tourists (Y. H. Kim et al., 2009).

The centralized and unpredictable political situation in Iran's political structure is one of the causes contributing to the country's food tourism policy's volatility, making it difficult to implement integrated and consistent policies to encourage food tourism. *"The lack of a defined model and set of specific strategies based on local culture has predisposed food tourism policy to exert personal preferences and deviate from the defined path."* (Tourism expert). In this regard, Bertella (2011) in a case study of food tourism in Norway and Italy, state that the success of any policy in the field of food tourism requires its coordination with the characteristics of local culture. The findings of our study show that Iran's inadequate tourism infrastructure, including the underdevelopment of hotels and tourist accommodation, along with the lack of connection to the international banking network, has acted as important obstacles to promote food tourism in Iran. Petrova et al. (2018) examined the role of local tourism infrastructure in the competitiveness of the tourist destination and found that among the infrastructure factors, respectively, security, quality, and physical communication of the tourist destination have the greatest impact on Russian tourists.

Holding food festivals, forming food tourism working groups in the Ministry of Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce, and registering the cities of Rasht and Kermanshah as creative food cities in the Unesco Intangible Heritage List were the most important processes in shaping food tourism policy in Iran. *"Currently, about 40 cities are registered as creative food cities in the Unesco list, two of which belong to Iran. I hope that by registering these two cities, we will be able to introduce their local food to the people of the world. Also recently, a project called The Atlas of Iranian Food has started to identify local foods and brand them."* (Director General of the Ministry of Tourism)

The present study is the first in Iran to examine the current state of Iran's food tourism policy by reviewing the documentaries and conducting interviews with several stakeholders. Our results show that despite the preparation of several strategies during the last 10 years to develop food tourism in Iran, no integrated and unified approach has existed to involve this branch of tourism

in the agenda and only temporary and transitional decisions were dominant in this field. Since Iran's rich food culture has the potential to become a tourism attraction and more tourists becoming interested in food tourism, it is recommended that respective policymakers, especially those within the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, carry out unified and integrated planning to grow and improve food tourism in Iran. We suggest that two cities in Iran be selected as pilot areas and that food tourism promotion strategies be implemented in them. After evaluating the strategies, they can be used at the national level.

Limitations of study - One of the limitations of the study was the interview with a smaller number of international tourists than domestic tourists, which could affect the findings of the study, so we suggest that this be adjusted in future studies. In this research, part of the findings was obtained using the interview method. As a result, some people may have refused to give real answers and gave unrealistic answers. Therefore, it is suggested to use questionnaires in similar studies along with the interview method. Another limitation of the study was the small sample size for interviews, and if more people were interviewed, more accurate results would probably be obtained.

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