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## Cultural Marketing through Food: a Case of Traditional Dish Names and Culinary Heritage in Gilan Province, Northern Iran

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| <p><b>Received:</b><br/>2025-06-15</p> <p><b>Accepted:</b><br/>2025-07-08</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>Cultural marketing is considered one of the most effective strategies for introducing and strengthening local identities in the context of globalization. Among various cultural elements, food holds a distinctive position as both a part of tangible culture and an element of intangible heritage. It can convey the values, narratives, and lifestyles of a region in an accessible and experiential way. This study examines the role of traditional culinary practices and local dish names in the cultural marketing of Guilan Province, Northern Iran. A mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) was used. In the qualitative phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, including local chefs, cultural heritage experts, and organizers of culinary tourism tours. Thematic Content Analysis was applied to interpret the interviews. In the quantitative phase, a researcher-designed questionnaire was administered to 306 incoming tourists who had experienced local food in the province. Their responses were analyzed statistically. The findings indicate that Guilan's traditional foods reflect the region's climate, history, language, rituals, and indigenous beliefs. Through the diversity of ingredients, unique cooking methods, and culturally rooted names, these foods have strong cultural appeal. Statistical analysis also revealed significant and positive relationships between tourists' demographic, psychological, and motivational characteristics and their willingness to consume local foods and engage in culinary tourism. Additionally, factors such as the diversity of dish names and preparation styles, the hospitality culture, health-related aspects of local food, and promotional activities were found to significantly influence demand and enhance the culinary tourism experience. Overall, the study emphasizes that the deliberate integration of food culture into tourism policies—especially by leveraging its symbolic and narrative dimensions—can strengthen destination branding and contribute to the sustainable economic and cultural development of local communities.</p> |
| <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Cultural marketing</p> <p>Culinary tourism</p> <p>Food sociology</p> <p>Traditional Dish Names</p> <p>Guilan Province</p>                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
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## Introduction

In today's world, where globalization is steadily dissolving cultural boundaries, societies are increasingly striving to preserve and promote their local identities. Among the most effective strategies to accomplish this is cultural marketing. This approach involves a series of planned and guided humanistic-cultural activities aimed at addressing the cultural needs of society by offering cultural products or services (Salahi, 2018; Bahonar, 2018; Rashidpoor, 2021). Relying on elements such as language, music, rituals, and especially cuisine, cultural marketing strives to present an authentic and engaging image of a region or nation to both domestic and international audiences (Richards, 2012). "Cultural marketing is the artful implementation of strategies that deeply engage the audience" (Imani Khoshkhoo & Korani, 2021, p. 6). Unlike many other cultural components, food possesses a uniquely high potential for universal, immediate, and tangible transmission. As a cultural element, cuisine not only reflects the lifestyle, beliefs, climate, and history of a region, but also plays an irreplaceable role in fostering cultural connections through direct sensory experience (Long, 2012; Sims, 2009). In this context, food tourism, as an emerging branch of cultural tourism, has garnered increasing attention from researchers and tourism policymakers in recent years. Through the tasting of local dishes, tourists enter the symbolic and cultural world of a destination in a palpable and accessible way (Timothy & Ron, 2013). The names of dishes, culinary traditions, and cooking rituals not only signify local distinctions but also carry cultural values, native languages, collective memories, and even folklore. When appropriately introduced and marketed, these elements can become powerful tools for attracting tourists, reinforcing regional identity, and even fostering economic development (Boyne & Hall, 2004; Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Guilan Province, located in Northern Iran, is one of the most culturally, climatically, and gastronomically diverse regions in the country. In this region, dishes are not only prepared using local and indigenous ingredients, but their names and methods of preparation often reflect the area's history, climate, and socio-religious beliefs. These characteristics led to Rasht, the provincial capital, being designated as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015). The region's remarkable culinary diversity — from plant-based dishes such as *Torsh Tareh* and *Sirabij*, to seafood dishes like *Mahi Fovij* and *Ashpal Kebab* — exemplifies the deep and inseparable bond between culture, nature, and food in Guilan (Pourhadi, 2016). Despite this unique potential, the targeted use of Guilan's culinary culture in cultural marketing and tourism still requires greater attention and strategic planning. Leveraging distinctive dish names, narrating culinary traditions, and reviving associated rituals can, alongside the pleasure of tasting local flavors, offer tourists a rich and lasting cultural experience (Mak et al., 2012; Horng & Tsai, 2015).

This study seeks to explore how Guilan's culinary traditions and traditional dish names function as cultural instruments in tourism marketing. Specifically, it seeks to demonstrate how a plate of food can convey a story — a narrative of the culture, history, and identity of the people who prepare it. Accordingly, the objectives of this research are: to explore the potential of Guilan's food heritage in showcasing the region's cultural identity; to assess tourists' awareness of and interest in experiencing local foods and its effect on attracting visitors; to analyze the role of dish names and culinary traditions in destination marketing; and finally, to propose strategies for the intelligent use of food in sustainable cultural tourism policymaking.

### **literature Review**

The marketing environment refers to the factors and forces that can influence and facilitate the effective delivery of products and services to consumers (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Within this context, tourism marketing is a managerial process that involves anticipating and fulfilling the needs and desires of current and potential visitors more effectively than competing suppliers or destinations (Lumsdone, 2022). Successful tourism destinations are intensely customer-focused and highly committed to marketing. These destinations strive to better meet customer needs by cultivating motivation across all organizational levels to deliver the value expected by tourists (Kotler et al., 2001). The dual purpose of marketing is to attract new customers by offering greater value and to retain existing ones by ensuring their satisfaction (Ghanavati, 2014).

Today's consumers are no longer satisfied with simply receiving a product or service—they seek value that extends beyond quality into the realm of social responsibility. When product or service quality and price are similar, most tourists prefer companies that support a cultural or social cause (Anghel et al., 2011). Therefore, in both attracting and retaining customers, it is crucial to consider their cognitive, cultural, and value-based preferences (Ramanathan, 2010). Culture, as Hofstede (2001) defines it, is a collective mental programming. Schwartz sees culture as the dominant set of beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values within a society. "Culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, ethics, customs, and all capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society, and it significantly shapes consumer behavior" (Bairami Masoumabad, 2020, p. 37). "Like any other product, culture requires marketing" (Anoosheh & Mousavi Neghabi, 2024, p. 218). While cultures visibly and invisibly influence the production of both material and spiritual goods in society, they also require audience targeting (marketing), audience engagement (market-making), quality, dynamism, people-centeredness (customer orientation), accessibility (market-delivery), long-term relationship building (market-retention), diversification, adaptation, and expansion of audience reach (greater market share) (Rasouli, 2010). Failure to recognize the importance of culture in business and commercial structures

leads to weakened competitive effectiveness (Rezvani et al., 2017). With the rise of global communication and cultural diversity, marketing and culture have become increasingly intertwined. “Marketing messages cannot reach individual consumers without cultural mediation” (Bahonar, 2018, p. 4). Accordingly, cultural marketing has garnered scholarly attention as a mechanism through which national identity and culture are transmitted to others while simultaneously meeting the cultural needs of society. “Cultural marketing refers to a set of humanistic, cultural, planned, and directed activities aimed at fulfilling the cultural needs of society through the provision of cultural goods or services” (Khoramshad et al., 2019, p. 167). It is a process of anticipating cultural needs and responding through cultural exchanges (Demangeot et al., 2015). The cultural characteristics that can influence marketing decisions include the durability of cultural values and subcultures. The core beliefs and values of a society tend to be deeply rooted, and individuals often resist forces that threaten these values—an aspect of particular relevance in cultural marketing (Gannon, 2011). Cultural marketing not only considers the material needs of the consumer but also their emotional and spiritual needs—needs grounded in values shaped by the cultural environment in which the individual has developed. These values shape the “consumer’s perceptions, behaviors, and preferences and must be accounted for throughout all stages of the marketing process” (Roustakhiz et al., 2022, p. 3). Fig 1. shows the dimensions of cultural marketing management.

Cultural marketing, as one of the most prominent subfields of contemporary marketing, refers to the process of designing, promoting, and distributing cultural products and services in response to the cultural needs and preferences of audiences. This type of marketing plays a crucial role in the development of the tourism industry, particularly in domains such as food tourism, which are inherently intertwined with the cultural and identity-related elements of societies. In recent years, food and culinary culture—recognized as an integral part of intangible cultural heritage—have garnered significant attention from scholars across diverse disciplines such as sociology, tourism studies, anthropology, and cultural marketing.

Belisle (1983) was among the first to highlight the meaningful relationship between food and tourism. Since then, numerous studies have explored the role of food in shaping tourists’ cultural experiences (Boyne & Hall, 2004; Timothy & Ron, 2013). Research by Sims (2009) and Mak et al. (2012) emphasizes that food can function as a cultural language, guiding tourists toward experiences that extend beyond mere consumption—offering engagement with the destination's culture, people, and natural environment. This transforms food into one of the most effective tools of cultural marketing and a symbolic representation of local identity.

Food tourism is thus defined as travel driven by the desire to experience distinctive foods and beverages, often with cultural intentions. Food serves as a primary factor in tourists’ destination choices

(Kim et al., 2009). As Ziaei and Torab-Ahmadi (2012) suggest, food and beverages are universal elements of the tourism experience, consumed by all travelers.

One of the widely used conceptual frameworks for analyzing motivations in tourism, particularly food tourism, is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This pyramid includes five levels of human needs, ranging from basic physiological necessities to higher-order self-actualization. At the foundational level, food tourism satisfies basic needs such as hunger and the desire for unique flavors. At the next level, concerns about food safety and hygiene shape destination preferences. In the middle tier, food acts as a social and cultural medium, facilitating intercultural interaction through festivals and communal events. The upper levels pertain to educational travel aimed at deepening understanding of culinary traditions, and ultimately to research-based and professional engagements—reflecting the maturity of food tourism as both a personal growth tool and a specialized industry. This spectrum of motivations illustrates the multidimensional nature of food tourism, fulfilling both material and spiritual human needs (Tikkanen, 2007). Overall, examining food tourism through the lens of Maslow's theory reveals that food contributes to fulfilling various levels of human needs, offering diverse motivational pathways for travel. "Personal behaviors, individual motivations, and regional characteristics can influence tourists' willingness to consume local foods" (Duarte Alonso et al., 2013, p. 554). "Cultural, religious, social factors, and prior experiences also significantly affect food choices at destinations" (Mak et al., 2012, p. 934). Any gastronomic tourism initiative that neglects regional cultural traits is unlikely to succeed. Culinary experiences allow tourists to access a destination's historical and cultural heritage through tasting and purchasing local products. According to Richards (2012), food provides a framework for enhancing tourism experiences by linking culture and tourism. It often acts as a gateway to local culture, bringing together visitors and residents in shared cultural encounters. By integrating local customs, traditions, landscapes, and food production systems, culinary tourism can offer tourists an authentic and engaging experience.

Food tourism, motivated by a desire to explore traditional and indigenous cuisines, not only addresses taste and physiological needs but also plays a pivotal role in familiarizing tourists with the host community's lifestyle, history, and rituals (Kim et al., 2009). Traditional foods, through their preparation methods, naming conventions, presentation styles, and even their designated occasions, convey rich cultural messages that cultural marketing can effectively decode and promote (Mak et al., 2012). The names of dishes function within a cultural semiotic system—many of them referencing identity markers such as ethnicity, geography, mythology, or historical narratives. These names reflect

local ways of life, beliefs, and cultural discourses. Cultural marketing, by leveraging such names, can foster emotional and cognitive connections between tourists and destinations.



Figure 1. Dimensions of Cultural Marketing Management (Rasouli, 2010)

Studies show that experiencing local foods with authentic, traditional names not only stimulates tourists' curiosity and sense of discovery but also elevates food from a mere commodity to a profound cultural experience (Richards, 2012). Effective marketing of traditional foods, therefore, requires a deep understanding of the cultural elements embedded in their names, preparation techniques, visual symbols, and associated oral narratives. From a functional perspective, cultural marketing plays three key roles in food tourism: (1) the promotional role, introducing traditional foods alongside their cultural and historical narratives; (2) the differentiating role, highlighting the uniqueness of a destination by



emphasizing the authenticity and indigenous identity of its cuisine; and (3) the identity role, portraying and reflecting the cultural identity of a community through food and its nomenclature.

In conclusion, strengthening the connection between cultural marketing and food tourism not only enhances the appeal of tourist destinations but also provides a strategic mechanism for preserving culinary heritage and elevating the cultural status of local communities on a global scale. Conscious incorporation of food traditions and naming in marketing campaigns creates an opportunity to fuse local identity with competitive advantage in the tourism marketplace. An overview of previous studies aligned with the present research is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Review of the Literature**

| <b>Thematic Area</b>                             | <b>Researcher / Year</b>        | <b>Title of Study</b>                                                                             | <b>Method / Population</b>                            | <b>Key Findings and Results</b>                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural Marketing</b>                        | Rasouli (2010)                  | Designing a Model for Cultural Marketing Management with a Cultural Development Approach          | Theoretical                                           | Provided a strategic framework for managing cultural demand with emphasis on market analysis and cultural product development. |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Entrepreneurship</b>     | Rezvani et al. (2017)           | Conceptualization of Marketing Mix in Cultural-Artistic Businesses                                | Qualitative + Quantitative (Case Study & Focus Group) | Identified the 5 Cs model (Communication, Content, Creativity, Cultural Value, Creator) in marketing for cultural businesses.  |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Tourism</b>              | Bahonar (2018)                  | The Impact of Cultural Marketing on Customer Performance in Ilam Tourism                          | Questionnaire-based (384 samples)                     | Demonstrated a significant impact of cultural marketing on customer loyalty, word-of-mouth, and citizenship behavior.          |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Social Economy</b>       | Bairami Masoumabad (2020)       | The Impact of Financial Literacy on Social Commerce with the Mediating Role of Cultural Marketing | Structural Equation Modeling – Baron & Kenny          | Cultural marketing plays a significant mediating role between financial literacy and social commerce.                          |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Cultural Development</b> | Rashidpoor (2021)               | Explaining the Concept of Cultural Marketing (Fourth Generation Marketing)                        | Analytical – Theoretical                              | Introduced cultural marketing as a tool for economic development, job creation, and export of Islamic values.                  |
| <b>Lifestyle – Cultural Tourism</b>              | Imani Khoshkhoo & Korani (2021) | Lifestyle and Cultural Marketing in Travel                                                        | Qualitative                                           | Cultural marketing contributes to identity reconstruction in travel but reveals a value gap with traditional culture.          |

| Thematic Area                                     | Researcher / Year                                                                                                      | Title of Study                                                         | Method / Population                         | Key Findings and Results                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Creative Industries</b>   | Roustakhiz et al. (2022)                                                                                               | Cultural Marketing in the Reproduction of Traditional Iranian Clothing | Comparative – Analysis of Asian Experiences | Consumer communication identified as the most critical success factor in marketing creative cultural industries.                                                 |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Social Strategy</b>       | Anoosheh & Mousavi Neghabi (2024)                                                                                      | A Model of Cultural Marketing with a Social Approach                   | Grounded Theory                             | Differentiated between internal (addressing youth cultural needs) and international (value export) dimensions of cultural marketing.                             |
| <b>Food Tourism – Iran</b>                        | Izadi (2015)<br>Beigi & Beigi (2016)                                                                                   | Capacities of Food Tourism in Iran                                     | Analytical                                  | Food tourism in Iran remains underutilized despite its vast cultural and economic potential.                                                                     |
| <b>Food Tourism – Gilan</b>                       | Mishamandani Pirbazari (2017), Jafari Mehrabadi et al. (2017), Abdinejad (2017), Nikraftar et al. (2019), Amiri (2021) | Capacities of Food Tourism in Gilan                                    | Modeling, Analytical & Empirical            | Unique local hospitality culture and food-related motivations significantly influence tourists' consumption of local food and contribute to tourism development. |
| <b>Consumer Behavior – Food Tourism</b>           | Khoshe Bast et al. (2021)                                                                                              | Psychological Factors Influencing Preference for Local Food            | Empirical                                   | Demographic and psychological factors (e.g., nostalgia, novelty-seeking) are influential in attracting food tourists.                                            |
| <b>Food Marketing – Cultural Policy</b>           | Cairns (2019)                                                                                                          | The Impact of Food Marketing on Food Culture                           | Systematic Review + Analysis of 31 Studies  | Food marketing affects societal norms, preferences, and food-related values.                                                                                     |
| <b>Food Marketing – Consumption Culture</b>       | Hiamey et al. (2021)                                                                                                   | Success Factors in Food Tourism                                        | Qualitative – Socio-cultural                | Cultural context, sensory and subjective perceptions of tourists impact their inclination toward local food consumption.                                         |
| <b>Cultural Marketing – Globalization of Food</b> | Stalmirska (2023)                                                                                                      | Cultural Globalization and Food Marketing in York                      | Urban Case Study                            | Cultural blending (homogenization and localization) affects how food is represented in destination marketing.                                                    |



Although the existing literature includes numerous studies on the role of cultural marketing in strengthening cultural industries (Rasouli, 2010; Anoosheh & Mousavi Neghabi, 2024), and several investigations have highlighted the potential of local food tourism in Iran (Izadi, 2015; Jafari Mehrabadi et al., 2017), few studies have specifically examined the role of cultural marketing in influencing tourists' willingness to consume local foods in culturally rich contexts such as Guilan Province.

Guilan is one of Iran's most culturally and gastronomically diverse regions, known for its wide array of traditional dishes, indigenous food names, cooking rituals, and authentic culinary culture. Despite this richness, the effective role of cultural marketing in promoting these foods, publicizing local names and culinary traditions, and influencing the attraction of food tourists has not been scientifically or systematically explored within a contemporary theoretical framework. Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on economic or quality-related factors of food, while the semiotic, symbolic, and identity-based dimensions embedded in the names of traditional Guilani dishes—and their influence on tourists' perception and consumption intentions—have received limited attention. Therefore, this study aims to address this theoretical and practical gap by investigating how cultural marketing, through the strategic use of traditional Guilani food names and customs, can shape tourists' willingness to consume local cuisine. The research intends to develop a conceptual model that explains the linkage between cultural marketing and food-related identity within the cultural context of Guilan Province. In this research, cultural marketing is conceptualized as a means of transmitting and reinforcing cultural identity through food, local traditions, and traditional dish names. The conceptual framework is based on the premise that food, its names, and the stories behind them are integral parts of a broader cultural system. When effectively utilized through cultural marketing, these elements can serve as powerful tools for attracting tourists and promoting the consumption of local cuisine.

**Table 2. Research Variables**

| Variable Type      | Variable Title                                       | Conceptual Definition                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Independent</b> | Cultural Marketing through Food                      | A set of strategies, messages, and activities aimed at promoting a region's culture through traditional food elements.                                           |
| <b>Dependent</b>   | Tourists' Willingness to Consume Guilani Local Foods | Tourists' inclination, enthusiasm, and decision to consume traditional foods from Guilan.                                                                        |
| <b>Mediator</b>    | Cultural Perception of Food (Food Identity)          | Tourists' perception of food as an integral part of the culture, tradition, and local identity of a community.                                                   |
| <b>Moderator</b>   | Cultural Naming and Narratives of Food               | The symbolic power, historical background, storytelling, and local identity embedded in the names of traditional dishes, contributing to their increased appeal. |

Given the growing importance of cultural marketing as a strategic tool for introducing and promoting the identity components of a region—particularly in the field of food tourism—this study aims to explore

the role of food traditions and dish names in Guilan Province as carriers of cultural meaning and instruments of marketing. The research is guided by the following key questions:

- What role do traditional food practices and dish names in Guilan Province (including content analysis of names and dish descriptions) play in cultural marketing?
- Is there a significant relationship between food-based cultural marketing and the attraction of tourists to Guilan?
- How do tourists' demographic characteristics (such as age, education, and income) affect their willingness to experience local foods?
- What strategies can be proposed for leveraging Guilan's food culture in tourism and cultural policymaking?

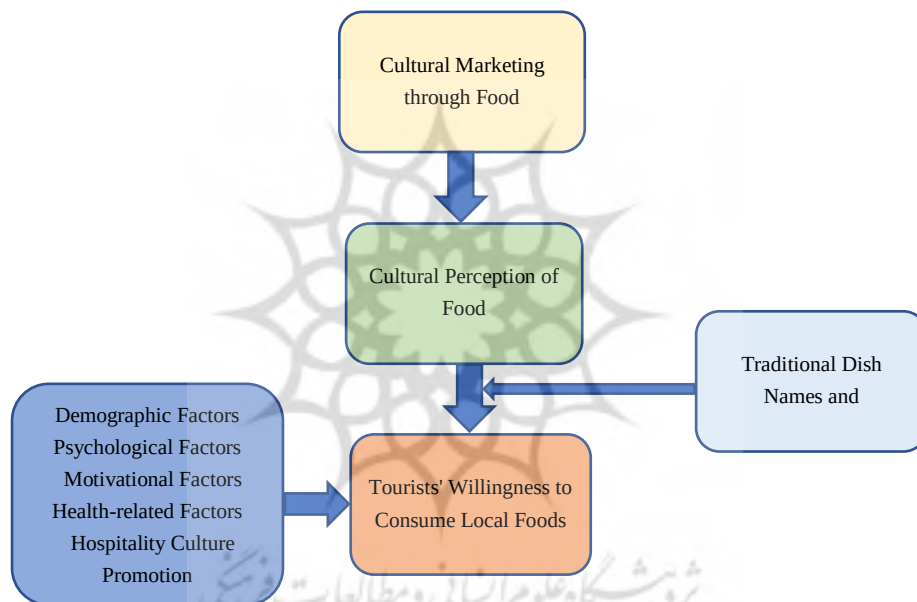


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Research

## Research Methodology

### Study Area Overview

Guilan Province, located in Northern Iran along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, is one of the most distinguished regions in the country in terms of biodiversity, climate, cultural richness, and, above all, culinary heritage. The province's lush natural resources, humid subtropical climate, and fertile lands provide an ideal environment for the cultivation of native herbs and vegetables, livestock farming, fishing, and agricultural production. These factors have collectively shaped Guilan's unique culinary culture.

With over 400 documented traditional dishes (Jamaatei, 2024), Guilan holds the highest national ranking in terms of food diversity. Well-known dishes such as *Mirza Ghasemi*, *Baghala Ghatogh*, *Anar Bij*, *Torshe Tareh*, *Sir Ghalieh*, *Vavishka*, *Ashpal Kuku*, *Gamaj Kebab*, *Naz Khatun*, *Shami Rudbari*, and *Pamador Khoresht* are prominent examples. These foods are significant not only because of their ingredients but also due to their distinctive cooking styles, ritualistic consumption, unique names, and cultural symbolism—contributing to both local memory and tourist perception.

Key features that make Guilan's food culture an exceptional case for studying food-based cultural marketing include:

- Extensive use of native aromatic herbs such as *Chuchagh*, *Khalvash* (a.k.a. *Kootekootou*), and garlic leaves;
- Remarkable diversity in both vegetarian and meat-based dishes;
- A focus on medicinal and dietary balance in meals, particularly the hot-cold temperament system (*mezaj*);
- Ritual-centered culinary traditions tied to festivals, mourning ceremonies, rice harvests, pregnancy, Ramadan, and Yalda Night;
- Unique and locally rooted food names that reflect Guilaki phonology and regional historical experiences (e.g., *Vavishka*, *Sirabij*, *Shami Torsh*, *Dokhtarlous*, *Naz Khatun*, *Gol dar Chaman*, *Morgh-e Parideh*, etc.);
- Distinctive food presentation and the strong role of family cooperation in cooking, which reflects social cohesion.

From a cultural heritage perspective, food in Guilan is understood not merely as a biological need but as a symbol of cultural identity, a ritual element, and a communicative tool between generations. In recognition of this significance, the city of Rasht—the provincial capital—was designated a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of gastronomy in 2015, thereby achieving international status as a center for culinary tourism and cultural marketing. In this study, Guilan is examined not merely as a geographic area but as a living model of the interconnection between food, culture, and identity—a model that can play a direct role in cultural branding and the sustainable development of local tourism.

### Qualitative Section

The first part of this study adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to develop an in-depth understanding of a socio-cultural phenomenon within a specific context—namely, the traditions and traditional dish names of Guilan Province as instruments of cultural marketing. Qualitative research enables the

exploration and interpretation of participants' meanings, beliefs, symbols, and lived experiences related to food and local culture.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 key informants. These included 10 local cooks (both women and men) experienced in preparing traditional dishes, 7 cultural heritage and tourism experts from the Guilan Provincial Office of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism, and 7 tourism practitioners and organizers of culinary and ecotourism tours. Interviews were conducted in person, and in some cases by phone or online, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

A purposive sampling method was employed, using criteria such as expertise, experience, and direct involvement with the topic. Attention was paid to gender, age, and geographical diversity to enhance the richness of the data and the credibility of the findings. Data were analyzed using a combined deductive–inductive qualitative content analysis approach. The analytical process involved: familiarization with the transcripts and identification of meaning units (open coding), categorization of codes into thematic clusters, and interpretation of the emerging concepts in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

In addition to interview analysis, a complementary section was devoted to the content analysis of traditional food names in Guilan. Around 40 well-known local dish names—such as *Baghala Ghatogh*, *Mirza Ghasemi*, *Anar Bij*, *Sir Ghalieh*, *Vavishka*, and *Torshe Tareh*—were examined from linguistic, semiotic, ritualistic, and cultural perspectives.

To enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed: member checking with selected participants, cross-validation of codes by two independent coders, and meticulous documentation of the data collection and analysis procedures to allow for future audit and replication. The researcher, with cultural familiarity and direct interaction with the local context of Guilan, maintained an active participatory role in data collection and, while adhering to neutrality, strived to document and interpret participants' authentic narratives with cultural sensitivity.

### **Quantitative Section**

This part of the study is applied in nature and follows a quantitative approach, classified methodologically as survey-based research. The study aims to examine the role of cultural marketing through food—specifically focusing on culinary traditions and traditional dish names in Guilan Province—and to identify the key factors influencing demand for local cuisine and the attraction of food tourists. The statistical population consists of tourists who traveled to Guilan Province during the data collection period. A total of 306 participants were selected using convenience sampling combined with the snowball technique.

The main data collection tool was a researcher-developed questionnaire, designed based on theoretical foundations and a review of relevant empirical literature. The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts in tourism and cultural marketing. The questionnaire comprised several sections, the most important of which included: demographic information (age, gender, education level, marital status), personality and motivational variables related to culinary experiences, familiarity with local dishes, names and food traditions, attitudes and behaviors toward cultural marketing through food, and factors influencing culinary tourism (such as hospitality culture, health aspects, variety, and promotion). In line with the study's theoretical framework, the key variables are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3. Sample Coding from Qualitative Content Analysis**

| Row | Participant Statement                                                                                                                                 | Initial Code               | Intermediate Category         | Core Concept                       |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1   | "The name <i>Baghala Ghatogh</i> evokes nostalgia for Guilani people; it reminds them of their grandmother's house and the taste of childhood."       | Food-related nostalgia     | Semantic weight of food names | Cultural identity of food          |
| 2   | "When we have foreign tourists, we tell the story behind dishes like <i>Mirza Ghasemi</i> and <i>Anar Bij</i> —they find it fascinating."             | Narrative appeal of food   | Food as a cultural narrative  | Cultural marketing through cuisine |
| 3   | "Guilan is full of herbs you can't find elsewhere, like <i>Kootkoto</i> or <i>Chochagh</i> . This uniqueness of ingredients is what attracts people." | Ingredient exclusivity     | Culinary distinctiveness      | Culinary destination appeal        |
| 4   | "Some dish names are really catchy—like <i>Vavishka</i> or <i>Sir Ghalieh</i> . Their pronunciation sounds fun and different to non-Guilanis."        | Linguistic charm           | Phonetic play in food names   | Cultural branding power of food    |
| 5   | "When we cook food in a <i>Gamaj</i> over low heat, there's a story behind it. These things should be promoted."                                      | Traditional cooking ritual | Cultural experience of food   | Intangible culinary heritage       |

**Table 4. Key Variables in the Tourist Questionnaire**

| Dimensions                                | Components                                          | Indicators                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Factors Influencing Demand for Local Food | Demographic, Personality, Motivational              | Gender, Age, Willingness to Try, Temperament, Food Appeal, Price, Quality, Appearance                |
| Factors Attracting Culinary Tourists      | Food Culture, Culinary Diversity, Health, Promotion | Variety of Dishes, Traditions, Cooking and Serving Customs, Ingredients, Familiarity with Food Names |

## Findings

### Qualitative Section

Data collected from 24 semi-structured interviews with local chefs, experts in tourism and culture, and ecotourism practitioners in Guilan Province were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach.

The analysis led to the identification of five major themes that represent key factors in cultural marketing through food in Guilan:

1. Food as a Cultural Symbol and Marker of Regional Distinction:

Most participants viewed traditional Guilan cuisine as more than just daily nourishment; they considered it a symbol of ethnic identity, oral traditions, family rituals, and the local ecosystem. Dishes such as *Mirza Ghasemi*, *Baghala Ghatogh*, and *Anarbij* were described not only in terms of their unique taste but also as carriers of narratives about local customs, lifestyles, and belief systems. This highlights the role of food as a vessel of cultural values and a strategic tool for cultural marketing.

2. The Power of Traditional Dish Names and Narratives in Stimulating Tourist Curiosity:

Dish names like *Vavishka*, *Sir Ghalieh*, *Pamador Khoresht*, and *Shami Torsh* were noted for their linguistic and cultural allure, particularly for non-Guilani tourists. According to many respondents, tourists often become intrigued by the name of a dish, ask questions about it, and ultimately choose to try it. In essence, the name of a dish serves as an entry point into the host culture. Participants suggested that the names and linguistic roots of these dishes be introduced through cultural storytelling on menus, packaging, and tourism guides.

3. Sensory and Ritual Experience of Food as a Driver of Cultural Consumption:

Interview analysis revealed that traditional cooking methods, use of indigenous herbs, cooking in clay pots (*gamaj*), woven straw mats, and serving customs play a crucial role in shaping the tourist's cultural perception. Some chefs emphasized that when food is presented along with explanations of its preparation rituals, it enhances the visitor's experience of "living culture" and "local authenticity."

4. The Role of Media, Advertising, and Experiential Marketing:

Participants widely pointed out the lack of professional marketing for Guilan's cuisine. Most promotions occur face-to-face, limited to local restaurants or word-of-mouth experiences, with minimal use of modern tools like documentaries, blogging, content marketing, or branding. It was emphasized that the narrative richness of Guilan's cuisine offers significant potential for storytelling-based cultural marketing.

5. Suggestions for Enhancing Cultural Food Marketing in Guilan:

Participants' recommendations for improving cultural food marketing in Guilan focused on several key areas:

- Producing short documentaries and videos of traditional cooking rituals narrated by grandmothers;
- Including local names and food stories in restaurant and eco-lodge menus;



- Organizing storytelling-based cooking festivals;
- Designing experiential tours for learning how to cook local dishes;
- Training and empowering local chefs to become “cultural food ambassadors.”

The findings suggest that cultural marketing in the food sector is most effective when it integrates three core cultural elements:

- The food name as a cultural symbol,
- The cooking process as a social ritual, and
- The consumption experience as a sensory-narrative encounter.

Aligned with theories of cultural marketing and experiential tourism, combining local identity, traditional storytelling, and sensory experience into a culinary brand can serve as an effective strategy to enhance destination image and attract cultural tourists.

### Quantitative Section

Demographic data of the sample were collected and analyzed using a structured questionnaire. According to the results, 42% of the respondents were male and 58% were female. Among them, 40% were single and 60% were married. In terms of education, 2% held a high school diploma, 8% an associate degree, 44% a bachelor's, 31% a master's, and 15% a doctoral degree. Regarding age, 1% were between 14–20 years old, 33% between 21–30, 39% between 31–40, 17% between 41–50, and 10% were over 51 years old.

Based on the questionnaire data, 51% of participants became familiar with Guilan's local foods through friends and acquaintances, 21% through social media, 1% via the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, and 26% through other sources. Regarding their level of familiarity with local Guilan foods, seasonings, breads, and meals, 43% reported very high familiarity, 33% high, 22% moderate, and only 2% low.

This study considered three key categories as factors influencing the demand for local foods: demographic, personality, and motivational factors. Meanwhile, the primary elements attracting culinary tourists included hospitality culture, the diversity of food and traditional dish names, health-related factors, and promotional efforts. These components and their sub-elements are detailed in Table 5.

The results of the statistical analysis of the research hypotheses were obtained using Pearson correlation tests in SPSS software. The primary objective was to examine the relationships between demographic, psychological, motivational, and cultural variables and the attraction of culinary tourists to Guilan Province. All analyses were conducted at a 95% confidence level ( $p < 0.05$ ). The findings from the correlation analysis indicate a positive and statistically significant relationship between all examined variables and the attraction of culinary tourists. A summary of these results is presented in Table 6.

**Table 5. Research Indicators and Variables**

| Dimension                                 | Dimension                                          | Dimension                                                       |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Factors Influencing Demand for Local Food | Demographic Factors                                | Gender                                                          | J1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Marital Status                                                  | J2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Education                                                       | J3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Age                                                             | J4 |
|                                           | Personality Factors                                | Willingness to try new foods                                    | S1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Compatibility of personal taste with Guilan's local cuisine     | S2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Improved mood after consuming Guilan's local foods              | S3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Willingness to cook Guilan's local dishes                       | S4 |
|                                           |                                                    | Willingness to share culinary experiences with others           | S5 |
|                                           |                                                    | Desire to enhance social status through consuming local cuisine | S6 |
|                                           | Motivational Factors                               | Visual appeal of local foods                                    | A1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Deliciousness of local foods                                    | A2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Attractiveness of local food names                              | A3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Uniqueness of local cuisine                                     | A4 |
|                                           |                                                    | Appeal of serving style and dishware                            | A5 |
|                                           |                                                    | Reasonable price of local dishes in Guilan                      | A6 |
|                                           |                                                    | Quality of service in local food establishments                 | A7 |
| Factors Attracting Culinary Tourists      | Hospitality Culture                                | Diversity of culinary traditions                                | P1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Distinctive cooking styles                                      | P2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Dining rituals and serving customs                              | P3 |
|                                           | Diversity of Local Food and traditional dish names | Variety of local jams                                           | M1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Variety of local condiments and appetizers                      | M2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Diversity and uniqueness of local food names                    | M3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Variety of traditional breads                                   | M4 |
|                                           | Health-Related Factors                             | Freshness of ingredients                                        | B1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Accessibility of ingredients                                    | B2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Local origin of food ingredients                                | B3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Hygiene standards observed by food providers                    | B4 |
|                                           | Promotion                                          | Willingness to attend local food festivals                      | T1 |
|                                           |                                                    | Willingness to join culinary tours in Guilan                    | T2 |
|                                           |                                                    | Willingness to participate in local cooking classes             | T3 |
|                                           |                                                    | Willingness to re-experience local cuisine on future trips      | T4 |

**Table 6. Summary of Correlation Results**

| Row | Independent Variable                 | Dependent Variable                          | Correlation Coefficient (r) | Significance Level (p) | Result      |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| 1   | Demographic Factors                  | Attraction of Culinary Tourists             | 0.361                       | 0.003                  | Significant |
| 2   | Personality Traits                   | Attraction of Culinary Tourists             | 0.293                       | 0.002                  | Significant |
| 3   | Motivational Factors                 | Attraction of Culinary Tourists             | 0.189                       | 0.025                  | Significant |
| 4   | Variety of Local Food and Dish Names | Motivational Factors for Tourist Attraction | 0.231                       | 0.014                  | Significant |
| 5   | Cultural Advertising                 | Tourists' Personality Traits                | 0.112                       | 0.021                  | Significant |
| 6   | Culinary Hospitality Culture         | Tourists' Personality Traits                | 0.189                       | 0.046                  | Significant |
| 7   | Health Aspects of Local Food         | Tourists' Personality Traits                | 0.232                       | 0.001                  | Significant |

According to the results presented in Table 6, demographic factors such as age, education level, gender, and marital status are significantly correlated with the attraction of culinary tourists. Specifically, individuals with higher education, middle age, and moderate to high income levels showed greater interest in experiencing local foods. Personality traits—including openness to trying new foods, the positive emotional impact of food, and a tendency to share food-related experiences—were also positively associated with culinary tourism. These findings underscore the strong psychological component in the demand for local cuisine.

Motivational factors, such as the visual appeal of food, affordable pricing, quality of service, and attractiveness of presentation (e.g., dishes and utensils), were found to have a significant relationship with tourist attraction as well. The variety and uniqueness of traditional dish names (such as *Vavishka*, *Baghala Ghatogh*, *Ashpal Kuku*, etc.) stimulate curiosity and reinforce cultural distinctiveness, thereby positively influencing consumer motivation.

Cultural advertising—particularly through media and social networks—was shown to increase awareness and psychological inclination toward trying local cuisine. Hospitality culture (including serving etiquette, traditional cooking styles, and host behavior) was positively associated with tourists' psychological responses, contributing to a more meaningful and enjoyable experience. Furthermore, the health-related aspects of Guilan's local cuisine—including the freshness of ingredients, their local sourcing, and adherence to hygiene standards—play a vital role in building trust, promoting well-being, and enhancing overall tourist satisfaction.

Statistical findings indicate that all examined variables—demographic, psychological, motivational, and cultural—are significantly associated with increased demand for local food and the attraction of culinary tourists in Guilan Province. These relationships highlight the importance of well-planned cultural strategies and effective marketing in leveraging local food as a tool for cultural tourism development.

To explore the causal relationships among research variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis were conducted. The results of hypothesis testing based on the study's conceptual model are presented in Table 7, providing insight into the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on mediating and dependent variables.

**Table 7. Results of Hypothesis Testing in the Structural Model**

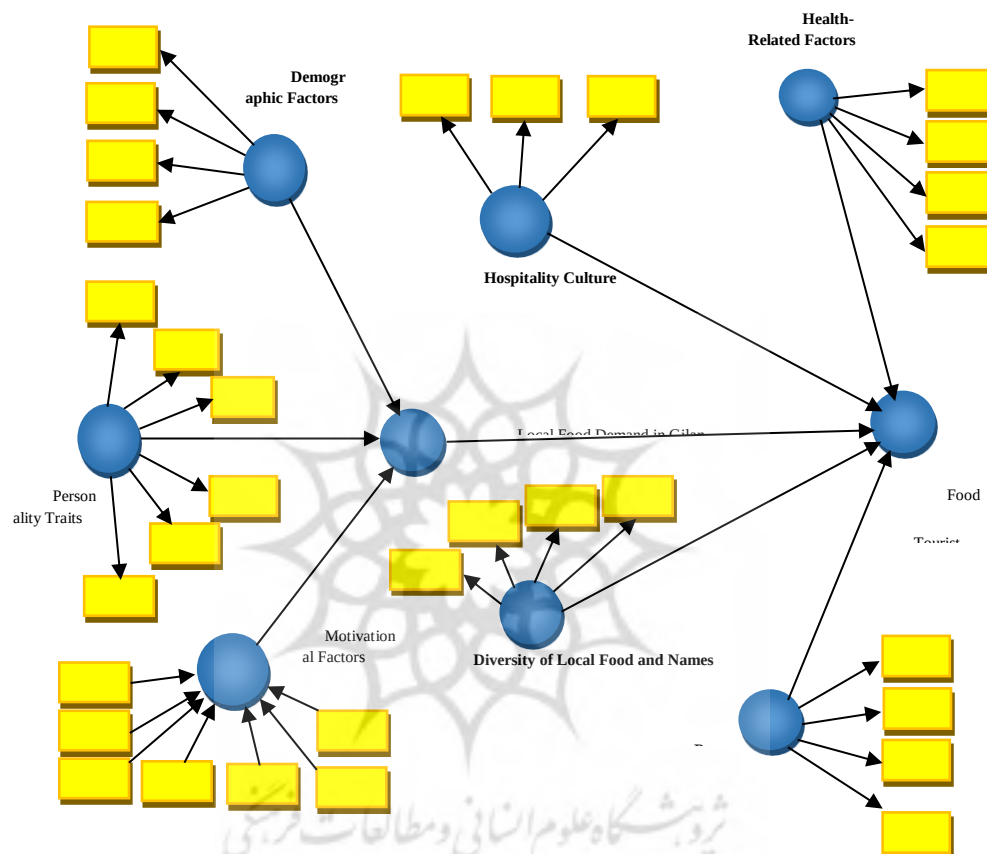
| Hypothesis                                      | Path Coefficient | Standard Error | T Value | P Value | Result    |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Local Food Demand → Culinary Tourist Attraction | 0.236            | 0.132          | 3.11    | 0.000   | Supported |
| Demographic Factors → Local Food Demand         | 0.346            | 0.039          | 4.71    | 0.002   | Supported |
| Psychological Factors → Local Food Demand       | 0.245            | 0.030          | 6.28    | 0.000   | Supported |
| Motivational Factors → Local Food Demand        | 0.221            | 0.036          | 5.05    | 0.000   | Supported |

According to the results of the path analysis (Table 7), the demand for local food has a positive and statistically significant effect on the attraction of culinary tourists. The obtained path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.236$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicates that a one-unit increase in demand for local food is associated, on average, with a 0.236 -unit increase in the attraction of food tourists. This finding underscores the pivotal role of local culinary experiences in enhancing travelers' motivation to visit a destination. Demographic factors—such as age, gender, education, and marital status—are significantly and positively related to the demand for local food ( $\beta = 0.346$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), suggesting that individual characteristics influence the degree of interest in consuming local cuisine. For instance, middle-aged individuals with higher levels of education tend to show greater interest in experiencing culturally rooted foods.

Psychological factors, including openness to trying new foods, cultural nostalgia, sensory pleasure, and the desire to share experiences, also significantly impact the demand for local food. The corresponding path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.245$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) suggests that these factors, through intrinsic motivation, strengthen the likelihood of choosing local foods while traveling.

Motivational factors—such as taste, visual appeal, affordability, service quality, and the attractiveness of dish names—are also shown to play a decisive role in local food demand. The path analysis ( $\beta = 0.221$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicates that enhancing the sensory and experiential appeal of local cuisine can increase tourists' willingness to try traditional foods.

Overall, the structural model findings demonstrate that the demand for local food is directly shaped by three key dimensions: demographic, psychological, and motivational. In turn, this demand significantly influences the extent to which culinary tourists are attracted to the destination. Therefore, cultural food marketing strategies must be developed with a precise understanding of these dimensions and incorporated into broader tourism policy and planning initiatives.



**Figure 3. Path Coefficients and Outer Loadings of Indicators in the Model Examining the Impact of Traditional Dish Names and Culinary Traditions of Gilan Province on Tourist Attraction**

## Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of culturally-based food marketing in attracting tourists to destinations such as Guilan Province. Drawing upon the study's conceptual model, the research examined the interrelationships between demographic, psychological, and motivational factors, along with cultural variables—including food name diversity, culinary rituals, food health attributes, and promotional strategies—in shaping local food demand and ultimately attracting food tourists.

According to the results, local food demand acts as a mediating variable with a significant impact on food tourist attraction. This suggests that tourists are not merely fulfilling physiological needs

through food consumption but are actively seeking cultural, aesthetic, and identity-based experiences. These findings align with previous research by Hamidi et al. (2016), Mgonja (2015), and Mnguni and Giampiccoli (2015), who emphasized the experiential nature of food tourism and the importance of cultural demand in driving it.

From a psychological standpoint, motivations such as curiosity for new flavors, the desire to learn about local culture, the pursuit of novel experiences, and the sharing of pleasurable and prideful food encounters were all significantly related to an increased willingness to consume local cuisine. These insights resonate with the views of Mitchell and Hall (2004) and Dehdashti Shahrokh & Jahedi (2021), who conceptualize food as both an aesthetic experience and a hedonistic element within the tourism process.

Moreover, factors such as hospitality culture, food-related advertising, and the health characteristics of local dishes showed significant influence on tourists' personality traits and psychological inclinations. The consumption of traditional foods often occurs within ceremonial and cultural contexts, transforming food itself into a narrative of local identity. This perspective is in line with the theories of Cohen and Avieli (2004) and Richards (2012), who stress the influence of socio-economic structures and host culture on food preference formation.

Specifically, the unique names of Guilan's local dishes (such as Vavishka, Baghela Ghatogh, Sirghalieh, and Shami Torsh) serve not only as marketing tools that spark curiosity but also as linguistic and cultural signifiers that attract tourists. This finding aligns with cultural marketing theory, which sees cultural products not merely as commodities, but as semiotic phenomena representing local identity.

The study also reveals that demographic factors such as age, gender, income, and education significantly influence tourists' willingness to try local foods. Individuals with higher education levels, middle age, and moderate to high income were more inclined to engage with culinary tourism. These results corroborate the geographical distribution patterns of ethnic restaurants identified in earlier works by Smith (1989) and Zelinsky (1985).

Ultimately, this research highlights how food—as both a cultural symbol and an authentic experience—can enhance a destination's tourism brand while also contributing to sustainable economic, social, and cultural development. As the UN World Tourism Organization reports, food tourism ranks among the top travel motivations, following cultural and nature-based tourism. Therefore, the development of food-based cultural marketing strategies, the branding of local food products, the use of traditional storytelling to introduce dishes, the organization of culinary events, and the strategic use of multimedia advertising can collectively elevate Guilan's position as a premier destination for food tourism in Iran.



### Limitations/Recommendation for future studies

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered to cultural policymakers, tourism practitioners, and regional planners to adopt food marketing not only as a tourism-oriented strategy but also as a developmental and identity-building policy within Guilan's broader cultural-economic planning:

1. Branding local foods through traditional dish names and cultural storytelling: It is recommended that narrative-driven techniques be incorporated into restaurant menus, ecotourism packages, and marketing campaigns.
2. Developing multimedia digital content about culinary traditions: Ritual documentation, the recording of grandmother narratives, and traditional cooking tutorials can enhance cultural appeal.
3. Creating experiential traditional cooking tours: Organizing tours that offer cooking classes, tasting sessions, and exposure to the cultural background of each dish can enrich the travel experience.
4. Using indigenous traditional dish names as marketing tools: Preserving authentic names like *Vavishka*, *Sirabij*, and *Baghela Ghatogh* in packaging, advertisements, and menus fosters a sense of authenticity and stimulates tourist curiosity.
5. Hosting national and international cultural-food festivals: Events centered around local food and music can solidify Guilan's cultural brand identity.
6. Empowering local chefs as "cultural food ambassadors": Training programs in communication, cultural storytelling, and personal branding are recommended for local culinary professionals.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are context-specific and rooted in the unique cultural, social, and culinary characteristics of Guilan Province in northern Iran. As such, the results may not be directly generalizable to other regions with different cultural dynamics or food traditions. Further comparative studies in diverse geographical and cultural settings are recommended to validate and extend the applicability of the proposed conceptual framework.

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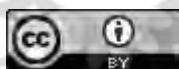
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