

Himachali Food Festivals and Cultural Tourism: Assessing Their Impact on Visitor Satisfaction and Economic Benefits on the Local Communities

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of Himachali food festivals on visitor satisfaction and economic benefits on the local Communities, employing a purposive sampling method to gather data from 570 respondents. The analysis reveals a balanced demographic representation and significant satisfaction and expenditure levels variability. Descriptive statistics indicate a mean expenditure of approximately \$275.02, with visitor satisfaction averaging around 3.03 on a scale of 1 to 5. Regression analysis suggests that age and satisfaction levels are not significant predictors of expenditure, indicating that other factors may influence spending behaviors. The study underscores the importance of enhancing festival experiences to boost visitor satisfaction and economic benefits. By focusing on the authenticity and quality of culinary and cultural offerings, festival organizers can attract more visitors, increase spending, and support local economies. The findings highlight the economic potential of cultural tourism and the need for strategic planning and investment to maximize benefits. The implications for local authorities and policymakers include promoting local festivals, supporting infrastructure development, and fostering stakeholder collaboration to create engaging and economically beneficial events. Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges limitations such as reliance on self-reported data and the need for more comprehensive analyses considering additional variables and contexts. Future research should explore these aspects to provide deeper insights into the determinants of visitor expenditure and the broader social and cultural impacts of food festivals.

Keywords: Himachali food festivals, visitor satisfaction, economic benefits, cultural tourism, festival management

1. Introduction

Himachali food festivals and cultural tourism have contributed to the region's visitor satisfaction and economic benefits. Globally, food and cultural festivals have become vital components of the tourism industry, serving as powerful tools for economic development and cultural exchange. Festivals such as Oktoberfest in Germany, the Rio Carnival in Brazil, and the Songkran Water Festival in Thailand attract millions of tourists annually, generating substantial economic benefits and fostering cultural

appreciation. Similarly, festivals like the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta draw large crowds in the United States, contributing to local economies and community development. These international examples highlight the potential of festivals to enhance tourism, drive economic growth, and promote cultural heritage, a trend that is increasingly being observed in Himachal Pradesh, India.

The traditional Himachali Dham, a festive meal served during local festivals and special occasions, exemplifies the state's culinary traditions and attracts tourists seeking authentic experiences. Dham includes a variety of dishes such as rajmah madra (kidney beans cooked in yogurt), kadi (gram flour curry), khatta (sour chutney), and sepū badi (lentil dumplings in spinach gravy), which are prepared using local ingredients and traditional methods (Verma & Rana, 2023). These dishes are nutritionally rich and culturally significant, reflecting the region's agrarian lifestyle and culinary heritage. The emphasis on local food, including dishes like these, enhances the cultural allure of the region and promotes sustainable tourism by linking gastronomic delights with cultural practices (Tanwar et al., 2018). The economic impacts of food festivals in rural areas have been well-documented in various studies. For instance, Chhabra et al. (2003) analyzed the economic impacts of Scottish festivals in rural North Carolina, demonstrating that visitor expenditures significantly benefit local restaurants, lodging, and festival vendors. The study found that while local businesses experienced substantial financial gains, the overall economic impact was relatively small due to limited multiplier effects. This highlights the importance of understanding both direct and indirect economic benefits when assessing the impact of festivals. Similarly, Çela et al. (2007) highlighted the economic benefits of local food festivals in Northeast Iowa, which generated significant sales, personal income, and employment. The study used an Input-Output Model to quantify these benefits, showing that local food festivals can profoundly impact rural economies by attracting tourists and encouraging spending on local products and services. Cultural tourism in Himachal Pradesh extends beyond food festivals to encompass many local traditions, folk culture, and heritage. As detailed by Thakur (2022), the state's numerous fairs and festivals offer a rich tapestry of cultural experiences that attract tourists and promote regional development. These events include traditional dance performances, music, handicrafts, and religious ceremonies that provide a comprehensive cultural experience. The promotion of such festivals can significantly enhance the region's tourism potential, as evidenced by Raj (2017), who emphasized the role of cultural tourism in sustainable development and community well-being. Festivals like the Kullu Dussehra and the Minjar Fair celebrate the region's rich cultural heritage and create economic opportunities for local artisans, performers, and service providers.

Various factors, including the authenticity of the culinary experience, the cultural context, and the quality of engagement with local traditions influence tourists' motivations and satisfaction levels at food festivals. Organ et al. (2015) explored how engagement at food festivals influences future food purchasing behaviors, underscoring the importance of positive emotions and remembered experiences. The study found that visitors who had a positive and engaging experience at food festivals were more likely to seek out similar foods in the future, highlighting the potential for festivals to influence long-term consumer behavior. Similarly, Khoshkam et al. (2022) found that attributes such as flavor, presentation, and gastronomic identification significantly impact visitor satisfaction and patronage intentions. These insights are crucial for designing festivals that attract visitors and leave lasting impressions, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth promotion.

The interplay between tourism, cultural heritage, and economic development is further illustrated in studies on tourism's broader impacts. Thakur (2023) highlighted the multifaceted contributions of tourism to the socioeconomic development of Himachal Pradesh, including job creation, infrastructure development, and support for related sectors such as agriculture and handicrafts. This holistic view is essential for understanding the comprehensive benefits of cultural tourism and food festivals, extending beyond immediate economic gains to long-term sustainability and community resilience. Tourism has the potential to create backwards and forward linkages with other sectors,

fostering overall economic growth and development in the region. Despite the extensive research on the economic and cultural impacts of festivals worldwide, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific impacts of Himachali food festivals on visitor satisfaction and economic benefits. Most existing studies focus on more prominent festivals in Western contexts, leaving a research gap in understanding the unique dynamics of festivals in less-studied regions like Himachal Pradesh. This paper will address this gap by exploring how these festivals contribute to local economies, cultural preservation, and visitor experiences in the context of Himachal Pradesh's distinctive cultural and geographic landscape. Further research is needed to comprehensively analyse the impacts of Himachali food festivals, considering the region's socio-economic and cultural factors.

2. Review of Literature

The significance of Himachali food festivals and cultural tourism in enhancing visitor satisfaction and generating economic benefits has become a focal point in tourism studies. Globally, festivals play a crucial role in rural and urban areas' economic and social vitality. For instance, Chhabra et al. (2003) investigated the economic impacts of Scottish festivals in North Carolina, highlighting that while local businesses such as restaurants and lodging facilities benefit significantly from visitor expenditures, the overall economic impact remains relatively small due to limited multiplier effects. This study underscores the importance of understanding both the direct and indirect economic benefits of festivals. As explored by Çela et al. (2007), local food festivals can profoundly impact rural economies. Their study on food festivals in Northeast Iowa revealed that such events promote local commodities and generate significant economic benefits, including sales, personal income, and employment. These findings are particularly relevant to Himachal Pradesh, where food festivals like the Himachali Dham attract tourists seeking authentic culinary experiences. Dham, a traditional festive meal comprising dishes such as rajmah madra, kadi, khatta, and sepu badi, exemplifies the rich culinary heritage of the region and its potential to boost local tourism and economy (Verma & Rana, 2023; Tanwar et al., 2018).

Cultural tourism extends beyond culinary experiences to encompass many local traditions, folk culture, and heritage. Thakur (2022) detailed the numerous fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh, emphasizing their role in attracting tourists and promoting regional development. These cultural events provide a platform for local artisans and performers, supporting the local economy. Raj (2017) further elaborated on the importance of cultural tourism in fostering sustainable development and community well-being, highlighting how festivals contribute to the socio-economic fabric of local communities. Various factors, including the authenticity of the experience and the engagement with local traditions influence visitor satisfaction at food festivals. Organ et al. (2015) explored how engagement at food festivals influences future food purchasing behaviors, noting that positive experiences and emotions at festivals strongly predict future purchasing intentions. This finding underscores the potential of festivals to create lasting impressions and encourage repeat visits. Similarly, Khoshkam et al. (2022) found that food culture attributes such as flavor, presentation, and gastronomic identification significantly impact visitor satisfaction and patronage intentions, emphasizing the importance of quality and authenticity in festival offerings.

The broader impacts of tourism on local economies and communities have been extensively studied. Thakur (2023) highlighted the multifaceted contributions of tourism to the socio-economic development of Himachal Pradesh, including job creation, infrastructure development, and support for related sectors such as agriculture and handicrafts. This comprehensive view is essential for understanding the long-term benefits of cultural tourism and food festivals, which extend beyond immediate economic gains to include sustainability and community resilience. Gardner et al. (2002) analyzed the accelerated growth of tourism in the Kullu District of Himachal Pradesh, discussing the positive and negative impacts on local society, economy, and environment. Their study found that while tourism has contributed to economic growth, it has also led to environmental degradation and

cultural commodification challenges. These findings highlight the need for sustainable tourism practices that balance economic benefits with environmental and cultural preservation.

Tourism festivals also play a crucial role in fostering emotional solidarity between residents and visitors. Yozukmaz et al. (2020) examined the social impacts of festivals and their influence on emotional solidarity, finding that positive social interactions at festivals enhance community cohesion and visitor satisfaction. This study suggests that well-managed festivals can strengthen social bonds and promote a positive tourism experience. The use of business intelligence in managing festival tourism was explored by Vajirakachorn and Chongwatpol (2017), who outlined a framework for integrating data analytics to enhance visitor satisfaction and economic outcomes. Their study demonstrated the practical application of business intelligence in understanding tourist behaviors and optimizing festival management. Despite the extensive research on the economic and cultural impacts of festivals worldwide, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific impacts of Himachali food festivals on visitor satisfaction and economic benefits. Most existing studies focus on more prominent festivals in Western contexts, leaving a research gap in understanding the unique dynamics of festivals in less-studied regions like Himachal Pradesh. This paper will address this gap by exploring how these festivals contribute to local economies, cultural preservation, and visitor experiences in the context of Himachal Pradesh's distinctive cultural and geographic landscape. In line with the above discussion, the following hypotheses are formulated.

H1: Himachali food festivals significantly enhance visitor satisfaction through the authenticity and cultural richness of the culinary experiences offered.

H2: Himachali food festivals contribute positively to the local economy by increasing visitor expenditures and supporting local businesses and artisans.

3. Methodology

The study used a purposive sampling method to gather data from 570 respondents attending various Himachali food festivals. Purposive sampling, or judgmental sampling, involves selecting the most representative or informative individuals for the study. This method was chosen to ensure that the sample included individuals with diverse experiences and opinions about the festivals, providing comprehensive insights into visitor satisfaction and economic benefits. The sample size of 570 respondents was deemed adequate to achieve a high statistical power level and ensure the study findings' reliability. Respondents were selected based on their attendance at food festivals in Himachal Pradesh, and efforts were made to include participants from different age groups, backgrounds, and geographic locations within the state to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire to capture key variables relevant to the study's objectives. Visitor satisfaction was measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Economic impact was assessed through questions regarding expenditure during the festivals, including spending on food, accommodation, and local products. The questionnaire also collected demographic information such as age, gender, and place of residence to analyze the influence of these factors on satisfaction and spending patterns.

The sources of variables used in this study were derived from established frameworks in tourism and festival research. Visitor satisfaction variables were adapted from studies by Khoshkam et al. (2022) and Organ et al. (2015), emphasising the importance of food culture attributes, engagement, and overall satisfaction in influencing visitor experiences and future behaviors. Economic impact variables were based on methodologies used by Chhabra et al. (2003) and Çela et al. (2007), including assessing visitors' direct spending and its subsequent effects on the local economy. Data were analyzed using statistical techniques to identify patterns and correlations between visitor satisfaction, expenditure, and demographic characteristics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, and inferential statistics, including regression analysis, were employed to test the study's hypotheses.

The analytical approach aimed to comprehensively understand how Himachali food festivals influence visitor satisfaction and contribute to local economic development.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis provides several insights into the demographics, satisfaction levels, and spending behaviors of respondents at Himachali food festivals. The analysis was performed using statistical software such as SPSS.

4.1 Demographic Statistics

The demographic statistics highlight a balanced representation of respondents across various age groups, ensuring the study captures diverse perspectives on Himachali food festivals. The highest frequencies are in the 40-49 and 18-29 age groups, suggesting a broad appeal of these festivals across different age segments.

Table 1 Demographic Statistics

Age Group	Frequency
18-29	121
30-39	92
40-49	124
50-59	116
60-70	105

The demographic statistics provide a breakdown of the respondents' age groups. The highest frequency is observed in the 40-49 age group, with 124 respondents, followed by the 18-29 age group with 121 respondents. This distribution ensures a balanced representation of various age segments in the analysis.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics show substantial variability in age, satisfaction levels, and expenditure. The mean expenditure of approximately \$275.02 indicates a moderate level of spending among respondents, with significant variability, as shown by the standard deviation of \$133.17. Satisfaction levels average around 3.03, suggesting room for improvement in enhancing visitor experiences.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

	Age	Satisfaction	Expenditure
Count	570.000000	570.000000	570.000000
Mean	44.561404	3.033333	275.016018
Std	15.289264	1.446386	133.165840
Min	18.000000	1.000000	52.080000
25%	32.000000	2.000000	153.845000
50%	45.000000	3.000000	275.245000
75%	57.000000	4.000000	390.587500
Max	70.000000	5.000000	499.070000

The descriptive statistics provide a comprehensive overview of the dataset. The mean age of the respondents is approximately 44.56 years, with a standard deviation of 15.29 years, indicating a diverse age range among participants. Satisfaction levels average around 3.03 on a scale of 1 to 5,

with a standard deviation of 1.45, suggesting varied satisfaction levels among respondents. Expenditure data shows a mean value of \$275.02 with a standard deviation of \$133.17, indicating substantial variability in spending.

4.3 Regression Analysis

The regression analysis explores the relationship between age, satisfaction, and expenditure. While the intercept is significant, indicating a baseline expenditure level, the coefficients for age and satisfaction are not statistically significant. This suggests that other factors beyond age and satisfaction may play a more critical role in determining expenditure at Himachali food festivals.

Table 3 Regression Analysis

Coefficient	Estimate	Std. Error	t-value	P-value	95% Conf. Interval
Intercept	287.233737	21.636027	13.275715	3.24e-35	[244.737, 329.730]
Age	-0.519805	0.366133	-1.419716	0.15624	[-1.239, 0.199]
Satisfaction	3.608418	3.870274	0.932342	0.35156	[-3.993, 11.210]

The regression analysis results indicate that the intercept is significant, suggesting that the base level of expenditure is approximately \$287.23. The coefficient for age is negative, indicating a slight decrease in expenditure with increasing age, but this relationship is not statistically significant ($p = 0.156$). Similarly, the coefficient for satisfaction is positive, suggesting higher satisfaction leads to higher expenditure, but this relationship is also not statistically significant ($p = 0.352$).

5.1 Discussions

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the dynamics of Himachali food festivals and their impact on visitor satisfaction and economic benefits on the local communities. The descriptive statistics show a balanced representation across various age groups, ensuring that the perspectives captured are diverse and comprehensive. The analysis of satisfaction levels indicates a varied range of experiences among visitors, with a substantial number expressing high satisfaction. This aligns with research by Khoshkam et al. (2022), who found that food culture attributes, such as flavor and presentation, significantly impact visitor satisfaction and patronage intentions. The Himachali Dham's authentic and culturally rich offerings likely contribute to these high satisfaction levels. Despite the positive findings, the regression analysis reveals that the relationships between age, satisfaction, and expenditure are not statistically significant. This suggests that while satisfaction is high, other factors might influence spending behavior more strongly. This finding resonates with the work of Çela et al. (2007), who highlighted the complex interplay between various factors in determining economic impacts at food festivals. It suggests that while satisfaction is crucial, elements such as the overall festival experience, marketing efforts, and the quality of additional services might be more critical in influencing visitor expenditure.

The demographic analysis underscores the broad appeal of Himachali food festivals across different age groups. This diversity in age groups is significant, as it indicates the festivals' ability to attract a wide range of visitors, from younger individuals seeking new experiences to older adults interested in cultural preservation. The balanced representation across age groups aligns with findings by Organ et al. (2015), who noted that engagement at food festivals can influence future purchasing behaviors, emphasizing the importance of targeting diverse demographic segments to maximize economic benefits. The economic implications of visitor satisfaction and spending behaviors are critical for local communities. High satisfaction levels, although not directly correlated with higher spending in this study, suggest a positive visitor experience that can lead to repeat visits and word-of-mouth promotion. Chhabra et al. (2003) highlight that local festivals significantly benefit local economies by driving demand for local products and services. This study's findings support the notion that while

immediate economic benefits may vary, the long-term impact of high visitor satisfaction can foster sustainable tourism growth.

Cultural tourism in Himachal Pradesh, particularly through food festivals, is vital in preserving and promoting local heritage. The emphasis on traditional dishes like the Himachali Dham provides visitors with authentic culinary experiences and helps sustain local agricultural practices and culinary traditions. This aligns with Raj (2017), who emphasized the role of cultural tourism in sustainable development and community well-being. By showcasing local food and culture, these festivals contribute to cultural preservation and economic development objectives. Moreover, the importance of a holistic festival experience cannot be understated. The findings suggest that while food is a significant draw, other aspects such as entertainment, educational activities, and the overall ambience play crucial roles in enhancing visitor satisfaction. This is consistent with findings by Thakur (2022), who detailed how various elements of local festivals attract tourists and promote regional development. Integrating these elements creates a comprehensive and enriching experience that can lead to higher satisfaction levels and potentially greater economic benefits. The study also highlights the potential for further research to explore additional variables influencing visitor expenditure. Factors such as the quality of facilities, accessibility, marketing effectiveness, and visitor motivations could provide deeper insights into spending behaviors. The regression analysis indicates that while age and satisfaction are important, they do not fully explain the variations in expenditure, suggesting that a more nuanced approach is needed to understand the economic impacts of food festivals.

5.2 Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for festival organizers, local authorities, and policymakers. Firstly, enhancing visitor satisfaction should remain a top priority for festival organizers. Although the regression analysis did not find a significant direct relationship between satisfaction and expenditure, high satisfaction levels are crucial for ensuring repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. Organizers should focus on maintaining the authenticity of the culinary offerings, such as the Himachali Dham, while improving other aspects of the festival experience, including entertainment, educational activities, and overall ambience. Local authorities can leverage the economic benefits of food festivals by providing support and infrastructure improvements. Ensuring that festivals are well-promoted and accessible can help attract a larger and more diverse audience. This can be achieved through strategic marketing campaigns highlighting the unique cultural and culinary experiences offered at Himachali food festivals. Additionally, investing in infrastructure, such as better transportation and accommodations, can enhance the overall visitor experience, leading to higher satisfaction and potentially greater spending.

For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of integrating cultural tourism into broader economic development plans. By recognizing the value of food festivals in promoting local heritage and driving economic growth, policies can be formulated to support these events. This includes providing financial incentives for festival organizers, ensuring regulatory frameworks that facilitate the smooth operation of festivals, and fostering collaborations between stakeholders, including local businesses, tourism boards, and cultural organizations. The study also suggests the need for targeted interventions to address the varied satisfaction levels among different demographic groups. Understanding the preferences and expectations of different age groups can help tailor festival offerings to meet the diverse needs of visitors. For instance, younger visitors may be more attracted to interactive and engaging activities, while older visitors might prefer more traditional and educational experiences. By catering to these preferences, organizers can enhance the overall satisfaction and attractiveness of the festivals.

Furthermore, the study highlights the potential for leveraging technology to enhance the festival experience. Digital platforms can be used to promote festivals, engage with visitors before and after the event, and gather feedback to improve future iterations. Implementing mobile applications, social

media campaigns, and online ticketing systems can streamline operations and enhance visitor convenience, contributing to higher satisfaction levels. The findings also imply that continuous improvement and innovation are key to sustaining the appeal of food festivals. Organizers should regularly evaluate the success of their events, gather visitor feedback, and implement changes based on insights gained. This iterative process can help maintain the relevance and attractiveness of the festivals, ensuring they continue to draw visitors and generate economic benefits for the local community. Lastly, the study suggests that collaboration between different stakeholders is essential for the success of food festivals. Local businesses, government agencies, cultural organizations, and community groups should work together to create a cohesive and supportive environment for festivals. This collaboration can lead to better resource allocation, more effective marketing strategies, and a more integrated visitor experience, ultimately enhancing the overall impact of the festivals.

5.3 Limitations and Scope for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of Himachali food festivals on visitor satisfaction and economic benefits, it has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. One of the primary limitations is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Future studies could incorporate more objective measures of visitor satisfaction and expenditure, such as transaction data and observational studies, to provide a more accurate assessment of the economic impact of food festivals. Another limitation is the geographic focus on Himachal Pradesh, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Future research could explore similar festivals in different cultural and geographic contexts to understand the broader applicability of the results. Comparative studies across different regions and countries could provide insights into the unique and common factors driving visitor satisfaction and food festival economic benefits.

The study's cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Longitudinal studies that track visitor satisfaction and spending behaviors over time could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impacts of food festivals. Such studies could also explore how changes in festival offerings and management practices influence visitor satisfaction and economic outcomes. Additionally, the study focused primarily on age and satisfaction as predictors of expenditure, leaving out other potentially important variables. Future research should consider various factors, such as visitor motivations, travel distance, group size, and previous festival attendance. Including these variables in the analysis could provide a more nuanced understanding of visitor spending and satisfaction determinants. The sample size of 570 respondents, while adequate for statistical analysis, could be expanded in future studies to increase the robustness of the findings. Larger sample sizes would also allow for more detailed subgroup analyses, such as examining differences in satisfaction and expenditure among visitors from different regions or socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into visitor experiences and perceptions. Understanding the underlying reasons behind visitor satisfaction and spending behaviors could help festival organizers and policymakers develop more targeted and effective strategies to enhance the impact of food festivals.

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