

Tackling Territorial Fragilities: Does Visitors' Engagement Matter?

The Active Involvement During Local Food Festivals

This study proposes an explorative model examining the visitors' involvement during the participation to local food festivals held in small-sized peripheral destinations. A sample of 70 visitors attending to a popular event repeated annually in the municipality of Castellalto in Abruzzo region was surveyed and, through the application of three latent constructs borrowed by the experience economy theory, the active and passive involvement of event's participants were tested on their overall perceptions. The application of a structural equation model reveals that the visitors' overall perceptions are positively influenced by their active involvement during the event, where the most relevant determinants are those related to the hedonic and emotional dimension. The related policy implications are discussed.

Contrastare le fragilità territoriali: il coinvolgimento dei visitatori è importante? La partecipazione attiva durante gli eventi gastronomici locali

Questo studio propone un modello esplorativo che esamina il coinvolgimento dei visitatori durante la partecipazione a eventi locali di tipo gastronomico realizzati in destinazioni periferiche di piccole dimensioni. È stato intervistato un campione di 70 visitatori partecipanti a un noto evento ripetuto annualmente nel comune di Castellalto in Abruzzo e, attraverso l'applicazione di tre costrutti latenti mutuati dalla teoria dell'economia dell'esperienza, è stato testato il coinvolgimento attivo e passivo dei partecipanti sulle loro percezioni complessive. L'applicazione di un modello di equazione strutturale rivela che le percezioni generali dei visitatori sono positivamente influenzate dal loro coinvolgimento attivo durante l'evento, dove i fattori determinanti più rilevanti sono quelli legati alla dimensione edonica ed emotiva. Si discutono le relative implicazioni di policy.

Enfrentar las fragilidades territoriales: ¿importa la participación de los visitantes? La participación activa en los festivales gastronómicos locales

Este estudio propone un modelo exploratorio que examina la participación de los visitantes durante su participación en eventos gastronómicos locales llevados en pequeños destinos periféricos. Se entrevistó a una selección de 70 visitantes que participaban en un evento muy conocido que se repite anualmente en el municipio de Castellalto en Abruzzo y, mediante la aplicación de tres construcciones latentes tomadas de la teoría de la economía de la experiencia, se puso a prueba la participación activa y pasiva de los participantes en el evento sobre sus percepciones generales. La aplicación de un modelo de ecuación estructural revela que las percepciones globales de los visitantes están influenciadas positivamente por su participación activa durante el evento, donde los factores determinantes más relevantes son los relacionados con la dimensión hedónica y emocional. Se discuten las relativas implicaciones políticas.

Keywords: territorial fragilities, visitors' engagement, active involvement

Parole chiave: fragilità territoriali, coinvolgimento dei visitatori, partecipazione attiva

Palabras clave: fragilidades territoriales, implicación de los visitantes, participación activa

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1. Introduction

The study of the relationships between food tourism and local producers, food craftsmanship and local economies is already well-established in the

international literature and the dynamics of food tourism have been addressed from multiple and intercultural analyses. Therefore, food tourism can represent an attraction itself, where the search for a particular gastronomic product, a winery or



a food festival, may provide a specific motivation for visiting an area, stay in it and, more generally, trigger consumption (Hall, Sharples and Smith, 2003, pp. 317-318).

If we refer to the areas marked by relevant spatial peripherality compared with the major centres, such relationships configure an instrument for a rural diversification, where the external interest for the local productions and activities can stimulate the awareness (Hall, Mitchell and Sharples, 2003, p. 26), strength the local identity and the sense of community (Richards, 2012, pp. 15-18) and become a significant place marker for the tourism promotion, because of the distinctive and typical character of the food production and the strong linkage with the respective local, regional or national traditions (Richards, 2002, p. 11).

The idea that the food tourism may have a central role in the planning process for the development of peripheral destinations is increasingly recognized in literature (Gladstone and Morris, 1999; Rusher, 2003; Mason and Paggiaro, 2012) and the inclusion of food-related tourism practices within the local strategies for enhancing the local identity represents a prerogative for gaining an economic return on local communities' income, because the food tourist can be considered as the last ring in a chain where the food tourism supply is not anymore a mere sequence of intermediaries (producer, wholesaler, retailer) but it is a multiple combination of complex relationships which operate within a broader network, with the aim to provide both the food product itself and a strictly connected mix of best practices, in terms of educational and informational programs (Hall, Mitchell and Sharples, 2003, pp. 32-33).

In this perspective, festivals are considered an important segment of the tourism industry (Chang and Yuan, 2011, p. 13) and, in particular, food festivals held in rural/peripheral communities are able to add value not only to the available local products (Jung and others, 2015, p. 278), but they can configure an instrument «to promote local commodities and to differentiate themselves from urban community festivals» (Chang and Yuan, 2011, p. 15), although not only the rural-based food festivals, but also the urban-based ones, are able to increase the «sense of place» of a destination (Lau and Li, 2019, p. 52). In this sense, food festivals effectively may be part of the destination branding of local communities or peripheral regional areas which are interested in food tourism (Lee and Arcodia, 2011,

p. 365), since the perceived ambience and quality of the festival provided¹ are two of the main determinants of the overall perceptions during such food experiences, which are – in turn – positive predictors of the destination image and the word of mouth generated after the event's participations (Lee, Park and Ahn, 2020).

But not only. The possibility to attract (and bring back again) a *food-sensitive* visitor into a specific destination hosting a food festival depends largely by the memories stored in his/her mind after previous participations to other similar contexts, since «the taste, smell and texture of food can serve to trigger memories of previous food events and experiences around food, while memory can serve to delimit food preferences and choices based on experience» and «the analysis of memories about food serves [...] to demonstrate that individual memory of “banal” events and experiences is not simply the subjective property of individuals but is part of a shared cultural experience» (Lupton, 1994, p. 668). Thus, given that the vividness of memory and the loyalty to an event (and its host destination) are positively influenced by the constructs of the experience economy (Manthiou and others, 2014) and considering that the overall perceived satisfaction (Lee and others, 2017) and the perceived value (Tanford and Jung, 2017) are functions of the revisit intentions of the event's attendees², it appears reasonable to explore the determinants that may influence the visitors' perceptions when attending a food festival held in a local community, with the aim to individuate some best practices to transmit to practitioners and local politicians to exploit such kind of «instrument» of local development and to attract more people towards their community.

On such bases, this paper is structured in the following scheme: the second paragraph provides a review of the constructs of the experience economy and their application in the context of the local food festivals; the third paragraph introduces the case study which takes as a reference a local food festival held in a small destination of the Abruzzo region in the central Italy and provides the descriptive statistics of the sample obtained by questionnaire, the statement of the hypotheses, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis and the discussion of the main evidences; the fourth and last paragraph provides final reflections and some possible implications for the destination, in the light of the existing literature.



2. Food Festivals under the Paradigm of Experience Economy: The Theoretical Framework

Few years after its conceptualization (Pine II and Gilmore, 1998), the constructs of the experience economy have found a broad categorization among tourism issues, where it is believed that the possibility of involving visitors and obtaining economic benefits from their purchasing behaviors it presupposes the need to provide memorable experiences, *staged* in a specific place or destination. The general perceptions that arise after having experienced a themed food festival, a guided tour in a wine cellar or in a micro-brewery, a visit to a specialty-food craft lab will be the result of a holistic and multi-sensory experience (Mason and Paggiaro, 2012, p. 1330), which is strictly connected to the visited environment. Therefore, several studies have explored the dynamics of food consumption experiences and their relating effects from the demand and supply side. In these regards, the focus about food festivals held in small and medium-sized destinations has raised particular attention among international literature (Mason and Paggiaro, 2012; Andersson and others, 2016; Chatzinakos, 2016; Van Niekerk, 2017; Chung and others, 2018), since local communities are seen as a «key source market for special events» (Connel, Page and Meyer, 2015, p. 283), being able to generate internal and external audiences for the peripheral destinations (Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014, p. 1591). The local perspective of «cultural authenticity» that the food festivals and, more broadly, food-related events, are able to generate can be traced back to the size of the event itself. As stated by Getz and Page (2016, p. 596), gastronomic events are generally placed at basic level of the «event portfolio pyramid», being characterized by a small-sized visitors' attendance; otherwise, the more the food festival tend to engage an external audience, the wider the possibility of exogenous conditioning will be, due to commercialization dynamics which undermine, albeit partially, the «romantic sense of community» (Haynes, 2015, p. 566).

The emphasis around the hedonic food consumption during tourist experiences was already pointed out in the late 1980s. In one of the earliest studies about event management Getz and Frisby (1988) through the exploration of a pattern of 52 local-managed festivals (most of them characterized by small audience and held in very small peripheral communities) geographically distributed

between the Province of Ontario (Canada), have found that some of the most recurring words frequencies for describing such manifestations were «food», «music» and «context». As for the remote areas of peninsular type, Hohl and Tisdell (1995) identified the food consumption among the primary expenses of travelers in the Peninsula of Cape York (Australia). As concerns, instead, to the rural and peripheral areas of New Zealand, Rusher (2003) stressed the importance of food festivals as an integral part of the regional development strategy; in this regard, it is shown how oysters and seafood have become a «cultural icon» of two small rural communities (Invercargill and Bluff), which have achieved a large-scale visibility through a food festival linked to them («The Bluff Oyster and Southland Seafood Festival»), able to encourage memorable experiences based on a «no-daily» type of food consumption.

Rural regions and peripheral areas characterized mainly by the richness of vernacular and distinctive foods are those most inclined to convert these potential attractions into taste-based events, also according to Quan and Wang (2004, pp. 301-303). Their theoretical model, with the aim to illustrate the various degrees of a food consumption experience in tourism, conceptualizes the evolution of food consumption from a mere extension of the home ontological habits to an opportunity to create peak gastronomic experiences, where the search for gastronomic novelties is itself the peak moment of a travel experience in which the food is «the main star on the stage» (*ibidem*). In other words, depending on the weight attributed to the food consumption in the visitor's priority scale during an unusual experience, it can configure or a simple support for the completing of the travel intentions or the pinnacle of the experience itself, well reflecting the dualism between *neophobic* and *neophilic* profiles of the «food seekers», conceptualized by Cohen and Avieli (2004).

Another interesting perspective about food festivals is provided by Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012), which, by applying the constructs of the experience economy to the wine tourism market, have revealed that the food festivals are able to provide educational and entertaining elements; Mason and Paggiaro (2012, p. 1334), instead, talking about «festivalscapes» in the northern Italy, in relation to the «Friuli DOC» festival, found that the possibility to generate favorable intentions in visitors' future behavior is positively influenced by their perceived satisfaction during



the event, which is – in turn – positively affected by the emotional experience and the cognitive dimension of the event, involving the visitors' psychological sphere.

What is particularly common in the aforementioned cases, most of which are conducted through factorial analysis, is that the success of food events based in peripheral and/or marginal destinations depends by the satisfaction perceived and by the control degree of the involved visitors' behavior. On such premises, this study is proposed to explore some of the main principle components able to generate positive perceptions in visitors' food experiences, by applying the constructs of the experience economy to a local food festival in Italy, which annually takes place in a peripheral destination of Abruzzo region.

3. Case Study Overview, Methods and Results

The proliferation of the gastronomic events held in small and peripheral destinations has become an extremely popular phenomenon in Italy, especially during the second decade of 2000s. The widespread interest around food experiences linked to taste-based events is constantly growing in numerical terms, making it difficult to estimate the overall extent at an aggregate level, also due to the absence of an officially recognized national register of gastronomic events. As noted by Santini, Cavicchi and Belletti (2013) the food festivals panorama in Italy is roughly composed of about 7.000 events per year, and it is right this fragmentation throughout the Peninsula that generates in them the characteristics of uniqueness and non-replicability. On the basis of such data, it appears quite legitimate to state that the gastronomic events constitute a main attractor for local communities, especially in terms of tourism regeneration for peripheral destinations. Therefore, the growing interest around rural destinations in Italy has triggered a strong demand for typical local products and this has aroused particular interest among the stakeholders involved at various levels (public institutions, regional organizations and local associations) in the promotion of *authentic* gastronomic products (Santini, Cavicchi and Belletti, 2013, p. 254).

The food festival, which this study refers to, takes place in Castellalto, a small municipality of about 7.500 inhabitants belonging to the most remote areas of Abruzzo region in Italy, according

to the general categorization introduced in 2014 by the national Technical committee for inner areas (Salvatore, Chiodo and Fantini, 2018). Since 2005, every year and for a whole week during the early August, the local community of Castellalto hosts the «Castellalto beer fest», a consolidated event able to attract thousands of visitors coming from within and beyond the regional boundaries.

As it appears to the visitors' gaze, the event shows a communicative-organizational bidirectional perspective: if, one side, great emphasis is placed around the consumption of authentic local and traditional foods, on the other, for what concerns beverages, a selection of over 200 worldwide craft beers is proposed during the week. In particular, while the local authenticity of the food products provided is not debatable, since the gastronomic offer is organized by the local producers in form of food trucks, as concerns the beverage selection, the supply derives from a selection of craft beers which is divided between local and regional craft microbreweries³, other cross-regional microbreweries coming from the Italian craft beer panorama and, with a lesser part, international craft microbreweries. On this matter, it appears clear that this kind of festival is in the middle between the promotion of local products and the exploitation of a kind of marketable «commodity»; for these reasons, there is no need to worry about the circumstance that this element may influence the discussed theoretical framework later; also because it is quite fixed in literature that the elements that may influence the visitors' perceptions are not only related to the «commodities» provided by a local food event, but there are many other features of tangible and intangible consistence that enable the creation of positive or negative sentiments and memories in the festivals' attendees and that are related to the overall ambience of the host destination. Moreover, according to the organizers' estimations, the visitors' basin of the event has steadily increased during the years, overcoming quota 10.000 visitors during the 2018 edition.

The event of Castellalto certainly represents an opportunity to encourage local tourism development, to enhance the accommodations' performances of nearby tourism facilities and to generate incomes for local producers. Despite being consolidated for more than a decade, the «Castellalto beer fest» has always maintained its authenticity, not recognizing dynamics of excessive *com-*



mercialization (Haynes, 2015, p. 566). Throughout the week local food producers and local chefs are involved into the food supply chain and, despite the peripheral location of the hosting municipality, the event is revealed as an important tool for strengthening the local community, as well as an interesting display for the enhancement of the territory. The geographical localization of the Castellalto municipality within the Abruzzo region is provided in the figure 1.

3.1. A SEM Approach under the Constructs of Experience Economy

In order to identify the main components able to stimulate positive perceptions during local food festivals held in peripheral destinations, the four realms of the experience economy (Pine II and Gilmore, 1998) were considered as the basis for creating 10 measurement items, submitted in the shape of questions to 91 festival attendees through the Likert evaluation scale of 1-5, with a final positive response rate of 76.9%. Given the high level of agreement in answers (the average value among the 10 measurement items was 3,64/5, which is

72,84/100 in percentage) and considering the estimated population of about 10.000 visitors during the week, such as those of the «Castellalto beer fest», with a confidence interval of $\pm 10\%$ the final sample of $N=70$ can be considered significant at the 95% of confidence level. At a later stage, these 10 measurement items were aggregated in 3 endogenous latent constructs, which were useful to define the research hypotheses. In particular, the aim was to measure whether the visitors' overall perception (OP) is influenced by an active involvement (AI) and/or by a passive involvement (PI) of the visitors during their participation to the event. On such premises, the hypotheses can be summarized as follows:

- a) H1: Food festival's overall perception is positively influenced by a visitors' active involvement;
- b) H2: Food festival's overall perception is positively influenced by a visitors' passive involvement.

The construct related to the active involvement (AI) is extracted by four measurement items which correspond to: the comprehensive perception of the event ambience (AI1), the emotional

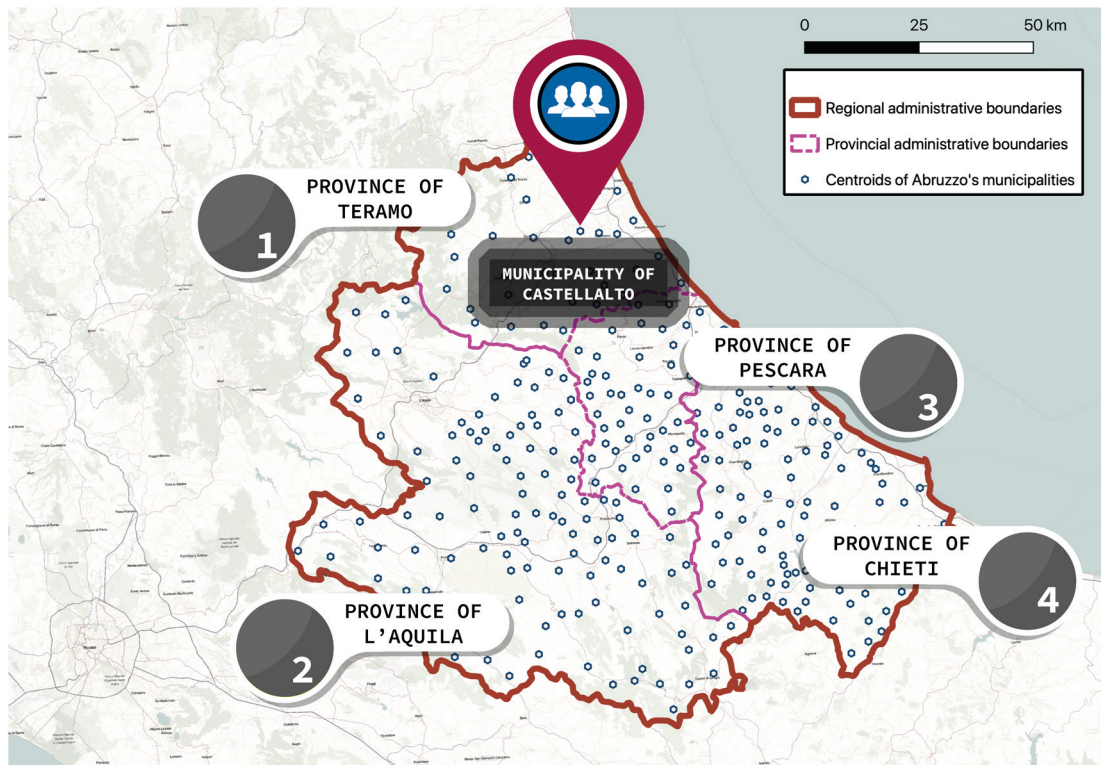


Fig. 1. Localization of Castellalto municipality (Abruzzo, central Italy)

Source: author's elaboration

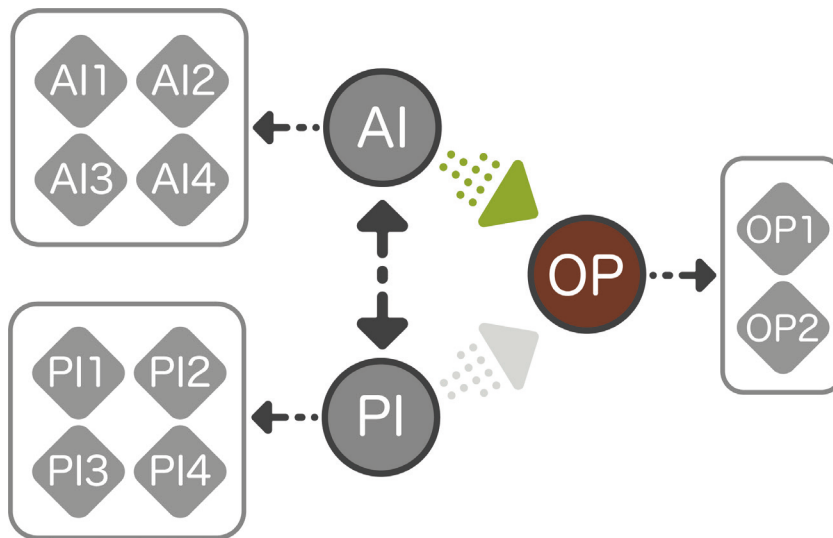


Fig. 2. Structural model. Effects of active (AI) and passive (PI) involvement on the overall visitors' perception (OP)
Source: author

sensations (AI2), the visual pleasantness of the environment (AI3) and to the setting of the food pathways (AI4).

The construct concerning the passive involvement (PI) is extracted by other 4 measurement items related to: the predisposition towards an educational learning about the history and traditions of the foods and beverages proposed (PI1), the curiosity regarding the production techniques through which the food and beverages have been produced (PI2), the perception of secondary activities realized during the event (PI3) the degree of appreciation towards the proposed music shows (PI4).

The construct related to the overall perception (OP), instead, derives from the observation of two measurement items: the visitors' perceived satisfaction while participating to the event (OP1) and the memories generated into the visitors' mind (OP2). The choice to consider the aforementioned measurement items for the constructs' composition is inspired by a consolidated literature closely related to the exploration of the food festivals dynamics in peripheral destinations and hosted by local communities⁴. The theoretical model deriving from these constructs' conceptualization is depicted in the figure 2.

3.2. Results

For what concerns the main descriptive statistics deriving from the demographic profile of the festival visitors, among the 91 interviews 70 were

successfully completed, with a positive response rate of 76,9%. In terms of gender, 56,8% of respondents were male and 43,2% were female, while, as for age, 41,4% were between 25-34 years old, 28,6% were 35-44, 17,1% were 15-24, 10% were 45-64 and 2,9% were equal or more than 65 years old. For what concerns the education level of the participants, 45,7% had a university degree, a PhD or more, 42,9% had a secondary school education, 7,3% had a middle school education and the 4,3% had a primary school education. As regards to the average income of the participants, 54,3% had monthly income level between 500 and 1.500 euros, 24,3% earned monthly between 1.501 and 3.000 euros, 15,7% earned monthly less than 500 euros while the 5,7% had a monthly income level higher than 3.000 euros.

In regard to the descriptive results of the measurement model and the list of the measurement items used during the interviews, as they have been submitted to the participants, they are summarized in the table 1, with all the related standardized loading factors.

A confirmatory factor analysis was applied, in order to perform the validity and reliability of the proposed measurement items. The general goodness of fit of the data to the proposed measurement model is quite satisfactory and all the control tests show acceptable parameters. In particular, the compute of the composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE) and of the coefficient of determination (CD) show good values, very close to the max-

Tab. 1. Reliability and validity of the measurement items

Code	Construct/ Measurement item description	Mean (SD)	Factor loading	Std. error	CR	AVE	Cronbach α
AI	Active Involvement				0,686	0,363	0,675
AI1	Festival environment makes me feel like in another dimension	4,057 (0,930)	0,689	0,082			
AI2	This experience permits me to escape from the daily routine	3,357 (1,192)	0,649	0,089			
AI3	The stands' disposal is visually detailed and pleasant	3,314 (1,043)	0,645	0,086			
AI4	The setting of the food pathways is accurate and easily walkable	3,657 (0,832)	0,378	0,115			
PI	Passive Involvement				0,587	0,327	0,541
PI1	I learned something new about foods and beverages proposed in this festival	3,442 (1,124)	0,891	0,109			
PI2	I will be more willing to discover new cooking methods and production techniques	3,485 (1,151)	0,593	0,102			
PI3	Some of the festival's secondary activities capture my interest	2,714 (1,118)	0,399	0,116			
PI4	Music shows are fun and overwhelming	3,685 (0,986)	0,076	0,132			
OP	Overall Perception				0,844	0,731	0,844
PC1	My experience in this festival is satisfying and fulfilling	4,414 (0,751)	0,870	0,053			
PC2	I will keep good memories about this experience	4,285 (0,782)	0,840	0,054			

Notes: CR= Composite Reliability; AVE= Average variance extracted. Fit indices of the measurement model: $\chi^2=243,84$ ($p<0,01$), $df=45$; RMSEA (Root mean squared error of approximation)=0,09; CFI (Comparative fit index)=0,895; TLI (Tucker-Lewis index)=0,852; AIC (Akaike's information criterion)= 1.821,89; BIC (Bayesian information criterion)= 1.896,09; CD (Coefficient of determination)= 0,967; SRMR (Standardized root mean squared residual)= 0,068

imum level of adaptability for all the three endogenous latent constructs.

For what concerns the standardized loading factors reported in the table 1, all the measurement items (excepted for PI4) show a significant difference from zero ($p<0,001$), being in this way fully significant, with coefficients ranging from a minimum of 0,378 to a maximum of 0,891. Also, the covariance between the two latent constructs related to the active involvement (AI) and the passive involvement (PI) is good, with a positive value of 0,532 at the highest significance level ($p<0,001$, two-tailed).

The results of the path analysis related to the research hypotheses are summarized in the table 2.

The choice of circumscribing the forecast of the overall visitors' perception to the only two hypotheses related to the active involvement and the passive involvement of visitors shall be understood under the idea that this work represents a pilot exploration of the phenomenon of gastronomic events at a very small scale, by taking as reference a municipality categorized as a peripheral destination in Italy. As it appears very clearly from the table 2, we are in presence of a definitely positive impact of the active involvement of visitors on their overall perception while participating to a small-sized food event ($\beta_{HI} = 0,844$), while, on the other side, no significant effects are found in relation to the passive involvement towards

Tab. 2. Results of the hypotheses tests

Hypotesis	Relation	Coefficient	OIM Std.error	t	p> t	Supported
H ₁	AI→OP	0,844	0,131	6,43	0,000*	yes
H ₂	PI→OP	0,058	0,160	0,36	0,716	no

Note: * denotes significance at $p<0,001$



overall visitors' perception.

In other words, the results of the two hypotheses tests shows a substantial diachronic perspective, on the grounds that it seems quite evident that the possibility to generate satisfaction and positive memories for the visitors involved into a food festival in a peripheral destination, with the consequential possibility to generate further repeated participation in similar contexts, it depends totally univocally on the capability of organizers and practitioners to favor an active involvement of the visitors during the event. For such reasons, in the following section, only the coefficients related to the active involvement (AI) latent construct and the related measurement items will be discussed.

3.3. Discussion

The first two measurement items related to the visitors' active involvement (AI1, AI2) have to be traced back to the *emotional* sphere of the experience economy (escapism); visitors, through these two measurement items, were asked to evaluate the perceived degree of «alienation» from the daily routine during the participation to the «Castellalto beer fest» and the two related coefficients are revealed to be the most significant of the construct ($\beta_{AI1} = 0,689$; $\beta_{AI2} = 0,649$). The other two measurement items of the construct (AI3, AI4), instead, refer to the *hedonic* dimension of the event, which can be ascribed to the *aesthetics* category of the experience economy; in this case, visitors were asked to evaluate the overall pleasantness of the festival environment and the visual impression of the proposed food pathways, where the item related to general perception reveals a substantial greater coefficient ($\beta_{AI3} = 0,645$) if compared to the item related to the accuracy and to the disposal of the food pathways ($\beta_{AI4} = 0,378$), and the latter, presumably, reflects some problems in terms of walkability and usability of the gastronomic routes.

In terms of main findings, with reference to the *emotional* dimension, the results are in line with most of the relevant studies regarding the related literature, where is found a strong positive relationship between the «escape from reality» and the visitors' loyalty in small-sized food events (Park and others, 2008; Li and others, 2009; Tanford and Jung, 2017); in other words, the more a visitor will perceive a unique and unrepeatable atmosphere (Lee, 2014, p. 115)

when participating to a local food festival the higher will be the possibility to generate for him positive and lasting memories of the event, able to encourage future participations towards other similar contexts. For what concerns the *hedonic* dimension, these results come under an already established literature which states that the hedonic consumption is almost always preferred by visitors during a gastronomic experience instead of an *utilitarian* consumption (Gursoy, Spangenberg and Rutherford, 2006); more in detail, when a food festival provides a pleasant ambience able to arouse positive and immediately impressions and perceptions, it is likely that the visitor will be more willing to actively participate and be involved in, with a higher possibility to generate satisfaction on his part (Wong and others, 2015).

The possible limitations of this study are mainly concerned to the very small scale of this event and the non-predictive nature of the model proposed, which could represent an efficient instrument to understand and explore certain characteristics, but is far from the possibility to make generalizable the findings to other types of food festivals.

4. Conclusions and Policy Implications

The implications of this study, although indicative of a marginal reality, may have a broader relevance due to some reasons. In the first place, as it appear from wide literature, the overall perceptions of visitors attending a local food event (which seem to be triggered, in the results of this study, by a type of «active involvement») are related to two major features, i.e. the revisit intentions (Gannon, Taheri and Olya, 2019) and the loyalty (Wan and Chan, 2011) towards the visited destination⁵, and this might be very relevant for those destinations who are marked by spatial peripherality and long-term abandonment and depopulation phenomena. In this sense, food festivals can represent an opportunity to revitalize the economic and social fabric of the interested local community, in particular because we know that local governmental policies are able to positively influence the environment quality and the overall performances of the festival (Lee, 2016). It is therefore important that local politicians have a special care about the possibility to encourage and to promote the organization of food festivals



in their communities, since their governmental role is pivotal for the successful outcome of the event itself.

If we consider that in Italy has been established a technical national committee with the objective to individuate the appropriate trajectories to revitalize peripheral and marginal destinations through a seven-year program (2014-2020) named National strategy for the inner areas (SNAI)⁶ and, given the well-know difficulties to intervene with short-and long-term structural changes⁷, it may be a feasible solution focus on *soft* and «place-sensitive» (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, p. 205) interventions, such as the encouragement and the promotion of local food events in the interested communities. Indeed, the choice to focus here on an event which takes place in a destination which is categorized as peripheral in the Italian panorama lies in the reason to explore the phenomenon from the perspective on a municipality that contains certain characteristics comparable to many other similar destinations in Italy.

Therefore, major importance is taken by the enhancement of the *foodscapes* of peripheral destinations, both in terms of potential attractiveness for the territory and as a key source for a tourism recovery of the small marginal destinations, where the linkage between authentic food and local identity emerges prominent for capturing visitors looking for no-daily food experiences. Secondly, as far as the results of this study are concerned, it appears quite clear that a visitor involved into a local food festival, in order to achieve an overall positive degree of satisfaction, needs to be actively involved during the event (Davis, 2017) and, therefore, measures able to touch the right strings in the visitors' emotional perceptions should be undertaken, avoiding the risk to relegate the visitor's experience to a passive absorption of the event.

The goal to attract – and bring back again (Caroli, 2014) – visitors in territories marked by marginalization and depopulation issues is certainly not an easy challenge for local authorities and for local stakeholders involved for various purposes in peripheral territorial dynamics. But, bearing in mind that many evidences worldwide demonstrate that the practice of local food festivals is a potential powerful tool to reinvigorate the socio-economic fabric of peripheral and/or marginal destinations, the tentative to give emphasis on the organization and exploitation of local food events should enter into the list of the best practices of

the (local) political agenda, in order to tackle the *territorial fragilities*⁸.

However, as it emerges from the case study here proposed, for a small municipality like Castellalto, the construction of a well-established local identity that relies on authentic (not only) local food and beverage production which lead to the realization of a distinctive local food festival, may represent an effective strategy for revitalize, in tourism terms, a peripheral destination (Connell, Page and Meyer, 2015) and encourage a positive engagement of visitors. The issue of the food festivals held in remote communities is arising in Italy, especially in the last decade, and for these reasons, this study can be considered as an initial exploration of the state of art, encouraging future studies in other destination of similar extent.

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Notes

- ¹ These features depend largely from the innovative format (Di Matteo, 2019) and from the visual creativity of the food trucks involved in the event (Alfiero, Lo Giudice and Bonadonna, 2017), i.e. the mobile vehicles equipped to satisfy the increasing demand of «quality over hunger» during many types of events (Alfiero and others, 2018, p. 367).
- ² Many contributors can be considered significant to validate this statement, such as: Kim, Duncan and Chung, 2015; Jung and others, 2015; Vajirakachorn and Chongwatpol, 2017; Chang, Kim J. and Kim D., 2018; Huang, Zhang and Quan, 2019; Lai, Khoo-Lattimore and Wang, 2019; Levitt and others, 2019; Vesci and Botti, 2019; Zhang and others, 2019; Troisi and others, 2019; Shin, Im and Severt, 2019.
- ³ All (or almost all) the microbreweries from Abruzzo region (around 30) are present during at least one of the days of the event. Further details, information and illustrative pictures are available at the website <https://www.festivalbirrecastellalto.it/> and on the official Facebook page of the event <https://www.facebook.com/festivalbirrecastellalto/> (last accessed: 18.I.2020).
- ⁴ For some examples, see Axelsen and Swan, 2010; Kim, Suh and Eves, 2010; Chang and Yuan, 2011; Mason and Paggiaro, 2012; Jung and others, 2015; Kim, Duncan and Chung, 2015; Organ and others, 2015; Akhoondnejad, 2016; Tanford and Jung, 2017.
- ⁵ Other exhaustive references along these lines, able to justify these statements, are provided in the previous footnote.
- ⁶ More information about the Strategy, which has been recently refinanced for another seven-year period (2021-2027), are available at the website: <http://old2018.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/> (last accessed: 18.I.2020).
- ⁷ At this purpose, it is significant the contribution of Accetturo and de Blasio, who illustrate in their book *Morire di aiuti: i fallimenti delle politiche per il Sud (e come evitarli)* (2019) a series of failures related to the scarce efficacy of the redistributive public programs over the last 20 years in Italy, especially for what concerns the southern Italy.
- ⁸ For a better knowledge about the concept of *territorial fragilities*, it is suggested to follow the activities of the Department of architecture and urban studies (DASTU) of the Politecnico di Milano, which was awarded the title of excellence department for a transdisciplinary project related to the articulated processes of fragilization of the relationship between space and society, for the period 2018-2022. Broader details are available at the website: <http://www.eccellenza.dastu.polimi.it/> (last accessed: 15.IV.2020).

