

Dietary restrictions and special food needs in tourism contexts: does the love of events go through the stomach?

International
Journal of Event
and Festival
Management

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Received 27 June 2024
Revised 3 October 2024
31 December 2024
Accepted 7 January 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate whether and how dietary restrictions or special dietary needs, arising not only from health concerns but also from lifestyle or religious considerations, impact the experiences of visitors at various organized events.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a qualitative research design, interpreting results of both content and sentiment analysis of 154 in-depth interviews with participants from cultural, sports and other events, originating from 18 countries and having dietary restrictions due to health, lifestyle or religious considerations.

Findings – The results underscore that the impact of dietary restrictions and special dietary needs on organized events depends on the duration and nature of the event. This significance is particularly pronounced in events lasting several hours or more and those centred around food and beverages, such as gastronomic festivals. While individuals with long-term dietary restrictions exhibit effective coping mechanisms without compromising their event experience, those with short-term restrictions feel particularly restricted. Although the provision of non-inclusive food during events may not immediately lead to participant dissatisfaction, it has the potential to impact the event's success in the future.

Originality/value – This study is the first to investigate a sufficiently large sample of interviewees with diverse dietary restrictions, encompassing more than just health-related reasons, who attend various types of events in tourist destinations. It is also the first to employ sentiment analysis to better understand the impact of dietary restrictions on visitor experiences at events. This research paves the way for further studies in this field, emphasizing specific event types and different visitor groups.

Keywords Event, Event experience, Dietary restrictions, Inclusive tourism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The global prevalence of individuals adhering to dietary restrictions, characterized by intentional caloric reduction, the selection of specific dietary compositions, or a combination of both (Anderson *et al.*, 2010), is increasing, primarily driven by health considerations, alongside lifestyle and religious factors. Health issues range from food sensitivity to serious allergies, with approximately 2.7% of the general population affected by food allergies (Fiocchi *et al.*, 2021). Across Europe, self-reported food allergies vary from 1.0 to 18.9% in adults and from 1.0 to 5.6% in school-age children (Lyons *et al.*, 2019). This upward trend is observed worldwide. Moreover, dietary restrictions are adopted not solely due to food sensitivity and allergies but have also emerged as an alternative approach for the prevention and management of various diseases, such as obesity and associated cardiometabolic dysfunction, and cancer prevention, as well as for promoting healthy lifespan extension (Mishra *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond health-related challenges and efforts toward a healthy lifestyle, ethical considerations, such as adherence to veganism for animal welfare, also contribute to



International Journal of Event and
Festival Management
Vol. 16 No. 1, 2025
pp. 61-81
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-2952
p-ISSN: 1758-2954
DOI 10.1108/IJEFM-06-2024-0076

specific dietary practices. Additionally, religions like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism impose dietary restrictions, representing approximately 46.9% of the world population (Pew Research Center, 2022).

While individuals generally adhere to their standard routines in their usual place of residence and are aware of safe dietary options based on their restrictions, travelling and staying outside their usual residence pose significant challenges. During such periods, dietary restrictions logically persist, but individuals often struggle to secure meals that align with their specific requirements.

As highlighted by scholars such as Eren (2020) and Mohammadi *et al.* (2023), health restrictions and personal preferences present distinctive challenges for individuals with special dietary requirements while travelling and staying in tourism destinations. This is why the UNWTO (2021) actively promotes initiatives for greater inclusivity in tourism. This emphasis is evident in studies examining the preparation of offerings for visitors with dietary needs (e.g. Jianu and Goleţ, 2019; Soon, 2020) and assessing how visitors with specialized requirements perceive food services (e.g. Barnett *et al.*, 2020; Kwon *et al.*, 2020).

Previous research in tourism has predominantly focused on dining facilities. Despite the growing significance of organized events in attracting visitors to tourism destinations in recent decades (Getz and Page, 2016), the issue of inclusivity for individuals with specific dietary requirements attending such events has not been sufficiently addressed. The only study that examined dietary restrictions at events (Weber and Lugosi, 2021) involved a very small sample of individuals with food constraints due to health issues such as food intolerance, allergies, or coeliac disease. The findings demonstrated that inadequate food provision could disrupt the overall event experience, leading to pathways of value destruction.

In response to Weber and Lugosi's (2021) call for further studies exploring the event experiences of a broader sample of attendees with diverse food sensitivities, the current study purposes to address this research gap and fill the void in the existing literature, where similar studies are notably absent. This study aims to investigate whether and how dietary restrictions or special dietary needs, arising not only from health concerns but also from lifestyle or religious considerations, impact the experiences of visitors at various organized events.

Event experience, as articulated by Rai and Nayak (2020), significantly influences participants' overall satisfaction. As emphasized by Asan *et al.* (2023), it is integral to understand participant behaviour, representing a critical framework. Therefore, it deserves thoughtful consideration and attention.

Literature review

Numerous past studies have sought to investigate the subject of dietary restrictions. In addition to a multitude of medically-oriented inquiries (e.g. Nordhagen *et al.*, 2021; Kotchetkoff *et al.*, 2023) and faith-oriented studies (e.g. Ho *et al.*, 2023; Santovito *et al.*, 2023), various research initiatives are dedicated to address dietary restrictions and specific food requirements within the realm of the tourism sector.

These studies predominantly concentrate on dietary restrictions arising from health reasons (e.g. Towers and Pratten, 2003; Nasserredine *et al.*, 2021; Figueroa-Gómez *et al.*, 2024), with some authors also examining dietary restrictions resulting from religious reasons (e.g. Kalenjuk and Tošić, 2018) or contemplating health, lifestyle, and religious aspects simultaneously (e.g. Oktadiana *et al.*, 2020; Mohammadi *et al.*, 2023).

Thus far, the authors have addressed the issue of dietary restrictions within tourism sector from either a demand perspective (e.g. Begen *et al.*, 2016; Kalenjuk and Tošić, 2018; Schiefert and Matteucci, 2018; Huang *et al.*, 2020; Barnett *et al.*, 2020; Eren, 2020; Kwon *et al.*, 2020; Wen *et al.*, 2020; Wingate *et al.*, 2021; Mohammadi *et al.*, 2023; Figueroa-Gómez *et al.*, 2024), a supply perspective (e.g. Towers and Pratten, 2003; Borchgrevink *et al.*, 2009; Pratten and Towers, 2004; Wham and Sharma, 2014; Altaş, 2016; Bordelon, 2016; Jianu and Goleţ, 2019; Oktadiana *et al.*, 2020; Soon, 2020; Buca and Yiğit, 2021; Nasserredine *et al.*, 2021; Lin *et al.*,

2022; Shakespeare, 2022; Stankovich *et al.*, 2023), or both aspects concurrently (Wingate *et al.*, 2021).

Demand side studies examine various food constraints, encompassing both adults and children. Individuals with dietary limitations often experience a sense of isolation (Schiefert and Matteucci, 2018; Eren, 2020; Figueroa-Gómez *et al.*, 2024), and food-related barriers may discourage them from travelling under certain circumstances (Huang *et al.*, 2020). They emphasize the importance of safety, which can be enhanced through consistent allergen labelling (Begen *et al.*, 2016; Figueroa-Gómez *et al.*, 2024), highlighting the importance of well-informed staff (Schiefert and Matteucci, 2018; Kwon *et al.*, 2020; Wen *et al.*, 2020; Wingate *et al.*, 2021).

Supply-side research has not delved into specific dietary restrictions but has instead examined the readiness of selected types of tourism enterprises to address the special dietary needs of consumers in general. While some authors (Wham and Sharma, 2014; Soon, 2020) assess the readiness of enterprises positively, others (Towers and Pratten, 2003; Borchgrevink *et al.*, 2009; Nasserredine *et al.*, 2021) highlight a significant deficiency in understanding dietary restrictions within the hospitality industry. Scholars implicitly agree that it is imperative to ensure adequate guest awareness through the labelling of food items on menus (Soon, 2020; Stankovich *et al.*, 2023) and websites (Bordelon, 2016), as well as through the appropriate education and training of staff within establishments (Towers and Pratten, 2003; Wham and Sharma, 2014; Jianu and Goleţ, 2019; Buca and Yiğit, 2021; Nasserredine *et al.*, 2021).

The scientific literature consistently supports the need to adapt dining facilities for the growing number of people with dietary restrictions. However, other aspects of destination supply remain neglected, currently offering only a limited comparison of allergen labelling on the websites of selected airlines, hotels, and attractions (Bordelon, 2016). The dynamic element of destination offerings – organized events as an attractor for destinations (Bustard *et al.*, 2019) – is largely ignored, despite Getz (2012) asserting that at numerous events, the provision of food and beverages holds experiential significance, while at others, it consistently assumes a secondary role.

The issue of dietary restrictions at events has been addressed only by Weber and Lugosi (2021), who focused exclusively on selected health-related restrictions. Their study was conducted with a limited sample of 22 event attendees from six countries, who had participated in events at dedicated, permanent venues such as sporting stadiums, theatres, and convention centres in the last 18 months. The results highlight that these dietary constraints significantly affect visitor experiences, shaping their preferences and participation. Specifically, inadequate food provision can lead to value destruction, while effective coping mechanisms and adequate food options can foster value creation. To date, no study has examined how other dietary restrictions and special food needs (arising from lifestyle, for instance) impact the event experience, nor how this experience varies across different types of events.

Methodology

Data collection tool

In this study, a qualitative research methodology is used, which is considered suitable to investigate a new field of study (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019; Hillman, 2022). More specifically, the interview method was selected as the main and widely adopted approach to conducting qualitative research (Monforte and Úbeda-Colomer, 2021). Given the exploratory and inductive nature of this study, individual one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted, in which the researcher posed a series of predetermined yet open-ended questions to the participants (Given, 2008; DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019).

Sampling strategy

Firstly, following the suggestion of Robinson (2014), a sample universe was defined by establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for potential interview participants. To select

interviewees, purposeful sampling was used, which is widely used sampling technique (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019), particularly to gather information from a specific population (Neuman and Robson, 2015).

The interviewees had to meet two criteria simultaneously. First, they had to confirm that they have specific dietary restrictions related to food allergies, intolerance, chronic diseases (such as diabetes), or special dietary needs arising from their lifestyle (e.g. vegetarianism, veganism, etc.) or religion (e.g. Halal, Kosher). Given the plethora of existing dietary restrictions and special food needs, and in an effort to include a diverse range of dietary restrictions in the study (including those stemming from religious reasons or lifestyle choices), interviewees were not limited; instead, they were asked to specify any dietary restrictions they have. Secondly, participants were required to confirm that they had attended cultural, sports, religious, or other organized events as spectators at tourist destinations in the past, regardless of the location. Unlike Weber and Lugosi (2021), who restricted their study to dedicated, permanent venues and within specific temporal and spatial limits, our approach did not impose such constraints. This inclusion is crucial, as many events, including major summer festivals, take place at airports and other non-traditional venues.

Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was achieved, as was the case in previous qualitative studies (e.g. Schiefert and Matteucci, 2018; Weber and Lugosi, 2021). Data collection ceased once saturation, defined as the point at which subsequent interviews confirm previous findings and do not uncover new and unexpected information, was identified. A total of 154 individuals participated in the interviews. This number was sufficiently large to successfully capture variations, patterns, and relationships, enabling comparisons between participants and validating these patterns (Gerson and Damaske, 2020).

Data collection itself was conducted by a group of university students enrolled in courses in Event Management, Marketing, and Gastronomy. These students underwent training as interviewers and were assigned the responsibility of interviewing and approaching individuals within their social circles who had dietary restrictions or special dietary needs. Similarly, selected students participating in an Erasmus exchange program received training as surveyors and were assigned to identify and conduct interviews with individuals with specific dietary requirements in diverse international contexts.

This approach facilitated the inclusion of interview participants from various age groups (from 15 to 65 years), representing 18 different countries of origin (Albania, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom).

Participants included a wide range of dietary practices motivated by health, lifestyle, or religious reasons, as well as combinations thereof, with religious considerations also included (Table 1).

Study procedure

The interviews were conducted using a flexible interview protocol to maintain focus on the intended line of inquiry and to systematically and comprehensively explore the opinions and attitudes of the respondents.

The preliminary interview protocol questions were developed based on previous study related to dietary restrictions at events (Weber and Lugosi, 2021). However, as this study did not address special dietary needs in a broader scope nor compare different types of events, the questions previously used in this study could not be directly adopted; they could only serve as inspiration. In the subsequent step, event management experts and gastronomy experts were approached to assist the authors in generating and reformulating a set of questions for the respondents. The final interview protocol emerged from this panel of experts. It consisted of core questions along with several follow-up questions and comments (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). The core questions were as follows:

- (1) What types of events do you attend during your visits to tourist destinations?

Table 1. Research sample

Research sample	Units N	%
<i>Age</i>		
15–20 years old	37	24.03
21–30 years old	89	57.79
31–40 years old	26	16.88
41–50 old	1	0.65
51 years and more	1	0.65
∑	154	100.00
<i>Sex</i>		
Woman	114	74.03
Man	40	25.97
∑	154	100.00
<i>Highest attained education</i>		
Primary education	5	3.25
Secondary education	84	54.55
University education	65	42.21
∑	154	100.00
<i>Dietary restrictions/special dietary needs</i>		
Lactose intolerance	35	22.73
Allergy to cow's milk protein	8	5.19
Gluten-free diet	27	17.53
Histamine intolerance	4	2.60
Seafood allergy	2	1.30
Nut allergy	1	0.65
Diabetes mellitus	3	1.95
Saving diet (nutrition for chronic digestive system diseases)	1	0.65
Keto diet	3	1.95
Vegetarianism	23	14.94
Veganism	12	7.79
Pescetarianism	1	0.65
Combination of dietary restrictions	34	22.08
∑	154	100.00
<i>Duration of dietary restriction/special dietary needs</i>		
Less than 1 year	6	3.90
1–5 years	2	1.30
6–14 years	50	32.47
15 years and more	96	62.34
∑	154	100.00
Note(s): Categorizing dietary restrictions and special dietary needs is based solely on subjective responses of the respondents and does not constitute an official categorization		
Source(s): Elaborated on the basis of IBM SPSS outputs		

- (2) What role do your dietary restrictions or special food needs play in relation to attending these organized events?
- (3) To what extent are your expectations typically met during organized events, and how do they relate to your dietary needs?
- (4) How do your dietary restrictions or special food needs influence your experience of organized events?

- (5) What measures would you propose implementing in practice to allow individuals with similar dietary preferences as yours to have the opportunity to achieve a comprehensive experience when participating in an organized event?

To improve the validity of qualitative data collection procedures and interpretation of findings, five academics with dietary restrictions and special food needs pretested the instrument.

The interviews were conducted between February and May 2023, using both in person and telephonic formats.

Considering that the interviews were conducted in various languages, the transcriptions originally recorded in non-English languages were subsequently translated into English utilizing Microsoft Translator, a cloud-based neural machine translation service that is part of the Azure AI services family. The translations were then verified for accuracy by a native English speaker. This facilitated the follow-up content analysis of the data using Atlas.ti, a software tool specifically designed for qualitative data analysis. Atlas.ti enables the structured and systematic analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, contributing to the development and discovery of theories.

Specifically, categorization was performed in Atlas.ti, assisting in identifying the main issues and capturing the range of issues expressed by interview participants. In addition to software-based analysis, the transcripts were carefully read multiple times by three authors to ensure a detailed textual analysis, which was crucial in accurately describing the phenomenon under investigation.

As it is known that individuals subjectively respond to external stimuli, including the availability or absence of special dietary options at events, through their emotional reactions (Lai *et al.*, 2023), and since consumer sentiment informs subsequent purchase decisions (Li *et al.*, 2023), the use of Atlas.ti software for conducting sentiment analysis is considered scientifically valuable, as proposed by Weber and Lugosi (2021).

Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, is a computational technique used to determine and extract subjective information from text. Sentiment analysis algorithms employ natural language processing and machine learning techniques to automatically identify and categorize subjective information. These algorithms analyse various linguistic features, such as the presence of positive or negative words, sentiment-bearing phrases, context, and syntactic structure, to predict generic positive, negative, or neutral sentiment expressed in the text. This procedure facilitates a deeper exploration of the issue by identifying emotional responses of respondents and decoding whether and how dietary restrictions or special dietary needs influence the experience of visitors at organized events.

Results

In this section, the results of in-depth interviews that focus on the significance of dietary restrictions and special food needs during the visit to events are interpreted. The analysis also includes the level of expectation fulfilment, the extent to which these needs impact the event experience, and recommendations for event organizers.

The significance of dietary restrictions and special dietary needs in event visitation

The significance of dietary restrictions and special food needs in organized events is highly dependent on the duration and nature of the event. It becomes particularly relevant for events lasting several hours or more, such as festivals, e.g.

For short events such as football matches lasting 1–2 hours, I either discreetly bring my own food or eat a substantial meal before the event to avoid the need to eat during it. I typically plan where I will eat after such events. However, multiday events can pose more significant challenges, with some being unsuitable for my dietary needs. Music festivals, for instance, are extremely difficult to attend due to limited possibilities of own food storage and a lack of options for coeliacs. When I travel for events in other countries, I have to research the food options available and this sometimes restricts my ability to

attend events. In such cases, I often need to rent apartments to cook, which is more expensive and time consuming than staying in hotels (IP6).

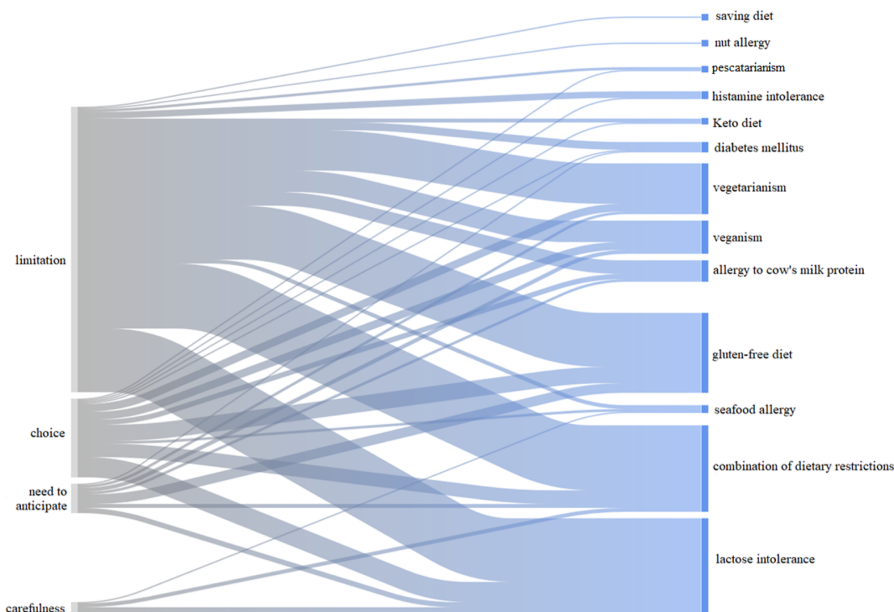
It is also pertinent for events centred around, or closely connected to, food and beverages, such as gastronomic festivals, fairs, and similar occasions, e.g.

My dietary restrictions have the most significant impact when attending gastronomic events. I need to be vigilant about the ingredients in the food and beverages offered and sometimes I have to inquire. On the contrary, at music events, food is not a primary concern for me. I only need to consider it if the event spans multiple days or evenings (IP26).

In-depth interviews revealed that four key thematic categories are crucial for individuals when considering the importance of dietary restrictions (Figure 1).

The category of limitations emerged as the most influential factor, encompassing restrictions such as attending events lasting more than a few hours or facing a severely limited food selection at the venue. Another significant aspect was the complexity associated with selecting appropriate meals and beverages, as well as the need for advanced planning, such as pre-purchasing or preparing food in advance and bringing it to the event. The interview participants also emphasized the importance of exercising caution during food selection and consumption.

The individuals most proportionately affected by limitations were identified as those following a saving diet, individuals with nut allergies, individuals with histamine intolerance, and those with combination of dietary restrictions. Individuals encountering multiple concurrent dietary restrictions most commonly indicated a combination of abstaining from pork and histamine intolerance, pork and gluten, pork and lactose, or adhering to a vegetarian diet while



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

Figure 1. Sankey diagram illustrating the main issues of the importance of dietary restrictions and special-need food categories

avoiding gluten. In fewer instances, combinations involving multiple intolerances or allergies were reported. Thus, it can be deduced that most individuals with combined dietary restrictions are likely to practice such restrictions primarily for religious purposes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that religious motivations were not explicitly mentioned by any participant during the interviews. This absence of direct reference to religious dietary rules suggests that the adherence to such restrictions might be embedded within broader lifestyle choices or perceived as culturally normalized behaviour rather than explicitly stated religious obligations.

In particular, individuals who have been dealing with allergies, intolerances, or special nutritional needs for 5 years or less reported experiencing the most significant limitations. Their responses consistently demonstrated how restricted they feel compared to other event attendees. On the contrary, people who have had specific dietary requirements for an extended period appeared to have adapted to the situation and demonstrated greater coping mechanisms. Rather than vehemently complaining about their limitations, they emphasized the availability of various alternatives, their ability to anticipate and proactively address situations, and their capability to find suitable food options despite certain restrictions. Additionally, they noted that the current variety of food and beverage offerings is significantly broader, contributing to their ability to manage dietary requirements effectively.

The limitations are most pronounced among young people who simultaneously participate in events more frequently, as well as among men and individuals with the lowest level of education.

The sentiment analysis of the in-depth interviews with regard to the importance of dietary restrictions and special dietary needs during visits to organized events (Figure 2) revealed that positive sentiment was the least common, accounting for only 4.55%. The predominant sentiment expressed by the interview participants was neutrality (81.49%). Negative sentiment followed with a significant margin (13.96%).

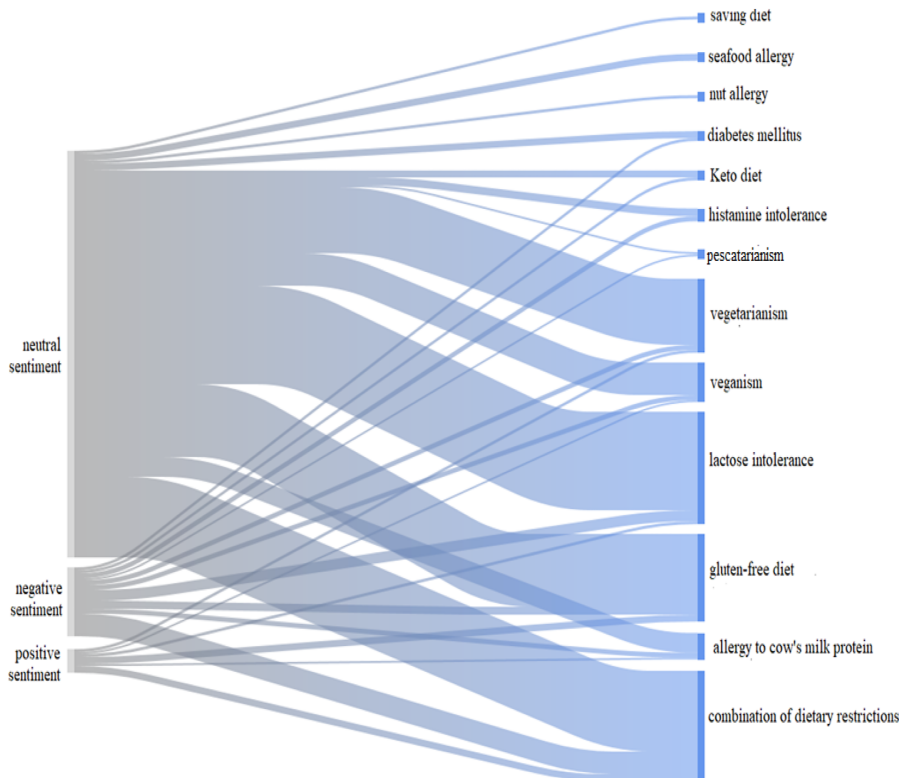
The limited presence of positive sentiment indicates that improving the provision of suitable food options and effectively accommodating dietary needs are areas that could enhance the experience and satisfaction of attendees. These insights highlight the importance of addressing the concerns of individuals with dietary restrictions and special food needs to ensure inclusion and optimize the visitor experience at organized events.

As highlighted by Zhang *et al.* (2022), neutral sentiment should not be automatically equated with consumer indifference. This sentiment can also signify a nuanced, comprehensive, and meticulous evaluation of a product, in our context, participation in an event that simultaneously encompasses both positive and negative emotions.

The presence of significant negative sentiment implies that participants with dietary limitations often encounter challenges or frustrations in navigating their dietary requirements at organized events. The negative sentiment was most pronounced among people following a pescetarian diet, those with histamine intolerance, and those with diabetes. On the contrary, positive sentiment prevailed among individuals with gluten intolerance and cow's milk protein intolerance. A relatively higher representation of sentiment was observed among people who have had dietary restrictions for more than 15 years. This pattern of sentiment distribution may be attributed to several factors. First, people following a pescetarian diet, histamine intolerance, and diabetes may face greater challenges in finding suitable food options at organized events due to the specific nature of their dietary requirements. Limited availability or lack of awareness about these nutritional needs may contribute to negative feelings among these individuals, e.g.

At the events, fast food is primarily promoted to maximize the profit of the seller but does not consider the group of people with specific dietary restrictions (IP145).

However, people with gluten intolerance and cow's milk protein intolerance may perceive positive sentiment due to the increasing availability of gluten-free and dairy-free options. Furthermore, people who have had dietary restrictions for an extended period may have developed a better understanding of their needs and established effective strategies to manage



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

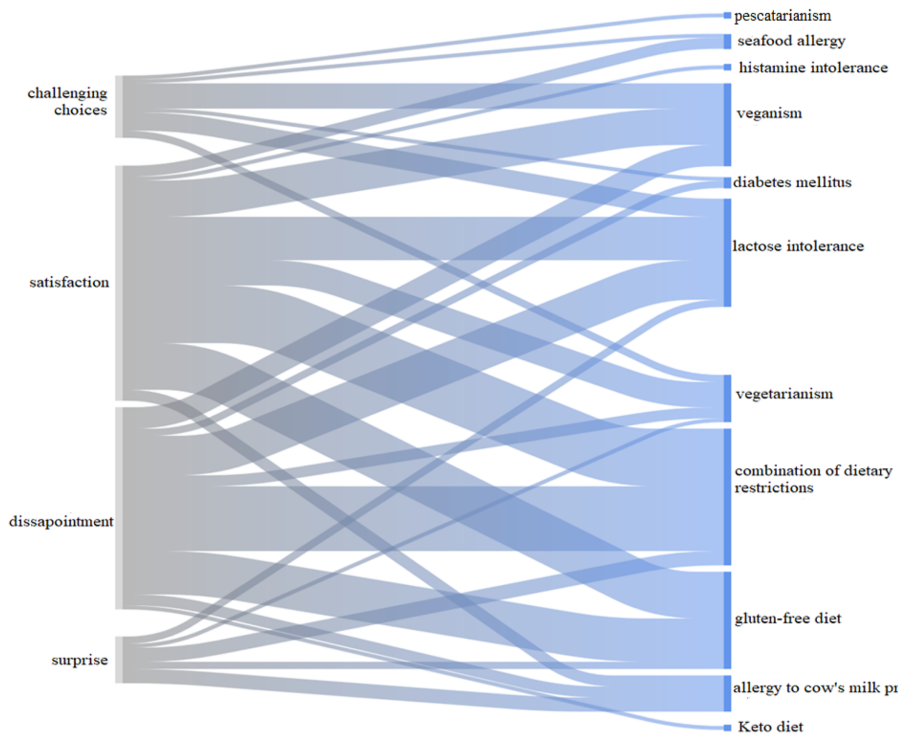
Figure 2. Sankey diagram illustrating the outputs of the sentiment analysis on the importance of dietary restrictions and special-need food categories

their dietary requirements. This increased familiarity and experience can contribute to a more positive sentiment among this group, as they are likely to have developed coping mechanisms and found reliable sources of suitable food options over time.

Meeting the expectations of event visitors

In the analysis of the fulfilment of attendees' expectations at organized events, four thematic categories were accentuated. These categories included satisfaction assessment, where some people expressed that, due to their dietary restrictions, they could always choose something, such as fries, from the alternatives offered, or they had no expectations as they only attended short events or brought their own food or medication (to help digest lactose). Others, however, expressed frustration and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, expressions of disappointment, surprise, and discussions about challenging food and beverage choices were observed (Figure 3).

Individuals with diabetes exhibited the highest level of disappointment. Vegetarians were the ones who mentioned satisfaction or dissatisfaction the most. In terms of challenging



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

Figure 3. Sankey diagram illustrating main issues in meeting the expectations of event visitors and special-need food categories

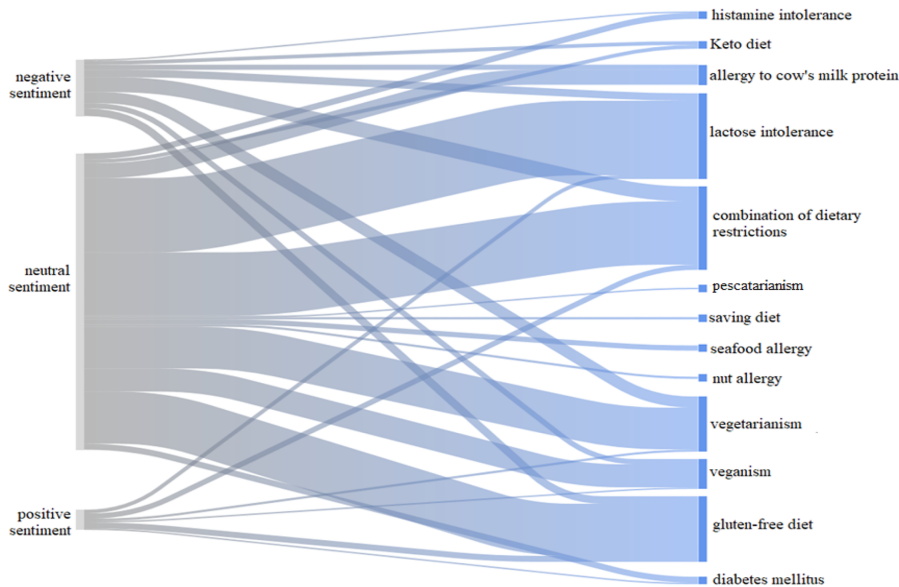
choices, respondents who identified as vegans spoke relatively the most, while expressions of surprise were predominantly found among people with a Keto diet.

For clearer interpretation, a sentiment analysis (Figure 4) was conducted, revealing that positive sentiment had a smaller presence (5.26%). This positive sentiment stemmed primarily from the observation that, compared to the past, current food and beverage services at events are more accommodating of dietary restrictions, providing options that are gluten-free and lactose-free.

The dominant sentiment was neutral (79.9%). This dominance of neutral emotions indicates the ambiguity in participants' responses, arising from the complexity of the issue, and highlights the multifaceted ways individuals manage the disparity between their internal needs and external stimuli, e.g.

Eating is a very community-based activity, whether we think about it in that way or not, so not being able to participate in it does mean you're not participating in the community around you too. Normal event attendees would not have that experience (IP6).

I hate to say it, but I'm often disappointed when I see people around me enjoying food that I can't. I often feel depressed, but I got used to it with age and I try to enjoy the event as much as possible despite the limitations I have (IP45).



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

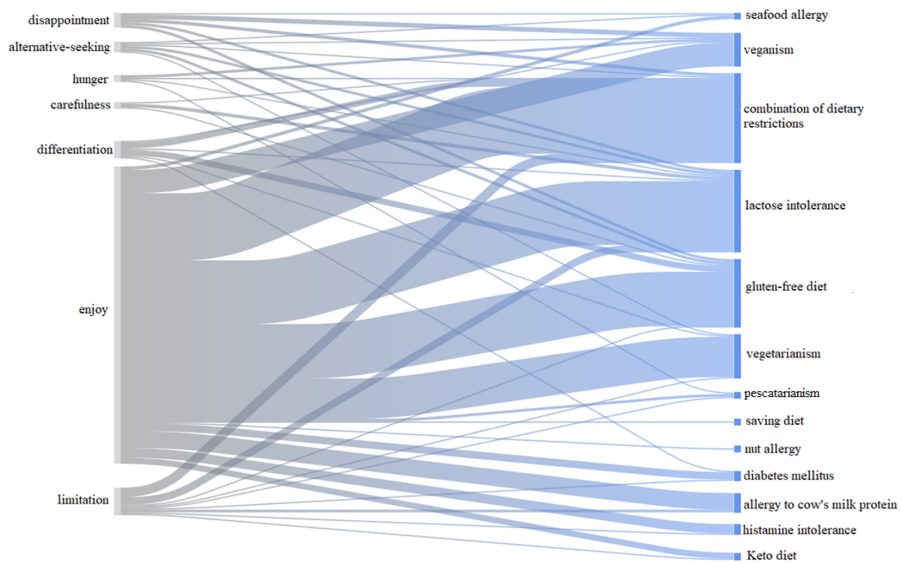
Source(s): Atlas.ti output

Figure 4. Sankey diagram illustrating the results of sentiment analysis of meeting the expectations of event visitors and food categories of special needs

Negative sentiment had the second largest representation (14.80%). Individuals following the Keto diet and those with cow's milk protein allergies demonstrated relatively higher levels of negative sentiment. This is mainly due to service providers not distinguishing between lactose intolerance and cow's milk protein allergy, offering lactose-free products as a solution. Negative sentiment was relatively more prominent among people with shorter periods of dietary restrictions who had not yet become accustomed to limited options in restaurants and organized events. Minimal differences were observed in terms of gender and education. Understanding and addressing these concerns can help improve the experience and satisfaction of the visitor.

Influence on the visitor experience at events

In exploring how dietary restrictions impact the visitor experience at organized events, a multitude of diverse topics emerged. Based on the frequency of words used in the responses of the respondents, seven key themes related to joy, disappointment, hunger, differentiation from other attendees, limitation, carefulness, and alternative search were identified (Figure 5). After applying codes using Atlas.ti software, it was observed that despite dietary restrictions, individuals strive to enjoy events and the experience is synonymous with happiness and joy for them. Among the various dietary restrictions, pescatarians and individuals following the Keto diet experience relatively greatest limitations in terms of event enjoyment. A notable divergence in experience, compared to other event attendees, is particularly evident among individuals with gluten intolerance. Hunger significantly hampers the experience of the event, particularly for pescatarians and vegans.



Note(s): The Sankey diagram illustrates the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of respondents belonging to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

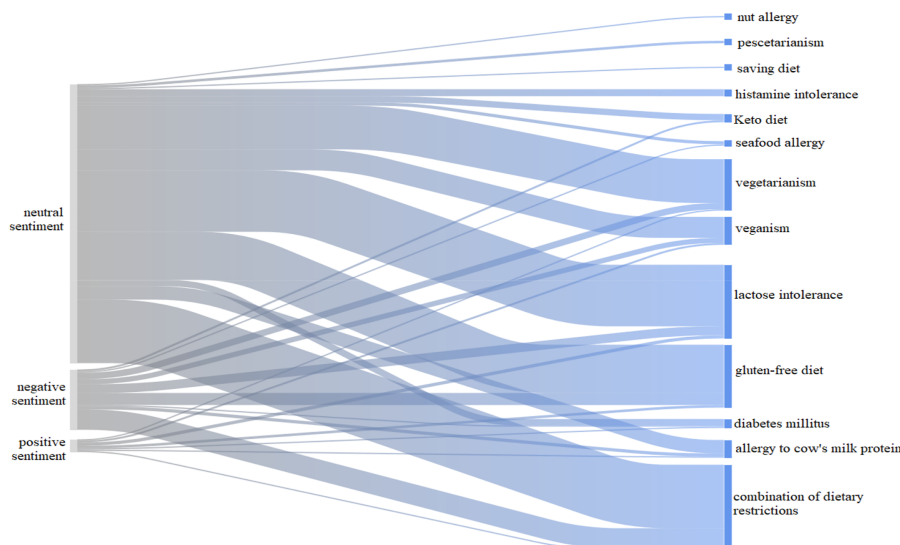
Figure 5. Sankey diagram illustrating main issues of dietary restrictions influence on visitor experience and special-need food categories

Similarly to previous instances, positive sentiment was observed in participant responses on how dietary restrictions and special dietary needs impact their event experience, although at a lower percentage (3.94%). Neutral sentiment (78.94%), characterized by its association with ambiguous emotions, was the predominant sentiment. Negative emotions constituted the second largest portion (17.12%) (Figure 6). If we accept the premise that sentiment analysis can forecast future demand, as suggested by Li et al. (2023), it becomes evident that having a prevalent neutral sentiment, followed by negative sentiment expressing individuals' discontent, does not bode well for event management.

Negative sentiment was relatively more prevalent among individuals with combined allergies/intolerances and those with shellfish allergies. Negative sentiment was relatively more dominant among men, people with university education, older people, and those with a moderate duration of dietary restrictions. This may be attributed to various factors, such as higher expectations or a longer history of navigating dietary limitations, which could potentially contribute to a greater awareness of the challenges and frustrations associated with dietary restrictions at events.

Suggestions for event organisers

As individuals with dietary restrictions have valuable experience in offering insights into practical measures that could enhance their inclusion and provide a more comprehensive experience in organized events, we sought their input in formulating feasible recommendations for event organizers. Drawing from examples of good practices encountered and their subjective opinions, the interview participants emphasized the importance of clear allergen labelling in menu offerings. They highlighted that menu



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

Figure 6. Sankey diagram illustrating the results of the sentiment analysis of the influence of dietary restrictions on the visitor experience at events and food categories of special need

displays, often presented as price lists with small fonts at event stalls, should prominently indicate allergens, for example:

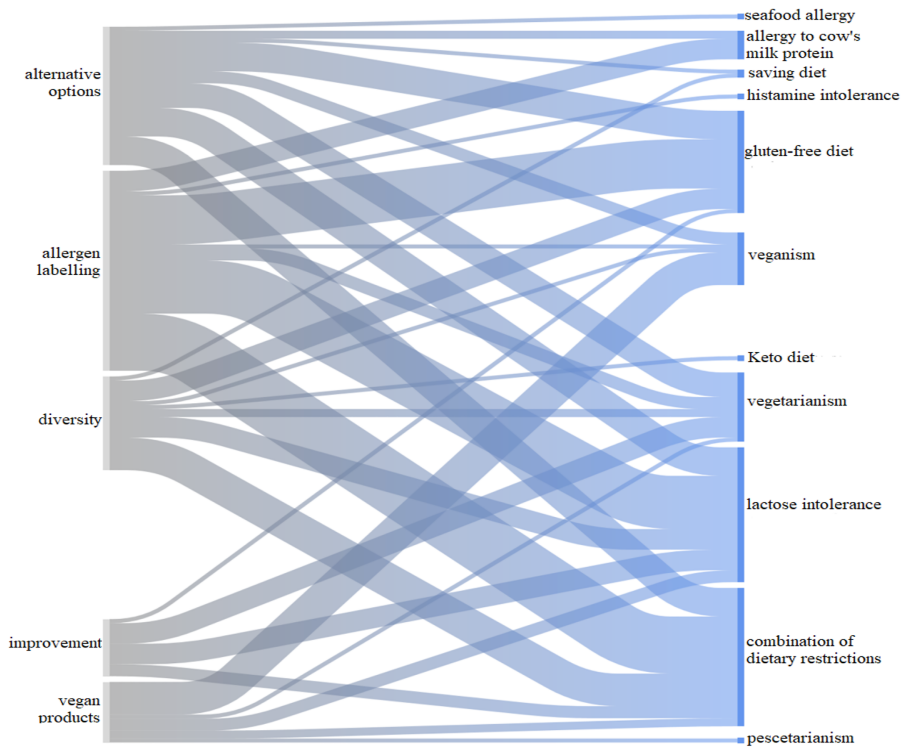
It would be helpful for me if there were more options available and if allergens were listed along with the food, as is commonly done in restaurants. At festivals, there is almost never any information about the food's content, so I think that should be changed (IP6).

This aspect holds particular significance for individuals with cow's milk protein allergies and those with combined allergies/intolerances. Furthermore, respondents underscored the need to provide multiple alternative ingredient options to accommodate a larger group of people with dietary restrictions, to ensure that the selection of food or beverages is suitable for a larger audience.

Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of diversifying food choices beyond standard options such as salads or fries. They advocated for the inclusion of vegan alternatives, as these cater to a wider spectrum of people with dietary restrictions, including vegans, pescatarians, vegetarians, individuals with lactose intolerance, and those with combination of dietary restrictions (Figure 7), for example:

I would appreciate a wider selection of plant-based products, preferably sourced locally, and an improvement in the quality and diversity of vegetarian and vegan dishes. It would be particularly gratifying to witness the adaptation of classic, traditional dishes into vegan versions (IP121).

Consequently, event organizers should prioritize the continuous improvement of the variety and quality of food services. This can be achieved through a meticulous selection of service providers and thoughtful negotiation of contracts with vendors, ensuring that the needs and preferences of people with dietary restrictions are adequately addressed.



Note(s): The Sankey diagram shows the frequency of responses, without taking into account the population size of interview participants that belong to individual categories based on dietary restrictions and special food needs

Source(s): Atlas.ti output

Figure 7. Sankey diagram illustrating main issues of suggestions for event organizers and special-need food categories

Discussion

Dietary restrictions significantly impact active living quality. Towers and Pratten (2003) emphasized the critical need, evident two decades ago, to provide suitable and harmless meals for those with special needs, as irreversible physical and legal consequences may occur in the tourism sector. The global population unable to consume regular food is on the rise. Medical literature, such as Nordhagen *et al.* (2021) and Kotchetkoff *et al.* (2023), addresses this issue more prominently than tourism studies, which have primarily focused on dining establishments. These studies range from health-driven restaurant choices (Schiefert and Matteucci, 2018) to lifestyle and religious preferences (Mohammadi *et al.*, 2023) on the demand side and the preparedness of hospitality staff on the supply side (Jianu and Goleț, 2019). Consequently, a research gap has been identified in the impact of heterogeneous dietary restrictions and special food needs on event participation, representing a fundamental contribution of this study. The discussion is significantly constrained, particularly in areas where studies addressing this issue are largely absent.

The experiences of attendees with dietary restrictions at organized events reveal noteworthy insights, emphasizing that their overall experience extends beyond mere service quality (Frochot, 2022). Despite dietary restrictions, individuals seek joy and happiness at

events, indicating that while food is crucial, it is not the sole determinant of a positive experience. [Lin et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted that other factor, such as comprehensive services and an excellent dining environment, also contribute significantly to the success of dining establishments at events. This underscores the complexity of services and the nature of the event as pivotal for attendee satisfaction. Similarly, [Weber and Lugosi \(2021\)](#) noted that food provision, traditionally viewed as a pure risk, presents opportunities for value creation. Therefore, effectively highlighting specialist food options in pre-event marketing can offer unique, engaging experiences for these segments, enhancing overall event success ([Weber and Lugosi, 2021](#)).

In general, tourism purchase decisions are predominantly experience-focused and pleasure-driven ([Kock et al., 2018](#)). However, visitors with dietary restrictions have limited flexibility in their decision-making before the event, and impulsive buying behaviour, where evaluating uncertain alternatives against future consequences ([Karl et al., 2021](#)), is minimized. This enriches the discussion of time scarcity on impulse buying behaviour of consumers, which still lacks consensus in the tourism literature ([Li et al., 2021](#)). Advanced planning is essential for individuals with dietary needs to have a positive experience. Participants prefer having written information to prepare for and during their dining experiences, providing them with more freedom and a sense of relaxation when eating out ([Begen et al., 2016](#)). Despite this, even well-established and prominent events with long-standing traditions currently do not typically provide attendees with specific written assurances regarding the availability of suitable dietary options during the event. For instance, the globally renowned Glastonbury Festival only provides relatively brief information, stating that food is available from 400 vendors, with an emphasis on diversity and the accommodation of specific dietary requirements.

Obviously, individuals with dietary requirements for over five years have adjusted and plan their participation in organized events. Therefore, individuals generally have a neutral attitude towards dietary restrictions and events. However, those with relatively new special dietary needs (less than 5 years) express negative emotions and frustration. This aligns with the conclusions of [Schiefert and Matteucci \(2018\)](#) who found that people with dietary restrictions due to intolerance/allergy feel guilt and perceive themselves as a burden when dining out. [Eren's \(2020\)](#) in-depth examination of travellers' gastronomy and tourism experiences revealed negative emotions: loneliness, isolation, shame, and guilt. In some cases, these dietary restrictions significantly discourage individuals from travelling ([Huang et al., 2020](#)). However, visitor perception and hesitation do not correspond to the attitude of foodservice workers and managers. [Nasseredine et al. \(2021\)](#) explored a positive approach toward 'special customers', but the ability to differentiate between food allergies and other dietary restrictions among kitchen staff and service personnel varies greatly ([Buca and Yiğit, 2021](#)).

Dietary restrictions not only affect visitors' experiences in restaurants and other hospitality facilities, but also impact their overall experience in the destination. Connecting consumers to the local context can be beneficial. Anchoring or forming an emotional connection to the place is crucial for building loyalty and positive word-of-mouth ([Frochot, 2022](#)). Thus, the economic consequences are much wider than for one stakeholder. Adaptation of destination supply would bring an engaged and loyal consumer.

We agree with [Frochot \(2022\)](#) that successful experiences are rich when addressing all five senses. Consequently, how can the enjoyment of a festival or a sports race be achieved when there is a constant concern about suitable food or cautiousness about dietary choices? Considering food as a fundamental physiological need, if it is not satisfied, it may hinder the fulfilment of higher-level needs. Therefore, dietary restrictions and principles based on health, religion, and lifestyle ([Kalenjuk and Tošić, 2018](#)) may not be excluded from the definition of the event experience.

This study acknowledges several limitations due to the relative novelty of the topic and the scope of the research.

Firstly, although the interview participants ranged in age from 15 to 65 years, there was a higher proportion of younger individuals. This age imbalance could influence the

generalizability of the findings, as younger participants may have different perspectives and experiences compared to older individuals. Additionally, the participants were from 18 countries, mostly from Europe, with fewer representations from South America and Australia. This geographical bias restricts the generalizability of the findings to a global context and may neglect regional variations in dietary restrictions and event experiences, including religious aspects. Given that Christianity, which predominates in Europe, imposes relatively few dietary restrictions (e.g. abstinence from meat on selected days) compared to other religions such as Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism, these contextual differences are likely to influence the observed outcomes and their applicability across diverse cultural settings.

While the study included participants with diverse dietary restrictions due to health, lifestyle, and religious reasons, religious reasons were only included in combined dietary restrictions. Given that adherence to a particular religion is a sensitive personal matter, direct questions regarding religious affiliation were avoided during the interviews. However, based on theoretical knowledge, it was anticipated that religious motivations for dietary restrictions would be more prominently reflected in the participants' responses. It can only be inferred that this lack of emphasis may be attributed to the fact that most participants were either atheists or Christians, whose dietary restrictions are minimal, limited to specific religious holidays. Another possible explanation is that individuals practicing religions with stricter dietary restrictions perceive their faith as an inherent part of their identity and, therefore, do not view it as restrictive; consequently, it may not have occurred to them to mention this aspect during the interviews. Additionally, the availability of meal options that exclude pork or meat altogether, as well as non-alcoholic beverages, during events might also explain why dietary restrictions based on religious beliefs were not prominently highlighted by the participants.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted in various languages and later translated into English using Microsoft Translator. Although translations were verified for accuracy by a native English speaker, nuances in language and cultural context may have been lost or misinterpreted during the translation process.

The sentiment analysis, which was used to interpret the emotional responses of participants, is inherently subjective. The predominant neutral sentiment observed in responses could signify both indifference and a balanced evaluation of experiences, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions about participant satisfaction. Furthermore, purposeful sampling was used to select participants with specific dietary restrictions and event experiences. While this approach is effective for gathering in-depth insights from a targeted population, it may introduce selection bias and limit the study's ability to generalize findings to the broader population.

This study paves the way for several important avenues for future research. First, it is essential to explore various event types more comprehensively. Since visitors' expectations may differ significantly across different events, such as street food festivals versus sports races, investigating these variations can provide deeper insights into how dietary restrictions affect the enjoyment and satisfaction of attendees. Understanding these differences can help tailor event planning and food service provisions more effectively to meet diverse needs.

Another area for future research is the supply side of food services at events. Specifically, examining food providers' attitudes and preparedness to cater to individuals with dietary restrictions during mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, could offer valuable information. This line of inquiry should include the readiness of food vendors to accommodate dietary needs related to health, ethics, and religion. Additionally, studying the demand for specific types of meals, such as Halal, Kosher, and vegetarian/vegan options, could reveal critical gaps and opportunities for better inclusivity in event catering.

Moreover, the intersection of religion and event experiences presents rich opportunities for further examination. Future studies could investigate how religious dietary laws impact participation and satisfaction at events. For instance, assessing the availability and quality of Halal and Kosher food options at large-scale events could provide insights into how well these needs are being met and what improvements are necessary.

Lastly, future studies could delve into the economic implications of catering to dietary restrictions at events. Understanding the financial benefits and challenges for event organizers in providing inclusive food options could provide valuable insights into the feasibility and impact of such measures.

Conclusions

The pioneering study underscores the importance of inclusivity in organized events. Inclusion should be multilayered and not limited to visible differences alone. The study shows that dietary restrictions affect event attendance differently depending on the duration and nature of the event, as well as the duration of dietary restrictions. Since the survey was conducted on a sample from 18 countries, its findings offer a clear international perspective. The study has significant implications for raising public awareness about the importance of addressing food-related barriers and advises tourism service providers that accommodating individuals with dietary restrictions may impact quality of life. It expands our understanding of inclusivity in events and the way food influences the overall event experience, going beyond just its taste. It contributes to event management knowledge, filling a gap in existing literature and opening avenues for further research.

The study's findings are also valuable for educating future event, destination, and marketing professionals, enhancing relevant courses.

The current research has important managerial implications. First, while food and beverage provision at events without considering dietary restrictions may not immediately lead to participant dissatisfaction; sentiment analysis suggest that it can affect future event attendance, affecting the success of future editions of the event. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize addressing food-related barriers.

Second, it emphasizes the need for meticulous planning and provision of diverse food options that cater to various dietary restrictions. This could involve the inclusion of vegan, gluten-free, and allergy-friendly options prominently labelled with clear ingredient information. Event organizers should collaborate closely with food vendors to ensure the availability of meals that accommodate health-related, lifestyle, and religious dietary needs. Religious dietary restrictions should be given particular consideration in countries with populations practicing faiths where dietary limitations are an inherent aspect, such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and others. Ensuring the availability of meals that accommodate religious dietary needs, even in Europe where such practices are less prevalent, aligns with ethical inclusivity and strategic benefits. Providing Halal, Kosher, or other compliant options demonstrates cultural sensitivity and supports principles of accessible tourism, fostering a welcoming environment for diverse audiences. Strategically, such accommodations enhance an event's reputation, attract international and multicultural attendees, and position it as inclusive and forward-thinking. Minimal adjustments, such as partnering with caterers to offer clearly labelled compliant options, can significantly reduce participation barriers and improve attendee satisfaction. Addressing religious dietary needs supports event success by broadening market appeal, encouraging positive word-of-mouth, and promoting repeat attendance. These efforts contribute to a competitive advantage in a globalized event landscape.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of pre-event communication regarding available food options. Event websites and promotional materials should provide detailed information about the dietary accommodations in place. This transparency allows attendees to make informed decisions and plan accordingly, reducing anxiety and enhancing their overall experience. Utilizing digital platforms and social media to disseminate this information can also broaden the reach and effectiveness of these communications.

Finally, the research suggests that training and educating event staff on dietary restrictions and food safety is crucial. This training ensures that staff can handle food-related inquiries and emergencies effectively, contributing to a safer and more inclusive event environment.

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