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Digital Rights in Gastronomy Tourism: A Qualitative Study of Academics' Perspectives*

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Abstract
Digitalization has transformed the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of gastronomy tourism. Despite the increasing use of digital platforms throughout this transformation process, attention to digital rights has remained limited. This study examines the awareness, perceptions, and critical evaluations of academics working in the fields of tourism and gastronomy at universities in Türkiye regarding digital rights in gastronomy tourism. Designed as a qualitative study, the research employed a written semi-structured interview form, and the data obtained from 12 academics were analyzed through content analysis. According to the participants, awareness of digital rights in gastronomy tourism is generally low. On the other hand, issues such as data privacy, informed consent, digital surveillance, and the misuse of customer information—particularly in small-scale enterprises—remain prevalent. Furthermore, the participants highlighted inadequate data protection practices, the ineffective implementation of legal regulations, the lack of institutional ethical guidelines, and the limited academic interest in digital governance within the sector. By focusing on a relatively underexplored area, the study offers recommendations for the development of ethical, sustainable, and rights-based digital governance strategies in gastronomy tourism.
Keywords: *Digitalization, digital ethics, digital rights, data security, gastronomy tourism*

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1. Introduction

With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, individuals' rights in digital environments have become an important concern in contemporary societies. In experience-oriented sectors such as tourism, digitalization has transformed not only service delivery and marketing practices but also the ways in which personal data are collected, processed, and shared. Recent studies emphasize that access to digital services and platforms in tourism constitutes not only a technical issue but also a legal and ethical responsibility, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Burke, Sanney & Clapper, 2020). In this respect, digital transformation in tourism directly affects issues of privacy, accessibility, transparency, and user autonomy.

Gastronomy tourism, which increasingly relies on digital platforms for promotion, reservation systems, and experience sharing, represents a particularly sensitive context in terms of privacy, data security, and user autonomy. Online reservation systems, mobile applications, loyalty programs, and social media platforms enable the extensive collection and analysis of personal data. While these practices support service personalization and operational efficiency, they also increase the risk of data misuse and unauthorized information sharing. Previous research highlights the importance of ethical data management and trust-based digital relationships in tourism, emphasizing the need for governance frameworks grounded in fairness and accountability (Yallop & Seraphin, 2023).

Although tourism literature has extensively examined digital transformation, most studies have focused primarily on technological innovation, customer satisfaction, and service efficiency. Research addressing digital rights from a comprehensive ethical and rights-based perspective remains limited, especially in the context of gastronomy tourism. Legal studies in different national contexts have revealed significant gaps in the regulation of data privacy, digital contracts, and freedom of expression within tourism services, indicating structural weaknesses in the protection of digital rights (Achilova, 2024). However, these issues are often discussed indirectly, without systematically analyzing how digital rights are recognized and implemented in daily sectoral practices.

Previous research has mainly focused on consumers and businesses, while the role of academics has received limited attention. However, as key actors in shaping ethical awareness and professional practices, academics influence both workforce training and policy development. In this context, this study examines limited awareness and weak implementation of digital rights in gastronomy tourism, emphasizing that violations such as unauthorized data use and lack of transparency may undermine trust, reputation, and legal compliance.

The study aims to explore how academics working in tourism and gastronomy departments perceive and evaluate digital rights. Using a qualitative design based on written semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to answer the following questions: How do academics conceptualize digital rights? What challenges do they identify regarding data protection and legal compliance? What strategies do they propose to strengthen ethical and institutional practices?

By focusing specifically on gastronomy tourism and academic perspectives, this study offers recommendations for developing more ethical, transparent, and sustainable digital governance practices in the sector.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section explains the main concepts related to digital rights and gastronomy tourism.

2.1. Understanding Digital Rights

Digital rights encompass a broad and diverse range of entitlements that users hold concerning their access to the internet, their interactions with digital devices, and their ability to use these tools effectively (Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany, 2021; Celeste, 2022). These fundamental and inalienable rights are increasingly being recognized and conceptualized as a new and vital category of human rights. This growing

recognition underscores the need for strong protections, rigorous frameworks, and strict legal regulations to prevent users from experiencing serious violations or loss of rights now and in the future (Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany, 2021; Petryshyn & Hyliaka, 2021; Li et al., 2024).

The rapid expansion of online platforms and digital services, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified individuals' dependence on digital infrastructures for work, education, and social interaction (Mariani & Nambisan, 2021; Kerber, 2023). This transformation has simultaneously increased exposure to risks such as unauthorized data use, digital surveillance, and unequal access to digital resources. As a result, the protection of digital rights has become a critical concern for both policymakers and researchers.

Beyond legal protections, digital rights also encompass the ethical responsibilities of technology providers and platform operators regarding data management, content moderation, and algorithmic decision-making (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021; Voitsikhovskyi et al., 2021). In this regard, digital rights function not only as individual entitlements but also as governance mechanisms shaping digital practices across sectors.

In this study, digital rights are approached through three interrelated dimensions: data privacy, informed consent, and fair access to digital services. These dimensions are particularly relevant in experience-oriented sectors such as gastronomy tourism, where personalization, online visibility, and user-generated content play a central role. By focusing on these specific aspects, the study seeks to move beyond general discussions of digital rights and establish a more sector-sensitive analytical framework.

2.2. Digital Rights, and Ethical Challenges in Gastronomy Tourism

The tourism sector is undergoing a rapid process of digital transformation with the widespread adoption of data-driven platforms, personalized services, and online content networks. Within this process, gastronomy tourism has gained a distinctive position by strengthening cultural representation and enhancing experiential value through digital storytelling (Boiko et al., 2021; Liu, 2022; Hjalager, 2022; Ingrassia et al., 2022). Social media, online review systems, and digital marketing tools have become fundamental instruments in the creation and dissemination of gastronomic experiences (Altun et al., 2022; Vukolic et al., 2022).

Unlike standardized tourism models, gastronomy tourism is based on personalized experiences, local narratives, and close interaction between producers and consumers (Richards, 2021). This structure necessitates the continuous collection of user-generated content, location data, and consumption preferences, thereby rendering digital rights and data privacy issues more sensitive and complex within the sector (Stylos et al., 2021; Cuomo et al., 2021; Troisi et al., 2023).

While the intensive use of personal data contributes to service improvement and experience customization, it also raises ethical concerns related to surveillance, profiling, and the construction of digital identities (Li & Cao, 2022; Yallop et al., 2023). Algorithm-based guidance can influence tourists' decision-making processes and limit individual autonomy. Therefore, the protection of digital rights constitutes not only a legal obligation but also a strategic necessity for sustaining trust in gastronomic destinations and preserving cultural integrity.

Despite regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the practical implementation of data protection principles on tourism-oriented digital platforms remains insufficient (Presthus & Sønslien, 2021; Ruohonen & Hjerppe, 2022). Privacy policies are often presented in highly technical language and embedded within complex digital interfaces, which makes it difficult for users to make informed choices (Tang et al., 2021). Moreover, formal compliance with legal standards does not always guarantee the effective protection of users' rights in everyday digital practices (Gong & Schroeder, 2022).

Another significant issue is the limited level of awareness of digital rights among gastronomy tourism stakeholders. Many practitioners and content producers lack adequate knowledge of data management, digital infrastructure, and ethical responsibilities (Hjalager, 2022; Vukolic et al., 2022). Furthermore, the

limited number of sector-specific regulations and social initiatives directly addressing digital rights in gastronomy tourism indicates an institutional gap (Gössling, 2021; Yallop et al., 2023). This situation increases digital vulnerability for both service providers and consumers.

Existing studies generally approach digitalization, data privacy, and ethical issues in tourism from a broad perspective and pay insufficient attention to the distinctive characteristics of gastronomy tourism. Consequently, the ways in which digital rights are perceived, implemented, and negotiated in this field remain largely underexplored. This represents a significant gap in the literature in terms of stakeholder awareness and sector-specific risks.

3. Literature Review

Gastronomy tourism has gained increasing importance in recent years as a form of tourism that highlights the cultural identity of destinations and contributes to local development by offering authentic food-based experiences (Hjalager, 2022; Ingrassia et al., 2022). The rapid development of digital technologies has led to the transfer of many processes, such as promotion, reservation systems, experience sharing, and customer interaction, to digital platforms, significantly transforming this field (Gössling, 2021; Stylos et al., 2021). While this transformation supports operational efficiency and service personalization, it has also intensified concerns related to personal data protection, privacy, accessibility, and ethical responsibility (Yallop & Seraphin, 2023; Cheng & Zhang, 2023). In this context, the concept of digital rights has become increasingly important in tourism and gastronomy tourism, particularly in terms of data security, user consent, transparency, and equal access to digital services. Previous studies have examined digitalization in tourism from various perspectives, including technological innovation, big data applications, smart tourism, digital ethics, and legal regulations (Pan et al., 2021; Gössling, 2021; Achilova, 2024).

The studies presented in Table 1 were selected based on their relevance to digital rights, digital ethics, and digital transformation in tourism and related fields. In addition to tourism-focused studies, theoretical and interdisciplinary research on digital rights was included to establish a comprehensive conceptual and legal framework for the present study (Custers, 2022; Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021).

An examination of the relevant literature reveals that some studies directly focus on tourism and gastronomy tourism (Hjalager, 2022; Ingrassia et al., 2022; Li & Cao, 2022), while others provide fundamental theoretical foundations for the protection of individual rights in digital environments (Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany, 2021; Custers, 2022). Studies addressing digital human rights, digital citizenship, and ethical data governance make significant contributions to understanding how individual rights should be protected on tourism-related digital platforms (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021; Yallop & Seraphin, 2023).

Tourism-oriented studies mainly focus on digital accessibility, ethical data management, smart tourism applications, big data usage, and social media-based experience design (Burke et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2021; Cuomo et al., 2021). These studies highlight both the opportunities and risks associated with digital transformation and emphasize the need for responsible data practices and inclusive digital policies (Werthner, 2022; Cheng & Zhang, 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature, comprehensive studies that address digital rights in gastronomy tourism from a rights-based and institutional perspective remain limited. Most existing studies evaluate digitalization primarily from technological or managerial viewpoints and address rights-related issues only indirectly (Gössling, 2021; Stylos et al., 2021). Fundamental questions regarding how digital rights are recognized, implemented, and monitored within the sector remain largely unanswered (Achilova, 2024).

This situation indicates that the framework for digital rights in gastronomy tourism is still in its developmental stage and highlights the need for systematic and interdisciplinary research. Addressing digitalization not only from a technological perspective but also from ethical, legal, and social dimensions

constitutes the main rationale of the present study (Werthner, 2022; Yallop & Seraphin, 2023). In this context, examining the perceptions and evaluations of academics working in tourism and gastronomy departments regarding digital rights is expected to contribute to increasing sectoral awareness and to supporting the development of effective policy and governance mechanisms.

Table 1. Relevant Literature

Author(s)	Focus Area	Relevance to Tourism/Gastronomy	Key Findings
Custers (2022)	Digital human rights	Provides conceptual basis for data protection and privacy in tourism platforms	Introduces new digital rights such as the right to be forgotten and highlights the economic value of personal data
Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany (2021)	Online human rights	Offers legal framework for tourism-related digital services	Argues that traditional human rights must be redefined for digital environments
Pangrazio & Sefton-Green (2021)	Digital citizenship	Supports understanding of tourists' digital behavior	Links digital literacy and rights awareness to responsible platform use
Özcan (2021)	Digital ethics	Explains ethical challenges in tourism education and management	Emphasizes the need for clear digital ethics guidelines
Cheng & Zhang (2023)	Corporate digital responsibility	Relevant for tourism enterprises' data practices	Argues for proactive ethical responsibility beyond legal compliance
Werthner (2022)	Digital humanism	Applies human-centered design to e-tourism	Advocates inclusive and ethical digital tourism policies
Gössling (2021)	ICT in tourism	Explains structural impact of ICT on tourism systems	Proposes a four-stage model of digital transformation
Pan et al. (2021)	Smart tourism ethics	Examines stakeholder power relations	Develops ethical principles for smart tourism
Burke et al. (2020)	Digital accessibility	Focuses on inclusive tourism services	Highlights accessibility as legal and ethical duty
Yallop & Seraphin (2023)	Data ethics	Provides governance framework for tourism data	Emphasizes trust-based data management
Hjalager (2022)	Gastronomy innovation	Directly related to gastronomy tourism	Analyzes digital innovation in food tourism
Ingrassia et al. (2022)	Influencer marketing	Explains social media's role in food tourism	Shows impact of influencers on destination image
Cuomo et al. (2021)	Big social data	Supports experience co-design	Demonstrates participatory tourism planning
Stylos et al. (2021)	Big data analytics	Improves tourism service personalization	Proposes integrated big data framework
Li & Cao (2022)	UGC analysis	Explains tourist decision-making	Uses NLP to analyze digital preferences
Achilova (2024)	Digital law	Legal basis for tourism services	Identifies regulatory gaps in tourism digital rights

4. Methodology

This section explains the research design, data collection process, and data analysis method used in the study.

4.1. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how academics in the fields of gastronomy and tourism perceive and evaluate digital rights in the context of digital transformation. By focusing on issues of privacy, data security, and equitable access in data-driven and personalized tourism environments, the study contributes to the literature by enhancing understanding of sector-specific awareness and practices. In

addition, it reveals how digital rights are interpreted within gastronomy tourism and offers an empirically grounded basis for the development of ethical, user-centered, and applicable digital governance policies.

4.2. Data Collection Tool

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on an inductive approach. As a data collection tool, an online written semi-structured interview technique was employed. The interview questions were developed through an extensive literature review (Burke et al., 2020; Özcan, 2021; Pan et al., 2021; Yallop et al., 2023; Werthner, 2022; Achilova, 2024) and were reviewed by four experts to ensure content validity. Based on expert feedback, the interview form was revised and finalized. The Table 2 presents the demographics of these experts.

Table 2. Demographic Information of Experts

Experts (Codes)	Title	Department
E1	Prof.	Tourism Management
E2	Assoc. Prof.	Tourism Management
E3	Asst. Prof.	Gastronomy and Culinary Arts
E4	Asst. Prof.	Gastronomy and Culinary Arts

A pilot study was not conducted because the interview questions had undergone comprehensive expert evaluation and multiple revisions prior to data collection, which is considered an effective method for ensuring content validity in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015; Patton, 2015). In addition, participants' responses were continuously reviewed during the data collection process, and no major comprehension problems were identified. The experts evaluated the written semi-structured interviews' questions as "necessary," "unnecessary," or "necessary but insufficient," and also provided additional suggestions, which contributed to the refinement and clarity of the final interview form.

The interview form consisted of seven core questions, eight probe questions, and four demographic questions (Table 3). The core questions were designed to address key dimensions such as digitalization, data security, ethical risks, legal compliance, and policy development in gastronomy tourism. Broad-scope questions were analytically examined by being divided into sub-dimensions during the coding and thematization process. Probe questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses and contributed to the identification of themes and deeper interpretation during the analysis process.

Table 3. Interview Questions

No	Questions
Q1	**1.** What does digitalization mean in the context of gastronomy tourism? • *How would you define digitalization based on your own experience?*
Q2	**2.** What are the positive and negative effects of digitalization in gastronomy tourism? • *What opportunities and challenges has digitalization brought to the sector?*
Q3	**3.** What kinds of practices have you encountered regarding the protection of personal data on digital platforms used in gastronomy tourism (reservation systems, ordering apps, loyalty programs, etc.)? • *What measures should be taken to improve data security?* • *How adequate, feasible, and impactful are these measures for the sector?*
Q4	**4.** To what extent do businesses in the field of gastronomy tourism comply with existing legal regulations regarding the protection of personal data? • *What are your opinions on the adequacy of current legal regulations?*
Q5	**5.** What ethical risks may arise from the unauthorized use or third-party sharing of customer data? • *What measures should businesses take in this regard?*
Q6	**6.** What policies should be developed to manage digitalization in gastronomy tourism within the framework of ethical principles? • *What might be the potential effects of these policies on sectoral stakeholders?*
Q7	**7.** What methods can tourism and gastronomy academics use to raise awareness about digital data security and ethics? • *How can education and awareness-raising efforts be made more effective?*

The demographic questions addressed to the participants included "gender," "academic title," "department," and "years of academic experience".

Data were collected through a written semi-structured interviews form sent to participants via online platforms. Participants responded to the questions in written form at their own convenience. Although this method limited real-time interaction, it allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed and well-considered responses. When necessary, additional clarification was requested from participants.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured by assigning codes to participants, and all data were stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the researchers. No personal information was shared with third parties.

4.3. Research Sample

The sample of this study consists of academics working in the Departments of Tourism Management and Gastronomy and Culinary Arts at public and foundation universities in Turkey. A combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling, both non-probability sampling methods, was employed in determining the sample. Purposive sampling was preferred to ensure the collection of data from participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience directly related to the research topic. Convenience sampling, on the other hand, facilitated access to available participants and increased the feasibility of the study during the data collection process (Akbaba et al., 2021).

To provide contextual information regarding the research population, previous studies in related fields were reviewed. For instance, Semint and Özbay (2021) reported that 406 academic staff were working in Gastronomy and Culinary Arts departments across Turkey, while Özdemir (2024) stated that approximately 555 academic staff were employed in Tourism Management departments. However, due to the absence of a centralized and up-to-date official database in these fields, these figures cannot be considered definitive and are presented solely to provide a general framework regarding the size of the research population.

In qualitative research, unlike quantitative studies, there is no strict requirement to reach a predetermined number of participants. The primary concern is whether the collected data sufficiently meet the informational needs of the researcher. Therefore, participant selection is based on purposive criteria rather than representativeness, with particular attention given to participants' relevance to the research topic (Türnüklü, 2000, p. 548; Punch, 2011, p. 183; İslamoğlu, 2011, p. 189). Although the sample size may appear limited compared to quantitative studies, the main objective of qualitative research is not statistical generalization but the generation of in-depth and rich data. In this context, sample adequacy is commonly evaluated based on the principle of data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this study, data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, and after a certain stage, it was observed that additional data no longer yielded new themes or concepts. Accordingly, thematic saturation was considered to have been achieved with the current sample size.

Data were collected from 12 academics who agreed to participate in the study between May 15 and May 30, 2025, through written responses via online platforms. Participants were coded as P1, P2, …, P12, and their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Pt.	Gender	Academic Title	Department	Experience
P1	Male	Assoc. Prof.	TM	10 years
P2	Male	Prof.	TM	25 years
P3	Female	Assoc. Prof.	GCA	20 years
P4	Male	Asst. Prof.	GCA	2 years
P5	Female	Assoc. Prof.	TM	14 years
P6	Female	Asst. Prof.	TM	7 years

P7	Female	Asst Prof.	GCA	12 years
P8	Male	Prof.	TM	16 years
Table 4 continued				
P9	Male	Assoc Prof.	TM	9 years
P10	Female	Asst Prof.	GCA	5 years
P11	Female	Asst Prof.	GCA	5 years
P12	Male	Assoc. Prof.	GCA	10 years

Notes: Pt. = Participants; TM = Tourism Management; GCA = Gastronomy and Culinary Arts; Exp. = Years of Academic Experience

5. Findings

In this study, qualitative data were analyzed using the content analysis method through a systematic and multi-stage procedure. The analysis process was structured to ensure transparency, analytical rigor, and methodological consistency.

In the first stage, participants' written responses were read repeatedly in order to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Subsequently, open coding was conducted. During this stage, meaningful words, phrases, and sentences reflecting participants' experiences and perceptions were examined in detail. Expressions indicating similar meanings, attitudes, and practices were grouped under preliminary codes. For example, statements such as "accessibility" and "speed" were classified under codes related to efficiency and ease of use in digital applications.

In the second stage, the preliminary codes were analyzed using the constant comparison method based on conceptual similarity, contextual relevance, and analytical relationships. Codes referring to similar phenomena were clustered to form sub-themes. Newly identified codes were systematically compared with existing ones to ensure internal consistency. For instance, codes such as "data-driven decision support," and "promotion of local culture" were grouped under the sub-theme of "global reach," as they reflected the association between digitalization and access to international markets.

In the third stage, sub-themes were integrated into higher-order themes in line with the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study. Theme construction was guided by three main criteria: (1) conceptual coherence, (2) alignment with research objectives, and (3) explanatory capacity. Accordingly, sub-themes reflecting different dimensions of digital transformation were organized under broader themes such as "Meaning and Scope of Digitalization," "Impacts of Digitalization," "Data Security and Personal Data," "Legal Compliance and Supervision," "Ethical Risks and Corporate Responsibility," "Development of Ethical Policies," and "Role of Academics".

The distinction between themes and sub-themes was made to enhance analytical depth and structural clarity. For example, the theme "Impacts of Digitalization" was divided into "Positive Aspects" and "Negative Aspects" in order to reflect the dual nature of participants' experiences. Within these sub-themes, more specific analytical categories, such as personalization, cultural superficiality, and digital addiction, were identified. This hierarchical structure enabled a more detailed interpretation of digitalization processes in gastronomy tourism and facilitated a systematic comparison of positive and negative dimensions.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, the coding scheme and thematic structure developed by the researcher were independently reviewed by two field experts. The experts evaluated the consistency between codes and themes, conceptual clarity, and the representational adequacy of selected quotations. This approach contributed to strengthening data reliability through the peer debriefing method recommended in qualitative research (Miles & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2010, p. 737). Based on their feedback, some codes were redefined, similar codes were merged, and certain sub-themes were reorganized. For example, codes such as "speed," "accessibility," and "convenience," which were initially examined separately, were later evaluated more comprehensively under the theme "Meaning and Scope of

Digitalization." Likewise, codes such as "global reach," "promotion of local culture," and "personalization" were grouped under the sub-theme "Positive Aspects of Digitalization." These revisions strengthened the analytical consistency of the findings and the conceptual coherence of the thematic structure.

Participant quotations were used not only as descriptive illustrations but also as analytical evidence supporting the development of specific codes and themes. Each quotation was selected to demonstrate how particular meanings and experiences were conceptualized. Brief interpretive comments were provided in the text to clarify the relationship between quotations and analytical categories. For example, the statement "It has turned dining experiences into a tool for creating a digital self (P2)" represents the code "digital self" and contributes to the theme "Meaning and Scope of Digitalization" by illustrating how digital platforms shape identity construction in gastronomy tourism. Similarly, the expression "People now think more about sharing what they eat than actually enjoying it (P3)" supports the code "cultural superficiality," reflecting the reduction of authentic experiences to digital representations. In addition, the statement "Reservation systems are very practical, but we do not know how our personal data are used (P5)" contributes to the theme "Data Security and Personal Data." Such quotations not only describe participants' perceptions but also demonstrate how analytical categories were generated and how themes were systematically constructed.

As a result of this multi-stage analytical process, the final structure of themes, sub-themes, and codes is presented in Table 5. The findings reveal how academics conceptualize digitalization in gastronomy tourism, evaluate its impacts, perceive ethical and legal challenges, and define their professional responsibilities in the digital environment.

Table 5. Codes and Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Codes	Representative Quotes
Meaning and Scope of Digitalization	-	Speed, accessibility, convenience, personalization of experiences, pre-access to information, virtual experiences, digital self	"It has turned dining experiences into a tool for creating a digital self (P2)."
Impacts of Digitalization	*Positive Aspects*	Global reach, service speed, personalization, promotion of local culture, data-driven decision support	"Presenting menus via QR codes provides great convenience(P1)."
	Negative Aspects	Cultural superficiality, loss of human interaction, digital divide, manipulation of reviews, digital addiction	"There are risks such as the degradation of authentic experiences (P3)."
Data Security and Personal Data	-	Informed consent, encryption, KVKK/GDPR compliance, limitations of small businesses, user control	"Data security is not just the responsibility of large enterprises, but of the entire sector (P12)."
Legal Compliance and Supervision	-	Partial compliance with regulations, lack of inspection, small vs. large business differences, need for training	"There is legislation, but implementation is weak; guidance is essential (P10)."
Ethical Risks and Corporate Responsibility	-	Privacy violations, reputational damage, unethical data use, lack of training	"Data should be treated not as a commodity but as a trust (P7)."
Development of Ethical Policies	-	Transparent data management, clear information, cultural sensitivity, supervision mechanisms	"Digital ethics is not just about complying with laws but about creating human-centered experiences (P11)."

Table 5 continues

Role of Academics	-	Curriculum integration, practical training, industry collaboration, social contribution, academic publications	"We need to raise students' awareness through real-life case studies (P6)."

6. Discussion

Gastronomy tourism, as a sector encompassing both traditional and experience-oriented practices, is highly exposed to the intensive use of digital technologies. This exposure not only creates new opportunities but also introduces uncertainties and risks. Digitalization plays a crucial role in planning, sharing, and personalizing gastronomy experiences, affecting consumer behaviors and the visibility of destinations (Gössling, 2021; Hjalager, 2022). This study examined the awareness, attitudes, and criticisms of academics specialized in gastronomy and tourism regarding digital rights, thereby systematically identifying the key challenges encountered during the digitalization of gastronomy tourism and how these challenges are perceived. When compared with the broader literature, the findings provide sector-specific insights and highlight the distinctive contributions of academics in shaping digital practices.

6.1. The Meaning and Scope of Digitalization

Participants perceived digitalization not merely as a technological tool but as a process transforming social interactions, consumption practices, and identity construction. This finding emphasizes that digitalization has operational, cultural, and experiential dimensions (Gössling, 2021; Hjalager, 2022). In particular, the visibility of gastronomy experiences on social media and online platforms alters consumer behaviors and generates new opportunities for destination promotion (Ingrassia et al., 2022). The increased reliance on digital tools and the proliferation of experience sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mariani & Nambisan, 2021; Kerber, 2023) parallel the findings of this study. Moreover, the integration of experiences into the "digital self" on social media highlights the symbolic and cultural aspects of digitalization (Li & Cao, 2022). This indicates that not only gastronomy tourism experiences but also cultural values and identity production are being reshaped in digital contexts.

6.2. The Impacts of Digitalization: Opportunities and Threats

Digitalization offers several opportunities for gastronomy tourism: increasing the visibility of small businesses, enabling personalized experiences, and promoting local cuisines on a global scale (Hjalager, 2022; Ingrassia et al., 2022). These findings align with Stylos et al. (2021) and Cuomo et al. (2021), who highlighted both the opportunities and risks associated with digitalization. However, participants also emphasized risks such as the superficialization of cultural values, weakened connection to physical spaces, and the susceptibility of users to manipulation on digital platforms. These results suggest that digitalization should be approached not only operationally but also through its cultural and experiential dimensions. Furthermore, the interaction between opportunities and threats highlights a strategic balance that must be considered to ensure the sustainable development of gastronomy tourism.

6.3. Data Security and the Protection of Personal Data

Participants stressed that data security is a critical issue in the digitalization of gastronomy tourism. Although legislation exists (KVKK, GDPR), practical implementation is often inadequate. Small businesses, due to limited technical knowledge, struggle to protect user data. These findings support the ethical data management needs highlighted by Yallop & Seraphin (2023) and Cheng & Zhang (2023). Participants recommended obtaining informed consent, enhancing user control, and simplifying privacy policies. Consequently, digital rights are revealed to be not only a legal but also an ethical obligation (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021). This finding provides an original contribution by demonstrating the practical applicability of digital ethics principles within the context of gastronomy tourism.

6.4. Legal Compliance and Supervision

Participants identified two primary issues regarding legal regulations: compliance challenges and insufficient supervision mechanisms. Small businesses were observed to have limited capacity to comply

with GDPR and KVKK. Additionally, the absence of guidance and monitoring mechanisms to support implementation leads to potential rights violations. This finding corroborates Presthus & Sønslien (2021) and Ruohonen & Hjerppe (2022), who argued that legal frameworks alone are insufficient. Thus, a purely regulatory approach appears to have limited impact on protecting digital rights in the sector.

6.5. Ethical Risks and Corporate Responsibility

Participants noted that unethical use of data, declining user trust, and privacy breaches represent the most sensitive areas in terms of digital rights. Specifically, the unauthorized use of customer data for advertising, marketing, and algorithmic targeting threatens the credibility of the sector (Cheng & Zhang, 2023; Yallop & Seraphin, 2023). This indicates that digitalization requires not only individual but also corporate ethical responsibility. The concept of corporate digital responsibility remains underexplored in the context of gastronomy tourism, and this study contributes uniquely by emphasizing the importance of ethical practices within the sector.

6.6. Development of Ethical Policies

A fundamental approach to addressing ethical issues involves developing holistic and transparent data management policies. Participants highlighted the importance of providing user information in an open, simple, and accessible manner. Policies that are culturally sensitive, prioritize user rights, and incorporate stakeholder participation are expected to enhance trust among both individuals and the sector (Werthner, 2022). This finding indicates that ethical policies should complement legal frameworks and offer actionable guidelines for practical implementation.

6.7. The Role of Academics

Participants emphasized that academics play a central role in raising awareness of digital rights in gastronomy and tourism. In the literature, the role of academics in transferring knowledge to the industry and providing ethical guidance remains limited (Hjalager, 2022; Vukolic et al., 2022). This study contributes to the literature by systematically revealing the perceptions and evaluations of Turkish academics in gastronomy and tourism regarding digital rights. Findings detail how academics can produce knowledge, shape curricula, and translate theoretical insights into practical applications within a sector-specific context.

Participants recommended incorporating digital ethics and data security courses into undergraduate and postgraduate programs, conducting applied training using real case studies, and establishing collaborative partnerships with industry. These suggestions illustrate that academics not only generate knowledge but also actively influence the development of ethical awareness and policy within the sector. While this role is not yet fully defined in the literature, the study's contribution is to demonstrate the potential impact of academics on safeguarding digital rights in gastronomy tourism and providing actionable strategies. This indicates that academics can act as a bridge between theoretical knowledge production and applied sectoral guidance, assuming multidimensional responsibility for the protection and ethical management of digital rights.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Digital technologies are reshaping not only consumer travel and dining experiences but also the ways in which businesses deliver services. While this transformation creates positive impacts such as increased service accessibility, enhanced destination promotion, and personalized user experiences, it also brings about major concerns such as the protection of personal data, violation of privacy, and unethical data usage.

In this study, the perceptions and evaluations of digital rights within the context of gastronomy tourism were examined using content analysis, based on the perspectives of academics specialized in gastronomy and tourism. The participants' statements revealed that understanding of digital rights is multidimensional, encompassing not only legal but also ethical, cultural, and social aspects.

According to academics, the awareness of digital rights is quite limited at the sectoral level, current legal regulations are not effectively implemented, and digital ethics have yet to be integrated into institutional policies. However, the solution proposals developed by academics from educational, research, and societal responsibility perspectives offer significant opportunities for strengthening digital rights in gastronomy tourism.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are presented to protect and enhance digital rights in the field of gastronomy tourism:

- Increase education-based awareness efforts. Institutions offering gastronomy and tourism education should incorporate courses on "digital rights," "data security," and "digital ethics" into undergraduate and graduate curricula. Digital awareness among students should be raised through practical case studies and real-world examples. Digital rights should become a priority topic in academic conferences and workshops.
- Provide guidance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Simplified guides, online training modules, and consultancy support programs should be developed to help small businesses comply with regulations such as KVKK and GDPR. Industry associations and local governments should produce tools like a "digital security audit guide" for SMEs.
- Mandate the development of ethical corporate policies. Gastronomy businesses should create data policies that clearly and transparently state how user data is collected, processed, and stored. These policies should be based not only on legal compliance but also on principles of respect, trust, and transparency, and should be communicated to users in clear, simplified language.
- Strengthen supervision and enforcement mechanisms. The number and effectiveness of independent supervisory bodies overseeing regulatory compliance should be increased. Digital platforms in particular should have their data-related practices reviewed periodically. Audits should be conducted not only in response to complaints but also through regular and random inspections.
- Promote academia–industry collaboration. Joint projects on digital rights should be conducted between academic institutions and the private sector. Students should be offered opportunities for internships, fieldwork, and pilot applications. Best practices in gastronomy tourism should be documented, and ethical certification systems should be established to recognize businesses that prioritize digital rights.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the study included only academics, and the perspectives of industry professionals or tourists were not incorporated. This participant group limitation may restrict the generalizability of the findings to all stakeholders involved in gastronomy tourism.

Second, the study relied on content analysis and interview-based data, reflecting participants' perceptions and interpretations. As a result, objective measurements of behaviors or actual practices in the field were not included. Third, digital technologies and applications evolve rapidly, creating a temporal limitation. Therefore, the findings of this study may change over time as new tools, platforms, and practices emerge.

Finally, the results are specific to an academic and gastronomy tourism context, which constitutes a contextual limitation. While the findings provide useful insights, minor adaptations may be required when applying them to different sectors or educational systems.

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