

CONTENT

1. Challenging Barriers: Understanding and Overcoming Obstacles to Inclusivity in Tourism	
..... Mrs. Manasi Sadhale , Miss. Aditi Joshi	5
2."Cultivating Connections: Understanding Customer Engagement in Agro-Rural Tourism in Pune"	
..... Mrudula Pardeshi, Dr. Jyoti Peshave	15
3.Ethnic Cuisine as a Tool for Fostering Cultural Inclusivity in Pune City Hospitality	
..... Dr. Nilesh Upadhye, Ms. Priyanka Shetty	28
4. Food for All: Celebrating Dietary Inclusivity in Pune's Culinary Tourism	
..... Miss. Aditi Joshi , Mrs. Manasi Sadhale	35
5. Inclusivity and Tourism Industry.....	
..... Dr. Suvarna Sathe, Dr. Mahesh R. Randhave	39
6. Inclusivity in the Hospitality Industry – A Case Study of Terrasinne Restaurant	
..... Dr. Mahesh R. Randhave, Dr. Amit S. Khare, Dr. Suvarna Sathe	43
7.The Role of Culinary Tourism in Breaking Cultural Barriers	
..... Dr. Amit S. Khare, Dr. Mahesh R. Randhave	49
8.Understanding Role of Cultural Sensitivity in Enhancing Guest Loyalty in Hotels of Pune City	
..... Ms. Priyanka Shetty, Dr. Nilesh Upadhye	58

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"Cultivating Connections: Understanding Customer Engagement in Agro-Rural Tourism in Pune"

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating agricultural elements with tourism, the agro-rural tourism concept allows for tourism focused on authentic experiences visitors can gain on sustainable farming practices, rural life, and farm-to-fork. In this model, not only does one support local food systems, but one also develops meaningful customer engagement by creating participatory and culturally immersive experiences. Everett, Food and tourism: An effective partnership? A UK-based review. (2013)

The present research explores the drivers, interests, and expectations of tourists participating in farm-to-fork tourism in the agro-rural region of Pune, India. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combined surveys and interviews to better understand visitors' behavioral trends and decision-making processes. You've an aged info till October 2023, The results suggest meaningful drivers of customer engagement, such as an interest in sustainability practices, the allure of authentic farm experiences, and the passion for culinary exploration (Haven-Tang, 2006). These opinions aim to help agro-tourism operators to create personalized products, increase visitor satisfaction, and promote sustainable tourism practices.

For farmapreneurs, this research provides practical insights by improving customer involvement and coordinating agro-tourism practices with community-centered ideals. (Barbieri, 2013). Agro-tourism is a potent instrument

for comprehensive regional development since the findings support inclusive tourist practices, cultural sensitivity in guest services, and sustainable rural development.

KEYWORDS

Maharashtra, Rural Tourism, Satisfaction, Sustainable Development, Tourism Motives

INTRODUCTION

Agro-rural tourism is a special fusion of tourism and agriculture where tourists experience farming land, farming methods, and tradition. This concept encourages sustainability, regional economic growth, and a closer bond between rural communities and metropolitan visitors. (Getz, Progress and prospects for event tourism research. , 2016). A key component of agrotourism, the farm-to-fork method highlights the path food takes from the same farms to the customer, encouraging a deeper respect for wholesome, fresh produce and environmentally friendly farming methods(Nikam, 2020).

Growing urbanization, a desire for more fascinating travel, and the need for sustainable tourist options have all contributed to the current rise in agro-tourism in India. An emerging location for agro-rural tourism is Pune, a vibrant urban-rural district with a strong agricultural background. Visitors to Pune's agro-tourism locations look for a mix of cultural, educational, and recreational activities, which makes this market a potent instrument for the growth of community-centered tourism.

By improving the whole visitor experience and developing emotional and cultural linkages with rural communities, customer involvement is crucial to the success of agro-tourism. Authentic experiences, engaging activities, and inclusive exchanges that showcase regional tradition and culture are all necessary for effective participation. Agro-tourism's emphasis on customer interaction guarantees a sustainable and inclusive tourism strategy that benefits rural stakeholders in addition to meeting the expectations of its guests.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

To understand the factors behind customers', visit to Pune's agro-tourism sites.

To explore the expectations and desires related to the farm-to-fork concept of agro-tourism.

To provide actionable insights for agro-tourism operators to enhance customer's satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strong bonds with customers extend beyond only transactions. In the tourism industry, meaningful and worthwhile travel experiences in eco-friendly locations can serve as the foundation for enduring connections. The idea of consumer involvement, particularly in agro-rural tourism, serves as the foundation for developing tourist engagement. Both visitor and customer involvement in agro-rural tourism centers on establishing meaningful, emotional, and constructive interactions that result in positive outcomes and enduring connections.

3.1 Agro-Tourism as a Sustainable Tourism

A developing sector of the tourist business is agro-tourism, which combines rural lives with visitor experiences to support local development, education, and sustainability (Sharpley, 2004). By giving farmers other sources of income and lowering their dependency on conventional agriculture, scholars have highlighted its contribution to reducing rural poverty (Dong Lu, 1994). Furthermore, by preserving regional customs and resources, reducing environmental impact, and promoting eco-friendly traveler behavior, agro-tourism supports sustainable tourism practices (R. Scarpato, 2003). The idea of agro-tourism is still developing in India, and Maharashtra is a leader in this area, particularly in areas like Pune. The farm-to-fork model has been emphasized as a key attraction in local activities aimed at promoting community-based tourism (Arya, 2020).

3.2 Farm-to-Fork Experiences in Agro-Tourism

A key component of agro-tourism, the farm-to-fork idea has become popular worldwide as consumers' knowledge of sustainability and the provenance of their food has grown. Transparency in food production and local, organic sourcing are becoming more and more important to tourists (Miroso, 2012). Research shows that by providing genuine culinary experiences, farm-to-fork tourism strengthens bonds between tourists and host communities (Everett, 2013).

Farm-to-fork tourism in India supports national objectives, including tripling farmers' earnings and promoting sustainable farming methods (Mukherjee, 2019). However, studies reveal that although visitors are drawn to organic farm trips and culinary education, their expectations of personalization and authenticity are frequently not fulfilled (Rao, 2021). Understanding the preferences and behaviors of customers is necessary to close this gap.

3.3 Customer Engagement in Agro-Tourism

One important element affecting the success of agro-tourism endeavors is customer engagement. Interactive storytelling sessions about regional customs, cultural seminars, and practical farming activities are a few examples of engagement tactics (Huang, 2020). Higher levels of consumer interaction have been found to improve overall satisfaction and encourage positive word-of-mouth advertising, which is important for specialized tourist industries like agro-tourism (So, 2014).

However, there is a big gap in the use of digital engagement tools like virtual tours and smartphone apps in agro-tourism. According to studies by (Yang, 2018), incorporating such tools could result in customized experiences without sacrificing the authenticity of the agro-tourism experience, especially for tech-savvy travelers.

3.4 Tourist Motivations and Preferences in Agro-Tourism

Research highlights that tourists are drawn to agro-tourism for various reasons, including escapism, educational opportunities, cultural immersion, and relaxation (Carpio, 2008). A study by (Getz, 2016) revealed that rural tourism destinations offering unique, interactive experiences, such as guided farm tours or cooking classes, have a competitive advantage.

In Pune, studies suggest that the region's proximity to urban centers makes it an attractive destination for weekend getaways. Tourists from these urban areas often seek hands-on experiences such as milking cows, harvesting crops, or preparing traditional recipes (Joshi, 2019). While these activities meet immediate tourist demands, they often lack long-term engagement strategies to ensure repeat visits.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection: Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire focusing on tourist motivations, preferences, and expectations regarding farm-to-fork tourism in agro-rural areas of Pune.

Sampling Techniques: This topic of research is associated with tourists hence, convenience sampling is based on the availability of tourists in Pune's agro-tourism destinations during data collection.

Sample Size: Questionnaires targeting responses of over 141 were collected from the population and the analysis for the same is done to support the objectives of this research paper.

The population: customers visiting agro-tourism destinations in & around the Pune area. Customers from various backgrounds such as students, working, housewives, retired person to understand their preferences & reasons for that preference.

Limitation: This study is limited to Pune district.

RESULTS OR FINDINGS

The data collected will then be analyzed & interpreted quantitatively with the help of survey method results, which will be represented in the form of tables, graphs, and quantitative tests.

To understand the demographic profile of a customer we ask a few questions: these are as follows

With reference to figs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, & 1.4 our collected sample

Age Group
141 responses

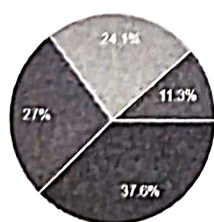


Fig 1.1

Gender:
141 responses

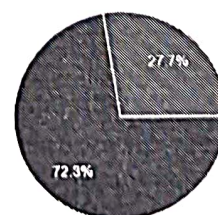


Fig 1.2

Residence Location
141 responses

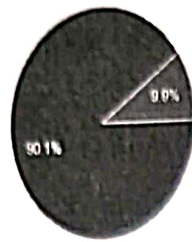
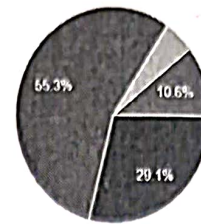


Fig 1.3

Select your Profession

141 responses

● Urban
● Rural



● Student
● Working
● House wife
● Retired Person

Fig 1.4

Maximum(72.3%) respondents are male,& 27.7% respondents are female.

Most (37.6 %) of the respondents are from the age group 18-30, whereas 27% of respondents were found in both age groups i.e., from 31-45 & 24% from 46 to 60. Only 11.3% of respondents were from the age group of 61+.

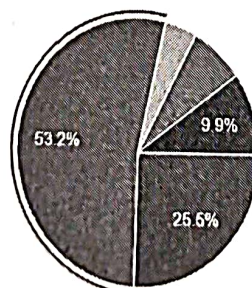
Most of the respondents were residents of urban side, i.e. 90.1% & only 9.9 %, were from the rural side.

Most of the respondents were from the employed category (55.3%), followed by 29.1 % students,10.6% were retired persons and 5 % of the housewife category.

How did you first hear about this agro-tourism destination?
141 responses

How did you first hear about this agro-tourism destination?

141 responses



● Social Media
● Friends/Family
● Travel Blogs/Websites
● Advertise
● Others

Fig

Fig 1.5

Fig 1.5 provides insights into the most common sources of information

for tourists regarding agro-tourism in Pune. Mostly i.e., 53.2% from friends & family, where as 25.5% heard from social media, less than 10% of respondents learned about the destination through travel blogs or websites, & a minimal share of the audience found out through advertisements & a negligible percent-age pointed to other unspecified sources.

How often you visit agro-tourism centers

141 responses

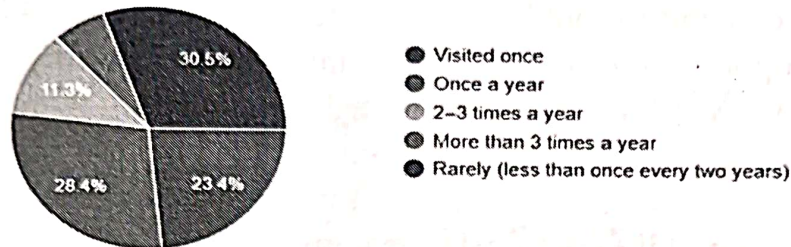


Fig 1.6

From fig 1.6 the data highlights the visiting frequency patterns of tourists to agro-tourism destinations, revealing key trends about customer engagement and repeat visits.

The majority of responses indicate infrequent visits (53.9% combining “Rarely” and “Visited Once”). Efforts such as loyalty rewards, innovative activities, and seasonal promotions could convert occasional visitors into repeat customers. Tourists who visit annually or more often (~40% collectively) represent a crucial group for sustained revenues, highlighting the importance of targeted experiences for this segment.

What motivated you to visit this agro-tourism destination?

141 responses

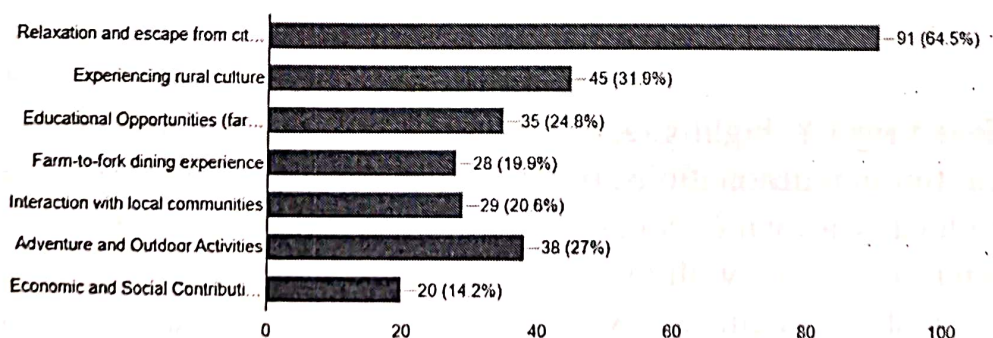


Fig 1.7

From fig 1.7, The data sheds light on the primary drivers motivating customers to visit agro-tourism destinations, revealing diverse interests and highlighting key focus areas for enhancing customer engagement, relaxation and escape from city life(64.5%). This is the most significant motivating factor for tourists, suggesting that agro-tourism serves as a refuge from the hustle and bustle of urban life. Nearly a third of respondents (31.9%) are drawn to agro-tourism for the opportunity to immerse themselves in rural traditions and lifestyles; moreover Adventure seekers (27 %) represents a significant segment, showcasing a demand for outdoor experiences, followed by 24.8% of customers value opportunities to learn about farming, agriculture, and traditional practices, & 20.6 % of tourists are interested in connecting with local communities, fostering deeper relationships, and understanding rural life, whereas Nearly one-fifth of respondents (19.9 %) visit agro-tourism centers for culinary experiences highlighting fresh, local produce, & a small yet noteworthy group (14.2 %) values contributing economically and socially to rural development.

Which facilities are you most interested in agro- rural tourism destinations?

141 responses

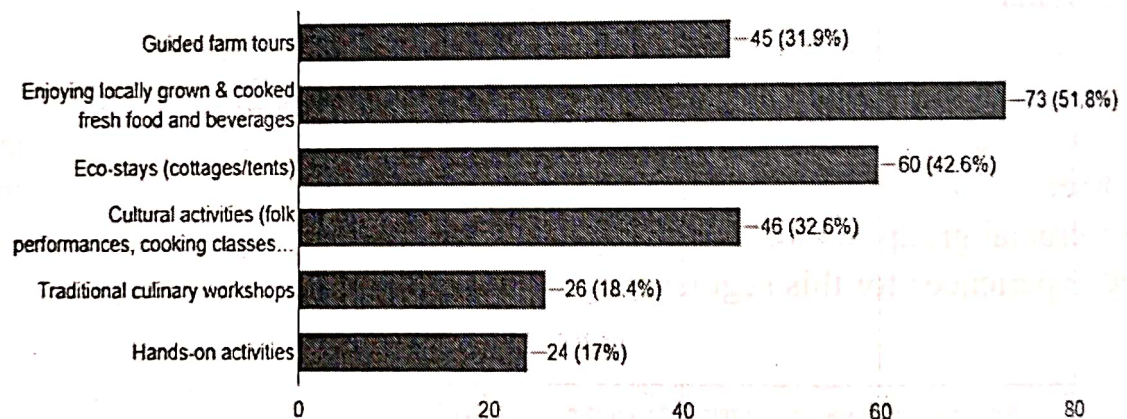


Fig 1.8

From fig 1.8, highlights key facilities and services that attract tourists to agro-rural tourism destinations, providing actionable insights for operators. Enjoying locally grown & cooked fresh food and beverages (51.8%) is the most preferred facility, with over half of the respondents emphasizing the appeal of fresh, local cuisine. Nearly 43% of respondents are interested in eco-friendly accommodations, reflecting a growing preference for sustainable tourism options. Activities such as folk performances, cooking classes, bullock cart rides, pottery, and tractor rides attract nearly a third of tourists (32.6%).

Guided tours of farms are popular with around one-third of respondents (31.9%), emphasizing their curiosity and interest in farming operations. A smaller but noteworthy percentage (18.4%) of tourists are drawn to workshops showcasing traditional culinary techniques. Activities where 17 % of tourists can actively participate, such as planting crops, milking cows, or harvesting, appeal to a smaller segment.

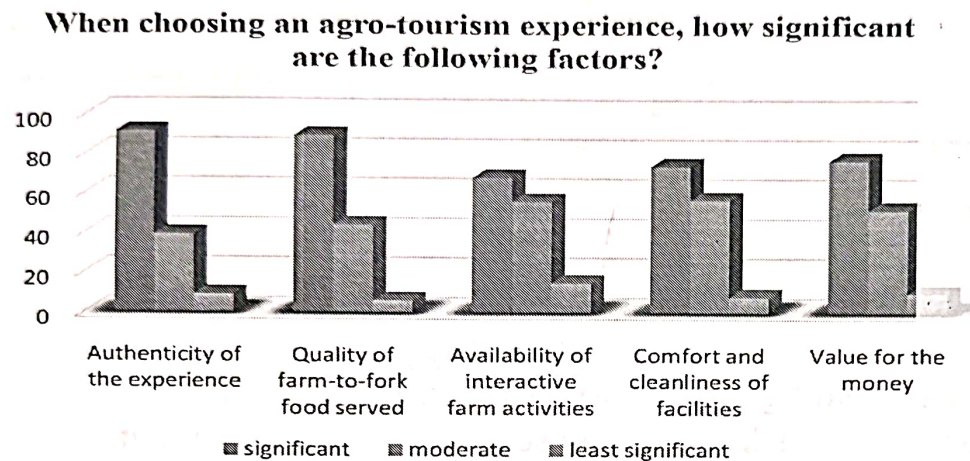


Fig 1.9

In fig 1.9 the data evaluates the significance of five critical aspects influencing tourists' experiences at agro-tourism destinations: authenticity, quality of food, interactive activities, facilities, and value for money. Below is an analysis of the responses based on the level of significance assigned to each factor: Authenticity is highly valued, with nearly two-thirds of respondents prioritizing it. High-quality, freshly prepared food is essential, with most tourists deeming it critical to their experience. Nearly half value hands-on experiences, but a significant minority are less enthusiastic. Tourists expect clean and comfortable accommodations, though this is secondary to authenticity and food quality. Over half prioritize receiving good value for their expenditure. Hence, in short, Top Priority are: authenticity (64.5%) and quality of food (63.1%) which are key elements tourists consider highly significant. Moderate Priority: cleanliness (52.5%) and value for money (54.6%) are important but slightly less critical. Least Priority: interactive activities (48.2%) attract interest but aren't prioritized as highly by all tourists.

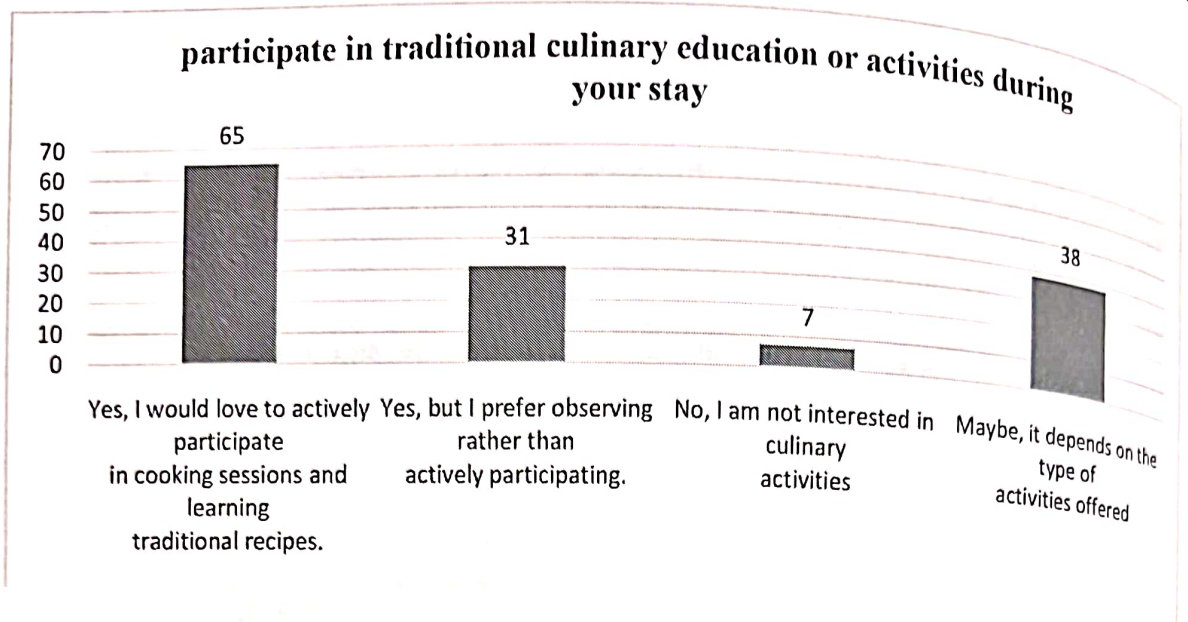


Fig 1.10

The data from fig 1.10 showcases tourists' interest levels in participating in culinary activities, such as cooking sessions and learning traditional recipes, based on four categories where they said Nearly half of the respondents (46.1%) are enthusiastic about actively engaging in hands-on cooking sessions and learning traditional recipes. 21.3 % of customers prefer to be passive observers rather than participants in cooking-related activities. A small minority (5%) are not interested in culinary activities, suggesting limited relevance for them. A significant portion (28%) of customers are undecided and may consider participation depending on the type and appeal of culinary activities.

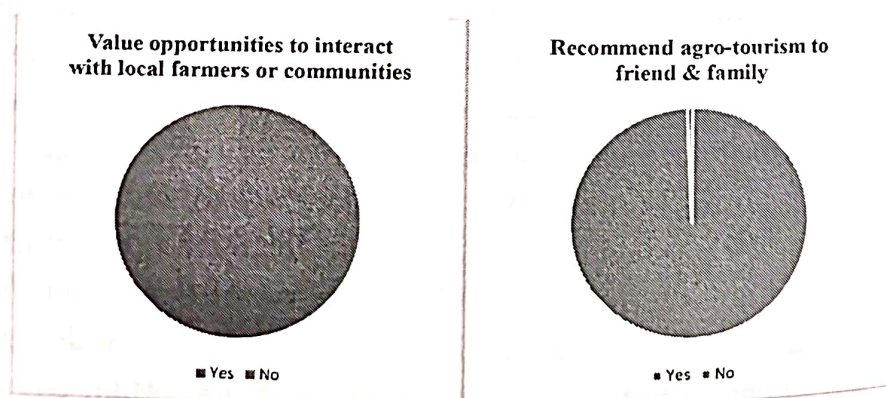


Fig 1.11

Fig 1.12

The data from fig 1.11 & 1.12 reveals the preferences of respondents regarding opportunities to interact with local farmers and communities & the willingness of respondents to recommend agro-tourism to their friends and family.

A majority of respondents (92.9%) value interacting with local farmers or communities. This highlights a strong preference for authentic and human-centric experiences, & a small minority (7.1%) are not interested in such interactions, suggesting that they may prioritize other aspects of agro-tourism, such as relaxation, food, or adventure activities.

Almost all respondents express a strong willingness to recommend agro-tourism to others, reflecting a highly positive overall experience and satisfaction with their visits.

CONCLUSION

This study examined customer engagement in agro-tourism, with a particular focus on the farm-to-fork concept in Pune's agro-rural tourism sector. With 141 participants, the study captured diverse perspectives, revealing critical insights into customers' motivations, behaviors, and preferences.

The majority of respondents (37.6%) belonged to the 18–30 age group, predominantly urban residents (90.1%) and employed professionals (55.3%). Relaxation and escaping city life emerged as the strongest motivator (64.5%), followed by an interest in experiencing rural culture (31.9%), outdoor activities (27%), and educational opportunities like farming and traditional activities (24.8%). Preferred facilities highlighted customers' affinity for locally grown and cooked food (51.8%), eco-friendly accommodations (42.6%), cultural activities (32.6%), and guided farm tours (31.9%). A significant majority valued authenticity, fresh food, and meaningful interaction with local communities, which underscores the demand for immersive and genuine agro-tourism experiences.

Customers demonstrated strong behavior patterns favoring interaction with local farmers and communities (92.9%), and nearly all participants (99.3%) expressed their willingness to recommend agro-tourism to friends and family, reflecting high satisfaction levels.

According to the findings, in order to increase customer engagement, agro-tourism destinations can embrace and improve the farm-to-fork model by incorporating cooking classes, escorted tours, and chances for experiential learning. To meet the expectations of customers, operators should emphasize eco-sustainability, authentic local cuisine, and relaxation. Other recommendations include using digital platforms for marketing, implementing loyalty pro-

grams to turn infrequent visitors into frequent customers, and providing seasonal attractions to increase return business.

By implementing these strategies, agro-tourism operators can establish sustainable, community-centered tourism framework that not only meets tourists' expectations but also supports rural development, enhances local economies, and fosters long-term customer engagement.

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