THE IMPACT OF GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCE ON TOURIST SATISFACTION, DESTINATION IMAGE, AND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the influence of gastronomic experiences in terms of tourist satisfaction, destination image, and Antalya on tourist loyalty, Turkey, a famous and cultural tourist destination. With the increasing recognition of food as a major component of tourism experiences, the aim of this research is to test an ideological model as an empirical test of gastronomic experience as an important determinant of positive tourist results. The data was obtained through a structured questionnaire that was completed by 391 domestic and international tourists who visited Antalya. The findings suggest that gastronomic experiences have an important and positive influence on both tourist satisfaction and destination image. Moreover, both tourist satisfaction and destination image were found to positively affect the loyalty of tourists. These findings outline the strategic importance of integrating local food culture to destination marketing and experience design. The study contributes to the literature by expanding the theoretical understanding of culinary tourism and provides practical insight to tourism stakeholders to increase competitive benefits through gastronomic discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, gastronomy has emerged as an important driver of tourism, converting food into a cultural experience from a basic requirement that attracts travellers worldwide (Nesterchuk et al., 2022). Gastronomic experience, sensory, emotional and cultural interaction refers to tourists with local recipes during their journey (Richards, 2021). It not only covers the taste and quality of food but also authenticity, presentation and reference in which it is consumed. From street food markets to fine dining, gastronomic experiences provide a unique lens to visitors, through which they can connect with destination traditions, history and identity (Sheoran, 2025). This experiential dimension of food tourism enriches the overall travel experience and contributes to the growing trend of tourism in many areas, including Turkey.

The impact of gastronomic experience on tourist behavior has attracted scholarly attention, as it directly affects the major result variables such as tourist satisfaction, loyalty and destination

image. A memorable food experience can significantly increase the perception of a destination and lead to a positive emotional evaluation. When tourists are satisfied with local cuisine, they have a tendency to develop a positive image of the destination and show loyalty through repeating trips and WOM recommendations. In addition, gastronomy plays a dual role: it acts both as a primary inspiration for the journey and as an increase in the overall tourism product. In the context of Turkey (a rich culinary legacy that spans diverse areas and cultures), understanding the relationship between gastronomic experiences and tourism behavioural results is important to develop permanent tourist strategies and increase destination competition.

Despite the growing body of literature on food tourism, there are many gaps (Omidvar & Deen, 2024). First, most of the existing research has focused on famous sites such as Italy, France or Thailand, which are already well-established in the global gastronomic tourism discourse. This leaves countries such as Turkey underexplored, despite their significant and rich culinary heritage rooted in a fusion of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian traditions (Omidvar et al., 2024; Omidvar & Palazzo, 2025).

Second, while prior research has investigated the role of food in shaping satisfaction or destination freezing (e.g.,Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016), relatively few studies have adopted integrative models that examine how these constructs jointly mediate the relationship between gastronomic experience and tourist loyalty. A clearer understanding of these mediation effects is essential, as it can uncover the mechanisms through which food tourism fosters repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth.

 Third, many studies rely on general tourist population without accounting for regional or cultural uniqueness of food practices. This lack of contextual sensitivity limits the generalizability and applicability of findings to destinations with distinct culinary identities. Given the unique geographical location of Turkey, which mixes the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Central Asian culinary effects, its gastronomic landscape provides a valuable case to explore how multicultural culinary influences shape tourist perceptions and behavior in a more nuanced way.

Therefore, this research aims to address these gaps by: (1) focusing on an underrepresented but culturally rich culinary destination—Turkey; (2) employing a comprehensive model that includes tourist satisfaction and destination image as mediators; and (3) collecting empirical

data from both international and domestic tourists to account for cultural and regional diversity. By doing so, the study extends existing literature on food tourism and provides practical insights for destination marketing and experience design in emerging culinary tourism destinations.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we will provide a thorough introduction to the conceptual framework along with the related study hypotheses. We will then present and systematically analyze our research findings. After that, we will organize the results for better clarity. Lastly, in the analysis chapter, we will emphasize the key theoretical insights from the research, the significant practical implications for practitioners, as well as limitations of the research and suggestions for future study.

2. LITEREATURE REVIEW

2.1. Gastronomic Experience in Tourism

Gastronomic experience has become an important element in contemporary tourism, making travelers a deep connection for the destinations they see (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). It not only consumes local food consumption, but also includes immersive experiences related to cooking practices, traditions and cultural importance of food (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). This versatile experience led to the overall satisfaction of tourists and affects their perceptions and behaviors (Liu et al., 2017). In Turkey, the prosperity of regional cuisine provides a fertile land for gastronomic tourism. For example, a study conducted in Gaziantep, recognized by UNESCO for its cook heritage, examined the relationship between tourism ethnicity, destination, local food motivation and destination food image. Conclusions highlighted the importance of local food motivation in shaping tourists and advocacy behavior, emphasizing the role of a gastronomy in enhancing the image of the destination (Durmaz et al., 2022; Turan et al., 2024).

2.2. Impact on Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Image, and Loyalty

The interaction between gastronomic experiences and tourist satisfaction has been largely studied (Forga & Valiente 2014; Liu et al., 2017; Hossain et al., 2024). Positive culinary experiences often cause high level of satisfaction (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019), which in turn affect the image of the destination (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017) and affect the possibility of returning tourists (Martin et al., 2021) or recommending the destination to others (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Martin et al., 2021).

A study focusing on affectionate aspects of gastronomic experiences in Turkey found that the emotional connections formed through culinary activities impressed tourist satisfaction and their intentions to affect their intentions. Study indicated that affectionate gastronomic experiences explained 64% of variance in satisfaction and 36% in revision intentions underlining the emotional dimension of food tourism (Jeong & Jang, 2011).

Table 1.
Literature Review.

Author and year	Methodology	Key Results
(Durmaz et al., 2022)	Quantitative survey; SEM analysis	Affective gastronomic experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction and revisit intention.
(Turan et al., 2024)	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)	Local food motivation and ethnocentrism positively affect destination food image and advocacy in Gaziantep.
(Çevik & Saçılık, 2023)	Qualitative case study; route mapping	Proposes an integrated gastronomic tourism route in South Marmara region of Turkey.
(Gündüz et al., 2024)	Comparative case study; document analysis	Gastronomy festivals improve cultural diplomacy and destination image.
(Ekerim & Tanrısever, 2020)	Archival research; GIS-based mapping	Gastronomy festivals are vital for attracting culinary tourists and enhancing regional identity.
(Erdi, Çoşkun, & Taşçı, 2023)	Quantitative survey; descriptive statistics	Polish tourists show strong interest in Turkish cuisine; food is a key motivator.
(Demirses et al., 2023)	Bibliometric analysis using Scopus data	Research on gastronomic experience is increasing; Turkey is a growing focus area.
(Bölükbaş, 2024)	Systematic literature review	Social media plays a key role in shaping food-related tourism perceptions.

In addition, research conducted in Gaziantep during the COVID-19 epidemic detected the role of destination satisfaction in arbitrating the relationship between gastronomy tourism and customer behavior. Research has shown that destination satisfaction significantly intercepted the relationship between gastronomy perception and customer behavior, which highlights the importance of satisfying experiences in influencing tourist behavior (Durmaz vd., 2022). Table 1 lists the studies conducted in this area.

2.2.1. *The impact of gastronomic experience on tourist satisfaction*

Consumer loyalty and satisfaction are critical concepts in marketing and business management, often studied from various theoretical perspectives (Ghaderi et al., 2024). Consumer satisfaction has been the subject of much study (Omidvar & Deen, 2024), especially within tourism and hospitality industry (Omidvar & Palazzo, 2024). Gastronomic experiences are recognized as a major component in increasing tourists' satisfaction, especially in destinations where food is deeply integrated with local culture. Cook experiences contribute to the emotional, sensory and cultural fulfillment of tourists, often leading to high satisfaction with overall travel experience. Polat (2023) displayed that an affectionate gastronomic experience, which incorporates emotional engagement with local cuisine, significantly enhances tourist satisfaction and affects the intentions to revisit. Turan et al., (2024) further strengthened the relationship, revealing that local food inspiration is a strong prophet of satisfaction among

gastronomic tourists. These findings align with international research by Kivela and Crotts (2006), who argued that food plays a central role in cultural tourists, and by Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016), who showed that food experiences affect not only for satisfaction but also the emotional relationship of tourists. Overall, literature confirms that gastronomic experience is an important driver of tourist satisfaction. Therefore, we develop the following hypotheses:

H$_1$: Gastronomic experience positively and directly affects tourist satisfaction.

2.2.2. *The impact of gastronomic experience on destination image*

Gastronomic experiences contribute significantly to shaping tourists' destinations, which contribute significantly to the formation of a positive destination image (Omidvar & Deen, 2023). Cook activities offer passengers a direct way of connecting with local culture, heritage and identity, from which they see and remember a place. Turan et al., (2024) found that local food motivation and tourism ethnicism positively influenced the image of destination food, suggesting that tourist engagement with regional recipes enhances its general image of the destination. Similarly, Gündüz et al., (2024) highlighted how the culinary events and gastronomy festivals are served as a soft power tool that improve cultural diplomacy and positively affect the destination image in both Turkey and Italy. These findings align with earlier work by Lin, Pearson, and Cai (2011), who emphasized that culinary experience enriches cognitive and affectionate dimensions of destination image, eventually affecting destination options and loyalty. As these studies show, a well -developed gastronomic experience is a powerful vehicle to strengthen the image of a destination in the brain of tourists. Therefore, we develop the following hypotheses:

H$_2$: Gastronomic experience positively and directly affects destination image.

2.2.3. *The impact of tourist satisfaction on tourist loyalty*

Tourist satisfaction is widely recognized as a major prophet of tourist loyalty, playing a central role in determining that passengers intend to see a destination again or recommend it to others. When tourists are content with their experiences, including the quality of service, attraction, and overall environment, they have a tendency to develop a strong emotional relationship with the destination, which repeats the journey and repeats the positive word-of-mouth. Polat (2023) found that satisfaction from affectionate gastronomic experiences was an essential factor that impressed tourists' intention to re -view the destination. International studies support this

pattern; Chi and Qu (2008) confirmed that overall satisfaction had a direct influence on both destination loyalty and the possibility of recommendation between American tourists. Similarly, Prayag et al., (2017) displayed that satisfied tourist showed high levels of destination and intentions again in various tourism settings. Collectively, these conclusions highlight that enhancing the satisfaction of tourists is necessary to promote long -term loyalty and maintain tourism development. Therefore, we develop the following hypotheses:

H3: Tourist satisfaction positively and directly affects tourist loyalty.

2.2.4.   The impact of destination image on tourist loyalty

A positive destination image is an essential factor affecting tourist loyalty, as it shapes the perceptions of tourists, emotional attachment and practical intentions towards a destination. A favorable image not only enhances the immediate satisfaction of tourists, but also makes a significant contribution to others to return or recommend the destination. Chi and Qu (2008) confirmed that the destination image directly and positively affects both tourist loyalty and satisfaction, emphasizing that an attractive and reliable image again encourage intentions. In the context of gastronomy tourism, Turan et al., (2024) indicated that a positive destination dining image - changes through interaction with local cuisine - advocacy of the singing and advocating the advocacy of the speech and intent of intentions among tourists in Gaziantep, Turkey. Prayag and Ryan (2012) also found that cognitive and affective components of destination image affected the loyalty of tourists in island tourism. Similarly, Stylidis, Shani and Belhassen (2017) showed that the destination was a strong prophet of image loyal behavior, especially when tourists developed a clear and consistent perception of unique characteristics of the destination. These studies underline the importance of managing and promoting a strong and attractive destination image as a strategic tool to maintain long -term tourist loyalty. Moreover, we develop the following hypotheses:

H4: Destination image positively and directly affects tourist loyalty

Conceptual model

The conceptual model presented (Figure 1) has been created to meet the objectives of this research, it includes Gastronomic experience, tourist satisfaction, destination image and tourist loyalty. In order to evaluate this model, 4 hypotheses were created.
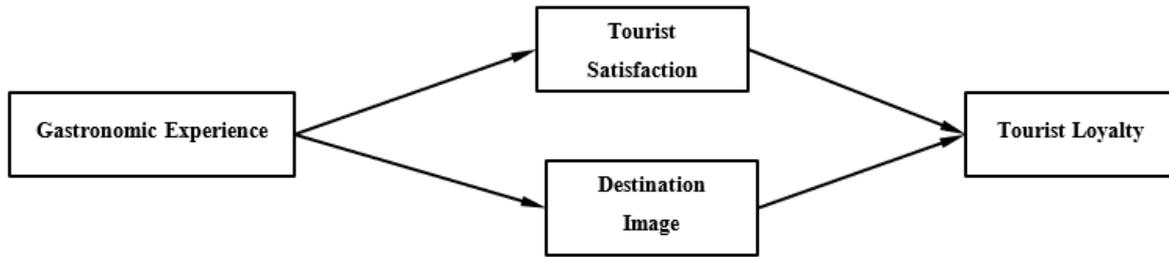
Figure 1- A proposed Conceptual Model

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample

The target population of this study comprises domestic and international tourists visiting Antalya. Given the challenges associated with reaching the entire population, a convenience sampling method was adopted to recruit participants who were easily accessible and likely to provide relevant insights (Malhotra, 2004). This method was selected due to its practicality and efficiency in accessing the desired sample. The data were collected through questionnaires administered to both domestic and foreign tourists in Antalya between April and May 2025. A total of 391 valid responses were gathered. Additionally, the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents were examined to support the interpretation of the findings.

3.2. Data Collection Tool

Data was obtained using a questionnaire designed especially for this investigation. A thorough analysis of pertinent literature served as the basis for the questionnaire's construction, guaranteeing that it was appropriate for the Antalya tourism setting. There were two primary components to the instrument. The respondents' gender age, education level and marital status were among the sociodemographic data gathered in the first segment. The primary study items were included in the second portion, which had 17 questions using a five-point Likert scale. Domestic and international travelers who were in Antalya were given the survey in person.

3.3. Variables and Measurement

The gastronomic experience scale was adapted from the research of Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016) and Kim et al., (2009). It consists of five items and represents a unidimensional construct. The tourist satisfaction scale, developed by Chi and Qu (2008) and Yoon and Uysal (2005) includes four items and is also unidimensional. The destination image scale, based on

the works of Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Beerli and Martín (2004), comprises four items within a single-factor structure. Lastly, the tourist loyalty scale, adopted from Oppermann (2000) and Zhang et al., (2014), contains four items and is likewise unidimensional. All of the scales were originally developed in English and were translated into Turkish for use in this research. The English version of the questionnaire was administered to foreign tourists, while the Turkish version was given to Turkish participants. Each scale was measured using a 5-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 to 5.

When examining the demographic characteristics of the sample in Table 2, it is observed that the majority of participants are female (57.8%), while 42.2% are male. In terms of age distribution, 32.5% of the participants are in the 18-25 age range, 21.7% are in the 26-35 age range, 26.1% are in the 36-45 age range, and 19.7% are aged 46 and above. Regarding educational level, 25.8% of the participants have a high school diploma, 56% hold a bachelor's degree, 11.3% have a master's degree, and 6.9% possess a doctoral degree. The majority of participants are single (56.6%), while 40.4% are married. The total sample size for this research is 391 participants.

Table 2.
Demographic Characteristics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	165	42,2
	Female	226	57,8
Age	18-25	127	32,5
	26-35	85	21,7
	36-45	102	26,1
	46 +	77	19,7
Education	High School	101	25,8
	Undergraduate	219	56
	Master's Degree	44	11,3
	Doctorate	27	6,9
Marital Status	Single	233	59,6
	Married	158	40,4
Total		391	100

Source: Research data

3.4. Data Analysis and Results

The data obtained were analyzed using the SmartPLS 4 software based on the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach within the scope of structural equation modeling (SEM). In addition, the SPSS 24 software was utilized to analyze and describe the demographic characteristics of the participants.

The VIF analysis was conducted as an initial step in this research to evaluate the degree of multicollinearity among the predictor variables. Upon analysis of the structural relationships, the VIF values were observed to range from 1.836 to 3.099. These values are significantly lower than the recommended threshold of 5.0, demonstrating that multicollinearity is not a concern in this model (Hair et al., 2017).

3.5. The Measurement Model

The reliability and validity statistics for the measurement model are proposed in Table 3. The findings demonstrated that the factor loadings for all constructs were statistically significant, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.50, while both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded the 0.70 threshold, thus confirming the achievement of adequate convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3.
Construct Reliability and Validity

Constructs and Items	Loadings	CR	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE
Gastronomic Experience (GE)		0.890	0.846	0.618
GE1	0.793			
GE2	0.827			
GE3	0.776			
GE4	0.762			
GE5	0.772			
Tourist Satisfaction (TS)		0.921	0.886	0.746
TS1	0.892			
TS2	0.831			
TS3	0.866			
TS4	0.864			
Destination Image (DI)		0.929	0.898	0.766
DI1	0.900			
DI2	0.864			
DI3	0.882			
DI4	0.855			
Tourist Loyalty (TL)		0.943	0.919	0.804
TL1	0.892			
TL2	0.904			
TL3	0.905			
TL4	0.885			

Note. GE: Gastronomic Experience, TS: Tourist Satisfaction, DI: Destination Image, TL: Tourist Loyalty.
Source: Research data

Then, heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) and Fornell Larcker (1981) criteria were used to examine discriminant validity in the study. Discriminant validity is considered adequate when HTMT fall below 0.85 or 0.90 (Henseler et al, 2015). According to this criterion, from the findings of the analysis it is clearly evident that discriminant validity has been established (Table 4).

Table 4.
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	DI	GE	TL	TS
DI				
GE	0.734			
TL	0.559	0.604		
TS	0.440	0.684	0.444	

Note. GE: Gastronomic Experience, TS: Tourist Satisfaction, DI: Destination Image, TL: Tourist Loyalty.
Source: Research data

Additionally, based on Fornell and Larcker (1981) the findings determine that the square root of the AVE of each variable is greater than its correlation with the other items, thus confirming the establishment of discriminant validity (Table 5).

Table 5.
Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	DI	GE	TL	TS
DI	0.875			
GE	0.645	0.786		
TL	0.512	0.535	0.897	
TS	0.395	0.595	0.401	0.863

Note. GE: Gastronomic Experience, TS: Tourist Satisfaction, DI: Destination Image, TL: Tourist Loyalty.
Source: Research data

3.6. The Structural Model

In testing the structural model, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value was first evaluated, with a suggested threshold of <0.10 used to assess model fit (Yılmaz & Kinaş, 2020). For this study, the SRMR score was 0.063, indicating an adequate model fit. Thereafter, the R^2 and Q^2 values were analyzed to evaluate the model's predictive power and explanatory capacity (Table 6). Upon examining the R^2 values, all were found to exceed the threshold of 0.10, as recommended Falk and Miller, (1992). In addition, when examining the Q^2 values based on Stone-Geisser's internal structure criterion, it is seen that the model has sufficient predictive power for all structures. These outcomes further affirm the model's predictive validity, as put forward by Hair et al., 2017. The outcomes from the path analysis of the study are displayed in Figure 2.
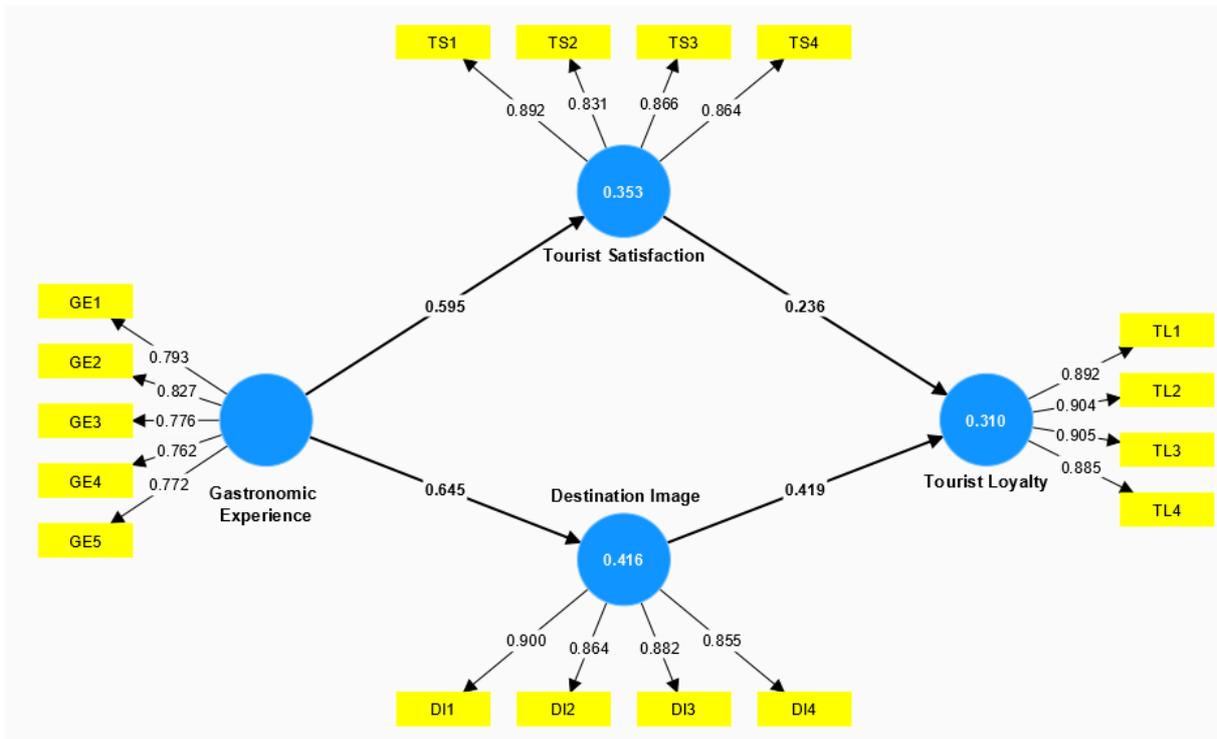
Figure 2- The Findings from The Path Analysis

The hypothesis testing results presented in Table 5 reveal statistically significant relationships among the variables under study. Gastronomic experience positively affects tourist satisfaction (H_1: $\beta = 0.595$, t = 14.754, p < 0.000) and positively influences destination image (H_2: $\beta = 0.645$, t = 15.915, p < 0.000). Tourist satisfaction, in turn, has a significant positive effect on tourist loyalty (H_3: $\beta = 0.236$, t = 4.143, p = 0.000). Moreover, destination image positively affects tourist loyalty (H_4: $\beta = 0.419$, t = 7.807, p<0.000).

Table 6.
Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Effect	T value	f^2	p values	Remarks
H1	GE → TS	0.595	14.754	0.547	p<0.001	Supported
H2	GE→ DI	0.645	15.915	0.712	p<0.001	Supported
H3	TS→ TL	0.236	4.143	0.068	p<0.001	Supported
H4	DI→ TL	0.419	7.807	0.215	p<0.001	Supported
R^2: (destination image: 0.416; tourist loyalty: 0.310; tourist satisfaction: 0.353) Q^2: (destination image: 0.314; tourist loyalty: 0.243; tourist satisfaction: 0.260)						

Note. GE: Gastronomic Experience, TS: Tourist Satisfaction, DI: Destination Image, TL: Tourist Loyalty.
Source: Research data

4. DISCUSSION

The outcomes of this research provide meaningful insights into the interconnectedness of gastronomic experience, destination image, tourist satisfaction, and tourist loyalty within the

context of Turkey's tourism industry. Each hypothesis was tested, and the results are discussed in alignment with existing literature.

The study supports the hypothesis that gastronomic experiences enhance tourist satisfaction significantly. This result corresponds to pre -study, which emphasizes that food -related activities contribute to the emotional and cultural engagement of tourists with destinations (Polat, 2023). The affective and sensory dimensions of culinary tourism were shown to improve overall satisfaction, affirming the view that food is more than sustenance—it is a critical component of the experiential value of travel (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). In particular, the empirical results showed that tourists who engaged more fully with local food, with activities such as tasting traditional foods, engaging in food related events, or experiencing food culture, reported significantly higher satisfaction. This indicates that food experiences prompt emotional, cultural and sensory engagement, thus reinforced tourists' overall positive perception of their trip. These results underscored the importance of developing and marketing authentic food experiences to enhance the allure of the destination and visitor satisfaction.

Results suggest that tourists' interaction with local cuisine positively shape their perception about the destination. This supports previous outcomes by Turan et al., (2024), which highlighted that local food motivation and dreamt value destination significantly enhance the food image. The study of research echoes shows that gastronomic experiences serve as cultural signifier, strengthen the uniqueness of a destination and strengthen their image (Lin et al., 2011; Gündüz et al., 2024). In our findings, tourists who engaged with regional culinary elements (such as traditional dishes, cooking styles, or local food markets) developed a more favorable and memorable image of the destination. This was particularly evident through high perception scores for cultural authenticity, uniqueness, and emotional connection. This effect is particularly stronger in areas such as Gaziantep and İzmir, where culinary identity lies deeply. These cities scored significantly higher in perceived destination image than other regions, indicating that well-preserved and actively promoted culinary heritage can substantially influence tourist perceptions. This reinforces the idea that food is not just a passive element of the travel experience, but a dynamic and symbolic tool for image building and destination branding.

This research confirms the direct influence of tourist satisfaction on the results of loyalty, such as again intention and positive words. These conclusions align with and Prayag et al., (2017)

and Chi and Qu (2008), who reported that tourist satisfaction plays a mediation in changing positive experiences in the intentions of future behavior. In the current study, higher satisfaction scores were significantly associated with tourists' willingness to revisit the destination and recommend it to others, confirming satisfaction as a key determinant of behavioral loyalty. In terms of Turkey, satisfaction from gastronomy and local culture promotes connections and attachment that increases loyalty (Polat 2023). This was especially evident in regions with strong culinary identities, where tourists reported stronger emotional bonds and a higher likelihood of returning. The findings suggest that enhancing satisfaction through food-related experiences can serve as a strategic tool for fostering destination loyalty, particularly in culturally rich contexts like Turkey.

 The positive influence of the destination image on tourist loyalty was also supported, suggesting that tourists with a suited image of the destination tend to return and recommend it. It corresponds to the research of Chi and Qu (2008) and Prayag et al., (2017), who demonstrated that cognitive and affective evaluation of destination image contribute significantly to loyalty formation. In our findings, tourists who perceived the destination as authentic, welcoming, and culturally rich (including its gastronomy) were significantly more likely to express revisit intentions and recommend the destination to others. Both cognitive components (such as perceived quality and variety of food offerings) and affective components (such as emotional attachment and sense of belonging) played a role in shaping destination image, which in turn influenced loyalty behaviors. In the context of tourism in Turkey, a favorable image is often associated with the perceptions of hospitality, authenticity, and food culture, which promote loyalty (Stylidis et al., 2017). The results confirm that enhancing the destination image through food-related experiences and cultural storytelling can be a strategic lever for increasing both short-term satisfaction and long-term tourist loyalty.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has been determined to examine the direct influences of gastronomic experiences on tourist satisfaction, destination image and loyalty, for the purpose of better understanding how tourism has shaped the behavior of tourism in Turkey. The outcomes provide compelling evidence supporting all four proposed hypotheses, which outlines the strategic value of gastronomy in tourism development and destination marketing. First, it turns out that gastronomic experience positively and directly affects tourist satisfaction, confirming previous research that greatly enrich the tourist experience. Connecting with local food enables tourists

to join cultural authenticity and increase their emotional and sensory relations with destination (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). This supports the notion that gastronomy is a major dimension of overall satisfaction, especially in culturally rich countries such as Turkey. Second, confirm that gastronomic experience positively and directly affects the destination image as the food serves as a cultural representation. The quality, authenticity and uniqueness of local cuisine increases the perception of tourism destination (Turan et al., 2024). A strong food image strengthens the overall brand image of a destination, making it more memorable and attractive in the global tourist market.

Third, the study confirmed that tourist satisfaction positively and directly affects tourist loyalty, resulting in earlier literature (Chi & Qu, 2008; Prayag et al., 2017). Satisfied tourists are more likely to review and recommend the destination, showing how satisfaction serves as a bridge between experience and long -term commitment at one place. Finally, the results demonstrated that the destination image positively and directly affects tourist loyalty, suggesting that tourists are more inclined to return to a destination with a positive and appropriate imprint. It corresponds to prior studies that emphasize the central role of the destination image in shaping the intentions of amendment and the destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Finally, this research outlines the crucial role of gastronomy as the driver of satisfaction, a shaper of destination image, and a contributor to loyalty. These insights are particularly relevant to Turkish tourism stakeholders, who can reinforce the destination branding and to redeem the country's rich culinary heritage to improve tourist retention. Since tourism continues to grow globally, destination's gastronomic diversity is deployed to attract culturally inspired travellers and to maintain long-term tourism development.

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

This research offers several theoretical advancements to the existing body of knowledge in tourism, gastronomy, and customer behavior by empirically validating the relationships among gastronomic experience, tourist satisfaction, destination image, and tourist loyalty within the context of a culturally rich yet under-examined market—Turkey.

First, by confirming that gastronomic experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction, the study deepens theoretical understanding of how sensory and cultural components—such as food consumption—serve as integral elements of satisfaction. This extends Experience Economy Theory by demonstrating that gastronomic experiences in Turkey activate key experiential dimensions (aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment) which in turn contribute to

the emotional evaluation of the trip. While earlier studies (e.g., Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Polat, 2023) proposed this link in qualitative terms, this study provides quantitative evidence in a destination-wide context, thus offering more robust theoretical support.

What is distinctive here is the application of Experience Economy Theory in a Turkish setting, where food is not simply consumed but culturally performed and emotionally interpreted. The results demonstrate that culinary experiences in Turkey are deeply immersive and emotionally laden, confirming the theory's relevance in non-Western, culturally hybrid contexts.

Second, the study contributes to Destination Image Theory by positioning gastronomy not merely as a supporting feature but as a formative element shaping both the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image. This extends the foundational framework by Baloglu & McCleary (1999), which categorized destination image into rational and emotional components. By identifying food as a major input to both, the study enriches theoretical understanding of how culturally embedded factors like cuisine enhance perceived authenticity and identity of a place (Lin et al., 2011).

What is new here is the empirical demonstration that, in the Turkish context, food serves as a powerful semiotic tool—a way through which tourists interpret, emotionally connect with, and assign meaning to the destination. This supports the idea that destination image is not static, but dynamically constructed through immersive experiences like gastronomy.

Third, the verification of Hypothesis 3 strengthens the satisfaction–loyalty paradigm, long rooted in consumer behavior theory (Oliver, 1980). While prior models (e.g., Chi & Qu, 2008) treat satisfaction as a generalized outcome influenced by various service components, this study isolates gastronomic satisfaction as a standalone driver of loyalty. This challenges conventional models and expands satisfaction theory by elevating high-affect factors like food to central status, particularly in cultural tourism.

Finally, confirming Hypothesis 4 reaffirms that destination image is a major predictor of behavioral intentions (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). However, this study adds that the component of image most strongly shaped by gastronomy significantly influences loyalty, indicating that image is not monolithic but layered and experience-specific. The results suggest that food-related perceptions—such as authenticity, hospitality, and taste—are key in constructing an image that drives repeat visitation and recommendation.

5.2. Managerial Implications

The outcomes of this study provide a few actionable insights for tourism stakeholders, including destination managers, tourism marketers, hospitality providers, and policymakers aiming to strengthen Turkey's competitive position in the global tourism market through gastronomy. As the study reveals a direct and positive effect of gastronomic experiences on both tourist satisfaction and destination image, tourism boards and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) should integrate local cuisine more prominently in branding strategies. Campaigns should highlight Turkey's rich culinary heritage—from street foods like simit and midye dolma to regional specialties like Antep cuisine or Aegean olive oil dishes—as symbolic cultural assets that contribute to a strong and favorable destination image (Lin et al., 2011). Hospitality businesses should go beyond simply offering local food and instead focus on creating immersive and culturally rich gastronomic experiences. Cooking classes, food markets, local farm visits, and storytelling around traditional meals can create memorable experiences that increase both satisfaction and the likelihood of return visits (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Polat, 2023). These experiences should align with the principles of the "Experience Economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), emphasizing personalization, entertainment, and education.

Chefs, tour guides, and hospitality personnel should be trained not only in service delivery but also in culinary storytelling and cultural communication. Their ability to communicate the historical and cultural context of the food can significantly enhance perceived authenticity, which is linked to higher satisfaction and destination image (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). Tourism marketers should develop segmentation strategies to specifically target culinary-motivated tourists. This includes tailoring digital campaigns, social media storytelling, and influencer collaborations that focus on gastronomic tourism. Culinary tourists tend to have higher levels of engagement and longer stays, increasing tourism yield and fostering loyalty (Quan & Wang, 2004). Given the diversity of Turkish cuisine, regional tourism agencies should develop and promote gastronomic routes (e.g., "Anatolian Flavors Trail" or "Black Sea Food Journey") to encourage exploration of local flavors across different parts of the country. These initiatives can support regional economies while also extending average tourist stays and dispersing visitors beyond over-touristed areas (Okumuş et al., 2007). As food contributes significantly to loyalty, DMOs and travel businesses should use post-visit email marketing or

social media campaigns centered around Turkish recipes, cooking videos, or "taste memory" triggers to sustain emotional connection and encourage repeat visits (Kim et al., 2007).

6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights in the role of gastronomic experiences in shaping tourist behavior, many limitations should be accepted, which in turn are in the open path for future research. Research was conducted in terms of Turkey - a destination with a rich, diverse and deeply contained culinary culture. While it strengthens the relevance of the study for Turkish tourism, it limits the generality of the outcomes to other cultural or gastronomic contexts. Future study can repeat this model in different countries or regions, especially with emerging tourism areas, to compare how to mediate the influence of gastronomy on cultural differences satisfaction and loyalty). In addition, the research employed a cross-sectional questionnaire design, which captures tourist perceptions at one time. This approach restrictions the ability to conclude the cause and over time the tourist cannot occupy the development of satisfaction or loyalty. Future study can use longitudinal or experimental designs to assess how gastronomic experiences affect tourist attitude and behaviors, during, during, and after their travel. In addition, the data was collected using self-reported questionnaires, which are susceptible to social desirable bias and general method variance. Although statistical investigation can reduce this anxiety, future studies are encouraged to include several data sources (eg, behavior data, online reviews, or intensive interviews) to strengthen the validity and reliability of results. In addition, the concept of gastronomic experience of this study is mainly focused on taste, cultural authenticity and emotional satisfaction. However, food related experiences are multi-faceted and may also include stability, health-conscious food, or social interaction. Future studies should consider expanding the construction to include these dimensions and to include tests for potential moderating or arbitration effects. Furthermore, although efforts were made to collect diverse samples of international and domestic tourists, the sample still cannot fully reflect the wider population of tourists visiting Turkey. Future research can adopt stratified sampling techniques or multi-gross analysis, whether relationships differ in tourist types, age groups, or pre-destination familiar levels. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling may introduce potential bias, as the sample may not accurately represent the broader tourist population. Participants were selected based on accessibility rather than randomization, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to employ probabilistic or stratified sampling techniques across various regions to enhance the representativeness of the findings. Finally, this study is a quantitatively operated,

which can ignore fine and subjective meaning tourists to connect with food experiences. Future studies can integrate qualitative methods, such as ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or netnography, to provide tourists with deeper insights into the interpretation and recollection of their gastronomic experiences.

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