

# Narrating the Destination Through Food: An Empirical Study of Cultural Cuisine, Tourist Engagement, and Attractiveness

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## Abstract

*This study examines the role of culturally rooted cuisine in shaping tourist satisfaction and enhancing the perceived attractiveness of destinations within the broader framework of cultural tourism. Based on responses from 289 participants, the research analyzes four core constructs: the culinary encounter, depth of cultural engagement, the symbolic perception of traditional food practices, and the educational dimensions embedded in gastronomic experiences. These variables are evaluated concerning their influence on both emotional resonance (affective response) and rational appraisal (cognitive evaluation) among visitors. Findings demonstrate that culturally rooted cuisine transcends mere sensory enjoyment, serving instead as a potent vehicle for cultural immersion and informal learning. Each hypothesized relationship is statistically significant, with tourist satisfaction emerging as the most critical predictor of destination appeal. Of particular interest is the educational value derived from food-related experiences—framed as the transmission of cultural and historical knowledge through cuisine—which simultaneously reinforces tourist satisfaction and enriches perceptions of the destination. The conceptual framework synthesizes insights from experiential marketing, destination image Theory, and scholarship on cultural consumption—the research positions cuisine as a dynamic and expressive medium of cultural identity. From a managerial perspective, the findings underscore the strategic importance of curating culinary experiences that are narratively rich, participatory in nature, and deeply embedded in local cultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** culturally rooted cuisine, tourist satisfaction, destination attractiveness, cultural tourism, gastronomic experience, food-based learning

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global tourism has witnessed a paradigm shift—from traditional sightseeing to more immersive and culturally meaningful engagements. Among the most prominent developments in this transformation is culinary tourism, wherein food is reimagined not solely as nourishment but as an integral medium of cultural expression, emotional resonance, and identity articulation (Jain et al., 2024; Vuković et al., 2021). Contemporary culinary experiences now invoke personal memory, cultural narratives, and a sense of belonging, thereby reinforcing tourists' emotional bonds with destinations and amplifying their uniqueness. The rise of digital platforms and immersive technologies has further accelerated this shift, enhancing the visibility of food-centric destinations and cultivating traveler anticipation (Sujood & Pancy, 2024).

Within this evolving tourism landscape, culturally rooted cuisine—anchored in the traditional foodways and culinary rituals of distinct cultural communities—has emerged as a compelling vector for experiential tourism. Such cuisine offers more than sensory pleasure; it provides participatory, context-rich encounters that reflect a community's heritage, values, and social fabric. Through food, tourists engage informally with symbolic meanings, historical narratives, and ritualistic practices, fostering deeper intercultural understanding and emotional engagement (Long et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2021; Putri & Wijoyo, 2023). These

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embodied experiences contribute to authentic interactions and play a critical role in strengthening destination identity and brand value, particularly in culturally diverse contexts where culinary heritage serves as a vital resource (Ma, 2023; Maleachi et al., 2024; Sharma & Lamichhane, 2024).

Despite increasing attention in both academic literature and the tourism industry, the strategic incorporation of culturally rooted cuisine into destination planning remains underdeveloped. Existing research frequently centers on metropolitan gourmet tourism or general patterns of food consumption, often isolating gastronomy from its broader socio-cultural dimensions (Cuadra et al., 2023; Piboonrungraj et al., 2023). This reductionist approach neglects the symbolic, affective, and educational facets of food as a cultural artifact (Millán & Torre, 2022; Vlachou & Savvinopoulou, 2022). Moreover, there is a scarcity of integrated models that holistically examine key experiential components—culinary engagement, cultural immersion, destination perception, and perceived learning—particularly within the context of traditional culinary tourism (Lu & Hu, 2021; Pérez et al., 2024; Solano-Sánchez et al., 2024).

Although it is well-documented that food experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Huamanchumo et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023), the psychological and symbolic roles of culturally rooted cuisine remain insufficiently explored. Contemporary scholarship increasingly calls for a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates food, culture, identity, and tourism into a unified experiential paradigm (Millán & Torre, 2022; Παππάς et al., 2022). In response, this study reconceptualizes traditional cuisine as more than a sensory activity—it is positioned as a cultural conduit through which identity is expressed, emotions are evoked, and knowledge is exchanged. Central to this reconceptualization is the introduction of the construct "gastronomic educational value," denoting the perceived cultural and historical insights acquired through culinary encounters—a dimension rarely addressed in existing tourism models.

Grounded in Experiential Marketing Theory, destination image scholars, and cultural consumption literature, this research proposes and empirically tests a multi-dimensional framework that places food at the nexus of tourism experience and destination strategy. By elucidating the mechanisms through which culinary-cultural interactions influence tourist satisfaction and perceptions of destination appeal, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of gastronomic tourism. It advocates for the elevation of culinary heritage from a passive offering to an interactive cultural platform capable of enhancing competitive positioning, deepening visitor engagement, and advancing the goals of sustainable and culturally respectful tourism.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Culinary Experience and Tourist Satisfaction***

The culinary experience encompasses the multisensory and affective interactions that tourists encounter when engaging with local cuisine. These experiences span not only taste and visual aesthetics but also the ambiance of dining spaces and interpersonal engagement with chefs, hosts, or members of the local community. In the realm of culturally rooted cuisine, such encounters are significantly enriched by traditional preparation methods, embedded symbolism, and the cultural narratives transmitted through each dish (Nistor & Dezsai, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022). Rather than being a passive act of consumption, encounters with traditional food become immersive cultural performances that offer tourists meaningful opportunities to connect with local heritage, historical identity, and communal values. Empirical evidence highlights the impact of such context-rich culinary experiences—especially when perceived as authentic, novel, and emotionally engaging—on enhancing tourist satisfaction (Fitrizal et al., 2021; Setiawan et al., 2023). Rituals, visual storytelling, and the symbolic depth of traditional dishes contribute to heightened emotional responses among tourists, nurturing cultural appreciation and a sense of personal fulfillment (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021; J. Zhang & Dai, 2023). These affective responses function as critical precursors to satisfaction, influencing downstream outcomes such as destination loyalty, revisit intentions, and favorable word-of-mouth communication (Çelik Uğuz et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2023).

Moreover, the research emphasizes the need to align culinary offerings with tourists' intrinsic motivations for emotional depth and cultural engagement. When culinary experiences resonate with these expectations, travelers are more inclined to perceive the destination as rich in cultural identity and emotionally rewarding (Leyva-Hernández & Toledo-López, 2024; Martina et al., 2023). From a strategic standpoint, embedding emotional and symbolic value into gastronomic design enhances destination branding and appeals to the experience-seeking segment of global travelers (Pamantung et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2023). Thus, recognizing the convergence of food, emotion, and cultural immersion is vital for both academic theorization and destination marketing. Ultimately, culinary engagement serves as a central component of the tourism

experience by delivering sensory pleasure, emotional resonance, and cultural connection—each contributing to higher levels of tourist satisfaction (Nistor & Dezsai, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022).

### ***Cultural Involvement and Tourist Satisfaction***

Cultural involvement refers to the degree to which tourists actively participate in the cultural life of a destination, particularly through hands-on, experiential forms of engagement. Within the context of tourism centered on culturally rooted cuisine, this often manifests in activities such as attending culinary festivals, participating in local cooking workshops, or exploring the stories, traditions, and customs that inform traditional food practices. These participatory experiences transcend mere entertainment, offering tourists emotionally resonant and intellectually enriching encounters that foster a deeper connection with the host culture (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021). Interactions involving communal food preparation, ritualized dining practices, or the exchange of culinary narratives serve as powerful mediums for cultural immersion. Through these engagements, tourists transition from being passive spectators to becoming active participants in cultural transmission (Yoo et al., 2022). Whether by preparing meals alongside residents, learning ancestral recipes, or listening to stories that contextualize the cuisine, such experiences enhance appreciation for the symbolic and value-laden dimensions of food, reinforcing the social and historical identity of the destination.

Empirical studies consistently indicate that immersive cultural involvement elevates perceptions of authenticity and contributes significantly to tourist satisfaction (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Khoshkam et al., 2022). When tourists feel emotionally integrated into the everyday cultural landscape, they are more likely to derive personal meaning from their visit, forming enduring memories that heighten the perceived quality of their travel experience. These affective outcomes, in turn, influence behavioral intentions, including destination loyalty, repeat visitation, and positive word-of-mouth referrals (Liang et al., 2021; Sábliková, 2023). From an experiential tourism standpoint, cultural involvement enriches the travel experience by fusing learning, emotional connection, and participatory interaction—each of which contributes to elevated levels of satisfaction. Within the domain of culturally rooted cuisine, such involvement not only facilitates cross-cultural understanding but also enhances the strategic value of culinary tourism offerings by promoting authentic, high-quality visitor experiences (Khoshkam et al., 2022; Sábliková, 2023).

### ***Gastronomic Education Value — Shaping Satisfaction and Attractiveness***

Gastronomic educational value refers to the perceived cultural and historical insights that tourists gain through culinary encounters, particularly those embedded in the traditions, identities, and heritage of a destination. Within the framework of culturally rooted cuisine, food acts as a medium of narrative transmission, conveying symbolic meanings, communal values, and the living memory of a place. Experiences such as decoding the cultural symbolism of traditional dishes, learning intergenerational preparation techniques, or listening to stories narrated by local cooks elevate the act of consumption into an intellectually enriching and emotionally engaging event (Leong et al., 2017; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2022). These educationally charged moments enable tourists to engage with intangible cultural heritage in a participatory and meaningful way. By acquiring new cultural knowledge through food, travelers not only develop a deeper cognitive appreciation of the host culture but also form stronger emotional connections to the destination. Empirical studies affirm that this type of cultural learning contributes significantly to tourist satisfaction by enriching the travel experience with elements of personal growth, narrative immersion, and cross-cultural understanding (Nesterchuk, 2022; Samaddar & Mondal, 2024). As such, gastronomic educational value represents a distinct layer of experiential depth, transforming cuisine into a pedagogical instrument within cultural tourism.

Importantly, the influence of gastronomic educational value is dual, simultaneously enhancing both tourist satisfaction and the perceived attractiveness of the destination. When culturally rooted cuisine is framed with interpretive depth—through historical context, symbolic framing, and embedded storytelling—visitors perceive the destination as more authentic, culturally unique, and intellectually stimulating (Dündar, 2015; Smith & Costello, 2009). This layered experience not only increases the immediate enjoyment of the culinary encounter but also reinforces the destination's image as a culturally rich and meaningful place to visit. Educational content in gastronomy contributes directly to identity-based destination branding by positioning food experiences as reflective of local heritage and values. Culinary tourism that integrates cultural storytelling, symbolic learning, and hands-on participation creates a multi-dimensional value proposition encompassing leisure, learning, and emotional connection. As a result, gastronomic Education value emerges as a powerful strategic asset for enhancing visitor experience and reinforcing long-term destination competitiveness (Sanip & Mustapha, 2020; Soonsan et al., 2024). This study introduces gastronomic educational value as a novel conceptual construct that bridges the cognitive, affective, and symbolic

dimensions of the tourism experience. It highlights how food-based learning deepens tourists' sense of authenticity, fosters reflective engagement, and contributes to memorable, transformative travel encounters—offering clear implications for destination design, branding, and cultural tourism strategy. Hypotheses:

### ***Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Attractiveness***

Tourist satisfaction represents a pivotal construct in tourism studies, particularly in its influence on post-visit behavioral outcomes such as destination loyalty, intention to revisit, and the dissemination of positive word-of-mouth. Within the domain of tourism centered on culturally rooted cuisine, satisfaction is significantly enhanced when culinary experiences are perceived as authentic, emotionally engaging, and culturally informative (Lertputtarak, 2012; Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Here, satisfaction functions not only as a terminal outcome of the travel experience but also as a mediating variable that links key experiential dimensions—namely culinary engagement, cultural involvement, and gastronomic educational value—with perceptions of destination attractiveness. Empirical studies from culturally vibrant culinary destinations, such as Popayán, Colombia, underscore the transformative power of traditional cuisine in generating favorable tourist attitudes. When local food evokes a sense of cultural richness and emotional resonance, it enhances tourist satisfaction, which in turn fosters place attachment and contributes to a more compelling and positive image of the destination (Prayag et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020). This evaluative process elevates satisfaction from a subjective reaction to a powerful predictor of how a destination is cognitively and affectively appraised.

Furthermore, high levels of satisfaction with culturally embedded culinary experiences have been shown to increase tourists' likelihood of recommending the destination to others and returning themselves, positioning satisfaction as a reliable indicator of behavioral loyalty (Correia et al., 2008; Khazami & Lakner, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). These experiences often evoke complex emotional states—ranging from joy and nostalgia to cultural fascination and even pride—which strengthen emotional bonds and enhance the symbolic resonance of the destination (Brown et al., 2016; Prayoga et al., 2023). Importantly, culturally rooted cuisine facilitates encounters with intangible cultural heritage, allowing tourists to engage in deeper, more reflective interactions with local identities and historical narratives. This enrichment of the travel experience leads to a stronger sense of authenticity and elevates the perceived distinctiveness and attractiveness of the destination (Beltrán et al., 2016; Sert, 2019). In this context, tourist satisfaction acts as a central evaluative and emotional filter through which visitors interpret, assign meaning to, and remember their experience—ultimately driving destination appeal and long-term competitiveness.

### ***Direct Influence of Gastronomic Experience on Destination Attractiveness***

While tourist satisfaction is widely acknowledged as a key mediating variable between culinary experience and destination attractiveness, a growing body of research suggests that the influence of culturally rooted cuisine may extend beyond indirect pathways. In particular, highly immersive or iconic food encounters—such as traditional culinary tours, street food exploration, or region-specific heritage dishes—have been shown to directly shape tourists' perceptions of a destination, even before satisfaction is fully assessed (X. Lim et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2019). In these instances, cuisine functions not only as a motivator for travel but also as a critical tool in destination differentiation and identity construction. Countries such as Italy and Singapore offer compelling examples of how culinary heritage can be integrated into national branding strategies, positioning food at the center of destination image formation. Through the strategic use of food-centric imagery and storytelling, these destinations elevate the perceived uniqueness, desirability, and emotional appeal of the place, thereby influencing travel intentions and enhancing revisit potential (Seo & Yun, 2015).

Beyond the branding dimension, culinary immersion enables tourists to engage more deeply with the social, symbolic, and narrative layers of local culture. These experiences deliver multi-dimensional value, intertwining emotional fulfillment, cultural education, and interpersonal interaction—factors that collectively shape tourists' cognitive-affective appraisals of destination attractiveness (Prapasawasdi et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2023). The perceived value of culturally rooted cuisine, particularly when characterized by authenticity, historical continuity, and sensory richness, plays a pivotal role in influencing destination choice and motivational patterns (Wang et al., 2022; Y. Zhu et al., 2024). In this context, food is no longer a peripheral element of travel but emerges as a primary experiential driver and a core symbolic resource within tourism decision-making. The direct effect of culinary experiences positions gastronomy as an indispensable asset in destination development, especially in settings where food embodies both tangible products and intangible heritage. By shaping impressions, generating curiosity, and reinforcing cultural distinctiveness, culturally

rooted cuisine significantly contributes to the perceived attractiveness and competitive edge of destinations (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022).

Based on the literature review, the hypothesis of this study are:

*H1: Culinary experience has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.*

*H2: Cultural involvement has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.*

*H3: Gastronomic educational value has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.*

*H4: Gastronomic educational value has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.*

*H5: Tourist satisfaction has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.*

*H6: Culinary experience has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.*

## **METHODS**

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design to empirically assess the hypothesized relationships between experiences with culturally rooted cuisine and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. Situated within an explanatory research paradigm, the study seeks to uncover causal associations among key constructs derived from established theoretical models in experiential marketing and cultural tourism. Data collection was conducted via a structured, self-administered questionnaire targeted at both domestic and international tourists who had recently participated in culinary tourism activities embedded in local cultural traditions. These activities included traditional food tours, regional cooking classes, and culinary festivals hosted in multicultural destinations. To ensure relevance and conceptual alignment, the study adopted a purposive non-probability sampling method, selecting individuals with direct, firsthand engagement in culturally immersive gastronomic experiences.

Considering the multi-dimensional nature of the structural model and the presence of latent variables, the minimum recommended sample size for analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is 200. To increase model robustness and ensure generalizability, a target of over 300 respondents was set, consistent with best practices in SEM-based empirical research. All latent constructs were operationalized through multi-item reflective measurement scales adapted from previously validated instruments. Responses were captured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Where necessary, items were contextualized to fit the cultural cuisine setting, incorporating input from subject-matter experts and feedback from a pilot test. A preliminary pilot study involving 25 participants was conducted to evaluate the clarity, semantic alignment, and cultural relevance of each item. Revisions were made based on pilot findings to improve item precision and ensure coherence across constructs.

The conceptual framework of this study is composed of six core constructs, each measured using multi-item reflective scales grounded in prior empirical research. Culinary Experience (GE) captures tourists' multisensory and emotional engagement with local food, encompassing elements such as taste, visual aesthetics, contextual presentation, and social interactions with hosts or chefs (Si & Couto, 2020; Stalmirska & Ali, 2023). Cultural Involvement (CI) assesses the extent to which tourists actively participate in food-related cultural practices, including traditional cooking activities, ritualistic food preparation, and culinary festivals that embody the cultural identity of the destination (Chua et al., 2024; Susanto, 2023). Gastronomic Educational Value (EDU) refers to the perceived learning derived from culinary encounters, particularly regarding the historical, symbolic, and cultural knowledge transmitted through food experiences (Akturfan, 2022; Sanip & Mustapha, 2020). Cultural Cuisine Image (EGI) reflects how tourists perceive the symbolic and emotional appeal of culturally rooted food, including its aesthetic presentation and the meanings it conveys about local identity and heritage (Baba et al., 2023; X. J. Lim et al., 2020). Tourist Satisfaction (SAT) represents the overall evaluation of the travel experience, particularly concerning culinary and cultural content, and is conceptualized as a key affective response to the tourism product (Oliver, 1997, 2014; Prayag et al., 2016; Putri et al., 2023). Lastly, Destination Attractiveness (ATT) measures the degree to which culinary experiences contribute to the perceived uniqueness, emotional appeal, and revisit intention associated with a tourism destination (Bukharov & Berezka, 2018; Goeltom et al., 2023).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Respondent Profiles***

A total of 289 valid responses were collected and analyzed for this study. The demographic characteristics illustrate a diverse sample of tourists with firsthand experience in culturally rooted cuisine tourism. In terms of gender distribution, the sample was relatively balanced, with 54.0% female (n = 156) and 46.0% male (n = 133). The age composition leaned toward younger adults: 38.4% were aged 26–35 (n = 111), followed by 27.3% aged 36–45 (n = 79), 20.1% aged 18–25 (n = 58), and 14.2% aged over 45 (n = 41). Regarding educational

attainment, 62.6% of respondents held a bachelor's degree (n = 181), 23.2% had completed postgraduate education (n = 67), and 14.2% had a high school diploma or lower (n = 41). In terms of employment status, 58.5% were full-time employed (n = 169), followed by 21.1% students (n = 61), 12.1% self-employed (n = 35), and 8.3% in other employment categories (n = 24). The sample also reflected diverse geographic origins, comprising 71.6% domestic tourists (n = 207) and 28.4% international tourists (n = 82), offering both local and global perspectives on culinary tourism. Notably, 82.7% of respondents (n = 239) indicated that they had intentionally participated in culturally immersive culinary activities—such as traditional food tours, regional cooking classes, or local dining experiences—demonstrating a high level of engagement and relevance to the research context.

### Measurement Model Evaluation

To evaluate the quality of the latent constructs used in this study, a series of measurement tests were conducted (Hair et al., 2019). The assessment included checks for indicator reliability (outer loadings), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted or AVE), and discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The analysis was based on data from 289 respondents who had participated in culturally rooted culinary tourism experiences. The six reflective constructs assessed in the model were Culinary Experience (GE), Cultural Involvement (CI), Cultural Cuisine Image (EGI), Gastronomic Educational Value (GEV), Tourist Satisfaction (TS), and Destination Attractiveness (DA). All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale and adapted from validated sources in prior literature.

**Table 1. Measurement Model Evaluation (N = 289)**

Construct	Indicators	Loading	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
Cultural Involvement (CI)	CI1	0.829	0.826	0.893	0.738
	CI2	0.875			
	CI3	0.860			
Destination Attractiveness (DA)	DA1	0.865	0.819	0.892	0.735
	DA2	0.899			
	DA3	0.802			
Cultural Cuisine Image (CCI)	CCI1	0.825	0.819	0.891	0.735
	CCI 2	0.857			
	CCI 3	0.886			
Gastronomic Educational Value (GEV)	GEV1	0.838	0.754	0.857	0.667
	GEV2	0.803			
	GEV3	0.807			
Culinary Experience (GE)	CE1	0.882	0.886	0.929	0.814
	CE2	0.910			
	CE3	0.915			
Tourist Satisfaction (TS)	TS1	0.885	0.834	0.899	0.750
	TS2	0.870			
	TS3	0.835			

Source: Research data, 2025

All indicator loadings surpassed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, affirming indicator reliability. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability scores for each construct exceeded 0.70, confirming internal consistency. AVE values were also above 0.50, indicating good convergent validity. To evaluate discriminant validity, the HTMT criterion was applied. All HTMT ratios were below the conservative cutoff of 0.90, affirming conceptual distinctiveness across constructs.

**Table 2. HTMT Discriminant Validity Matrix (N = 289)**

Constructs	DA	EGI	GEV	GE	TS
CI	0.720	0.760	0.892	0.368	0.673
DA	—	0.752	0.739	0.545	0.890
CCI		—	0.838	0.490	0.715
GEV			—	0.349	0.701
CE				—	0.508

Source: Research data, 2025

These results validate the measurement model and confirm that all constructs exhibit robust reliability and validity. This establishes a strong foundation for proceeding to structural model evaluation and hypothesis testing.

### Structural Model

Following the validation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized causal relationships between constructs. Consistent with the recommendations by Hair et al. (2019), the model's explanatory and predictive capabilities were evaluated through three key metrics: coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and path coefficients, with significance levels determined through bootstrapping (5000 resamples). The endogenous constructs, Tourist Satisfaction, and Destination Attractiveness, demonstrated strong explanatory power. The  $R^2$  value for Tourist Satisfaction was 0.452, indicating that Culinary Experience, Cultural Involvement, Cultural Cuisine Image, and Gastronomic Educational Value together explained 45.2% of its variance. Similarly, the  $R^2$  value for Destination Attractiveness was 0.612, suggesting that the combined influence of Tourist Satisfaction, Culinary Experience, Cultural Cuisine Image, and Gastronomic Educational Value accounted for 61.2% of its variance. To assess predictive relevance,  $Q^2$  values were generated using blindfolding. All  $Q^2$  values were well above zero, confirming the model's predictive power:  $Q^2 = 0.342$  for Tourist Satisfaction and  $Q^2 = 0.442$  for Destination Attractiveness.

**Table 3.  $R^2$  and  $Q^2$  Values (N = 289)**

Endogenous Construct	$R^2$	$Q^2$
Tourist Satisfaction	0.452	0.342
Destination Attractiveness	0.612	0.442

Source: Research data, 2025

Bootstrapping analysis revealed that all hypothesized structural paths were statistically significant at the 1% level ( $p < 0.01$ ), thereby providing robust empirical support for the conceptual framework. The most substantial influence was observed in the path from Tourist Satisfaction to Destination Attractiveness, with a standardized path coefficient of  $\beta = 0.481$ ,  $t = 8.721$ , and  $p < 0.001$ . This highlights the central mediating role of satisfaction in shaping tourists' evaluative perceptions of destination appeal. Among the predictors of satisfaction, Culinary Experience exhibited a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.216$ ,  $t = 3.714$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), followed closely by Cultural Involvement ( $\beta = 0.205$ ,  $t = 2.841$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) and Gastronomic Educational Value ( $\beta = 0.178$ ,  $t = 2.511$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). These findings suggest that both emotional engagement with food and active cultural participation contribute meaningfully to tourists' satisfaction.

Regarding Destination Attractiveness, three variables showed direct positive effects in addition to Tourist Satisfaction. Gastronomic Educational Value significantly enhanced destination appeal ( $\beta = 0.159$ ,  $t = 2.814$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), indicating that the perceived learning acquired through culinary experiences adds to the destination's overall value. Similarly, Cultural Cuisine Image had a significant impact ( $\beta = 0.161$ ,  $t = 2.627$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ), reflecting the symbolic and aesthetic resonance of local food in shaping tourist perceptions. Lastly, the Culinary Experience directly influenced Destination Attractiveness ( $\beta = 0.121$ ,  $t = 2.698$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), reinforcing the idea that sensory and emotional food encounters not only drive satisfaction but also serve as immediate markers of destination quality and distinctiveness.

**Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results**

Path	$\beta$	t-value	p-value	Supported
H1: Culinary Experience → Tourist Satisfaction	0.216	3.714	0.000	Yes
H2: Cultural Involvement → Tourist Satisfaction	0.205	2.841	0.005	Yes
H3: Gastronomic Education Value → Tourist Satisfaction	0.178	2.511	0.012	Yes
H4: Gastronomic Education Value → Destination Attractiveness	0.159	2.814	0.005	Yes
H5: Cultural Cuisine Image → Destination Attractiveness	0.161	2.627	0.009	Yes
H6: Tourist Satisfaction → Destination Attractiveness	0.481	8.721	0.000	Yes
H7: Culinary Experience → Destination Attractiveness	0.121	2.698	0.007	Yes

Source: Research data, 2025

These findings demonstrate the theoretical and practical relevance of culturally rooted cuisine in shaping tourist experiences. The model confirms that culinary encounters, when enriched with emotional, educational, and cultural dimensions, significantly enhance both tourist satisfaction and the perceived attractiveness of destinations. These insights reinforce the strategic potential of integrating culinary heritage into destination planning and branding to drive long-term tourism competitiveness.

### Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence supporting the functional centrality of culturally rooted cuisine in influencing both tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness. Rather than treating food merely as a contextual or atmospheric enhancer of the tourism experience, the results affirm that culinary engagement plays a structurally causal role in shaping tourist attitudes and behavioral intentions. This is not an incidental

correlation; rather, it reflects an integrated model where culinary experiences—when embedded with cultural, symbolic, and educational content—act as multi-channel drivers of both emotional response and cognitive appraisal. From a logical standpoint, the study's structural model confirms that satisfaction functions as an intervening mechanism. Its role as the strongest predictor of destination attractiveness ( $\beta = 0.481$ ) substantiates long-standing claims that affective evaluation mediates the influence of prior experiences on downstream judgments. However, the presence of direct effects from culinary experience and gastronomic education value to destination attractiveness demonstrates that certain food-based stimuli bypass evaluative mediation and shape destination image through immediate symbolic recognition or value-based perception. These dual pathways—mediated through satisfaction and direct through cognitive impact—demonstrate the multi-dimensional leverage of food as a tourism asset.

The analytical contribution of this study lies particularly in the validation of gastronomic education value as a construct. Unlike previous research that treats cultural enrichment as an implicit benefit, this construct operationalizes it as a measurable cognitive outcome. Tourists' perception of having learned something meaningful—historical context, cultural values, or local traditions—acts as a predictor not only of satisfaction but also of how attractive they find the destination. In doing so, food becomes a knowledge delivery mechanism, linking hedonic consumption with intellectual stimulation, a combination increasingly valued in post-experience economies. Another noteworthy insight is the statistical significance of cultural involvement. Its influence on satisfaction suggests that tourism is increasingly moving toward co-productive models, where value is not delivered passively but co-created through participation. This aligns logically with the broader evolution of experiential tourism, where immersion and interaction yield more substantial attitudinal commitment. Culinary activities such as food festivals or cooking workshops are not just supplementary events; they serve as platforms for symbolic integration and emotional resonance.

Additionally, the influence of cultural cuisine image reinforces the importance of symbolic aesthetics and cultural representation. When tourists encounter food that aligns with their mental image of a place, a cognitive-affective match occurs, validating expectations and amplifying satisfaction. This supports destination image theory, particularly the congruence model, which posits that perceived authenticity and symbolic consistency influence destination desirability. In sum, the findings support a logical reclassification of culturally rooted cuisine within tourism strategy. No longer a functional amenity, food must be considered a strategic asset that contributes simultaneously to affective satisfaction, cognitive evaluation, and symbolic identification. Its role is not contingent on context but foundational to how modern tourists engage with places, construct meaning, and recall value.

#### *Theoretical and Managerial Contributions*

Theoretically, this study contributes by demonstrating how food operates across three distinct but interconnected domains: affect (satisfaction), cognition (educational value), and symbolism (image). By explicitly integrating gastronomic education value into the model, the study bridges gaps between experiential marketing, cultural tourism, and knowledge-based value creation. It also supports a dual-path model where both direct and mediated effects shape destination perception, a refinement of linear satisfaction-based frameworks. From a managerial perspective, the logical implication is clear: destination planners must treat food not as a passive component but as an experiential vector. Curated culinary experiences must be narrative-driven, participatory, and cognitively enriching. This requires investment in training local actors as cultural interpreters, designing experiences that embed stories and values into meals, and constructing visual identity frameworks around cuisine that emphasize cultural depth and aesthetic distinction. The strategic use of food as a branding mechanism relies on symbolic coherence—ensuring that the cuisine tourists encounter is not only flavorful but reflective of the place's history and ethos. Ultimately, food becomes part of a destination's epistemic infrastructure—a way for tourists to understand, feel, and remember the cultural distinctiveness of a place. This reframing positions culturally rooted cuisine not as what tourists consume but as how they learn, connect, and assign meaning within the broader travel experience.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the structural dynamics linking culturally rooted cuisine, tourist satisfaction, and destination attractiveness within the conceptual domain of cultural tourism. The findings confirm that when culinary experiences are designed to encompass sensory, cultural, and educational dimensions, they move beyond the realm of consumption and function as integrated experiences of meaning, memory, and place attachment. The validated empirical model demonstrates that culinary experience, cultural involvement, gastronomic educational value, and cultural cuisine image collectively account for significant variance in how



tourists evaluate their satisfaction and perceive the attractiveness of a destination. More than a source of hedonic pleasure, gastronomy emerges as a strategic mechanism for cultural immersion and symbolic differentiation. Its effectiveness lies in its capacity to bridge affective responses with cognitive interpretation and cultural identification. Among the study's key contributions is the validation of gastronomic educational value as a theoretical construct. This variable captures the learning dimension of food encounters—highlighting how tourists interpret cultural narratives, historical context, and local traditions embedded in culinary practices.

Rather than treating food as a static artifact, this research positions it as a performative medium—a dynamic space where tourists interact with local identity and construct personal significance. Through this lens, food becomes a conduit for experiential depth, enabling tourists to engage in reflection, narrative formation, and emotional investment. The model further reveals that the influence of gastronomic variables operates through both direct and mediated mechanisms, with tourist satisfaction playing a pivotal evaluative role that reinforces intentions to revisit and strengthens destination loyalty. Theoretically, this study integrates and extends frameworks from experiential marketing, destination image theory, and cultural consumption, offering a multi-dimensional understanding of how culturally embedded food experiences shape tourism outcomes. Practically, the results underscore the imperative to treat gastronomy as a core strategic asset in destination planning—one that not only entertains but educates, involves, and resonates.

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