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More Than a Meal: Ethnic Gastronomy as Cultural Performance and Strategic Asset in Destination Competitiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of ethnic gastronomy in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness within the framework of cultural tourism. Using a quantitative approach with 332 respondents, the research examines how gastronomic experience, cultural involvement, ethnic gastronomy image, and gastronomic education value contribute to tourists' emotional and cognitive responses. Findings reveal that ethnic gastronomy is a sensory encounter and a culturally immersive and educative medium. All proposed relationships are statistically significant, with tourist satisfaction emerging as the strongest predictor of destination attractiveness. Notably, gastronomic education value—reflecting tourists' perceived learning from food experiences—exerts a dual influence, enhancing satisfaction and perception of destination appeal. The study introduces a multi-dimensional model that bridges experiential marketing, destination image, and cultural consumption theories. Theoretical implications suggest that food is a performative cultural asset, while managerial insights emphasize the need for curated, story-driven, and participatory culinary experiences in tourism development strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global tourism has shifted significantly from conventional sightseeing to more immersive, culturally driven experiences. Among the emerging trends, gastronomy tourism has gained prominence as a form of travel where food becomes central to cultural exploration and emotional engagement (Jain et al., 2024; Vuković et al., 2021). No longer viewed merely as sustenance, food now serves as a medium of identity, memory, and storytelling—deepening tourists' sense of place attachment and enhancing destination competitiveness. This evolution is further amplified by digital marketing and immersive technologies, which increase the global visibility of culinary destinations and stimulate traveller anticipation (Sujoed & Pancy, 2024). Within this context, ethnic gastronomy—representing the traditional culinary practices of specific cultural communities—offers not only distinctive flavours but also participatory experiences that align with the principles of experiential tourism, where food consumption becomes an act of cultural immersion and education (Long et al., 2024; Mohamed et al., 2021; Putri, J., A. & Wijoyo, 2023).

Ethnic gastronomy enables travellers to engage with rituals, symbols, and narratives that reveal local communities' social and historical fabric. These immersive food experiences enhance emotional connections and strengthen destination branding, particularly in multicultural regions where culinary diversity is a rich cultural asset (Ma, 2023; Maleachi et al., 2024; Sharma & Lamichhane, 2024). Despite its growing appeal, the strategic integration of ethnic gastronomy into tourism planning remains underutilized, especially concerning its influence on tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness (Jain et al., 2024; Tham & Chin, 2024). Leveraging ethnic culinary heritage presents a timely opportunity for destinations to promote cultural preservation, enrich visitor experiences, and support sustainable economic development (Bhanityanakorn et al., 2024; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2023).

While numerous studies have examined the relationship between food and tourism outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty, much of this research focuses on general or gourmet culinary tourism in urban contexts (Cuadra et al., 2023; Piboonrungraj et al., 2023). These studies often isolate food as a standalone attraction, overlooking its deeper symbolic, cultural, and experiential dimensions (Millán & Torre, 2022; Vlachou & Savvinopoulou, 2022). Particularly lacking are holistic models that integrate gastronomic experience, cultural involvement, destination image, and educational value into a unified framework—especially in the context of ethnic gastronomy in multicultural settings (Lu & Hu, 2021; Pérez et al., 2024; Solano-Sánchez et al., 2024). Although prior research affirms that gastronomic motivations affect satisfaction, loyalty, and even life happiness (Huamanchumo et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023), the role of ethnic food in shaping these psychological and behavioural outcomes remains largely theoretical. Scholars have thus called for a more integrated research paradigm that captures the interplay between food, culture, and tourism experience (Millán & Torre, 2022; Παππάς et al., 2022).

Responding to these gaps, this study positions ethnic gastronomy as a culturally immersive and educative medium that extends beyond sensory pleasure to encompass cultural involvement, identity communication, and narrative education. Drawing from experiential marketing, destination image theory, and cultural consumption, this research introduces gastronomic education value as a novel construct that captures food's symbolic and storytelling power. Unlike previous studies that treat food as a peripheral tourism element, this framework recognizes its central role in shaping meaningful tourist experiences and perceptions of authenticity. By clarifying how culinary-cultural interactions influence tourist behaviour, this study contributes to the theoretical development of gastronomic tourism. It

provides practical insights for destination marketers seeking to leverage ethnic food heritage as a strategic tool for enhancing competitiveness, engagement, and destination appeal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Gastronomic Experience and Tourist Satisfaction

The gastronomic experience encompasses tourists' sensory and emotional engagement with local cuisines, including taste, presentation, atmosphere, and interaction with local hosts or chefs. In ethnic gastronomy, these experiences are enriched through cultural storytelling, traditional cooking methods, and symbolic meanings embedded in each dish (Nistor & Dezzi, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022). This immersive engagement transforms food consumption into meaningful cultural encounters, fostering a deeper appreciation for culinary heritage and shaping tourists' emotional responses. Research has shown that when such experiences align with expectations of authenticity and novelty, they significantly enhance overall tourist satisfaction (Fitrizal et al., 2021; Setiawan et al., 2023). Including rituals and narratives further amplifies the perceived cultural value, making the journey enjoyable but also educational and transformative (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021; Zhang, J. & Dai, 2023).

The emotional impact derived from rich gastronomic encounters plays a pivotal role in reinforcing tourist satisfaction and influences behavioural outcomes such as destination loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendations (Çelik Uğuz et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2023). Studies also emphasize that aligning culinary offerings with tourists' desires for authentic and meaningful engagement enhances their perception of a destination as culturally enriching (Leyva-Hernández & Toledo-López, 2024; Martina et al., 2023). From a strategic perspective, integrating the cultural narratives of ethnic cuisine into destination branding can strengthen a region's identity and appeal to gastronomic tourists seeking immersive and emotionally resonant travel experiences (Pamantung et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2023). Ultimately, recognizing the intersection of gastronomy, culture, and emotional fulfilment is key to enhancing tourist satisfaction and fostering lasting bonds with destinations (Nistor & Dezzi, 2022; Nurhayati et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2023).

Hypothesis H1: Gastronomic experience has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.

2.2. Cultural Involvement and Tourist Satisfaction

Cultural involvement refers to the degree to which tourists actively engage with local cultural practices during their travels. In ethnic gastronomy tourism, this involvement often manifests through participation in food-related cultural festivals, local cooking classes, or exploration of the customs and traditions embedded in ethnic cuisines. Such immersive interactions allow tourists to connect with the destination emotionally and cognitively, enriching their understanding of cultural identity and contributing to a more meaningful travel experience (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021). Activities like cooking with locals or learning traditional food preparation techniques foster a sense of belonging and inclusion, leading to a stronger appreciation of the cultural values behind the cuisine (Yoo et al., 2022).

This cultural engagement enhances perceived authenticity and tourist satisfaction by transforming dining into a culturally informed experience. Emotional connections formed through direct involvement in culinary traditions promote lasting memories and encourage tourists to perceive their experiences as transformative (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Khoshkam et al., 2022). Furthermore, such interactions contribute to destination loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, especially when travellers feel genuinely included in the local way of life (Liang et al., 2021; Sábliková, 2023). Ultimately, cultural involvement in ethnic gastronomy provides tourists with an enriched experiential journey—one that is deeply rooted in participation,

learning, and emotional fulfilment (Khoshkam et al., 2022; Sábliková, 2023).

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

2.3. Gastronomic Education Value: Shaping Satisfaction and Attractiveness

Gastronomic education value refers to the perceived educational benefit that tourists derive from culinary experiences, particularly in understanding a destination's culture, history, and traditions. Food is a narrative medium conveying local identity, values, and collective memory in this context. Educationally rich culinary experiences—such as learning the cultural symbolism behind certain dishes or participating in traditional cooking processes—transform simple consumption into meaningful, memory-making moments (Leong et al., 2017; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2022). These experiences help tourists connect with a place's intangible heritage, reinforcing gastronomy's role as an educational and immersive component of the tourism experience. As tourists gain insights into the social and historical contexts of local foods, they report higher satisfaction, enriched cultural understanding, and a deeper emotional bond with the destination (Nesterchuk, 2022; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2022; Samaddar & Mondal, 2024).

Furthermore, gastronomic education enhances satisfaction and strengthens tourists' perception of destination attractiveness. When local cuisines are presented in ways that highlight their uniqueness and cultural significance, tourists are more likely to view the destination as authentic and distinctive (Dündar, 2015; Smith & Costello, 2009). Culinary tourism that emphasizes educational content—such as storytelling, historical context, and traditional techniques—can strengthen a destination's identity and competitiveness in the tourism market (Sanip & Mustapha, 2020; Soonsan et al., 2024). This layered experience, where learning is embedded in leisure, positions food as a bridge between tourists and the local way of life, shaping their satisfaction and appreciation for the destination. In this regard, gastronomy is a strategic tool for enhancing visitor experience and destination branding.

Hypothesis H3: Gastronomic education value has a positive effect on tourist satisfaction.

Hypothesis H4: Gastronomic education value has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.

2.4. Ethnic Gastronomy Image and Destination Attractiveness

Ethnic gastronomy image refers to tourists' perceptions of the visual, cultural, and symbolic appeal of a destination's ethnic culinary offerings. This image is shaped by uniqueness, authenticity, cultural richness, and aesthetic presentation, influencing how tourists evaluate a destination. Destinations widely recognized for their distinctive ethnic foods—such as Singapore branding itself as "the Food Capital of Asia"—effectively strengthen their culinary-cultural identity and global appeal (Lai et al., 2019; Seo & Yun, 2015). A compelling gastronomy image can lead to strong emotional associations and become a motivating factor for initial visits or return intentions, reinforcing the role of ethnic cuisine as a central component of destination branding (Chen et al., 2020; Seo & Yun, 2015). Through effective food branding, destinations can position themselves as culturally rich and gastronomically unique, directly contributing to their overall attractiveness in the competitive tourism landscape.

Moreover, the authenticity and emotional resonance of ethnic culinary experiences play a crucial role in shaping travel satisfaction and intent. Tourists who perceive ethnic foods as authentic and emotionally engaging often report higher levels of excitement, pleasure, and cultural connection, increasing the likelihood of revisiting the destination (Aziz et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2024; Zhang, Y. et al., 2022). Thus, Gastronomy functions as nourishment and

cultural storytelling, with visual aesthetics and symbolic meanings embedded in each dish (Aziz et al., 2023; Bessière & Tibère, 2013). These sensory and emotional experiences amplify the perceived value of the destination and elevate gastronomy as a strategic tool in tourism marketing. The appeal of ethnic food imagery can spark curiosity and imagination, prompting tourists to explore destinations more deeply and view culinary heritage as a gateway to cultural understanding (Lim, X. et al., 2019; Song, H. & Kim, 2022). Ultimately, ethnic gastronomy image is a powerful factor in enhancing a destination's distinctiveness, emotional appeal, and long-term attractiveness (Baba et al., 2023; Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Song, J. & Qu, 2019).

Hypothesis H5: Ethnic gastronomy image has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.

2.5. Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Attractiveness

Tourist satisfaction is pivotal in shaping post-visit behaviours, such as destination loyalty, word-of-mouth promotion, and revisit intentions, particularly in ethnic gastronomy. When tourists are satisfied with their overall culinary experience—marked by authenticity, emotional engagement, and educational enrichment—they tend to view the destination as more attractive and worth revisiting (Lertputtarak, 2012; Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Satisfaction is a mediating variable that bridges core experiential dimensions—such as gastronomy, cultural involvement, and educational value—with perceptions of destination attractiveness. Studies in destinations like Popayán, Colombia, affirm that attitudes toward local gastronomy significantly affect tourist satisfaction, which in turn shapes emotional connections and broader destination image (Prayag et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020).

In addition, several studies emphasize that tourists who report high satisfaction with culinary experiences are more likely to recommend the destination and return in the future (Correia et al., 2008; Khazami & Lakner, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Enjoyable food encounters evoke emotional responses such as joy, nostalgia, and cultural curiosity, strengthening place attachment and reinforcing the destination's appeal (Brown et al., 2016; Prayoga et al., 2023). Moreover, gastronomy contributes to tourists' understanding of intangible cultural heritage, enabling deeper cultural appreciation and a more meaningful connection to the place (Beltrán et al., 2016; Sert, 2019). In essence, the satisfaction derived from ethnic gastronomic experiences not only enhances the perceived value of the destination but also serves as a powerful driver of revisit intentions and destination loyalty.

Hypothesis H6: Tourist satisfaction has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.

2.6. Direct Influence of Gastronomic Experience on Destination Attractiveness

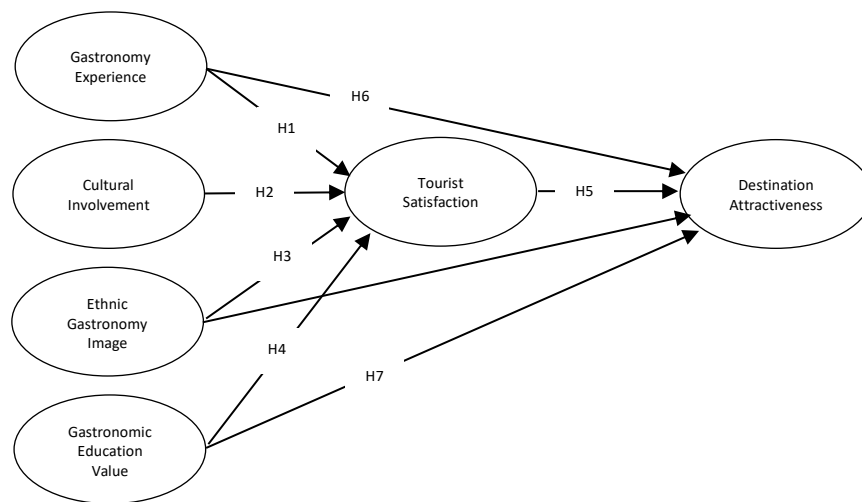
While tourist satisfaction often mediates the relationship between gastronomic experiences and destination attractiveness, several studies highlight that gastronomic experiences can also directly influence destination appeal. Highly immersive or iconic culinary encounters—such as traditional food tours or region-specific signature dishes—can shape tourists' perceptions of a place even before they evaluate overall satisfaction. In such cases, food is a primary motivator for travel and a strategic differentiator in a competitive tourism market (Lim, X., et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2019). Destinations like Italy or Singapore, known for their distinctive culinary identities, demonstrate how gastronomy can be positioned at the core of destination branding, influencing travel intentions through strong food-based imagery and narrative (Seo & Yun, 2015).

Moreover, immersive culinary experiences allow tourists to engage with local cultural

narratives, enhancing emotional resonance and deepening their connection to the place (Prapasawasdi et al., 2018; Zhu, D. et al., 2022). This "food immersion" form provides multi-layered value—including emotional satisfaction, cultural learning, and social interaction—directly influencing tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness (Aziz et al., 2023). The perceived value of food, particularly when it reflects local heritage and quality, plays a central role in shaping travel motivations and revisiting intentions (Wang et al., 2022; Zhu, Y. et al., 2024). In this regard, gastronomy is not merely a complement to travel but a core attraction that significantly informs tourists' decision-making and destination preferences (Dedeoğlu et al., 2022).

Hypothesis H7: Gastronomic experience has a positive effect on destination attractiveness.

Based on the hypothesis development, the proposed framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.



Figures 1. Research Model

Source: Research data, 2025

3. METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between ethnic gastronomic experiences and destination attractiveness from tourists' perspective. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to tourists who had experienced ethnic culinary activities at selected multicultural destinations. The explanatory research intends to test the hypothesized relationships among variables using established measurement models and analytical techniques. The target population for this study consists of domestic and international tourists who have engaged in ethnic gastronomy tourism activities, such as local food tours, cultural cooking classes, or participation in food festivals. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who had recent and relevant experiences with ethnic culinary tourism. A minimum sample size of 200 respondents is sufficient for structural model testing using multivariate analysis techniques. However, larger sample sizes ($N > 300$) are preferred to improve the robustness of results, especially when involving latent constructs with multiple indicators.

All constructs were measured using validated multi-item scales adapted from prior studies and assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The items were modified slightly to suit the context of ethnic gastronomy tourism, as described in Table 1. All measurement items will be pre-tested on a small group of respondents to ensure clarity

and contextual relevance before the main data collection.

Table 1. Instrument Development

Construct	Source	Description
Gastronomic Experience (GE)	(Clara & Couto, 2020; Stalmirska & Ali, 2023)	Measures sensory, emotional, and contextual enjoyment of local food (e.g., taste, presentation, interaction).
Cultural Involvement (CI)	(Chua et al., 2024; Susanto, 2023)	Measures engagement in cultural practices related to food (e.g., cooking, rituals, festivals).
Gastronomic Education Value (EDU)	(Akturfan, 2022; Sanip & Mustapha, 2020)	Assesses perceived learning outcomes from culinary experiences, including historical and cultural insights.
Ethnic Gastronomy Image (EGI)	(Baba et al., 2023; Lim, X., et al., 2020)	Captures visual, symbolic, and cultural appeal of ethnic food as tourists perceive it.
Tourist Satisfaction (SAT)	(Oliver, 1997; Oliver 2014; Prawira et al., 2023; Putri, R., A., S., I. et al., 2023; Prayag et al. 2016)	Measures overall satisfaction with the culinary and cultural experience.
Destination Attractiveness (ATT)	(Bukharov & Berezka, 2018; Goeltom et al., 2023)	Evaluates how food experiences influence tourists' perceptions of a destination's appeal and revisit intention.

Source: Research data, 2025

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Respondent Profiles

A total of 332 valid responses were collected and analyzed in this study. The demographic profile of the respondents provides insights into the diversity of tourists who engaged in ethnic gastronomy experiences. Of the total sample, 54.2% were female ($n = 180$), and 45.8% were male ($n = 152$), indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 26–35 years old (38.3%), followed by those aged 36–45 years (27.1%), 18–25 years (19.9%), and above 45 years (14.7%). Regarding education level, 62.7% held a bachelor's degree, 23.2% had completed postgraduate education, and the remaining 14.1% had a high school diploma or lower. Most respondents were employed full-time (58.4%), followed by students (21.4%) and self-employed individuals (12.3%). Regarding nationality, 71.4% were domestic tourists, while 28.6% were international tourists, reflecting a mix of local and global perspectives on ethnic gastronomy tourism. Additionally, 83.1% of respondents reported that they had intentionally participated in local culinary activities during their trip, such as food tours or cooking classes, further supporting the relevance of their experiences to the study's objectives.

4.2. Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the reliability and validity of the latent constructs used in this study. Following the guidelines from (Hair et al., 2019), this assessment includes checking 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). Six reflective constructs were included in the model: Gastronomy Experience (GE), Cultural Involvement (CI), Ethnic Gastronomy Image (EGI), Gastronomic Education Value (GEV), Tourist Satisfaction (TS), and Destination Attractiveness (DA). All indicators were adapted from established

instruments in previous literature and measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Table 2. Measurement Items, Loadings, Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Indicator Statement	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Cultural Involvement	CI1: I participated in cultural activities related to local food.	.835	.830	.898	.745
	CI2: I made efforts to learn about the culture behind local cuisine.	.888			
	CI3: I tried to understand the traditional significance of my foods.	.866			
Destination Attractiveness	DA1: The food experience increased my interest in this destination.	.868	.823	.895	.740
	DA2: I would recommend this destination to others because of the food.	.905			
	DA3: I consider this destination attractive due to its culinary culture.	.806			
Ethnic Gastronomy Image	EGI1: The ethnic food I experienced looked visually appealing.	.832	.826	.896	.742
	EGI2: The ethnic cuisine represented unique cultural characteristics.	.863			
	EGI3: I had a positive image of this destination due to its ethnic food.	.888			
Gastronomic Education Value	GEV1: I learned new things about culture through local food.	.841	.760	.862	.676
	GEV2: The culinary experience deepened my cultural understanding.	.815			
	GEV3: I gained knowledge about the traditions of the region through food.	.810			
Gastronomy Experience	GE1: The taste of the local food was impressive.	.888	.892	.933	.823
	GE2: The food presentation was aesthetically pleasing.	.916			
	GE3: I emotionally enjoyed the local gastronomy.	.917			
Tourist Satisfaction	TS1: I am satisfied with the overall culinary experience.	.890	.839	.903	.756
	TS2: The food experience met my expectations.	.877			
	TS3: I feel happy about my decision to experience ethnic gastronomy here.	.841			

Source: Research data, 2025

All indicator loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating good indicator reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs are well above 0.70, confirming internal consistency reliability. Moreover, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceed the 0.50 threshold, satisfying the condition for convergent validity. These results indicate that all constructs used in the study are valid and reliable for further analysis.

The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was calculated for all pairs of constructs to assess discriminant validity. According to Henseler et al. (2016), an HTMT value below 0.90 suggests adequate discriminant validity between constructs, as described in Table 3. All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.90, confirming that each construct demonstrates discriminant validity and captures a concept distinct from the others.

Table 3. HTMT Matrix

Constructs	DA	EGI	GEV	GE	TS
Cultural Involvement	0.724	0.765	0.900	0.370	0.678
Destination Attractiveness	—	0.758	0.745	0.550	0.897
Ethnic Gastronomy Image		—	0.843	0.494	0.721
Gastronomic Education Value			—	0.352	0.709
Gastronomy Experience				—	0.514

Source: Research data, 2025

The measurement model assessment confirms that all constructs exhibit strong reliability and validity. Indicator loadings, internal consistency measures (Cronbach's Alpha and CR), and AVE values meet the recommended thresholds. Furthermore, HTMT analysis supports discriminant validity, indicating that the constructs are conceptually distinct. These results provide a solid foundation for proceeding to the structural model and hypothesis testing.

4.3. Structural Model

After confirming that the measurement model meets all reliability and validity requirements, the next step involves evaluating the structural model to assess the relationships between the latent constructs and test the proposed hypotheses. Following the approach of Hair et al., (2019), this includes examining the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and path coefficients, along with their respective t-values and p-values based on bootstrapping (5000 subsamples).

The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the proportion of variance in the endogenous variables explained by their respective predictors. In this study, Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Attractiveness are endogenous constructs. As shown in Table 4, the R^2 value for Destination Attractiveness is 0.631, indicating that the combined influence of Tourist Satisfaction, Gastronomy Experience, Gastronomic Education Value, and Ethnic Gastronomy Image explains 63.1% of its variance. For Tourist Satisfaction, the R^2 value is 0.475, meaning 47.5% of the variance is explained by Gastronomy Experience, Cultural Involvement, Ethnic Gastronomy Image, and Gastronomic Education Value. The Q^2 values, calculated using blindfolding procedures, further support the model's predictive relevance. Q^2 values greater than 0 indicate the model's capability to predict the endogenous constructs. The Q^2 value for Destination Attractiveness is 0.456, and for Tourist Satisfaction is 0.350, both of which suggest strong predictive relevance.

Table 4. R^2 and Q^2 Values

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Q^2
Tourist Satisfaction	0.468	0.350
Destination Attractiveness	0.626	0.456

Source: Research data, 2025

Path coefficients were examined along with t-statistics and p-values to test the proposed hypotheses using a bootstrapping procedure. The results (see Table 5) show that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), confirming the robustness of the structural paths. Notably, Tourist Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Destination Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.494$, $t = 9.049$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as the strongest predictor in the model. Other significant direct effects include Gastronomy Experience $\rightarrow$ Tourist Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.221$, $t = 3.907$), Ethnic Gastronomy Image $\rightarrow$ Tourist Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.249$, $t = 3.134$), and Gastronomic Education Value $\rightarrow$ Destination Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.163$, $t = 2.990$). All hypotheses are supported with statistically significant relationships, providing strong empirical support for the conceptual

model proposed in this study.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Note
H1: Gastronomy Experience → Tourist Satisfaction	0.221	3.907	0.000	Supported
H2: Cultural Involvement → Tourist Satisfaction	0.212	2.933	0.004	Supported
H3: Gastronomic Education Value → Tourist Satisfaction	0.184	2.608	0.009	Supported
H4: Gastronomic Education Value → Destination Attractiveness	0.163	2.990	0.003	Supported
H5: Ethnic Gastronomy Image → Destination Attractiveness	0.168	2.756	0.006	Supported
H6: Tourist Satisfaction → Destination Attractiveness	0.494	9.049	0.000	Supported
H7: Gastronomy Experience → Destination Attractiveness	0.128	2.915	0.004	Supported

Source: Research data, 2025

Figure 2 illustrates the structural model after estimation, showing the standardized path coefficients between constructs and the R^2 values for endogenous variables. Each arrow represents a validated relationship, with thickness corresponding to the strength of the relationship. For visual clarity, Tourist Satisfaction is a central mediating variable, linking Cultural Involvement, Gastronomic Education Value, Ethnic Gastronomy Image, and Gastronomy Experience to Destination Attractiveness.

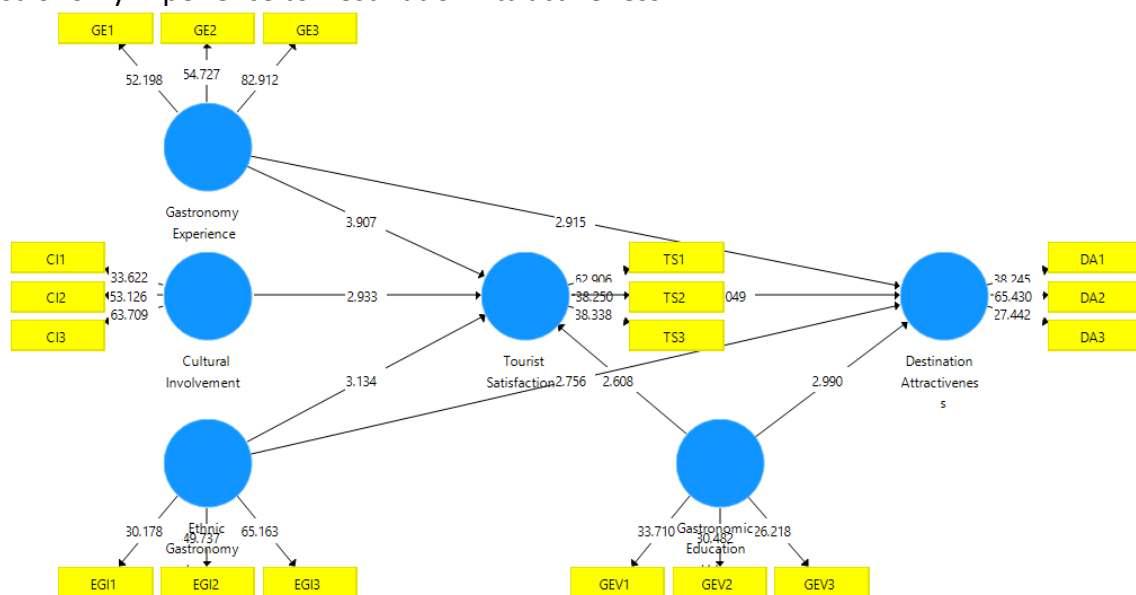


Figure 2. Structural Model After Estimation

Source: Research data, 2025

The results demonstrate that the structural model has strong explanatory power and predictive relevance. All proposed hypotheses are statistically supported, reinforcing the role of ethnic gastronomy as a multi-dimensional construct influencing tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness. These findings highlight the strategic potential of cultural and educational culinary experiences in enhancing tourist engagement and loyalty.

4.4. Discussions

This study supports the conceptual shift in contemporary tourism scholarship, where ethnic gastronomy is no longer viewed as a peripheral or auxiliary component of the travel

experience but rather as a central axis of cultural, emotional, and symbolic engagement. In this context, food operates as a performative artefact—a tangible entry point into intangible heritage, reflecting identity, history, and values through everyday practices. The empirical findings of this study confirm that gastronomic experiences generate satisfaction and serve as a distinctive attribute that elevates destination attractiveness, both directly and indirectly. The results demonstrate that gastronomic experience, grounded in sensory pleasure, emotional resonance, and aesthetic appreciation, substantially impacts how tourists evaluate their overall satisfaction. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the emotional and hedonic dimensions of culinary tourism (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017). The finding is particularly salient here that gastronomic experience also directly influences destination attractiveness, highlighting the strategic potential of food to serve as a primary travel motivator, not merely a supporting element. This affirms previous claims by Dedeoğlu et al. (2022) and Testa et al. (2019) that food can become the core of destination branding, especially when infused with cultural authenticity and visual distinctiveness.

Equally important is cultural involvement—the extent to which tourists engage actively with local culinary traditions. When visitors participate in cooking classes, food rituals, or cultural festivals, their connection to the destination transcends consumption and moves toward the co-creation of meaning. This engagement fosters deeper satisfaction and emotional intimacy with the host culture, aligning with the experiential tourism paradigm (Indra et al., 2024; Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021), where immersion and personal relevance are key drivers of meaningful experiences. The study also introduces and validates gastronomic education value, a relatively underexplored dimension that captures the learning potential embedded in food experiences. Tourists who view culinary encounters as educational—offering insights into history, tradition, and local customs—report greater satisfaction and a stronger perception of destination richness. These findings support assertions by Leong et al., (2017), Şahin & Kılıçlar (2022) and Susanto (2023) that knowledge acquisition through gastronomy enhances travel depth and contributes to the development of cultural memory. The dual influence of this construct—affecting both satisfaction and attractiveness—positions gastronomy not just as entertainment but as a pedagogical medium that enhances tourists' cognitive and emotional investment in a place.

Moreover, the image of ethnic gastronomy—shaped by perceptions of authenticity, uniqueness, and visual appeal—is a key determinant of destination attractiveness. As proposed by Seo & Yun (2015), food's symbolic and aesthetic dimensions help build a mental image of the place even before the visit occurs. This suggests gastronomy is a semiotic resource, conveying place identity, evoking imagination, and influencing destination selection. The alignment between image and experience further strengthens satisfaction, underscoring the importance of managing expectations and delivering on promised cultural value. Among all the relationships examined, tourist satisfaction emerged as the most powerful predictor of destination attractiveness. This aligns with established tourism behaviour literature (Prayag et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020), emphasizing satisfaction as a central mechanism driving revisit intention, word-of-mouth promotion, and overall destination image. Satisfaction in this context is not derived from a single moment but is an integrated response to the quality, authenticity, and meaningfulness of the experience—a synthesis of emotion, learning, and cultural resonance.

Together, these findings offer robust empirical support for positioning ethnic gastronomy as a strategic pillar of destination development. The convergence of emotional engagement, cultural immersion, and symbolic expression within food experiences points to their multi-

dimensional value in tourism. Destinations that effectively curate and communicate these dimensions will likely benefit from stronger tourist loyalty, enriched brand identity, and sustained competitive advantage.

4.5. Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

This study advances tourism and consumer experience theory by presenting a comprehensive conceptualization of ethnic gastronomy that integrates affective, cognitive, and symbolic dimensions. It extends previous models by incorporating gastronomic education value as a critical construct and by demonstrating the direct and mediated effects of culinary experience on destination image. Furthermore, the findings bridge theories of experiential marketing, destination image, and cultural consumption, reinforcing the idea that food functions as a performative space for identity construction and intercultural communication.

These insights provide clear direction for practitioners: gastronomy must be elevated from an operational element to a strategic destination asset. Tourism marketers should design integrated culinary experiences beyond taste, incorporating storytelling, participatory elements, and educational layers that express tourists' desire for authenticity and meaning. Visual branding of ethnic food should emphasize its aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic appeal, as perception significantly influences both pre-travel intentions and post-travel evaluations. Training local stakeholders—chefs, guides, hosts—to serve as cultural narrators can transform ordinary meals into transformative experiences. Ultimately, food is what tourists consume and what they remember, learn from, and emotionally connect with.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the intricate relationship between ethnic gastronomy, tourist satisfaction, and destination attractiveness within the broader context of cultural tourism. The findings demonstrate that gastronomic experiences—when framed as sensory, cultural, and educational encounters—serve as more than passive consumptive acts. They are transformative experiences that shape perceptions, generate emotional connections, and strengthen a destination's appeal. The model developed and empirically validated in this research offers a holistic framework that integrates gastronomic experience, cultural involvement, gastronomic education value, and ethnic gastronomy image to explain variations in tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness.

Among the key insights is the recognition of gastronomy as a strategic pillar for tourism development, particularly in culturally rich or multicultural destinations. When food is curated as an immersive cultural encounter—complete with storytelling, aesthetic richness, and emotional resonance—it becomes a compelling driver of satisfaction, brand identity, and loyalty. Importantly, the findings validate the role of education through gastronomy, a dimension that remains underexplored in the literature. Tourists consume and connect by learning the cultural meanings behind the food—deepening their travel experiences and memories.

Theoretically, this study contributes to tourism literature by synthesizing concepts from experiential marketing, destination image theory, and cultural consumption while introducing and validating gastronomic education value as a novel and impactful construct. It extends existing frameworks by showing that the effects of gastronomy are both direct and mediated, with satisfaction playing a central role in reinforcing destination attractiveness. This positions ethnic gastronomy as a multi-dimensional tourism resource that activates affective, cognitive, and symbolic mechanisms in tourist decision-making.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-

sectional design, restricting the ability to observe changes over time or track long-term tourist behaviour. Future research may benefit from longitudinal designs to examine how gastronomic experiences influence destination loyalty across multiple visits. Second, the sample was limited to respondents with recent gastronomic experiences in selected destinations; comparative studies across different cultural contexts or destination types (urban vs. rural, domestic vs. international) could yield richer insights. Third, although this study introduced educational value as a construct, it did not fully explore the role of narrative forms (e.g., guided tours, chef storytelling) in shaping that perception—an area ripe for qualitative or mixed-method exploration.

Future research should also consider the role of digital influence—such as food influencers, social media, and virtual tastings—in shaping gastronomy perceptions and travel motivations. As digital and physical experiences increasingly converge, understanding how tourists interpret, imagine, and anticipate food experiences through mediated channels could refine how we conceptualize gastronomic images and intent.

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