



The Relationship Between Local Food Consumption Motivation and Destination Image: The Case of Şanlıurfa*

Yerel Yiyecek Tüketim Motivasyonu ile Destinasyon İmajı Arasındaki İlişki: Şanlıurfa Örneği

ABSTRACT

Food is not only a physiological need; it also plays a significant role in the formation of cultural identity, social belonging, and economic structures. Local foods play a strategic role in the identification and differentiation of destinations, and stand out among tourists' travel motivations. This study aims to examine the relationship between motivation for consuming local food and destination image. The study focuses on Şanlıurfa province, with its rich gastronomic heritage. Şanlıurfa cuisine, with its historical background, geographical features, and multicultural structure, demonstrates the cultural heritage quality of local dishes. A quantitative research design was adopted, and a questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to measure the relationships between the variables included in the study. The analysis results showed a significant and positive correlation between motivation for consuming local food and destination image.

Keywords: Local food, motivation, destination image.

ÖZET

Yemek sadece fizyolojik bir ihtiyaç değil; aynı zamanda kültürel kimlik, sosyal aidiyet ve ekonomik yapıların oluşumunda önemli rol oynayan bir unsurdur. Yerel yiyecekler, destinasyonların kimlik kazanmasında ve farklılaşmasında stratejik rol oynamakta; turistlerin seyahat motivasyonları arasında öne çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, yerel yiyecek tüketim motivasyonu ve destinasyon imajı arasındaki ilişki incelenmeye amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada destinasyon olarak zengin gastronomik mirasıyla Şanlıurfa ili ele alınmıştır. Şanlıurfa mutfağı, tarihsel geçmişi, coğrafi özellikleri ve çok kültürlü yapısıyla yerel yemeklerin kültürel miras niteliğini göstermektedir. Araştırma kapsamında, nicel araştırma deseni benimsenmiş ve veri toplama aracı olarak anket formu kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada yer alan değişkenler arasındaki ilişkilerin ölçülmesindeki doğrulayıcı faktör analizi kullanılmıştır. Analiz sonuçları, yerel yiyecek tüketim motivasyonu ile destinasyon imajı arasında anlamlı ve pozitif bir yönlü bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yerel yiyecek, Motivasyon, Destinasyon imajı.

INTRODUCTION

This article on local foods aims to explain the sociological and anthropological effects of food culture on societies and, in this context, to reveal how local cuisines become an element of identity. Local foods are shaped not only by geographical conditions but also by traditional production techniques, religious beliefs, and social habits (Yılmaz ve Akman, 2018). From this perspective, the cuisine of Şanlıurfa, chosen as an exemplary destination, stands out with its unique dishes born from the interaction of different cultures; this shows that the local cuisine has a direct impact on the destination's image (Umur ve Şener, 2023).

The concepts of destination image and behavioral intention have been evaluated within the scope of gastronomic tourism; the perceptions of tourists regarding the destination and the effects of these perceptions on their behavioral intentions have been explained (Buhalis, 2000). In addition to the physical characteristics of the destination, its cultural and social structure, along with its local cuisine, shapes the perception of tourists, and this perception can be transformed into behavioral outcomes such as the intention to revisit (Giritöglü and Öksüz, 2016).

For a product to be defined as local food, it is important that it is grown or produced in a specific region, and that it can be purchased from local producers or local markets. The fact that local foods are made with traditional recipes and use their own unique cooking techniques attracts a special interest from tourists (Enthoven and Van, 2021).

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Local foods are very important in terms of reflecting the climate, geographical formations, and cultural values of the region where they are made. Another prominent feature of local foods for the region is their contribution to the formation of regional identity and creating distinction and recognition among tourists. Many tourists highlight the local foods they experience during their travels and recommend them to those around them on social media. In addition, local foods are among the important destination attractions.

Local foods are produced using traditional methods in processes that have developed over time, without the idea of long-term storage, and generally in a way that will last until the next harvest season, or in winter conditions, to meet the needs and last for that period. The sustainability of local foods supports the economy in the region, is important for future generations and is important for health because it is natural (Yılmaz and Akman, 2018).

Local food encompasses the cultural richness specific to a region and the daily eating and drinking habits of the local people. It has become a concept that is traditional in rural or urban areas, consumed more often on special occasions and community gatherings, entirely embedded in cultural values, and considered superior to other foods by people (Hatipoğlu et al., 2013). Each society has developed its own unique concept of food and drink depending on the geographical conditions in which it lives. It has become a leading cultural heritage of societies, passed down from generation to generation and carried into the present day.

Local foods are directly proportional to the climate and geographical features of the region. This direct correlation is influenced by the region's soil structure, water resources, and climatic conditions, affecting the variety of plants and animals grown in the region. For example, while olives and grapes are predominantly grown in the Mediterranean climate, corn and hazelnuts are more prevalent in the Black Sea region due to excessive rainfall and altitude. This diversity in local foods demonstrates the richness of region-specific products. One of the most fundamental characteristics of local foods is their compatibility with the biodiversity of the region. This means that the food is grown without harming the region and that local foods are produced without harming the ecosystem of the plant species living in that region. The production of local foods in the region is generally based on seasonal cycles and harvested in a way that adapts to the ecological balance. This method of production helps preserve the diversity of local foods and traditional methods. Local foods are the most important elements reflecting social lifestyle and cultural identity. Each region has its own unique culinary traditions, customary traditions in invitations and celebrations, tools and equipment used in the kitchen, cooking techniques, historical cultural interactions in that region, religious beliefs, and socio-ethnic structure. Local foods not only meet nutritional needs but also keep the cultural and social ties of the region alive. As an example of this explanation, the herbs and spices used in the dishes prepared in different villages of Anatolia, and the different cooking techniques reveal the agricultural and commercial relationships of the local people in the past. General characteristics of food and beverages (Cömert and Özkaya, 2014):

- ✓ Procurement
- ✓ Preservation
- ✓ Kitchen utensils
- ✓ Food preparation
- ✓ Serving the meal
- ✓ Table etiquette, and all other cultural elements that form and develop around the kitchen.

The settlement of Turks in Anatolia and their adoption of the characteristics of Anatolian cuisine, blended with the culinary culture they brought from Central Asia, resulted in the birth of a rich culinary culture. Later, with the geographical expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the gastronomic local riches of different regions were seen in Turkish cuisine (Cömert and Özkaya, 2014). The period in which Turkish cuisine developed the most was the Republic period after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In its early years, it began to be influenced by French and Russian culinary cultures, and with the addition of decorations on plates, various different sauces, and the increasing number of cookbooks that were not previously present in Turkish cuisine, a new culinary understanding emerged, and these works attracted interest abroad as well. With the spread of television over time, cooking recipes were presented in morning programs every day, and in some programs, they were taught by expert instructors (Batu, 2024).

Meat dishes in Turkish cuisine are made from sheep, lamb, beef, fish, chicken, and poultry. Meat dishes are generally prepared with tomato paste, garlic, onions, and vegetables from the region. Tandoor, stew, clay pot, well, and grilling techniques are used for cooking meat. Turkish cuisine offers a rich variety of dishes, including meat, olive oil-based, vegetable, dough-based, etc. The staple dishes of Turkish cuisine are soup and bread. Rice and

bulgur pilaf are always served alongside meat dishes. There are different types of bread and soup depending on the region. Spices commonly used in Turkish cuisine include cinnamon, black pepper, allspice, cumin, cloves, nigella seeds, dried mint, and chili flakes. Turkish cuisine can vary depending on the location (Güler, 2010).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Şanlıurfa Cuisine

Turkish cuisine, and specifically Şanlıurfa cuisine, has become one of its most important cornerstones. The most important detail that makes Şanlıurfa cuisine special is its historical and cultural heritage. Şanlıurfa is a city that has entered the world cultural heritage with its historical and cultural heritage. Although its founding date is not precisely determined, archaeological excavations suggest that Şanlıurfa's history is older than it appears. According to old legends, it is said that the first wheat was planted in the Harran plain, marking the beginning of farming history (Çelik and Aksoy, 2017).

Shared culinary traditions of Muslim communities are evident. In Şanlıurfa, this shared local delicacy is the dish known as 'Jewish Meatballs,' or 'Masluka.' It means meat boiled in water in Arabic. Şanlıurfa bears traces of the Osrohene Kingdom, local dynasties, and Roman influences in its cuisine. Because Şanlıurfa is close to the al-Jazira/Diyar-i Mudar/Northern Syria basin, it has also been influenced by the food and drink culture of that region. In this context, Şanlıurfa has been open to interactions from the east, west, and south. These regions include Mardin, Gaziantep, Adana, Aleppo, and Mosul. In Şanlıurfa's culinary culture, clarified butter and spicy isot (a type of chili pepper) are indispensable. Spices, flour, and rice are secondary, while vegetable dishes are third in importance. Despite the variety of vegetables, meat dishes are observed to be more prominent in this culture. In this region, the culinary culture is particularly prominent, featuring red chili flakes, meatballs/kebabs, kebabs, and desserts. Having hosted different civilizations for centuries, Şanlıurfa cuisine has acquired a unique identity. The region's historical past, climate, and cultural diversity have created a distinctive food culture. The preparation methods and ingredients of local foods in Şanlıurfa cuisine are directly related to the climate and agricultural products. One of the most prominent spices in Şanlıurfa is isot (Urfa pepper), famous not only for its sweet and spicy aroma but also for adding a distinct color to dishes, and plays a fundamental role in çiğköfte (raw meatball dish). It is among the most essential components in meat-based dishes in Şanlıurfa. Lamb and beef are commonly used in local dishes. It is used in kebabs and stews. The uniqueness of Şanlıurfa cuisine is reflected not only in the recipes of the dishes but also in the way they are served, showing the community's relationship with food (Ekinci, 2016).

The local foods of Şanlıurfa cuisine are actually carriers of cultural heritage over time. The fact that local foods have come down from the past to the present is not only about nutrition, but also about strengthening social bonds and becoming elements that serve a social function. With the hospitality of the people of Şanlıurfa, mutual offerings are shared at these feasts. For this reason, Şanlıurfa's local foods, progressing within the framework of cultural interactions, become carriers of cultural heritage. Şanlıurfa's local foods consist of rich and diverse flavors reflecting the cultural and geographical structure of the region. It is observed that Şanlıurfa has emerged from the formation of local foods where social interactions have been together from the past to the present. Şanlıurfa cuisine has a unique place both among other cuisines in Turkey and in world cuisine. Şanlıurfa cuisine is becoming a part of the gastronomic heritage. It continues to attract the attention of both local people and tourists. With the emergence of forgotten recipes of local foods, it is observed that Şanlıurfa has a rich culinary culture. In this way, local foods and forgotten recipes play an important role in terms of sustainable cuisine. Şanlıurfa cuisine is among the dishes recognized by UNESCO as 'Intangible cultural heritage'. In conclusion, local foods of Şanlıurfa, spices, meat dishes, bulgur and olive oil dishes, form the basic building blocks of Urfa cuisine (Umur and Şener, 2023).

Local Food Motivation

In tourism, local food motivation refers to a set of intrinsic psychological needs that drive a person to act in a particular way or to participate in a tourist activity during travel. Local food motivation is the sum of factors that explain the emergence of foods related to a region's culture and culinary traditions. Local food motivation becomes an understanding of why it is preferred, what socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors shape these foods, and their functions in the life of the community. Local food motivation offers an important analysis of which foods and drinks communities consume. Local foods are directly linked to consumer behavior and cultural values. The motivations for local foods are influenced by historical, cultural, geographical, and socio-economic factors. When these factors come together, they play an important role in shaping local foods in kitchens and in the preference for local foods. Local food motivation often helps us understand a cultural heritage that reflects a community's identity, past, and the environment in which it lives (Nisari and Yilmazer, 2018). Local food Geography is the most fundamental determinant of motivation. Therefore, the climate of the region greatly affects

local agriculture, the variety of products, and consequently, the content of the food. Several factors are involved in evaluating local food motivation using the example of Şanlıurfa. Climate and agriculture affect Şanlıurfa's local food motivation. Although the variety of vegetables and fruits is limited in this region, known for its hot and dry climate, agricultural products such as wheat, barley, and lentils are widely cultivated. Another factor is known as cultural and traditional motivations. Identity and a sense of belonging form the identity of a society. Ceremonies and celebrations, local foods in religious and cultural ceremonies, festivals, and special meals such as iftar meals during Ramadan can also affect local food motivation. The continuation of family tradition, the transmission of food from generation to generation in Şanlıurfa, is also among the local food motivations. The preservation of cultural heritage by family members through recipes and cooking techniques is seen as both a learning process and a unifying member of the community. Socio-economic motivation also plays a major role in the preference for local foods. The accessibility, cost, and nutritional value of food are among the determining factors in a community's food preferences. Local food motivation provides the opportunity for healthy, climate-adapted products. Local food motivation is also gastronomic and aesthetic, and it also offers an emotional experience. As a result, local food motivation becomes a structure that includes many different layers, cultural, economic, aesthetic, gastronomic, and social, not just based on nutritional purposes. These motivations form the culinary cultures of societies through their historical processes, while also establishing a deep connection with the social structures, identities, and lifestyles of the society. In this context, many tourists show interest in local food in the places they visit, which contributes to the formation of local food motivation. The need for local food shared with others in tourists' travel experiences is motivated by their needs (Daşdemir and Madenci, 2021).

The Concept of Destination and the Image of Destination

The concept of destination emerges as a concept generally used in the context of tourism, referring to a geographical region. This concept expresses destinations that offer activities and experiences in the areas that tourists travel to for sightseeing. The concept of destination falls within planned regions that include cultural, natural, historical, or artificial elements, containing infrastructure and services related to the activities of one or more tourists. The concept of destination can emerge as a result of the interaction of multiple factors, and these factors include elements designed to meet the expectations and experiences of tourists in terms of physical and psychological aspects.

The concept of a destination has emerged as a result of the interaction of many factors. These factors include elements designed to meet both the psychological expectations of tourists and their physical experiences. The basic components of destinations consist of natural resources, cultural and historical resources, infrastructure and services, image and marketing, and social and economic factors. Natural resources of a destination include mountains, seas, lakes, and forests—in short, all the natural environmental elements. Cultural and historical resources include museums, monuments, festivals, local traditions, and historical structures in the geography where it is located. Another component of a destination is infrastructure and services, which can be described as elements that meet many tourist needs such as hotels, transportation networks in the city, and shopping centers (Çiçek and Ilgaz, 2015).

In terms of tourism, image becomes a concept arising from people's perception of the products or services offered by the tourism sector. Tourism research shows that image is not just an abstract concept, but also a concrete expression. Although a common image assessment has not yet been conducted in academic studies on the image of a tourism region, academics agree that the image of a tourism region is an indispensable factor for the development and marketing strategies of the tourism region. In tourism, the concept of image is expressed as 'destination image'. Destination image is the perspectives of tourists that include their beliefs, thoughts, and impressions of the places they visit. Destination image can also be defined as the impression that tourists form in their minds about a particular place, the pictures in their minds about those places. Changes in the tourism sector, competition between products and destinations, and changes in the expectations and habits of all tourists ensure that tourist destinations are seen as a brand that should be viewed from a strategic perspective (Aksoy and Kiyici, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

This research aims to measure the impact of local food consumption motivation on destination image. Within the scope of the research, the reasons why tourists consume local foods (e.g., gaining cultural experiences, discovering authentic flavors, health and sustainability concerns) were analyzed, and how these motivations are linked to the destination image was evaluated. Accordingly, the study aims to contribute to destination marketing strategies and provide a theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of the interaction between local gastronomy and

tourism. In addition, developing strategic recommendations on how tourism destinations can more effectively use local foods as an attraction element is also among the objectives of the research.

Population, Sample, And Sampling Method

The universe of the research consists of all tourists visiting Şanlıurfa. However, due to time, cost, and accessibility constraints, a sampling method was used. A sample size of 410 tourist was considered in the research. Convenience sampling technique was preferred as the sampling method. The sample consists of both domestic and foreign tourists.

Limitations of the Research

Firstly, the study has a sample size limitation. Since the study will only be conducted in Şanlıurfa province, the generalization of the findings to different destinations or different cultural contexts may be limited. Given Şanlıurfa's gastronomic identity and local food diversity, the results obtained within the scope of the research have been evaluated within a framework specific to this region. However, to understand how local food consumption motivations change in different destinations, similar studies need to be conducted in different geographical regions. In addition, the study surveyed 410 participants, and the limited sample size may limit the research's capacity to represent a large population. Another limitation relates to the cultural and demographic limitations of the research. The study examined motivations for consuming local food, but factors such as age, education level, and socioeconomic status of the individuals participating in the research could differ. These variables could influence individuals' gastronomic experiences and their perceptions of destination image.

Data Collection Technique

The survey data collection technique was chosen from quantitative research methods. The first section of the survey form included demographic questions, the second section used 5-point Likert scales to measure local food consumption motivation, and the third section used 5-point Likert scales to measure destination image. Ethical permission was obtained. Data was collected face-to-face using a survey form. The face (surface) validity of 410 questionnaires was checked.

Method

In quantitative research, a pre-created questionnaire is administered to a specific group of participants. The quantitative research method is used to obtain concrete and numerical data on any subject or problem. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to measure the relationship between variables. It was mentioned that hypotheses were tested according to the measurement model results and fit values.

Model And Hypotheses

The research model demonstrating the relationship between motivation for consuming local food and destination image is presented below:

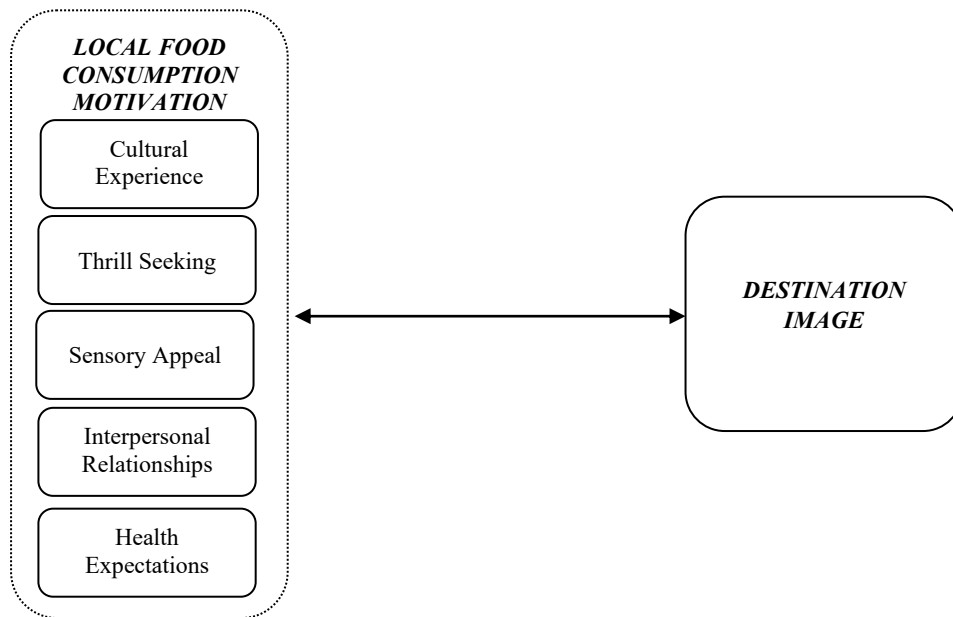


Figure 1: Research Model

The hypotheses established to measure the relationship between the variables included in the model within the scope of the research are listed below:

H₁: There is a significant correlation between cultural experience, a sub-dimension of food consumption motivation, and destination image.

H₂: There is a significant correlation between the thrill-seeking aspect, a sub-dimension of food consumption motivation, and destination image.

H₃: There is a significant correlation between sensory appeal, a sub-dimension of food consumption motivation, and destination image.

H₄: There is a significant correlation between interpersonal relationships, a sub-dimension of food consumption motivation, and destination image.

H₅: There is a significant correlation between health expectations, a sub-dimension of food consumption motivation, and destination image.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The reliability values of all scales used in the research were calculated using the internal consistency coefficient method. The Cronbach's alpha value of the "Local Food Consumption Motivation Scale" is 0.951. The Cronbach's alpha value of the "Destination Image" Scale was calculated as 0.906.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) - Measurement Model Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is a technique that is a continuation of Exploratory Factor Analysis, aiming to discover the underlying structure of the data. While Exploratory Factor Analysis helps to uncover hidden structures in the data and formulate hypotheses, CFA is used to test whether this structure fits a predefined model. With CFA, it is possible to evaluate which factors the variables are related to, to what extent the factors are independent of each other, and how well the model explains the data (Erkorkmaz et al., 2013).

Within the scope of the research, CFA was conducted on local food consumption motivation and destination image.

The standardized results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented below:

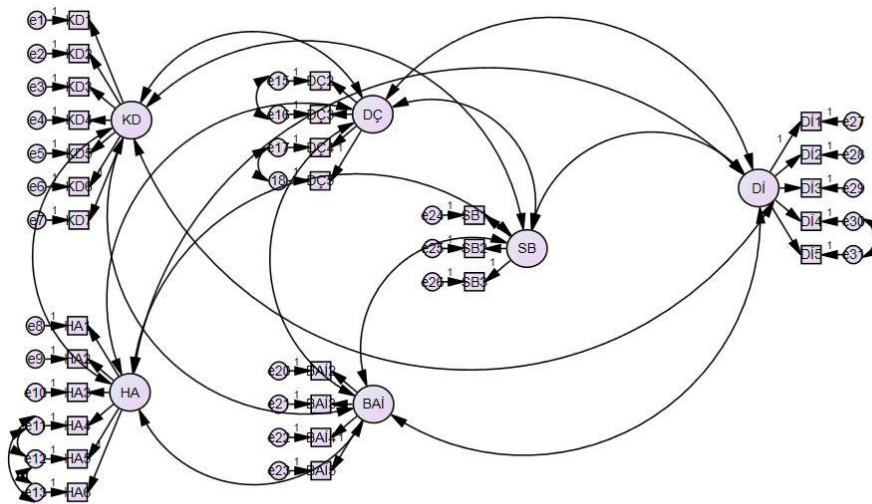


Figure 2: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

When the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, which was performed to determine whether the factor structures were confirmed, were examined, it was seen that the factor loadings were statistically strong and significant.

Table 1: Coefficients Related to the Measurement Model (Non-Standardized)

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
KD7	<---	KD	1,000			
KD6	<---	KD	1,418	,130	10,915	***
KD5	<---	KD	1,566	,140	11,202	***
KD4	<---	KD	1,541	,137	11,210	***
KD3	<---	KD	1,459	,133	10,979	***
KD2	<---	KD	1,510	,134	11,301	***
KD1	<---	KD	1,675	,146	11,474	***
HA6	<---	HA	1,000			***
HA5	<---	HA	1,065	,115	9,240	***
HA4	<---	HA	,998	,100	9,986	***
HA3	<---	HA	2,067	,273	7,581	***
HA2	<---	HA	2,235	,293	7,616	***
HA1	<---	HA	2,184	,286	7,637	***
DÇ5	<---	DÇ	1,000			***
DÇ4	<---	DÇ	,977	,070	13,874	***
DÇ3	<---	DÇ	,867	,083	10,439	***
DÇ2	<---	DÇ	,868	,085	10,186	***
BAİ5	<---	BAİ	1,000			***
BAİ4	<---	BAİ	1,056	,025	41,515	***
BAİ3	<---	BAİ	1,010	,026	39,441	***
BAİ2	<---	BAİ	1,064	,024	44,094	***
SB3	<---	SB	1,000			***
SB2	<---	SB	,972	,022	44,457	***
SB1	<---	SB	,948	,025	38,222	***
Dİ1	<---	Dİ	1,000			***
Dİ2	<---	Dİ	,985	,020	49,612	***
Dİ3	<---	Dİ	,949	,023	41,240	***
Dİ4	<---	Dİ	,569	,044	12,974	***
Dİ5	<---	Dİ	,567	,046	12,402	***

As can be seen from Table 1, the confirmatory factor analysis applied to the measurement model shows that the regression coefficients of all observed variables are highly significant (p=0.000).

Table 2 shows the results regarding the calculated fit indices for the measurement model:

Table 2: Calculated Fit Indices of the Measurement Model

Fit Index	Calculated Value of the Model	Perfect fit	Acceptable Compliance
χ^2/df	2,549	$0 \leq \chi^2/df \leq 2$	$2 < \chi^2/df \leq 5$
NFI	,929	$0,95 \leq NFI \leq 1$	$0,90 \leq NFI$
NNFI (TLI)	,949	$NNFI (TLI) \geq 0,95$	$NNFI (TLI) > 0,90$
GFI	,882	$0,95 \leq GFI \leq 1$	$0,90 \leq GFI < 0,95 / 0,80 - 0,89$
AGFI	,856	$0,90 \leq AGFI \leq 1$	$0,85 \leq AGFI < 0,95 / 0,80 - 0,89$
RMSEA	,062	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0,05$	$0,05 < RMSEA \leq 0,08$

As a result of the CFA applied to the measurement model of the study; as can be seen from Table 16, it was observed that all of the calculated fit indices of the measurement model, χ^2/df , NFI, NNFI (TLI), GFI, AGFI and RMSEA have good fit values.

Correlation between Variables and Hypothesis Results

Within the scope of the research, the correlation values between latent variables were examined using the AMOS program. Correlation (mutual relationship) is a statistical analysis method frequently used to determine the association and direction between variables (Nakip, 2003).

Table 3 shows the correlation values between the latent variables in the research model:

Table 3: Hypothesis Results

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	Hypothesis	Result
KD	←---→	Dİ	,518	,032	7,175	H ₁	Accepted
HA	←---→	Dİ	,559	,031	6,008	H ₂	Accepted
DÇ	←---→	Dİ	,723	,046	9,047	H ₃	Accepted
BAİ	←---→	Dİ	,751	,052	11,578	H ₄	Accepted
SB	←---→	Dİ	,999	,066	13,650	H ₅	Accepted

As can be seen in Table 3, there is a positive (+) relationship between all latent variables included in the research model. All 5 hypotheses established regarding the research model were accepted based on the results of CFA and correlation analysis.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study comprehensively examined the relationship between local food consumption motivations and destination image within the framework of gastronomy tourism in Şanlıurfa, a destination widely recognized for its rich culinary heritage, deep-rooted traditions, and strong cultural authenticity. In recent years, the tourism industry has undergone a significant transformation as travelers increasingly seek meaningful, authentic, and experience-oriented activities rather than merely visiting destinations for sightseeing purposes. Within this evolving tourism landscape, gastronomy has emerged as one of the most influential components affecting destination selection, tourist satisfaction, and overall travel experiences. Consequently, understanding how local food experiences shape tourists' perceptions of destinations has become an important area of research in tourism studies.

The findings of this study reveal that local foods are not perceived solely as products that satisfy physiological needs. Instead, they are regarded as valuable cultural assets that provide opportunities for cultural exploration, emotional engagement, social interaction, and the creation of memorable tourism experiences. Through the consumption of local dishes, tourists are able to gain a deeper understanding of the destination's traditions, customs, historical background, and social values. Therefore, gastronomy experiences contribute significantly to the overall tourism experience by allowing visitors to establish a stronger connection with the destination.

The results obtained from participant responses and statistical analyses indicate that Şanlıurfa's distinctive culinary culture plays a substantial role in the development of a positive destination image. The city's traditional dishes, unique recipes, authentic cooking techniques, locally sourced ingredients, and culturally embedded presentation styles collectively create a tourism experience that differentiates Şanlıurfa from competing destinations. These gastronomic elements not only enhance visitors' satisfaction levels but also strengthen their perceptions of the destination's uniqueness and authenticity. Furthermore, the sensory experiences associated with tasting local foods contribute to creating lasting memories, which positively influence tourists' evaluations of the destination. Another significant finding of the study is that the interactions established between tourists and local residents during gastronomic experiences contribute positively to destination image formation. Visitors often view food as a gateway to understanding local culture, and conversations with local people regarding food preparation methods, culinary traditions, and regional customs enhance cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Additionally, the historical narratives associated with local cuisine and the symbolic meanings attached to traditional dishes

strengthen tourists' emotional attachment to the city. Such experiences increase visitors' curiosity, interest, and appreciation of the destination while fostering a stronger sense of connection with the local community.

The study further demonstrated that tourists are motivated to consume local foods for a variety of interconnected reasons. These motivations include the desire to experience different cultures, discover authentic tastes and flavors, satisfy curiosity, engage in social interaction, gain educational experiences, and pursue healthier and more natural food consumption practices. In many cases, tourists perceive local cuisine as an essential component of the travel experience because it allows them to immerse themselves in the cultural environment of the destination. The findings indicate that these motivations positively affect tourists' overall evaluations of Şanlıurfa and contribute to favorable perceptions regarding the destination.

The statistical analyses conducted within the scope of the research provide further support for these conclusions. The confirmatory factor analysis and correlation analyses confirmed the existence of a statistically significant and positive relationship between local food consumption motivation and destination image. This finding suggests that gastronomy experiences represent an important determinant of how tourists perceive destinations. Positive culinary experiences can influence visitors' satisfaction levels, strengthen their emotional attachment to a destination, and shape their future behavioral intentions, including revisit intentions and recommendations to others. An additional important outcome of the study is the recognition of Şanlıurfa's gastronomic richness as a strategic tourism resource capable of enhancing the city's competitiveness and destination branding potential. In an increasingly competitive tourism market, destinations must differentiate themselves through unique and authentic attractions. Şanlıurfa's culinary heritage represents a valuable asset that can be utilized to create a strong and recognizable destination identity. Gastronomy tourism contributes not only to attracting visitors but also to strengthening the destination's image at both national and international levels. Furthermore, gastronomy tourism generates significant economic benefits for destinations by increasing tourist expenditures, supporting local businesses, and creating employment opportunities. The growing demand for local food experiences encourages the development of restaurants, food markets, culinary tours, and related tourism services. At the same time, gastronomy tourism contributes to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage by encouraging communities to maintain traditional recipes, culinary techniques, and food-related customs. Therefore, local foods should be considered a fundamental component of sustainable tourism development strategies. To maximize the benefits of gastronomy tourism, several practical initiatives may be implemented. Organizing gastronomy festivals, food-themed cultural events, culinary workshops, cooking classes, and local food exhibitions can help attract a wider range of visitors. Similarly, promoting geographically indicated products and supporting collaborations between local producers, restaurants, tourism enterprises, and public institutions may enhance visitor satisfaction while extending tourists' length of stay in the region. Such initiatives not only contribute to economic development but also help safeguard traditional culinary knowledge and create sustainable income opportunities for local communities. In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that local foods represent multidimensional tourism elements that influence not only consumption behavior but also destination perception, cultural interaction, emotional engagement, and overall visitor experience. The case of Şanlıurfa clearly illustrates how a strong culinary identity can be transformed into a valuable tourism product and an effective destination branding instrument. Gastronomy tourism should therefore be recognized not merely as a specialized tourism niche but as a powerful mechanism for promoting cultural identity, enhancing tourist experiences, fostering community development, and supporting sustainable regional growth. Consistent with previous studies in the tourism and hospitality literature, the findings indicate that local cuisine significantly contributes to tourists' perceptions of authenticity, uniqueness, and cultural richness. These perceptions ultimately strengthen destination image and positively influence visitor satisfaction. In the context of Şanlıurfa, the city's rich historical heritage, multicultural background, and long-standing culinary traditions further reinforce the attractiveness of its gastronomy. As a result, local food experiences become more meaningful, memorable, and emotionally engaging for visitors. One of the most remarkable findings of the study is that tourists tend to perceive local foods as cultural symbols rather than ordinary consumption products. This finding supports the argument that gastronomy tourism functions as an important bridge connecting tourists with local culture. Through local food experiences, visitors gain valuable insights into the traditions, lifestyles, beliefs, and social values of the destination. Such cultural interactions contribute to deeper emotional satisfaction and create a sense of authenticity that many contemporary tourists actively seek during their travels. Moreover, these meaningful experiences may encourage repeat visitation and generate positive word-of-mouth communication, both of which are crucial factors for destination competitiveness and long-term tourism success. Satisfied visitors often share their experiences with friends, family members, and online communities, thereby increasing the destination's visibility and attractiveness to potential tourists. Consequently, gastronomy tourism can serve as an effective marketing tool that enhances destination awareness and reputation. The positive relationship identified between local food consumption motivation and destination image also highlights the growing significance of experiential tourism.

Modern tourists increasingly prefer authentic, participatory, and immersive experiences over standardized tourism products. Destinations that successfully integrate gastronomy into their tourism offerings can therefore gain a sustainable competitive advantage within the global tourism market. Given its strong culinary traditions, unique gastronomic heritage, and culturally rich food practices, Şanlıurfa possesses considerable potential to position itself as a leading gastronomy tourism destination.

Nevertheless, despite these positive outcomes, several challenges must also be taken into consideration. The rapid commercialization of local cuisine may create risks related to the loss of authenticity, particularly if traditional culinary practices are modified solely to satisfy tourist expectations. Excessive standardization or adaptation of local dishes for commercial purposes may weaken the cultural value that makes these foods attractive in the first place. Therefore, maintaining an appropriate balance between tourism development and cultural preservation is essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of gastronomy tourism. In this context, local authorities, tourism stakeholders, cultural organizations, and community members should prioritize the protection of authentic recipes, traditional preparation methods, indigenous ingredients, and local production systems. Policies aimed at preserving culinary heritage should be integrated into broader tourism development strategies. By safeguarding authenticity while simultaneously promoting gastronomic attractions, Şanlıurfa can continue to strengthen its destination image, increase tourist satisfaction, support local economic development, and preserve its unique cultural identity for future generations.

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the empirical data were collected exclusively from tourists visiting Şanlıurfa, a destination characterized by a unique gastronomic heritage, rich cultural traditions, and distinctive local cuisine. While this context provides valuable insights into the relationship between local food motivations and destination image, the specificity of the study setting may limit the generalizability of the findings to other destinations with different cultural, social, and gastronomic characteristics. Gastronomy tourism experiences are often shaped by destination-specific factors, including culinary authenticity, local food culture, accessibility of traditional cuisine, and tourists' prior expectations. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending the results of this study to other gastronomic destinations. Another limitation concerns the scope of the variables examined. Although the study focused on the influence of local food motivations on destination image, other factors that may affect tourists' perceptions and consumption behaviors were not included in the research model. Variables such as age, gender, nationality, educational background, travel experience, cultural involvement, and travel motivations may play a significant role in shaping gastronomic experiences and perceptions of destinations. Future research could incorporate these demographic and psychographic characteristics to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of local food consumption and destination image formation. In addition, future studies may benefit from conducting comparative analyses across different gastronomic destinations. Such comparative research could reveal whether the relationships identified in the present study are consistent across destinations or whether they vary according to local cultural and gastronomic contexts. Comparative studies would also contribute to the development of a broader theoretical framework regarding the role of gastronomy in destination marketing and tourism development. From a methodological perspective, the current study employed a quantitative research design, which provides valuable statistical evidence regarding the relationships among the investigated variables. However, quantitative methods may not fully capture the complex emotional, symbolic, and cultural meanings that tourists attach to local food experiences. Therefore, future studies utilizing qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observations, could offer richer insights into tourists' subjective experiences, emotional responses, and cultural interpretations of local cuisine. Such approaches would complement quantitative findings and contribute to a deeper understanding of gastronomic tourism experiences. Despite these limitations, the study makes several important contributions to the growing body of literature on gastronomy tourism. The findings provide empirical evidence that local food motivations constitute a significant factor influencing tourists' perceptions of destination image. This result supports the argument that gastronomy should not be viewed merely as a supplementary tourism product but rather as a strategic component of destination attractiveness and competitiveness. By highlighting the role of culinary experiences in destination image formation, the study contributes to a better understanding of how food-related motivations shape tourists' evaluations of tourism destinations.

The findings also have important practical implications for tourism planners, destination marketing organizations, and local stakeholders. Developing and promoting authentic culinary experiences may strengthen destination image, enhance tourist satisfaction, and increase destination competitiveness in an increasingly experience-oriented tourism market. Furthermore, preserving and promoting local culinary heritage can contribute to sustainable tourism development by supporting local economies, safeguarding cultural identity, and encouraging community participation. Consequently, destination managers should integrate gastronomy into broader tourism development and marketing strategies, recognizing its potential as both a cultural asset and a sustainable tourism resource.

According to the results of Temizyürek's (2020) study, significant relationships were found between the perception of local food consumption values, attitudes, gastronomic destination image, and behavioral intentions. In this respect, it can be said that the results of this research are parallel to those of this study. In Ünlü's (2025) study, it was concluded that food image has a significant effect on tourists' travel motivation. The results confirm the conclusion that food image is related to motivation. According to the results of İdikut Şahin's (2023) study, it was observed that the motivation to consume local food has a suppressive effect on the influence of gastronomic identity on destination image. All these studies essentially reveal the existence of a relationship between food motivation and destination image.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that local food motivations play a meaningful role in shaping destination image and influencing tourists' perceptions of gastronomic destinations. The findings underline the strategic importance of gastronomy in tourism development and provide a foundation for future research aimed at exploring the multifaceted relationship between food, culture, and destination experiences.

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