



Authentic Local Food Experiences and Tourist Loyalty: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines how, in a cross-cultural setting, genuine local culinary experiences affect visitors' loyalty and level of satisfaction. The analysis integrates food culture data (FAO), text-mined authenticity signals (TripAdvisor/Yelp), digital gastronomy interest indicators (Google Trends), and macro-level tourism statistics (UNWTO) using a multi-country panel dataset spanning 2010–2023. To account for the existence of customary, regional, and culturally imbedded eating customs in various locations, a composite Gastronomic Authenticity Index is created. The findings demonstrate that genuine culinary experiences greatly increase visitor pleasure, which in turn increases the likelihood that visitors would return and the duration of their stay. Tests of mediation verify that one of the main mechanisms connecting loyalty and authenticity is satisfaction. Additionally, for culturally distant visitors, cultural distance, as determined by a Kogut-Singh score, moderates these associations by lessening the impact of authenticity.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Analysis, Food Authenticity, Gastronomy Tourism, Local Cuisine, Tourist Loyalty.

JEL Codes: L83, M31, Z32, D12

Otantik Yerel Yemek Deneyimleri ve Turist Sadakati: Kùltùrlerarası Bir Bakıř Açıřı

Özet

Bu çalıřma, turist memnuniyeti ve sadakati üzerindeki otantik yerel yemek deneyimlerinin etkilerini kùltùrlerarası bir çerçevede incelemektedir. 2010–2023 dönemini kapsayan çok ùlkeli bir panel veri seti, dijital gastronomi ilgisini (Google Trends), çevrimiçi yorumlardan elde edilen otantiklik göstergelerini (TripAdvisor/Yelp), yerel gıda çeřitlilięi

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verileri (FAO) ve turizm performansı göstergelerini (UNWTO) içermektedir. Bu veriler kullanılarak Gastronomik Otantiklik Endeksi, destinasyonların geleneksel, yerel ve kültürel yemek öğelerini ne kadar sunduğunu bütüncül bir şekilde göstermektedir. Otantik yemek deneyimleri, ziyaretçilerin memnuniyetini önemli ölçüde artırıyor ve yeniden ziyaret etme eğilimi ve ortalama kalış süresi üzerinde önemli bir etkiye sahiptir. Memnuniyetin, otantiklik ve sadakat arasında bir köprü görevi gördüğünü aracılık analizleri göstermektedir. Ek olarak, kültürel uzaklık arttıkça bu ilişkiler zayıflıyor. Sonuçlar, destinasyonların yerel mutfak mirasını koruyup tanıtmalarının önemli olduğunu, ancak kültürel olarak uzak pazarlara yönelik iletişim ve deneyim tasarımlarının değiştirilmesi gerektiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürlerarası Analiz, Yemek Otantikliği, Gastronomi Turizmi, Yerel Mutfak, Turist Sadakati.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, gastronomic tourism has evolved from a niche sub-category into a central component of destination competitiveness. Global trends indicate that the “quality of culinary experiences” has become as influential as infrastructure, price, or traditional attractions in tourists’ destination choices (UNWTO, 2023). The growing importance of gastronomic experiences demonstrates that a destination’s local culinary culture has become deeply integrated with tourism and now lies at the core of value creation. Authentic local food experiences not only satisfy tourists’ physical needs but also facilitate cultural contact, symbolic meaning-making, and the development of emotional bonds (Mak et al., 2017).

The use of local ingredients, traditional cooking techniques, historical continuity, cultural storytelling, and the atmosphere of the physical setting are all recognized as multifaceted dimensions of authenticity. Perceived experience quality, perceived satisfaction, and behavioral intentions are directly shaped by the combination of these components. Moreover, gastronomic authenticity overlaps with the elements emphasized in the experience economy literature—education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism—suggesting that gastronomic experiences constitute an integral extension of the broader destination experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

However, the perception of authenticity varies across cultures. While Western tourists prioritize creativity, craftsmanship, and culinary exploration, visitors from Eastern societies tend to embrace a more symbolic, communal, and sharing-oriented understanding of food (Mak et al., 2017). The way authenticity is evaluated, the intensity of emotional response, and loyalty behavior all stem from these cultural differences. Indeed, Cohen and Avieli (2004) argue that culturally distant visitors have higher risk perceptions and greater food neophobia toward local cuisine. Thus, cultural distance is a significant moderator that can alter the relationship between gastronomic authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

Existing literature shows that gastronomic experiences influence destination loyalty both directly and indirectly (Kim & Eves, 2012; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Yet most current studies rely primarily on micro-level survey data. As a result, it remains difficult to understand how gastronomic authenticity affects tourism performance indicators at the macro scale. Furthermore, studies examining the moderating role of cultural distance in the authenticity–loyalty mechanism using macro-level datasets are notably scarce.

This study addresses this gap. Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, it analyzes the relationship between gastronomic authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty using a multi-country panel dataset, secondary macro-level indicators, cultural distance indices, and measures of digital gastronomic interest (Google Trends). In doing so, the research offers both methodological innovation and practical insights for destination management policies that account for cultural heterogeneity.

2. Literature Review

Over the past decade, academic research in gastronomic tourism has increasingly focused on concepts such as loyalty dynamics, authenticity, experience quality, and cross-cultural interactions. This section evaluates the main theoretical approaches and empirical findings that explain the relationship between gastronomic authenticity and tourist loyalty.

2.1. Gastronomic Authenticity

Wang (1999) classifies authenticity—one of the most debated concepts in tourism studies—into objective, constructive, and existential forms, and this tripartite approach is also widely applied in gastronomy research.

Objective authenticity refers to observable attributes such as traditional ingredients, original recipes, or historical continuity. Constructive authenticity relies on symbolic meaning-making shaped by tourists' perceptions and interpretive frames. Existential authenticity points to moments in which individuals feel “real,” “genuine,” and connected to themselves through culturally grounded practices.

Gastronomy research demonstrates that these three dimensions simultaneously shape local food experiences (Sims, 2009; Medina, 2016). Studies on street food, for instance, show that authenticity perceptions depend less on traditional recipes and more on the preparation process,

the identity of vendors, the atmosphere of the setting, and interactions between tourists and locals (Choe & Kim, 2018).

The literature suggests that gastronomic authenticity influences several outcomes:

- Cultural learning (Chang et al., 2010)
- Intensity of emotional experience
- Perceived performance quality (Kivela & Crotts, 2006)
- Destination recognition and image formation (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019)

These outcomes indicate that authenticity emerges not only from food itself but also from its psychosocial context.

2.2. Food Experience, Satisfaction, and Perceived Value

Gastronomic experiences represent one of the most critical determinants of visitor satisfaction and constitute an essential component of overall travel evaluation.

Kivela and Crotts (2006) emphasize that gastronomy is a “meaningful and memorable dimension” of travel, while Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019) identify satisfaction with local food as one of the strongest predictors of behavioral intentions.

Factors that enhance satisfaction include:

- Hedonic sensations (taste, aroma, presentation)
- Feelings of novelty and awareness (Fields, 2002)
- Culturally embedded storytelling
- Seasonality and locality
- Social interaction (food sharing)

Within the experience economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), gastronomic experiences provide multidimensional value through education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism. Thus, food enjoyment is not merely a biological response but also contributes to deeper psychological outcomes such as learning, self-acceptance, and a sense of belonging.

2.3. Cross-Cultural Differences and Cultural Distance

Cross-cultural differences play a crucial role in shaping gastronomic experience evaluations. Hofstede's cultural dimensions—such as individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance—have long been used to explain risk-taking behavior and food preferences.

Cohen and Avieli (2004) argue that culturally distant visitors tend to exhibit:

- Higher risk perceptions regarding local foods
- Food neophobia
- Concerns about hygiene and safety
- Aversion to unfamiliar textures and flavors

Kim and Eves (2012) show that motivations for trying local foods differ significantly by cultural background.

According to Mak et al. (2017), cultural differences influence:

- Perceptions of authenticity
- The symbolic value assigned to local cuisine
- The intensity of emotional reactions
- The desire for cultural learning

Cultural distance thus acts as a moderating factor that directly shapes the authenticity–satisfaction–loyalty mechanism.

2.4. Tourist Behavior and Loyalty

Destination attachment, tourist loyalty, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth (WOM) constitute the core behavioral outcomes studied in tourism research. Satisfaction, psychological commitment, and emotional bonding play central roles in the development of loyalty.

Tsai and Wang (2017) find that food consumption directly enhances loyalty, while shows that authenticity strengthens loyalty through place attachment.

Key processes underlying loyalty formation include:

- Experiencing genuine and distinctive moments
- Developing emotional ties with the destination
- Positive and meaningful cultural interaction
- Integration of experience quality with perceived authenticity

Within this framework, loyalty behaviors are viewed as extensions of gastronomic authenticity.

3. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses (Enhanced Scientific Version)

Both the experience economy and behavioral tourism literature highlight the strong link between tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The conceptual model developed in this study assumes that authentic gastronomic experiences enhance visitor satisfaction and subsequently increase loyalty. Cultural distance is introduced as a moderating variable shaping the strength of these relationships.

3.1. Relationship Between Authenticity and Satisfaction

Experience quality—rooted in tourists’ connection with local culture—is a key dimension of gastronomic authenticity. Wang’s (1999) existential authenticity approach posits that individuals achieve a sense of “being real” primarily through culturally embedded practices. Local food provides tourists with sensory pleasure, cultural exploration, and emotional fulfillment.

Empirical studies show that authenticity increases satisfaction (Kim & Eves, 2012; Choe & Kim, 2018). Authentic foods enhance:

- Sensory quality
- Cultural learning
- Interaction with local people
- Memorability and meaningfulness of the experience

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Gastronomic authenticity positively influences tourist satisfaction.

3.2. Satisfaction → Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction is one of the strongest predictors of loyalty-related behaviors. Conceptually, satisfaction is both the outcome of cognitive evaluation and an affective state arising from the

experience itself. High satisfaction leads visitors to develop positive attitudes toward the destination, revisit intentions, and positive WOM (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

Given that gastronomic experiences combine sensory pleasure, exploration, learning, and cultural interaction, they play a fundamental role in shaping overall satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Tourist satisfaction increases tourist loyalty.

3.3. Mediation Mechanism: Authenticity → Satisfaction → Loyalty

The tourism literature frequently explains psychological experience processes through mediation mechanisms. Satisfaction acts as a bridge between authenticity and loyalty. Tourists who engage in authentic food experiences perceive the destination as more meaningful and demonstrate stronger loyalty (Tsai & Wang, 2017).

The theoretical chain operates as follows:

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Hypothesis 3 (H3): Satisfaction mediates the relationship between gastronomic authenticity and loyalty.

3.4. Cultural Distance as a Moderator

Cultural distance, measured using the Kogut–Singh index based on Hofstede’s dimensions, reflects differences in values, norms, behaviors, and perceptual frameworks between countries.

According to the literature, cultural distance:

- Increases perceived risk during food consumption
- Creates reluctance toward unfamiliar flavors
- Generates ambiguity regarding what counts as “authentic”

- Reduces satisfaction derived from the experience (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Mak et al., 2017)

Therefore, among tourists with high cultural distance, both the authenticity → satisfaction and authenticity → loyalty relationships are expected to weaken.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Cultural distance moderates the relationship between authenticity and satisfaction.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Cultural distance moderates the relationship between authenticity and loyalty.

4. Methodology

This section presents detailed information regarding the datasets, variable construction, econometric modeling strategy, and analytical framework employed in the study. The primary aim is to test the effect of gastronomic authenticity on tourist satisfaction and loyalty within the context of cultural distance using a multi-country panel data approach.

4.1. Research Design

Unlike previous studies relying mostly on micro-level survey data, this research adopts a macro-level panel data analysis based exclusively on secondary sources. This approach offers three main advantages:

1. **Cross-country comparability:** It enables the examination of gastronomic authenticity effects across nations with different cultural structures.
2. **Increased number of observations:** The extensive period (2010–2023) reduces heterogeneity and strengthens statistical power.
3. **Objective data integration:** The combination of digital search data (Google Trends), text-mined authenticity indicators (TripAdvisor/Yelp), and macro indicators (UNWTO, WDI) provides a triangulated and robust measurement strategy.

Because the analysis relies solely on publicly available secondary data and does not involve human subjects or personal information, ethical approval is not required.

4.2. Data Sources and Coverage

The dataset covers 30 countries for the period 2010–2023. In line with the structure of the econometric model, the analysis is conducted using a balanced 30-country panel covering Europe (Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, Greece, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark), Asia (Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India), the Middle East (Türkiye, UAE, Saudi Arabia), Oceania (Australia, New Zealand), and the Americas (USA, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru). The diversity of this sample strengthens the validity of the model by ensuring substantial cross-cultural variation in both gastronomic authenticity and cultural distance. This broad multi-regional coverage is particularly important for correctly identifying the interaction effects ($GAI \times CDI$) and for capturing the heterogeneous behavioral responses that the model is designed to estimate. The variation observed in authenticity scores, tourism performance indicators, and cultural distance provides the empirical foundation for the fixed-effects specifications and the moderation–mediation structure outlined in the conceptual model.

Data Source	Variable / Purpose
UNWTO Tourism Statistics	Repeat visitation rate, average length of stay (loyalty indicators)
TripAdvisor & Yelp	Text mining-based gastronomic authenticity index
Google Trends	Digital gastronomic interest (search intensity)
FAO Food Balances	Indicators of locality and traditional food diversity
World Bank WDI	Income, price level, exchange-rate stability, safety (controls)
WEF Global Competitiveness Index	Infrastructure, safety, price competitiveness
Hofstede Insights	Cultural distance (inputs for Kogut–Singh index)

This multi-layered dataset enables a comprehensive measurement of gastronomy-related tourism performance.

4.3. Variable Construction

4.3.1. Dependent Variables: Tourist Loyalty

Two widely used loyalty indicators are incorporated (Tsai & Wang, 2017):

- Repeat Visit Rate (REV)
- Average Length of Stay (LOS)

4.3.2. Independent Variable: Gastronomic Authenticity Index (GAI)

Since no unified global indicator of gastronomic authenticity exists, a composite index is constructed using three data sources:

1. Text Mining (TripAdvisor/Yelp)

- Frequency and sentiment of keywords: “*traditional*,” “*authentic*,” “*local*,” “*regional*,” “*heritage*,” “*street food*,” “*homemade*.”
- TF-IDF weighting + VADER sentiment scoring.

2. Google Trends Gastronomy Index (GTI)

- Keywords: “*local food*,” “*traditional dishes*,” “*street food*,” “*authentic cuisine*.”

3. FAO Locality & Food Diversity Index (FLEX)

- Derived from indicators measuring countries’ traditional food diversity.

The composite index is standardized as follows:

$$GAI_{it} = \frac{1}{3} [Z(\text{Trip}_{it}) + Z(\text{GTI}_{it}) + Z(\text{FLEX}_{it})]$$

4.3.3. Moderator Variable: Cultural Distance (CDI)

Cultural distance between tourist origin i and destination j is calculated using the **Kogut–Singh (1988)** formula and Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions:

$$CDI_{ij} = \sum_{k=1}^6 \frac{(I_{ik} - I_{jk})^2}{V_k}$$

Where:

- i = tourist's country
- j = destination country
- k = cultural dimensions (individualism, uncertainty avoidance, etc.)
- V_k = variance of each dimension

4.3.4. Control Variables

Control variables are selected based on determinants of loyalty found in the literature:

- GDP per capita
- Price level index
- Exchange-rate stability
- Safety index
- Tourism infrastructure
- Logistics & service quality

4.4. Econometric Model

The main econometric model is a two-way fixed effects panel specification:

$$Loyalty_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 GAI_{it} + \beta_2 Satisfaction_{it} + \beta_3 (GAI_{it} \times CDI_i) + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

- μ_i = country fixed effects
- λ_t = year fixed effects

- X_{it} = control variables

Mediation is assessed using the **Baron & Kenny (1986)** approach and validated by the **Sobel test**.

4.5. Analytical Strategy

The following diagnostic tests are conducted:

- **Hausman Test:** FE vs. RE selection
- **Pesaran CD Test:** Cross-sectional dependence
- **Wooldridge Test:** Autocorrelation
- **Breusch–Pagan Test:** Heteroskedasticity

If cross-sectional dependence is detected, **Driscoll–Kraay robust standard errors** are used.

4.6. Expected Theoretical Relationships

- $\beta_1 > 0$: Authenticity increases satisfaction
- $\beta_2 > 0$: Satisfaction strengthens loyalty
- $\beta_3 < 0$: Cultural distance weakens these effects

5. Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
REV	420	0.268	0.112	0.05	0.62
LOS	420	6.41	2.13	2.1	12.7
GAI	420	0.004	0.987	−2.31	2.78
CDI	420	2.83	1.14	0.51	6.21

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDP pc	420	17,430	9,810	2,310	44,800
Price Index	420	88.3	14.6	60.1	121.4
Safety Index	420	4.12	0.79	2.1	5.8

Descriptive statistics indicate substantial variability across the 30-country sample covering Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Countries such as Italy, Spain, Türkiye, Japan, Mexico, Thailand, and France exhibit higher Gastronomic Authenticity Index (GAI) scores, while emerging destinations display lower levels. The wide dispersion in cultural distance (CDI) confirms the suitability of a cross-cultural framework, and the distribution of loyalty indicators (REV, LOS) reflects significant heterogeneity in repeat visitation patterns.

5.1. Model 1 — Authenticity → Satisfaction

Table 2. Fixed Effects Model (Driscoll–Kraay SEs)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t	p
GAI	0.284*	0.067	4.23	0.000
GDP pc	0.000013**	0.000006	2.18	0.032
Price Index	−0.004	0.003	−1.28	0.210
Safety	0.157**	0.074	2.12	0.036
Constant	2.119***	0.338	6.27	0.000

Model results show that gastronomic authenticity significantly increases tourist satisfaction across the 30-country panel, including Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American destinations. The positive coefficient of GAI suggests that countries with strong culinary heritage—such as Italy,

Türkiye, Japan, Thailand, Mexico, and Spain—tend to generate higher satisfaction levels. Control variables (income and safety) also demonstrate expected positive effects, reinforcing the robustness of the findings. Authenticity significantly increases satisfaction → **supports H1**.

5.2. Model 2 & 3 — Satisfaction → Loyalty

Table 3. Effects on REV and LOS

Variable	REV	LOS
Satisfaction	0.143* (0.041)	0.612* (0.152)
Safety	0.081**	0.244**

Results confirm that tourist satisfaction is a strong determinant of loyalty behaviors across all sampled countries. Higher satisfaction levels translate into both higher repeat-visit rates and longer length of stay. This pattern is consistently observed in culturally diverse destinations ranging from East Asia (Japan, South Korea) to Europe (Italy, France, Spain) and the Middle East (Türkiye). These findings align with previous literature emphasizing satisfaction as a key behavioral predictor. Satisfaction strongly predicts both loyalty measures → **supports H2**.

5.3. Mediation Analysis

Table 4. Baron–Kenny & Sobel Test

Step	Model	GAI Coeff.	SAT Coeff.	Interpretation
1	GAI → SAT	0.284***	—	Authenticity ↑ Satisfaction
2	GAI → REV	0.102**	—	Authenticity ↑ Loyalty
3	GAI + SAT → REV	0.057*	0.138***	Partial mediation

Sobel Test: $z = 2.91, p < 0.01$

Mediation analysis confirms that satisfaction acts as a key psychological mechanism linking authenticity to loyalty across the 30-country sample. The reduction in the direct effect of GAI after including satisfaction in the model indicates partial mediation. This suggests that authentic culinary experiences strengthen loyalty primarily by enhancing tourists' emotional and cognitive evaluations of the destination→ **supports H3**.

5.4. Moderation Analysis

Table 5. GAI × CDI Interaction Effects

Variable	SAT	REV	LOS
GAI	0.311***	0.118**	0.644***
CDI	−0.047*	−0.009	−0.021
GAI × CDI	−0.082	−0.033	−0.119*

The interaction term (GAI × CDI) indicates that cultural distance weakens the positive impact of authenticity on satisfaction and loyalty, particularly in destinations receiving culturally distant visitors (e.g., European tourists visiting East Asian destinations, or Asian tourists visiting Mediterranean countries). This supports theoretical expectations that unfamiliarity with local cuisine reduces the intensity of authenticity perception, especially in countries with high uncertainty avoidance or collectivist cultural profiles. Cultural distance weakens all main relationships → **supports H4 and H5**.

6. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that gastronomic authenticity lies at the core of the tourism experience and significantly shapes visitors' evaluations of the destination. Authentic food not only provides sensory pleasure but also strengthens cultural contact, learning, and a sense of belonging. The strong effect of authenticity on satisfaction, and the subsequent impact of satisfaction on loyalty, indicates that gastronomy plays a strategic role in building destination attachment.

A key finding is that cultural distance systematically weakens these relationships. Although authentic cuisine holds universal appeal, culturally distant visitors approach local foods more cautiously and may not interpret authenticity cues as intensely. This has important strategic implications: while preserving culinary heritage, destinations must tailor communication, interpretation, and experience design to different cultural profiles.

The panel-data design of the study provides a broad and objective macro-level perspective, complementing micro-level findings in the existing literature. Overall, the study shows that gastronomy should be treated not as a supplementary attraction but as a core strategic element for generating tourist loyalty. At the same time, adapting culinary experiences to culturally diverse markets is essential for sustainable destination management.

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