

FOOD IMAGE AND DESTINATION LOYALTY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LOCAL FOOD CONSUMPTION VALUES

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ABSTRACT

Local food tourism is becoming increasingly popular, riveting academics to determine the relationships between food image, loyalty, and local food consumption values. The authors particularly aimed to examine how food image might impact loyalty and the mediating role of local food consumption values in this relationship. The research sample comprises foreign tourists visiting İstanbul and Antalya. Analyses were performed over the data collected from 659 foreign tourists visiting the relevant destinations. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for testing the hypotheses. The results revealed that food image is an influential element that plays a determinant role on local food consumption values. Moreover, it was found that food image affects loyalty positively and significantly. It was concluded that taste/quality value, epistemic value and interaction value mediate the relationship between food image and loyalty. On the grounds of the research findings, suggestions were presented for practitioners and future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of food and beverages within the tourism industry has progressively increased over time. Local food and beverages feature national, regional, or individual identity of a destination and thus develop the food image (FI) in the destination concerned. With the positive FI

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created in the minds of tourists, destinations gain greater competitive advantages over their rivals (Chen & Tsai, 2007). It has come to light that the image increases destinations' potential of being preferred, affects decision-making processes and tourist behaviors at large (Wang, 2021). For this reason, it can be argued that FI is a fundamental element that impacts tourist behavior.

Numerous studies have delved into the effects of FI on loyalty and have concluded that a destination's FI has a noteworthy impact on loyalty (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Yasami et al., 2020). However, a positive destination image alone does not necessarily explain revisit intentions (Yasami et al., 2020). In addition, most studies have examined the mediating role of food satisfaction, personality traits, and culinary quality in the relationship between FI and loyalty (Peštek & Činjurević 2014; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019) but disregarded the idea of value.

On the other hand, value has been emphasized as an antecedent variable impacting loyalty, one of the strongest predictors of the perceived value attracting the growing attention of researchers (Chen & Chen, 2010). Previous studies have revealed that the perceived value of a travel destination or tourist experience plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' decisions to revisit (Choe & Kim, 2019; Hussain et al., 2022; Leow et al., 2024; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Prominent marketing constructs such as image and perceived value are often cited as indicators of loyalty. Numerous studies in service industries have explored the reciprocal relationships between the two constructs (Clemes et al., 2014).

Beyond the basic benefits obtained from food consumption, the characteristics and benefits of local foods consumed in any destination also differ. For example, consumption of local foods in a destination is associated with values such as meeting the local culture, eating new local foods, showing interest in the food culture of the host country, expecting good memories, interacting, gaining prestige, and expressing oneself as a tourist (Mak et al., 2012, 2017). For this reason, the consumption value of local foods offered in the tourism destination differs from the perceived value of other products and services (Choe & Kim, 2019). While the number of studies is limited, they have acknowledged the importance of consumption value in the realm of food tourism. These studies have shed light on the importance of tourist's local food consumption values (TLFCVs) and their influence on attitudes towards local food, destination image, satisfaction, and intentions to consume local food (Choe & Kim, 2019; Gupta et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2022; Leow et al., 2024; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020).

The impact of tourists' TLFCVs on their behavior has thus remained an under researched issue, with just a few studies addressing it (Choe & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, TLFCVs have far-reaching implications for destinations (Mak et al., 2017).

In parallel, no previous study has linked these concepts to the mediating mechanism of TLFCVs despite the FI and loyalty being salient concepts in consumer behavior and tourism research. Also, many scholars have highlighted the lack of mediated analysis in tourism research (Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015; Tyagi et al., 2016).

Given the lack of research and gaps in this area, this study aimed to reveal the relationship between FI and loyalty and explore the mediating role of TLFCVs in this relationship. Hence, it intended to fill the research gap by integrating the concepts of the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) model and the theory of consumption values to explain the research framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The concept of consumption values helps to understand the influence of TLFCVs on loyalty behavior.

Overall, the findings are expected to contribute significantly to knowledge in the field. This study primarily evaluates the utility of the S-O-R theory and consumption values to explain how FI impacts TLFCVs and loyalty intentions. Second, this research makes a valuable contribution to the field of literature by uncovering the mediating role played by TLFCVs in the association between FI and loyalty. Third, in the context of the Turkish tourism market, it theoretically proposes a new model for the mediating role of TLFCVs between FI and loyalty. The emerging framework might provide academics and managers with a deeper understanding of the key factors impacting the loyalty behavior of tourists who prefer a specific destination, particularly concerning FI. Consequently, identifying TLFCVs of tourists and how FI impacts on loyalty is essential to foresee the behaviors of tourists and to plan future steps accordingly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

S-O-R Theory

The S-O-R theory was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and later revised by Jacoby (2002). It is a widely used theory for understanding the antecedents, interventions and consequences of core tourism activities (Yasami et al., 2020). It includes three elements: stimulus, organism and response (Kamboj et al., 2018). In this study, food image is defined as

“tourists' holistic impressions of the gastronomic products and food culture of a particular destination” (Chang & Mak, 2018). Therefore, this study considers food image (FI) as a stimulus that triggers tourists' evaluations and information processing.

In S-O-R theory, organisms are mediating variables such as perceptions and emotions that represent the full mediation process between stimulus and response (Kamboj et al., 2018). In this study, TLFCVs, which play an important role in tourists' destination choice, pre- and post-travel evaluations, decision-making process, and outcome behaviors (Choe & Kim, 2019), are considered as organisms. In the S-O-R model, response is the final component that encompasses an individual's decisions and/or behavioral outcomes. In this study, loyalty represents the response, as loyalty is considered as a response to human behavior and is considered as a critical factor for the sustainability of the travel industry (Su & Hsu, 2013).

The Theory of Consumption Values

Choe and Kim (2019) developed TLFCVs based on consumption value theory, as the food experience in a tourist destination encompasses various qualities. They proposed that TLFCVs consist of emotional, epistemic, health, prestige, taste/quality, price, and interaction values. Emotional value relates to emotions evoked by the dining experience, epistemic value to the desire to learn about local cuisine, and health value to nutritional and safety concerns. Prestige value refers to the benefit of increasing one's status, taste/quality value to taste, flavor, and functional consequences, price value to food cost, and interaction value to the food's ability to facilitate social interaction. Examining these value dimensions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that enhance the appeal of local cuisine and tourists' motivations for selecting a food destination. This insight can elucidate the decision-making and behaviors of tourists more effectively.

FI and TLFCVs

Food image (FI) can be described as the “*overall impression that tourists have of a destination's food culture and culinary products*” (Chang & Mak, 2018). Image is of great importance as it impacts on decision-making processes as well as experiences, evaluations, and destination loyalty of tourists (Chen & Tsai, 2007). The close relationship between destination image and perceived value has always been an area of interest for the academics studying in the field of tourism. However, the relationship between value

and image is complex. Some researchers suggest that value influences image (Leow et al., 2024; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019), while others argue the reverse (Wu et al., 2018). Additionally, although some studies do not explicitly address image, they propose that destination attributes enhance perceived value. For instance, Calza et al. (2020) found that onboard ambiance significantly contributed to the perceived value of a cruise. Similarly, Kim et al. (2013) observed that perceived healthy food positively impacted both perceived value and the intention to revisit a restaurant. Therefore, this study analyzes a destination's FI and suggests that it can help increase the TLFCVs of the destination. The better the destination FI, the higher the tourists' perception of its value, which leads to their satisfaction with the destination. Omar et al. (2015) found that FI significantly affects tourists' emotional experiences and overall satisfaction. Mak et al. (2012) examined tourists' motivation to try new and exotic foods and found that FI influences the desire to acquire new knowledge. Similarly, Guan and Jones (2015) investigated the role of local cuisine in tourists' cultural learning experiences and showed that favourable FI encourages cultural knowledge acquisition. Grunert (2010) showed in his study that consumers are greatly influenced by FI when evaluating the health value of food products. National identity and prestige play a role in food product evaluation and purchase intentions, especially for local products (Šapić et al., 2018). Overall, a positive destination FI can increase tourists' perceptions of taste and quality (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). Destination image has been shown to influence perceived price fairness for iconic regional products, especially among consumers with less product knowledge (Velikova et al., 2023). These findings emphasize the importance of destination image in shaping tourists' overall evaluations of TLFCVs. Accordingly, the hypotheses developed are as follows:

H1: FI affects emotional value positively.

H2: FI affects epistemic value positively.

H3: FI affects health value positively.

H4: FI affects prestige value positively.

H5: FI affects taste/quality value positively.

H6: FI affects price value positively.

H7: FI affects interaction value positively.

FI and Loyalty

Playing an essential role in the interpretation of tourists' attitudes towards a destination, image is regarded as an important determinant in studies addressing destination management, marketing and tourist behavior in the field of tourism (Yasami et al., 2020). It is known that destination image plays a significant role in leading the tourist behavior and decision-making processes as well as evoking revisit intentions in tourists for the future (Eren, 2016). As image has a remarkable impact on perceptions, destination preferences and future behaviors of tourists, its importance has been widely recognized in the literature. It is anticipated that tourists with positive image perceptions would have higher levels of loyalty, and the studies supporting the argument in question do exist in the body of literature (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Furthermore, the small number of studies in the area of culinary tourism also tested the relationship between FI and loyalty (Yasami et al., 2020). The literature puts forward that local food has a positive impact on the revisit intention and the recommendation intention of tourists (Deng & Tang, 2020; Yasami et al., 2020). Accordingly, the hypothesis developed is as follows:

H₈: FI affects loyalty positively.

TLFCVs and Loyalty

According to Khanna et al. (2022), patrons who experience emotional benefits such as exhilaration, enjoyment, relaxation, or satisfaction from consuming local cuisine are satisfied and eager to revisit an ethnic food establishment. In local food consumption, it has been established that epistemic value notably influences behavioral intention (Shin et al., 2021). According to Kim et al. (2009), tourists are concerned about the health benefits of their food intake while traveling to destinations, as emphasized in prior research (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). Enjoying delightful culinary experiences at a destination requires tourists to be assured of their safety and hygiene standards. Prior research has identified the significance of both interaction value and prestige value in the context of food tourism (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Consequently, the consumption values of prestige and interaction engender a favourable attitude towards local foods. Good quality and taste of products or services at a tourist destination, aligned with tourists' preferences, encourage positive behaviors and intentions to return (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). According to Talwar et al. (2020), both money and quality values play a significant role in influencing purchase intention toward

online travel agencies. Fair pricing enhances consumers' willingness to pay and revisit restaurants (Bichler et al., 2020). Accordingly, the hypotheses developed are as follows:

H₉: Emotional value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₀: Epistemic value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₁: Health value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₂: Prestige value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₃: Taste/quality value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₄: Price value affects loyalty positively.

H₁₅: Interaction value affects loyalty positively.

The Mediating Role of TLFCVs

It has been demonstrated in past studies that there is a relationship, whether direct or indirect, between destination image and loyalty. Some researchers have argued the likelihood of perceived value having an impact on loyalty as a mediator. Studies supporting the finding concerned do exist in the body of literature (Heung & Ngai, 2008; Shafiq et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, the relationship concerned has not yet been investigated in the context of culinary tourism. The significance of destination image as a mediating factor cannot be overlooked. Previous studies have demonstrated that it has a profound impact on perceived value, and consequently, it is highly likely to influence customer loyalty as well (Leow et al., 2024; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019; Wu et al., 2018). In the light of the above-mentioned argument, FI is expected to increase TLFCVs, which is likely to result in an increase in loyalty. In light of this, the formulated hypotheses are as follows:

H₁₆: Emotional value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₁₇: Health value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₁₈: Prestige value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₁₉: Price value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₂₀: Epistemic value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₂₁: Taste/quality value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

H₂₂: Interaction value mediates the relationship between FI and loyalty.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the relationships between the variables of FI, loyalty, and TLFCVs were examined, and therefore the relational survey model was used as the research model. This research model is used to determine the relationships between multiple variables. This model is used to determine whether variables change together or not. It is used to determine whether there is a change, and if there is a change, how this change occurs. It is also used to determine the relationships between multiple variables (Crano & Brewer, 2002).

Research Area

Turkish cuisine is known nationally and internationally for its diversity, unique taste, and unique presentation techniques. Turkish local dishes create originality with various cooking techniques that reflect Turkish traditions and create unique dining experiences. Therefore, local cuisine plays an important role in stimulating tourism in Türkiye. At the same time, Turkish local food is an important source of motivation for domestic and foreign tourists (Eren, 2016). Türkiye, with its unique location and rich and diverse gastronomic heritage that has developed over time, can be considered a center for gastronomic tourists. Therefore, it was chosen as the study area.

İstanbul and Antalya are the research areas in the present study. There are two fundamental reasons why these provinces were selected. First, they are the most preferred destinations by foreign tourists. Türkiye hosted 15,971,201 foreign tourists in 2020 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020). While 5,001,981 of those visited İstanbul, 3,444,426 tourists visited Antalya (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020). Second, Antalya and İstanbul are peculiar destinations where the food and beverage industry is well developed, the number of food and beverage establishments is high and foreign tourists are provided with the opportunity to experience

different flavors of Turkish cuisine at one-stop. Data showing the exact number of food and beverage establishments in İstanbul and Antalya could not be found; however, it is indicated in a report that the food and beverage industry encompassing nearly 150,000 restaurants and cafes generates a revenue of 20 billion dollars, and that 43% of the revenue concerned comes from İstanbul and 30% from cities including Antalya, while the remaining percentage comes from other places throughout Türkiye (HRI Food Service Sector, 2016). İstanbul and Antalya are included in the research scope in order to examine the arguments made regarding the links based on the previously stated justifications.

Measurement Items

The survey form was structured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for "Strongly Disagree" to 7 for "Strongly Agree." It is claimed that this scale makes more accurate measurements compared to others (Tsang, 2012), yields more reliable results, and better reflects the actual assessments of the respondents (Finstad, 2010). In previous studies, a 7-point Likert scale was used for these scales (Choe & Kim, 2019; Williamson & Hassanli, 2020). Because of these considerations, the 7-point Likert scale was chosen more acceptable. The survey form comprises 4 parts including questions to identify demographic characteristics and travel behaviors of the respondents. Information concerning the survey parts are presented below.

In the first part, the scale used by Choe and Kim (2019) in their study addressing TLFCVs was adopted to identify FI in the present study. The scale had one dimension and 5 items. In the second part, the scale developed by Choe and Kim (2019) employed to detect TLFCVs. The scale concerned employs several advantages. To put it more clearly, the facts that it was developed to directly measure TLFCVs, that merely tourism-related subjects were involved, and that it has a high level of reliability and validity laid the foundation for the adoption of the scale to measure TLFCVs in the current study. The measurement encompasses a total of 29 items, which are categorized into seven distinct dimensions.

In the third part, items related to behavioral intention were utilized to measure loyalty, as in prior studies (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Williamson & Hassanli, 2020). The loyalty scale adopted in the present study also consists of one dimension and 3 items. The fourth and last component of the survey form includes questions about the demographic characteristics and travel behaviors of foreign tourists (gender, education level, age, marital status, nationality, yearly income, purpose of visit, and duration of stay).

As the research sample comprises foreign tourists, the survey forms are prepared in different languages. The countries from which the highest number of visitors arrived in İstanbul in 2020 are Russia, Germany, and England, respectively. On the other hand, tourists visiting Antalya the most are from Russia, Ukraine, Germany and England, respectively (TÜRSAB, 2020). In this vein, the survey forms are in English, German and Russian. In its early stages, the form was crafted in English, subsequently translated into German and Russian. The back-translation method was used for this purpose (Brislin, 1976). The forms were translated by those having professional knowledge of both source (English) and target languages (German, Russian).

A pilot test was conducted to ensure the language validity and face validity of the study. For this purpose, the pilot study was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews with a total of 105 foreign tourists by selecting 35 foreign tourists (British, Russian, and German) for each of the questionnaires prepared in three different languages. In order to make communication with Russian and German tourists easier, support was received from tourist guides. Within the scope of this pilot study, the comprehensibility and format of the measurement tool were examined, and it was stated that the statements were generally short, clear, and understandable. Expert evaluation was conducted to ensure face validity. Three experts in two different languages, Russian and German, were consulted for expert evaluation. The questionnaire was finalized in line with the feedback from the experts.

Data Collection and Respondent Profile

The technique employed to gather research data involved conducting face-to-face interviews during the period from June to July 2021. The survey form was applied by the researcher herself and three other interviewers who were informed and trained by the researcher about the survey content. All the interviewers involved in the research have good command of English and data collection experience. In İstanbul, historical sites like Topkapı Palace, Hagia Sophia Mosque, Sultan Ahmet Mosque and Basilica Cistern were preferred to conduct interviews, while in Antalya the ancient city of Kaleiçi and Side were chosen for the same purpose. There are several reasons underlying the preference of those places. The first is that their foreign tourist attraction potential is high, and they are the most visited attractions. The second is that airport administrations do not permit data collection due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The third is that those places are main tourist attractions characterized by a wide range of local restaurants

for tourists. The fourth is that the researchers desired to avoid conducting the research in a single area.

For data collection, convenience sampling and purposive sampling methods were employed, respectively. While applying the purposive sampling method, the criteria taken into account to select the units fitting the best to the aim of the study are as follows: respondents being over the age of 18 years, being of a foreign nationality, having experienced Turkish local cuisine and having consented to take part in the research.

A minimum response time and two survey questions were determined to ensure the suitability of the survey data for the study. The desired sample for this study is made up of international tourists who are curious about local Turkish cuisine and have had the chance to savor it during their trips. Participants who showed no interest in local food or had never tasted Turkish dishes were not included in the investigation. In light of this, the study posed the questions:

(1) Is experiencing Turkish food one of your primary motivations for visiting Türkiye?

(2) Is experiencing Turkish food an important part of your trip?

Tours organized for foreign tourists were utilized throughout the data collection process. Foreign tourists visiting historical places via such tours were contacted through tour guides and the research context was briefly explained to them. Tourists who consented to take part in the research were interviewed based on the survey form. In addition, those visiting the above-mentioned places individually were contacted personally and guided to fill in the survey. No motivation used to encourage the respondents. In total, 800 questionnaires were distributed, with a subsequent collection of 716 questionnaires that were fully answered. 22 respondents providing negative responses to the first two questions (“Is experiencing Turkish food one of your leading motivations to visit Türkiye?” and “Is experiencing Turkish food an important part of your trip?”) in the first part of the survey were excluded from the analysis. Since the missing values in 9 survey forms were above 50%, they were deemed ineligible for analysis (Hair et al., 2014). So as to identify the outliers, the Mahalanobis distance was calculated and 26 survey forms containing outliers were excluded from the data set. After eliminating invalid questionnaires, 659 replies were analyzed, indicating an effective feedback rate of 82.37%.

In studies conducting structural equation modeling, the sample size of around ten times the number of observed variables is considered sufficient (Chin, 1998). In their study, According to Hair et al. (2014), a sample size that is at least five times the number of variables being analyzed is necessary for reliable findings. Accordingly, 659 participants qualify for PLS-SEM tests as they meet various sample size requirements for this type of study.

Male respondents accounted for 58.1% of the total, while female respondents accounted for 41.9%. 71.3% of the female respondents are married and 29.6% are in the age range of 34-41 years. Regarding the educational background, half of the respondents are undergraduates while 32.3% of high-school graduates. 61.9% of the respondents visited Türkiye 2 to 4 times, 62.1% stayed over 5 nights and more. Nearly all the respondents visited İstanbul and Antalya for holiday/leisure purposes.

Data Analysis

Demographic profile of the survey participants was disclosed through the utilization of descriptive statistics. The statistics were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). To evaluate the research model, the SmartPLS 3 program was employed. There are two main reasons for preferring the SmartPLS 3 program. First, the model embodies high numbers of latent variables and correlations. While the complex structure of the model may cause troubles in other programs, SmartPLS has the capacity to analyze complex structures smoothly (Chin, 1998). Second, TLFCVs, price value and interaction value are variables having two indicators. While the other programs merely analyze the variables having at least three indicators, the SmartPLS program can analyze variables with one or two indicators as well (Doğan, 2019).

The structural equation modeling was implemented by adopting the two-stage approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The approach concerned requires the testing of the external (measurement) model first. On the condition that the external model has acceptable fit indices, the process proceeds with testing of the internal (structural) model. To identify the existence and type of mediating effect in the present study, the stages and approach suggested by Zhao et al. (2010) were followed.

RESULTS

Common Method Variance (CMV) and Non-response Bias

The examination of Common Method Variance (CMV) used Harman's single-factor test, revealing only one component explaining 39% (0.5) of the variation, indicating CMV was not a significant issue. Additionally, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below the 3.3 threshold, supporting this conclusion (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To check for non-response bias, independent sample t-tests and Chi-square tests were conducted, showing minimal differences between early and late respondents, suggesting non-response bias was not a concern (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

Outer Model

Table 1 presents the validity and reliability scores of the external model. Since all the variables concerned have reflective structures, the evaluations take into account the reflective models. In formative modeling, researchers should treat the latent variable as being caused by and affecting its indicators, whereas in reflective modeling, they should consider the indicators as manifestations of the latent variable (Aybek & Karakaş, 2022; Duarte & Amaro, 2018). At the same time do Valle and Assaker (2016) reveals reflective conceptualization is widely preferred when using PLS in tourism-related literature. Since all the variables concerned have reflective structures, the evaluations take into account the reflective models. In this vein, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity were tested (Doğan, 2019; Hair et al., 2014).

Table 1. *Results of The Measurement Model*

Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
<i>Food Image</i>		0.909	0.770
FI1	0.948		
FI2	0.918		
FI3	0.919		
FI4	0.915		
FI5	0.867		
<i>Loyalty</i>		0.956	0.814
LY1	0.921		
LY2	0.902		
LY3	0.902		

<i>Emotional Value</i>		0.827	0.548
EMTN1	0.752		
EMTN2	0.779		
EMTN3	0.612		
EMTN4	0.803		
<i>Epistemic Value</i>		0.935	0.705
EPST1	0.775		
EPST2	0.830		
EPST3	0.837		
EPST4	0.811		
EPST5	0.873		
EPST6	0.905		
<i>Health Value</i>		0.884	0.656
HLT1	0.728		
HLT2	0.804		
HLT3	0.899		
HLT4	0.800		
<i>Prestige Value</i>		0.917	0.736
PRS1	0.801		
PRS2	0.810		
PRS3	0.837		
PRS4	0.972		
<i>Taste/Quality Value</i>		0.885	0.609
TST1	0.662		
TST2	0.750		
TST3	0.797		
TST4	0.837		
TST5	0.842		
<i>Price Value</i>		0.933	0.874
PRC1	0.906		
PRC2	0.963		
<i>Interaction Value</i>		0.910	0.834
INT1	0.911		
INT2	0.915		

First, Composite Reliability (CR) coefficient being ≥ 0.70 indicates that internal consistency is achieved (Hair et al., 2014). As presented in Table 1, composite reliability coefficients for all structures range between 0.827 and 0.956. Thus, it can be reported that all the structures have reliable internal consistency.

Second, the convergent validity results were analyzed. To validate convergent validity, external loadings and AVE coefficients are controlled (Hair et al., 2014). It is reported that the coefficients for external loadings should be ≥ 0.50 with the ideal threshold being ≥ 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014). The AVE coefficient is supposed to be ≥ 0.50 (Chin, 1998). It is seen that the AVE coefficients of the structures range between 0.548 and 0.874, revealing that convergence validity is achieved.

Table 2. *HTMT results*

	FI	EMTN	EPST	HLT	PRS	TST	PRC	INT	LY
FI									
EMTN	0.639								
EPST	0.652	0.696							
HLT	0.673	0.581	0.568						
PRS	0.597	0.564	0.693	0.491					
TST	0.660	0.586	0.575	0.628	0.536				
PRC	0.639	0.502	0.642	0.527	0.626	0.633			
INT	0.603	0.539	0.584	0.532	0.632	0.570	0.627		
LY	0.809	0.665	0.756	0.597	0.640	0.694	0.661	0.672	

Notes: FI: Food Image, EMTN: Emotional, EPST: Epistemic, HLT: Health, PRS: Prestige, TST: Taste/Quality, PRC: Price, INT: Interaction. LY: Loyalty.

Third, it is required for external models to be tested for discriminant validity. In the current research, cross-loadings and heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) were taken into notice to test the discriminant validity. As a result, it was revealed that the items EMTN5 and EMTN6 under the dimension of emotional value were overlapping, therefore, their exclusion from the analysis underwent a re-performance. Thus, the criterion related to cross-loadings was met (Chin, 1998). Lastly, As stated in Henseler et al. (2015) HTMT should be below 0.85. The HTMT values observed in the current study, as displayed in Table 2, are all below the threshold of 0.85.

Inner Model

Table 3 displays the inner model findings. The evaluation criteria present in the literature for inner models were taken as the basis (Hair et al., 2014). The first criterion to be checked is, as suggested by Hair et al. (2014), whether there exists a multicollinearity problem among the variables. Findings on the inner model are provided in Table 3 and demonstrated in Figure 1.

As shown in Table 3, all VIF values are below 5, revealing that no multicollinearity problem exists in the inner model. Then, the R^2 values for

the impact power and the Q^2 values for the predictive power were explored. Having examined the R^2 scores of hypotheses, it was observed that they have weak and strong impact powers. To establish predictive strength, Q^2 values need to be higher than zero. Having examined the Q^2 values of the variables, it was observed that they are greater than zero, showing that they have predictive power. It is important to note that PLS-SEM does not offer specific indices for evaluating a model's overall goodness of fit (GoF). Consequently, the model's fit and predictability can be assessed using the GoF index, defined as: $\sqrt{(\text{av.AVE} \times \text{av.R}^2)}$ (Tennenhaus et al., 2004). In this study, a GoF value of 0.573 was calculated for the proposed model, suggesting a strong model fit (Wetzels et al., 2009). As a last step, path coefficients, significance and f^2 values were analyzed in order to proceed with the testing of the hypotheses.

Table 3. *Inner Model Results*

Hypothesis	Effect	β	t	p	Result	VIF	f^2
H_1	FI → EMTN	0.642	23.959	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.702
H_2	FI → EPST	0.657	26.300	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.759
H_3	FI → HLT	0.675	26.265	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.836
H_4	FI → PRS	0.601	23.709	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.566
H_5	FI → TST	0.661	23.173	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.777
H_6	FI → PRC	0.639	22.560	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.690
H_7	FI → INT	0.602	23.094	0.000	Supported	1.000	0.569
H_8	FI → LY	0.427	8.860	0.000	Supported	2.818	0.297
H_9	EMTN → LY	0.043	0.911	0.362	Not supported	2.354	0.004
H_{10}	EPST → LY	0.299	6.710	0.000	Supported	2.962	0.139
H_{11}	HLT → LY	-0.080	1.957	0.050	Not supported	2.175	0.014
H_{12}	PRS → LY	-0.005	0.122	0.903	Not supported	2.419	0.000
H_{13}	TST → LY	0.170	3.759	0.000	Supported	2.341	0.057
H_{14}	PRC → LY	0.013	0.329	0.742	Not supported	2.435	0.000
H_{15}	INT → LY	0.158	3.693	0.000	Supported	2.154	0.053

EMTN $R^2= 0.412$ $Q^2= 0.214$; EPST $R^2= 0.431$ $Q^2= 0.287$; HLT $R^2= 0.455$ $Q^2= 0.283$; PRS $R^2= 0.361$ $Q^2= 0.249$; TST $R^2= 0.437$ $Q^2= 0.252$; PRC $R^2= 0.408$ $Q^2= 0.339$; INT $R^2= 0.363$ $Q^2= 0.288$; LY $R^2= 0.783$ $Q^2= 0.582$

FI has a positive, significant and high-level impact on emotional value ($\beta= 0.642$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.702$), epistemic value ($\beta= 0.657$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.759$), health value ($\beta= 0.675$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.836$), prestige value ($\beta= 0.601$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.566$), taste/quality value ($\beta= 0.661$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.777$), price value ($\beta= 0.639$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.690$) and interaction value ($\beta= 0.602$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.569$), revealing that H_1 , H_2 , H_3 , H_4 , H_5 , H_6 and H_7 are accepted.

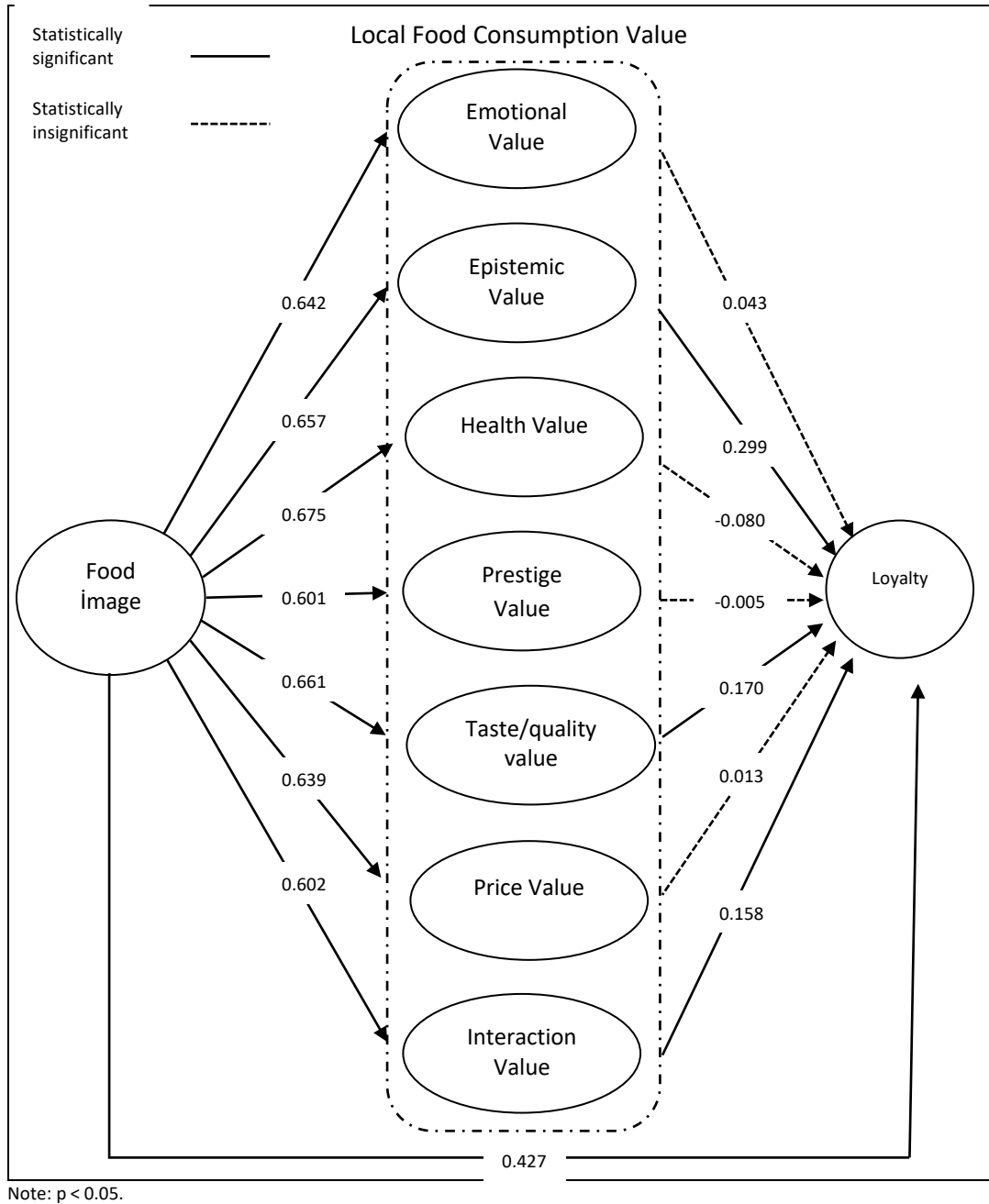


Figure 1. *Structural Model*

Furthermore, it has been noted that FI has a considerable and beneficial effect on loyalty ($\beta = 0.427$; $p < 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.297$). Therefore, H_8 is supported. Since emotional value does not have an important impact on loyalty ($\beta = 0.043$; $p > 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.004$), H_9 is not supported. While epistemic value has a positive, significant and low-level impact on loyalty ($\beta = 0.299$; $p < 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.139$), meaning that H_{10} is supported, health value ($\beta = -0.080$; $p > 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.014$) and prestige value ($\beta = -0.005$; $p > 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.000$) have no significant impact on loyalty. For this reason, H_{11} and H_{12} are not supported.

As taste/quality value has a positive, significant and low-level impact on loyalty ($\beta= 0.170$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.057$), H_{13} is supported, whereas H_{14} is not supported since price value has no effect on loyalty ($\beta= 0.013$; $p>0.05$; $f^2= 0.000$). Interaction value, on the other hand, has a considerable and low-level influence on loyalty ($\beta= 0.158$; $p<0.05$; $f^2= 0.053$), hence, H_{15} is accepted.

Mediating Effects of TLFCVs

For analyzing the mediating effects, the stages and perspective proposed by Zhao et al. (2010) were followed. It has been found that the indirect impacts of FI on loyalty through emotional value ($\beta = 0.028$; $p>0.05$), health value ($\beta = -0.054$; $p>0.05$), prestige value ($\beta = -0.003$; $p>0.05$) and price value ($\beta = -0.003$; $p>0.05$) are insignificant, while its direct effects are significant ($\beta=0.427$; $p<0.05$). In the light of these findings, the aforementioned relationships are not influenced by mediation and there are only direct effects concerned. It is seen that the direct as well as indirect effects of FI on loyalty through epistemic value ($\beta = 0.197$; $p<0.05$), taste/quality value ($\beta = 0.112$; $p<0.05$) and interaction value ($\beta = 0.095$; $p<0.05$) are significant. Accordingly, a supplementary effect does exist in the aforementioned relationships. These findings reveal the fact that FI affects loyalty directly as well as indirectly through taste/quality, epistemic, and interaction values. As presented in Table 4, the 95% confidence intervals (5000 bootstrap samples) for all indirect effects do not contain zero. Therefore, H_{16} , H_{17} , H_{18} ve H_{19} , are not supported whereas H_{20} , H_{21} and H_{22} are supported.

Table 4. *Results of The Mediation Test*

Effect	Indirect Effect	t	p	Direct Effect	Mediation type	95% CI	
						LL	UL
FI→EMTN→ LY	0.028	0.915	0.360	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.032	0.087
FI →HLT→ LY	-0.054	1.940	0.052	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.109	0.001
FI →PRS→ LY	-0.003	0.121	0.903	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.051	0.045
FI →PRC→ LY	0.009	0.328	0.743	0.427*	Direct only (No mediation)	-0.043	0.060
FI →EPST→ LY	0.197	6.424	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.136	0.257
FI →TST→ LY	0.112	3.742	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.053	0.171
FI →INT→LY	0.095	3.600	0.000	0.427*	Complementary (Partial Mediation)	0.042	0.148

PLSpredict analysis was conducted to evaluate the out-of-sample predictive power of the model. During the process, the guidelines proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019) were taken into account, and the mean absolute error (MAE) values for the PLS-SEM model and the linear model (LM) and the Q2_predict values values for the key endogenous structures of the model were analyzed. Q2_predict values values of the indicators are positive. The results show that all of the indicators in the PLS-SEM analysis have lower MAE values compared to the LM benchmark, indicating high out-of-sample predictive power.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the light of the findings, H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6 and H7 are supported which argue that FI has a positive and significant impact on emotional, epistemic, taste/quality, prestige, health, price, and interaction values. Strong FI paves the way for foreign tourists to have strong TLFCVs. Since no study measuring the effect of FI on TLFCVs exists in the body of literature, the findings could not be compared. However, the studies conducted so far on the effect of destination image on perceived value address similar effects (Ozturk & Qu, 2008). These findings emphasise the importance of FI in shaping TLFCVs. This means that if tourists have a higher level of FI they will be able to process information about LFCVs more efficiently when evaluating local food. Since it is confirmed that LFCVs perceived by tourists are influenced by tourists' FI, improving the FI that tourists have of a destination should be the main objective of management.

H8 which argues that FI has a positive and significant effect on loyalty is supported. FI is acknowledged as one of the leading determinants of loyalty. According to findings, a destination's positive FI has a strong impact on loyalty (Peštek & Činjurević, 2014; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Likewise, the current study revealed that FI affects loyalty positively, and the findings show parallelism with those concluded in previous studies. Tourists' loyalty is ultimately influenced by FI. Therefore, tourists' perception of a favourable FI will need to be promoted and managed in a way that leads to loyalty. In addition, destination management should endeavour to effectively create, maintain and improve the perceived FI of the destination. Creating a consistent local food "brand" can further enhance the loyalty of local, regional and global tourists to the destination.

Of the hypotheses suggesting that emotional, health, prestige, epistemic, taste/quality, price and interaction values have a positive and significant effect on loyalty, only H10, H13 and H15 are supported. Hypotheses suggesting that emotional, health, and prestige values positively and strongly impact loyalty were rejected. These findings discorded with previous research in tourism (Jiang & Hong, 2021). Unlike previous studies in the literature, which showed that emotional, health, and prestige values were positively related to destination attachment and visit intention (Alexandris et al., 2006; Jiang & Hong, 2021; Thio et al., 2022), this finding shed new light on the link between these constructs in the context of food tourism.

The absence of a positive correlation between price value and loyalty was observed. This finding confirmed the studies that did not find a notable effect of price value on satisfaction, belongingness, and loyalty within the scope of ecotourism and night tourism (Jiang & Hong 2021).

Epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values were found to impact loyalty positively, confirming the studies that identified a substantial impact of epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values on attitudes, belongingness, and loyalty toward local foods in the context of tourism (Hussain et al., 2022; Jiang & Hong, 2021; Thio et al., 2022). Research findings suggest that when foreign tourists attribute high epistemic, taste/quality and interaction values to local foods, they find a destination more attractive and are more likely to revisit it in the future. It is important for local food suppliers to provide detailed information about their food culture on social media or in food courts to attract tourists. Organising fun events such as gastronomy festivals or cooking competitions can increase the chances of building long-term relationships with tourists. In addition, local food providers preserving authentic flavours and traditional presentation methods can offer a unique experience for tourists. Providing a comfortable dining area where tourists can comfortably consume local food is also of great importance, as this enriches their interaction and experience.

The reason why emotional value does not pose any effect on loyalty can be explained on the grounds that the destination's cuisine and local dishes may not trigger positive emotion or contribute to the food experience for tourists. Moreover, some studies suggest that tourists' dispositions are often dominated by food neophobia, which may create negative emotions and food experience at the point of travel (Hsu & Scott, 2020). In addition, the fact that health value does not affect loyalty can be due to tourists'

having low perception of food hygiene and food safety of Turkish food. Contextual differences between local food environments in Türkiye and developed countries may be influential. In Türkiye, food establishments are likely to fail to meet the standards and expectations of foreign visitors. In this context, the health value associated with poor service culture and unhygienic business environments is not related to loyalty intention. It is also seen that prestige value has no impact on loyalty, which can be explained on the grounds that foreign tourists have different cultural backgrounds, and the ethnicity of most visitors may not align with the diversity of local food available in Türkiye. Lastly, the reason why price value does not impact on loyalty can be that price value varies depending on the hotel tourists choose for accommodation. Due to all-inclusive system and exclusive service delivery characterizing the hotels in Antalya, tourists mostly spend their holidays within the premises. Therefore, it is considered that comparison regarding price value would depend on the hotel and may not reflect the overall situation in the destination. Consequently, support managers should pay attention to local price competition and carefully choose strategic pricing strategies.

In the present research, it was revealed that FI poses indirect effects on loyalty through taste/quality value, epistemic value, and interaction value. Therefore, it was concluded that taste/quality value, epistemic value, and interaction value play a mediating role in the relationship between FI and loyalty. This finding can be a useful concept for both researchers and destination management focusing on key strategies for building tourist loyalty. According to the analysis conducted using the mediation classification framework proposed by Zhao et al. (2010), it was discovered that taste/quality, epistemic, and interaction values play a role in partially mediating the relationship between FI and loyalty.

Theoretical Contributions

The first of the most important theoretical findings of this research is its focus on the mediating impact of TLFCVs in the correlation between FI and loyalty. As a matter of fact, no study was found in the body of literature that specifically examines the impact of TLFCVs on the correlation between FI and loyalty.

Second, despite the fact that the effects of destination image on perceived value are researched frequently in the literature (Ozturk & Qu, 2008), it has been observed in the light of the literature review that the studies concerned do not address the relationship among FI, loyalty and

TLFCVs. Taking into consideration that FI has started to be addressed and measured as a different concept than destination image relatively recently and that food experience is regarded as a supporting and secondary element in tourism (Quan & Wang, 2004), it comes to the light why the relationship between FI and TLFCVs has been researched rarely.

Third, it is seen in the literature that the studies conducted on TLFCVs have approached the subject from a unidimensional perspective (Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Oh, 2000). Few studies (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020) examined local food consumption within the framework of the theory of consumption values. Unidimensional approaches toward TLFCVs are subject to criticism (Choe & Kim, 2019). The current research study adds to the existing body of knowledge in the literature on local foods by examining the concept of TLFCVs within the framework of the theory of consumption values.

Fourth, consumer value is recognized as a fundamental notion in the context of the hospitality and tourism industry. In this respect, offering value to customers is of great importance to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Lee & Min, 2012). Consumer value plays a key role in loyalty. For instance, value perceptions of tourists for products and services may influence their loyalty in a positive way. Likewise, it is known that value in the context of dining experience impacts on repurchase intention positively both before and after the experience concerned (Oh, 2000). Despite the fact that no study is found in the literature that empirically tests the relationship between TLFCVs and loyalty, the present research provides empirical findings supporting the argument that taste/quality, interaction, and epistemic values have a beneficial impact on foreign tourist loyalty. From this point of view, this study can be regarded as one of the first attempts to reveal that taste/quality, interaction, and epistemic values do affect loyalty.

This study emphasizes the advantages of using consumption values theory and the SOR paradigm in understanding tourists' destination loyalty. Moreover, as there are limited studies investigating the determinants and consequences of the local food consumption values, the variables used in this paper and their consequences are original to the theory. In particular, it is documented that FI can play a determinant role on TLFCVs. Although the tourism literature has recently attempted to examine the impact of TLFCVs on tourist behaviour (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020), there are no studies on how FI can influence TLFCVs. Moreover, the influence of TLFCVs on destination loyalty has not

been explicitly recognized in both marketing and tourism literature. Considering these, both research findings will be extremely useful for understanding consumption values and their limits to complete the main picture of the theory.

Practical Contributions

The current study encompasses various practical implications. First, the findings in this study verify that FI has a positive effect on TLFCVs and loyalty, besides highlighting the significant contribution of FI to TLFCVs and loyalty development. Destination managers and marketers should constantly work on the destination FI in terms of eateries/restaurants, food and culinary culture, food quality, food events, food safety and quality, and local food. In particular, tourist hotels and airports might actively promote Türkiye's FI by providing information on the country's local food and food destinations. Second the findings of this study shed light on the interplay between FI, TLFCVs, and loyalty. It is evident that marketing and promoting a positive FI can significantly enhance TLFCVs among tourists, thereby fostering loyalty.

Accordingly, improving the FI of a destination in the eyes of tourists should be among the goals of destination management organizations. Destination managers can help improve Türkiye 's FI by means of social media and a range of promotional activities. They can offer a unique FI to the visitors and travelers from different countries. Promotion and marketing initiatives that would highlight the difference of its cuisine from other destinations in the world should be taken so that Türkiye increases its market share in culinary tourism and destinations gain further attraction and competitive advantage. It has been reported that Türkiye falls short of marketing, advertising and providing up-to-date services within the framework of culinary tourism and that the attempts for promoting local food are not effective (Sahingoz & Kızıleli, 2019). Promotional activities should highlight the richness of Turkish cuisine, and the attributes differentiating it from other cuisines in the world should be addressed.

Our findings show that epistemic, taste/quality, and interaction values promote tourists' loyalty to the destination. In addition, TLFCVs of Turkish food should be well-communicated to tourists. Choe and Kim's (2019) suggested strategies could be advantageous in addressing this matter. Taking into notice that learning about different cultures is an important component of travel, the epistemic value of the cuisine can be promoted for the potential tourism market by emphasizing that local food

consumption is an opportunity to learn novel things about Turkish cuisine and would bring along unique experiences (Choe & Kim, 2019). More emphasis should be placed on experienced traditional chefs, local ingredients, and equipment to reflect the Turkish culinary heritage and authenticity. This, in turn, will allow tourists to learn more about culinary culture.

Careful preparation of buffets, ensuring sensory food quality, and presentation of local foods in an acceptable taste and look are recommended to enhance the taste/quality value. Also, Turkish culinary practitioners are advised to carefully adjust some recipes and utilize popular international seasoning and best presentations to ensure nutritional value, taste, texture, appearance, and flavor.

In order to increase the interaction value, gastronomy-themed activities such as gastronomy days, festivals, tasting events and cooking workshops can be promoted more. Such activities would yield fruitful results in the event that they are treated by destination managers as important components increasing the interaction value of the destination rather than just being leisure-time activities enjoyed by local residents and tourists. In addition, the grill culture in Turkish cuisine and offering self-catering opportunities should be highlighted to enrich the dining experience by increasing the value of interaction.

Tourists having positive value perceptions of local cuisine in Türkiye would consider Türkiye as a culinary tourism destination and their likelihood of revisiting Türkiye would increase. In order to increase loyalty, destination marketers and managers are recommended to focus further on taste/quality, interaction and epistemic values, as revealed in the current study that these components create a positive impact on foreign tourist loyalty. Therefore, it is of great importance to organize more memorable and effective promotional activities for foreign tourists where these values are highlighted.

The research results demonstrate that taste/quality value, interaction value, and epistemic value play a mediating role in the relationship between FI and loyalty. Therefore, improvement merely in FI would not suffice to develop high-level loyalty toward culinary tourism. In the event that positive FI is accompanied by high levels of taste/quality value, interaction value and epistemic value, loyalty of foreign tourists would reach higher levels. In this vein, destination marketers and managers are recommended to view this relationship from a holistic perspective and organize activities accordingly.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research should address several recommendations based on current study constraints. First, expanding research to destinations known for culinary tourism, rather than just cultural or sea-sand-sun tourism, could offer deeper insights into the relationships among food involvement (FI), loyalty, and tourist's local food consumption values (TLFCVs). Second, examining how personality traits and food characteristics affect culinary experiences could enhance understanding of their impact on FI, TLFCVs, and loyalty. Third, repeating studies post-pandemic, when tourism is back to normal, could provide more accurate data. Fourth, using longitudinal data instead of cross-sectional data could better capture changes over time in FI, loyalty, and TLFCVs. Additionally, incorporating indicators like variety and location value (Hussain et al., 2022) into TLFCVs and considering factors such as destination attachment could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, investigating TLFCVs in contexts like food festivals or cooking classes could offer valuable insight.

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