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AUTHENTICITY AND TOURIST SATISFACTION IN ISTANBUL'S LOCAL RESTAURANTS: THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED VALUE AND FOOD INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract: Local restaurants serving authentic cuisine play a central role in shaping tourists' overall destination experience. This study examines the influence of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction in Istanbul's local restaurants. Furthermore, it empirically evaluates the mediating role of perceived value and the moderating effect of food involvement within this relationship. Drawing on the gastronomy tourism and consumer behavior literature, a conceptual model comprising six hypotheses was developed. Research data were collected from 410 tourists visiting local restaurants in Istanbul using the convenience sampling method and a face-to-face survey technique in and around Sultanahmet Square, where tourist density in the city is highest. The measurement instruments were adapted from previously validated scales in the literature. The gathered data were analyzed using structural equation modeling with a bootstrapping procedure to examine the direct, mediating, and moderating effects among the variables. The analysis results reveal that restaurant authenticity does not directly affect customer satisfaction; however, it exerts a full mediating effect on satisfaction through perceived value. Furthermore, it was determined that food involvement significantly strengthens the relationship between authenticity and perceived value, whereas it does not alter the process from perceived value to satisfaction. In other words, authentic attributes contribute to satisfaction only when tourists perceive them as a source of value, and this value-creation process is more pronounced among tourists who attach greater importance to food. These findings offer theoretical contributions to the gastronomy tourism literature and provide practical implications for restaurant managers and destination marketers, suggesting that authenticity should be communicated as a value proposition through storytelling, menu design, and service quality, particularly to food-involved tourist segments.

Keywords: restaurant authenticity, tourist satisfaction, perceived value, food involvement, Istanbul local restaurants

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INTRODUCTION

In today's tourism market, destinations integrate their unique culinary characteristics into the services they provide to attract tourists and differentiate themselves from other locations (Sthapit, 2017). Local dining experiences based on authentic food and beverages are considered significant attractions for tourists seeking to understand the destination's culture (Güvenç et al., 2025). In this context, the unique gastronomic experiences offered by destinations are among the key factors enhancing their appeal (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). Especially large metropolises attract tourists through their authentic culinary experiences. Istanbul, having hosted various empires and societies for centuries, stands out as one of the world's most remarkable gastronomic destinations (Kara & Türkay, 2024). Restaurants in the city go beyond being mere food outlets, offering tourists the opportunity to experience the identity of Turkish cuisine, its social structure, and the local way of life.

One of the most significant factors determining the quality of experience in food and beverage establishments in Istanbul is their authenticity. Restaurant authenticity plays a critical role in tourists' perception of local flavors as 'real,' 'authentic,' and 'place-specific'. This perception shapes both the destination experience and the mental and emotional evaluations of tourists. Current literature reveals that restaurant authenticity is one of the strongest elements shaping the tourist experience. While DiPietro & Levitt (2019) emphasize that authenticity has become a primary determinant of consumer satisfaction, studies by Sari et al. (2025) and Koufodontis & Gaki (2025) demonstrate that authentic restaurant experiences have significant and direct effects on perceived value, particularly within the context of gastronomic tourism. Furthermore, the literature indicates that tourists evaluate their dining experiences not only through the taste or presentation of the product but also through the cultural fabric of the venue, the perception of locality, and socio-cultural representation (Skinner et al., 2020). There are a limited number of studies regarding how international tourists perceive restaurant authenticity, the extent to which it influences the relationship between value and satisfaction, and the moderating role of food involvement in this relationship. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explain the impact of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction and to examine the mediating role of perceived value in this link. Additionally, the study analyzes how food involvement alters the effects among restaurant authenticity, perceived value,

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and tourist satisfaction (moderating role). Investigating these relationships through a holistic model in a destination like Istanbul—which is culturally profound, possesses high gastronomic diversity, and hosts millions of foreign tourists annually—not only fills a gap in the literature but also offers significant strategic implications for restaurant managers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of authenticity is generally defined as an individual's perception that something is 'real' or 'original' (Taylor, 2001). Restaurant authenticity, on the other hand, is a multidimensional construct that refers to consumers' perception of a food and beverage establishment as 'real,' 'authentic,' and 'place-specific' from cultural, historical, and sensory perspectives (Chatzopoulou & Gorton, 2025; Levitt et al., 2021). In the literature, restaurant authenticity is treated as a holistic experience emerging through elements such as the physical fabric of the venue, the quality of local dishes presented on the menu, the locality of the ingredients used, staff attitudes, and the style of presentation (Magnini et al., 2011; Richards, 2021; Song & Kim, 2022). Arviv et al. (2024) emphasize that in restaurants where authenticity is high, tourists have a greater tendency to establish a cultural connection, and their perceptions of the destination are positively influenced. Furthermore, authenticity is regarded as a critical factor that enhances tourists' perceived value from the dining experience, their level of satisfaction, and their general attitudes toward the destination (Aybek & Özdemir, 2022; DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). Perceived value is defined as a cognitive and emotional evaluation made by consumers by comparing the benefits obtained from a product or service with the cost incurred and the effort expended (Miao et al., 2022; Wu & Huang, 2023). Micu et al. (2019) consider perceived value as the perceptual difference between the price paid by consumers (price and sacrifice) and the value received (quality, benefits, and utility).

While a positive difference encourages repurchase intention, a negative difference hinders purchase intention. The literature indicates that perceived value is one of the strongest determinants of tourist satisfaction, which in turn directly influences behavioral intentions toward the destination (Brochado et al., 2022; Qian & Li, 2024). Within the context of gastronomy and restaurant experiences, perceived value emerges as a multidimensional construct encompassing a range of elements such as food taste, presentation quality, venue atmosphere, service performance, and the level of restaurant authenticity (Gong et al., 2025; Ortega-Pérez et al., 2025; Riva et al., 2022). Consequently, perceived value is accepted as one of the fundamental concepts explaining the quality of the restaurant experience in gastronomic tourism research.

Involvement is defined as the perceived importance an individual attaches to an object based on their inherent needs, values, or interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Food involvement, on the other hand, is defined as the importance and level of interest individuals assign to food, as well as the cognitive and emotional effort they expend on food choices (Levitt et al., 2019). This indicates how frequently an individual thinks about food, engages in food-related discussions, how much food they purchase, and their involvement in preparing ingredients and cooking (Robinson & Getz, 2016). In terms of consumer behavior, this concept suggests that food is viewed not merely as a biological necessity but also as a hedonic experience and a means of cultural expression (Davison et al., 2015). In the context of tourism, food involvement emerges as a distinctive trait that directly influences tourists' desire to explore local cuisines, their restaurant preferences, and their travel motivations (Lacap, 2019; Li et al., 2023). Literature indicates that tourists with high food involvement are more sensitive to details such as the authenticity, taste, and service quality offered by a restaurant; thus, this interest plays a role in the formation of satisfaction (Güdek, 2024; Pourfakhimi et al., 2021). Indeed, a study conducted by Chen et al. (2023) revealed that food involvement has a significant and positive effect on tourists' sense of local belonging and destination loyalty.

Tourist satisfaction is described as the emotional response resulting from a comparison between the visitors' experience in a destination or service environment and their own expectations (Kusumah, 2024; Shahrivar, 2012). In the context of gastronomic tourism, tourist satisfaction is influenced not only by fundamental elements such as the taste or presentation of the food but also by a broad range of experiential factors including the restaurant's authenticity, atmosphere, service quality, and cultural representation (Candar & Omidvar, 2025; Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023; Bütün & Önçel, 2025). Consequently, authentic experiences provided especially in restaurants yield outcomes such as increased satisfaction levels, positive attitudes toward the destination, revisit intentions, and recommendation behaviors (Jalali et al., 2025; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024). The literature indicates that tourist satisfaction is one of the most critical outputs of tourism service quality and holds a central role in determining tourist behavior (Nastabiq & Soesanto, 2021; Rismawati & Sitepu, 2021). In this framework, satisfaction is considered a key performance indicator for the sustainability of gastronomic tourism and destination competitiveness.

Restaurant authenticity is recognized as a significant element in tourists' dining experiences (Jang et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, it is considered one of the most vital indicators reflecting the cultural identity of destinations (Wareebor et al., 2025b). Restaurants characterized by an authentic atmosphere, the use of local ingredients, regional recipes, and a cultural fabric create a perception of a 'real' and 'place-specific' experience, thereby increasing perceived value (Chen et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2021). Literature indicates that authentic restaurant experiences strengthen consumers' perceptions of both symbolic and experiential value (Leksana et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2018). In the context of gastronomic tourism, authenticity enables visitors to establish an emotional connection with the destination, making the benefits derived from the dining experience more meaningful (Kim & Song, 2024; Urdianti et al., 2024). Consequently, restaurant authenticity is expected to positively influence perceived value. In this framework, the following hypothesis has been developed to examine whether restaurant authenticity has an effect on perceived value:

H_1. Restaurant authenticity has a significant and positive effect on perceived value.

Zeithaml's (1988) classical approach to value indicates that consumers evaluate the service provided from both tangible (taste, price, portion, quality) and intangible (emotional satisfaction, symbolic meaning, cultural experience) perspectives. The literature demonstrates that perceived value strongly influences tourist satisfaction (Yu et al., 2023), and a high perception of value both increases emotional satisfaction with the service (Elshaer et al., 2025) and positively shapes the overall destination

experience (Li et al., 2025). In this context, tourists' perception of the restaurant experience as high-value contributes to the development of positive attitudes toward the destination by increasing their satisfaction levels (Han & Yoon, 2020; Jalali et al., 2025). Therefore, perceived value is expected to have a positive effect on tourist satisfaction. In this framework, the following hypothesis has been developed to examine whether perceived value has an effect on tourist satisfaction:

H_2. Perceived value has a significant and positive effect on tourist satisfaction

Restaurant authenticity is recognized as one of the most critical elements determining the pleasure and satisfaction tourists derive from their dining experiences (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Wareebor et al., 2025a). Research indicates that the perception of a restaurant's atmosphere, menu, and cultural components as 'authentic' by tourists both enhances psychological satisfaction (Leksana et al., 2025) and positively differentiates the overall service experience (Liu et al., 2018). Consequently, the more authentic a restaurant is perceived by tourists, the more their level of expectation fulfillment—and subsequently their satisfaction—increases (Chen et al., 2020; Sari et al., 2025). Therefore, restaurant authenticity is expected to have a direct and strong effect on tourist satisfaction. In this framework, the following hypothesis has been developed to examine whether restaurant authenticity has an effect on tourist satisfaction:

H_3. Restaurant authenticity has a significant and positive effect on tourist satisfaction

Restaurant authenticity significantly enhances perceived value by enabling tourists to find the experience culturally meaningful, genuine, and local (Levitt et al., 2021). The authentic spatial atmosphere, the presentation of regional flavors, and the reflection of cultural elements in the experience contribute to the perception of the experience as valuable by creating both emotional and symbolic benefits for tourists (Jang et al., 2012; Kim & Song, 2024). Gastronomy tourism literature indicates that perceived value is one of the strongest antecedents of satisfaction and that consumers evaluate service performance through this sense of value (Jalali et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2023). Therefore, the positive effect of restaurant authenticity on customer satisfaction is expected to be shaped by the extent to which tourists find the experience valuable. In other words, perceived value functions as a fundamental psychological mechanism that strengthens the relationship between authenticity and satisfaction. In this context, the following hypothesis has been developed to examine whether perceived value has a mediating effect on the impact of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction:

H_4. Perceived value mediates the positive effect of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction.

Food involvement is a fundamental psychological tendency representing the level of interest, attention, importance, and cognitive engagement individuals establish with food and dining experiences (Li et al., 2023). The study conducted by Bell & Marshall (2003) indicates that food involvement is a strong differentiating factor in food-related decision-making processes. Gastronomy tourism literature emphasizes that individuals with high food involvement are more sensitive to authentic, local, and experiential meals (Chen et al., 2023; Robinson & Getz, 2016).

Since such individuals perceive elements such as the cultural fabric of the restaurant, local flavors, the atmosphere of the venue, and the chef's approach more attentively, they tend to feel the impact created by authenticity more strongly (Lacap, 2019). Therefore, the value felt by tourists with high food involvement upon perceiving restaurant authenticity will be higher compared to those with low food involvement. In other words, food involvement plays an enhancing role in the strength of the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value. In this context, the following hypothesis has been developed to test the moderating effect of food involvement:

H_5. Food involvement plays a positive moderating role in the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value; as food involvement increases, the effect of authenticity on perceived value strengthens.

Food involvement can shape not only the impact of authenticity but also the satisfaction levels that tourists develop at the end of their experience. When evaluating a restaurant experience, individuals with high food involvement consider multi-dimensional stimuli such as taste, aroma, presentation, locality, cultural symbols, and social interaction, rather than just basic service elements (Kim & Kim, 2017; Stone & Castillo-Ortiz, 2025). Therefore, perceived value is reflected much more strongly in the satisfaction of tourists with high involvement levels (Wei & Bing, 2025). In other words, tourists who find the experience valuable and simultaneously establish a high level of engagement with food tend to transform this value into satisfaction more effectively. This theoretical framework reveals that food involvement is a reinforcing moderating variable in the relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction. In this context, the following hypothesis has been developed to test the moderating effect of food involvement:

H_6. Food involvement plays a positive moderating role in the relationship between perceived value and tourist satisfaction; as food involvement increases, the effect of perceived value on tourist satisfaction strengthens.

In accordance with the theoretical framework obtained from the literature review and the hypotheses developed, the research model illustrating the structural relationships between restaurant authenticity, perceived value, and tourist satisfaction, as well as the moderating role of food involvement in these relationships, is presented in Figure 1.

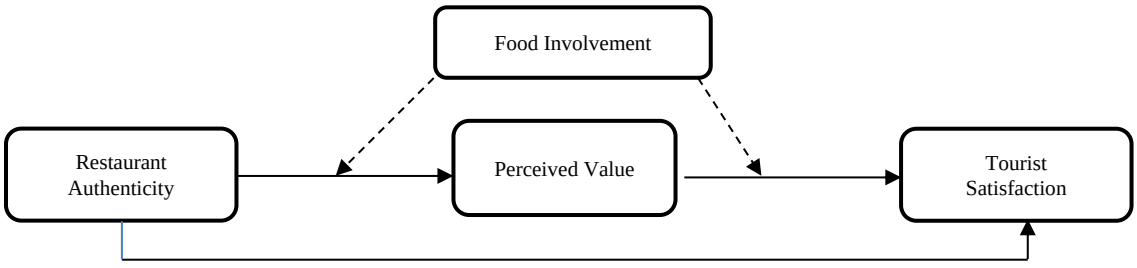


Figure 1. Research model

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Variables and measurements

A survey technique was employed as the data collection tool in the research. The prepared survey form consists of two sections. The first section includes questions aimed at determining the participants' demographic characteristics (gender, marital status, age, education, income) and behavioral traits regarding their visit to Istanbul (duration of visit, travel companions, restaurant experiences, etc.). The second section contains scale items designed to measure the variables in the research model. In the development of these scales, studies with proven validity and reliability in the relevant literature were utilized. In this context, to measure restaurant authenticity, the study developed by Chen et al. (2020) was used, and the scale was measured with 10 items. For the perceived value variable, the scale used by Ryu et al. (2008) was adopted, consisting of 3 items. To measure the food involvement variable, 4 items adapted from the study by Güdek (2024) were utilized. Finally, for the tourist satisfaction variable, a 3-item scale used by Cankül et al. (2024) was adapted.

All items in the scales were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from '1: Strongly Disagree' to '5: Strongly Agree'. Since the target population of the research consists of international tourists visiting Istanbul, the survey form was prepared in English. To maintain the construct validity of the scales and to prevent potential loss of meaning that might arise from translation, the original English statements from the referenced studies were directly utilized.

Sample and data collection

The population of the research consists of international tourists visiting Istanbul. Due to the size of the population and the mobility of the participants, convenience sampling, one of the non-probability sampling methods, was preferred. Sultanahmet Square and its surroundings, located in the historical peninsula of Istanbul where the tourist density is highest, were determined as the data collection point. This location holds strategic importance in terms of accessing a diversity of tourists from different nationalities and demographic backgrounds. Data were collected between August 20 and October 10, 2025 using the face-to-face survey technique. Since the language of the survey form was English, a preliminary screening was conducted to ensure that participants could accurately understand and respond to the questions.

Potential participants were first asked about their English proficiency; the survey was administered only to those who declared language competency and volunteered to participate in the research. The researchers informed the participants about the academic purpose of the study and provided assurances regarding data confidentiality. At the end of this process, a total of 410 valid survey forms were obtained and included in the analysis.

RESULTS

Profile of the consumer Sample

Table 1 presents the distributions regarding the demographic characteristics of the research participants. It is observed that 53.7% (n=220) of the 410 participants were male and 55.9% were single. Regarding the age distribution, it was determined that the participants were predominantly clustered in the young and middle-aged groups; the highest participation was provided by the 24-29 age group (27.3%), while the lowest participation was from the group aged 47 and over (5.9%).

When Table 2 is examined, it is observed that the duration of tourists' stay in Istanbul is predominantly concentrated between 2 and 4 days. Furthermore, 88.5% (n=363) of the sample consists of first-time visitors to Istanbul, while 66.1% (n=271) are individuals who have not previously experienced Turkish cuisine.

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of the Sample

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	**Female**	190	46.3
	Male	220	53.7
Marital Status	**Single**	229	55.9
	Married	181	44.1
Age	**18-23**	46	11.2
	24-29	112	27.3
	30-35	76	18.5
	36-41	106	25.9
	42-47	46	11.2
	47 and over	24	5.9

Table 2. Visit and Experience Characteristics of Participants

Visit and Experience Characteristics		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Duration of stay in Istanbul (days)	**1**	37	9
	2	114	27.8
	3	109	26.6
	4	84	20.5
	5	44	10.7
	6+	22	5.4
Previous visit to Istanbul	**Yes**	47	11.5
	No	363	88.5
Previous experience in a restaurant serving Turkish cuisine	**Yes**	139	33.9
	No	271	66.1

Reliability and validity

Prior to testing the research model, validity and reliability analyses of the constructs used in the study were conducted. In this context, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were evaluated. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and Composite Reliability (CR) values were taken into account for the measurement of internal consistency. To determine convergent validity, factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were examined. The relevant literature suggests that factor loadings should be at least 0.40, Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability coefficients should be above 0.70, and AVE values should exceed 0.50 (Hair et al., 2006; Hair et al., 2014; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The findings regarding the evaluations made in accordance with these criteria are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Findings Regarding Factor Analysis

Construct	Item Code	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Restaurant Authenticity	Ra1	0.715	0.938	0.937	0.626
	Ra2	0.650			
	Ra3	0.757			
	Ra4	0.730			
	Ra5	0.877			
	Ra6	0.816			
	Ra7	0.823			
	Ra8	0.886			
	Ra9	0.834			
Perceived Value	Pv1	0.943	0.947	0.947	0.856
	Pv2	0.903			
	Pv3	0.930			
Tourist Satisfaction	Cs1	0.991	0.972	0.972	0.920
	Cs2	0.932			
	Cs3	0.953			
Food Involvement	Fi1	0.906	0.928	0.928	0.761
	Fi2	0.855			
	Fi3	0.852			
	Fi4	0.877			

The fact that the Cronbach's Alpha values of the constructs range between 0.928 and 0.972, and the Composite Reliability (CR) coefficients range between 0.928 and 0.972, indicates that internal consistency reliability is ensured. Furthermore, factor loadings ranging from 0.650 to 0.991 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.626 to 0.920 demonstrate that convergent validity is met.

Hypothesis test

After determining the construct validity and reliability through the measurement model evaluation, a structural model with a two-stage approach was implemented. The first stage involves the assessment of the mediating effect, and the second stage involves the assessment of the moderating effects.

The bootstrapping method was preferred for hypothesis testing. In this context, the analysis was conducted using 10,000 sub-samples. The standardized path coefficients, p-values, and R^2 results of the obtained model are illustrated in Figure 2.

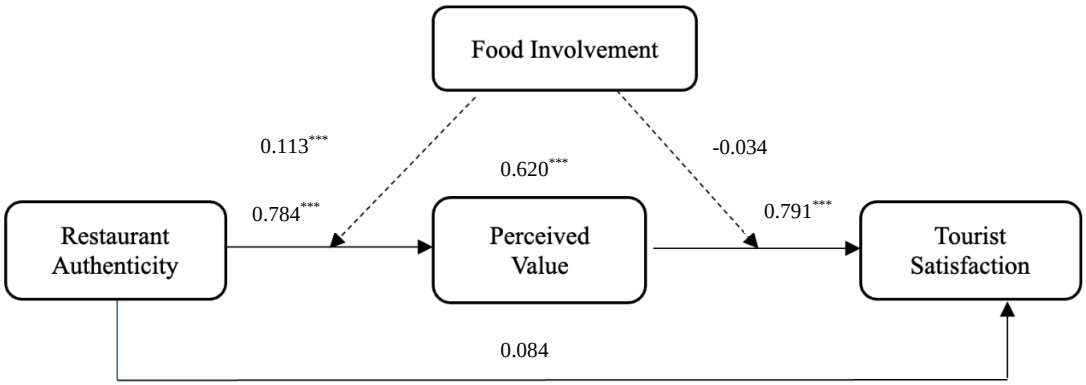


Figure 2. SEM Analysis Results of the Conceptual Model (Note(s): ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05)

The direct effects resulting from the testing of the structural model are presented in Table 4, and the indirect effects are shown in Table 5. Upon examining the path coefficients regarding the direct effects in Table 4, it is observed that restaurant authenticity has a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on perceived value (β=0.784; p<0.001). This finding indicates that the unique structure and authentic characteristics of the restaurant significantly enhance the value perceived

by consumers. Furthermore, it was determined that perceived value has a strong and significant effect on customer satisfaction (β=0.791; p<0.001). This result reveals that high perceived value obtained from the restaurant directly increases the satisfaction levels of the customers. On the other hand, the direct effect of restaurant authenticity on customer satisfaction was found to be statistically insignificant (β=0.084; p>0.05). In light of these findings, the H_1 and H_2 hypotheses of the study were accepted, while the H_3 hypothesis was rejected.

Table 4. Path Coefficients Regarding Direct Effects

Path		β	Standard Deviation	t- value	p- value	Hypothesis Result
Restaurant Authenticity	**Perceived Value**	0.784	0.025	31.029	0.000	**Supported**
Perceived Value	**Tourist Satisfaction**	0.791	0.050	15.732	0.000	**Supported**
Restaurant Authenticity	**Tourist Satisfaction**	0.084	0.054	1.571	0.116	**Not Supported**

Table 5. Path Coefficients Regarding Indirect Effects

Path			β	Standard Deviation	t- value	p- value	Hypothesis Result
Restaurant Authenticity	**Perceived Value**	**Tourist Satisfaction**	0.620	0.044	14.250	0.000	**Supported**

Upon examining the path coefficients regarding the indirect effects in Table 5, it is observed that restaurant authenticity has a positive and statistically significant indirect effect on customer satisfaction through perceived value (β=0.620; p<0.001). This finding indicates that the unique and authentic characteristics of the restaurant do not enhance customer satisfaction directly, but rather increase it indirectly by primarily improving the perceived value. The significance of the indirect effect points to the presence of a mediating relationship, as stated in the literature.

Accordingly, the results reveal that perceived value plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between restaurant authenticity and customer satisfaction. Zhao et al. (2010) state that the presence of a mediating effect can be discussed when the indirect effect is significant. In this direction, the obtained mediating effects were evaluated within the framework of the mediation decision tree proposed by Yıldız (2021).

As a result of the analyses, it was determined that perceived value plays a full mediating role in the relationship between restaurant authenticity and customer satisfaction. Consequently, the effect of restaurant authenticity on customer satisfaction occurs through perceived value, and this mediating effect is statistically significant. According to the research findings, the hypothesis regarding the indirect effect (H_4) is supported.

Table 6. Path Coefficients Regarding Moderating Effects

Path	β	Standard Deviation	t- value	p- value	Hypothesis Result
Food involvement as moderator					
Restaurant Authenticity-Perceived Value	0.113	0.033	3.379	0.001	**Supported**
Perceived Value -Tourist Satisfaction	-0.034	0.030	1.123	0.261	**Not Supported**

Upon examining the findings regarding the moderating effects in Table 6, it is observed that food involvement has a positive and statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value (β=0.113; p=0.001). This result indicates that for consumers with high levels of interest and involvement in food, the authentic characteristics of the restaurant enhance perceived value more strongly. In other words, individuals with a greater interest in gastronomy tend to perceive the unique structure of the restaurant as more valuable.

In contrast, it was determined that food involvement does not play a significant moderating role in the relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction (β=-0.034; p>0.05). This finding suggests that the impact of perceived value on customer satisfaction does not change significantly based on the consumers' level of involvement in food. According to the results obtained, the hypothesis stating that food involvement strengthens the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value (H_5) is supported, while the hypothesis regarding its moderating role in the relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction (H_6) is not supported.

DISCUSSION

The research results reveal that perceived value is one of the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction. When consumers perceive the value obtained from the restaurant experience to be high, their satisfaction levels increase accordingly. Conversely, the lack of a directly significant effect of restaurant authenticity on customer satisfaction indicates that authenticity elements do not influence satisfaction directly, but rather through the mediation of perceived value. Indirect effect analyses have confirmed this mediating relationship, demonstrating that perceived value plays an integral mediating role. The study also examined the moderating role of food involvement. The findings indicate that the effect of restaurant authenticity on perceived value is stronger among consumers with a high level of interest in food.

In contrast, it was determined that food involvement does not significantly alter the relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction. This result suggests that while individuals with high interest in gastronomy perceive the unique characteristics of a restaurant as more significant value generators, the process of transforming perceived value into satisfaction operates independently of consumers' food involvement.

The findings obtained are largely consistent with the studies in the literature. The result indicating that restaurant authenticity enhances perceived value aligns with previous studies showing that authentic experience elements are perceived as value generators by consumers (Chen et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018; Ryu et al., 2012). Similarly, the finding that perceived value is a strong predictor of customer satisfaction supports research in the service and experience marketing literature emphasizing the role of value on satisfaction (Noviyani & Viwattanakulvanid, 2025; Qiu et al., 2024). However, the lack of a significant direct effect of restaurant authenticity on customer satisfaction presents a result consistent with studies stating that experience elements are reflected in satisfaction primarily through perceived value (Rathnasiri et al., 2025; Ryu et al., 2021). Furthermore, the fact that food involvement strengthens the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value overlaps with studies revealing that individuals with a high interest in gastronomy evaluate experience elements more profoundly (Akhoondnejad, 2025).

Overall, the research reveals that restaurant authenticity does not influence customer satisfaction directly, but rather through the mediation of perceived value, and that consumers' food involvement plays a strengthening role at specific stages of this process. These findings demonstrate that the gastronomy experience is shaped within a value-based framework and that authenticity elements play a critical role in providing meaning to the customer experience.

This study offers significant contributions to the gastronomy literature and consumer behavior theories, particularly within the context of local restaurants in the Istanbul destination. The research has proven that the impact of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction occurs not directly, but entirely through perceived value. By clarifying the mechanism of the authenticity-satisfaction relationship in the literature, this finding theoretically confirms that authenticity elements can only provide tourist satisfaction when they are transformed into a 'value proposition'.

The findings revealed that tourists with high levels of food involvement perceive authenticity elements in local restaurants as a much stronger source of value. By demonstrating how individual interest levels shape cognitive evaluation processes, this situation enriches the context of the gastronomy experience and contributes to the limited number of moderating variable studies in the literature. This study, conducted specifically on local restaurants in Istanbul, has expanded the cultural and geographical boundaries of the existing literature by testing the empirical validity of theoretical models in emerging gastronomy destinations.

The research results indicate that authenticity alone is not sufficient for customer satisfaction; these elements must be perceived by the tourist as a benefit or value. Instead of focusing solely on being old or traditional, operators should emphasize how these features offer a privilege to the guest through storytelling, price-performance balance, or emotional connection. The fact that tourists with high food involvement pair authenticity with higher value increases the importance of segmentation in marketing strategies. Restaurants and tourism agencies should centralize the emphasis on authenticity in their advertisements targeting 'gastronomic tourist' or 'gourmet' profiles, as this audience is more inclined to appreciate locality and view it as a value.The finding that perceived value is the key to satisfaction proves that businesses must invest not only in physical authenticity but also in staff service quality and hospitality. An authentic atmosphere combined with poor service will fail to generate value for the tourist and will not translate into satisfaction. Finally, the finding that the unique structure of local restaurants increases tourist Satisfaction demonstrates the strategic importance of positioning these businesses as authentic stops in the marketing of Istanbul as a gastronomy destination.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the influence of restaurant authenticity on tourist satisfaction in Istanbul’s local restaurants, focusing on the mediating role of perceived value and the moderating role of food involvement. Based on data collected from 410 international tourists, the findings show that restaurant authenticity has a strong and positive effect on perceived value, and that perceived value, in turn, is the main determinant of tourist satisfaction. However, restaurant authenticity does not exert a significant direct effect on satisfaction; its influence is transmitted entirely through perceived value. This result indicates that authentic attributes such as local recipes, a traditional atmosphere, and culturally embedded service become meaningful for tourists only when they are perceived as a source of value.

The study also demonstrates that food involvement strengthens the relationship between restaurant authenticity and perceived value. Tourists who attach greater importance to food interpret authentic cues more attentively and derive higher value from them. In contrast, food involvement does not moderate the relationship between perceived value and satisfaction, suggesting that once value is formed, its transformation into satisfaction follows a similar pattern regardless of tourists’ level of interest in food. From a theoretical perspective, the study clarifies the mechanism underlying the authenticity–satisfaction relationship by positioning perceived value as a full mediator and by identifying the stage at which individual food involvement becomes relevant. In doing so, it extends gastronomy tourism research by testing an integrated mediation–moderation model in a culturally rich metropolitan destination. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that restaurant managers should not rely on authenticity alone but should translate authentic features into tangible and emotional benefits through storytelling, fair pricing, consistent food quality, and attentive hospitality. Destination marketing organizations may also benefit from positioning Istanbul’s local restaurants as authentic gastronomic stops and from targeting food-involved tourist segments in their communication strategies.

In conclusion, authenticity represents a valuable strategic resource for local restaurants and for Istanbul as a gastronomy destination; however, its contribution to tourist satisfaction depends on its successful conversion into perceived value. Strengthening this conversion process can enhance the competitiveness of local restaurants and support the sustainable development of gastronomy tourism in the city.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of the research involve certain methodological and contextual limitations inherent in the nature of the study. First, the fact that the data were obtained only from tourists visiting local restaurants in Istanbul constitutes a constraint regarding the generalizability of the findings to other gastronomy destinations with different cultural and economic backgrounds. Furthermore, the lack of a detailed differentiation based on the participants' nationalities or cultural codes may have led to the oversight of cultural variations in the perception of authenticity. Finally, the use of a quantitative survey technique made it difficult to fully capture the in-depth and subjective meanings that participants assign to concepts such as 'authenticity' and 'perceived value.

In light of these limitations, several avenues are proposed for future research. Primarily, cross-cultural comparative studies could be conducted to understand how the perception of authenticity differs among tourists from various nationalities. Additionally, qualitative research methods or focus group interviews could be preferred to analyze the underlying psychological dynamics of perceived value in depth. Incorporating new variables, such as 'novelty seeking,' into the research model could enhance its explanatory power. Moreover, investigating the impact of sensory dimensions of restaurant authenticity such as smell, sound, and texture on the consumer through objective measurement tools like neuromarketing techniques or eye-tracking would provide a unique and scientific contribution to the gastronomy literature.

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