

Exploring the relationship between gastronomic travel intentions and self-congruity, perceptions of culinary brand equity, and loyalty attitudes

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between foreign tourists' gastronomic travel intentions and their self-congruity, perceptions of culinary brand equity, and loyalty attitudes. Data were acquired from 578 foreign tourists visiting Istanbul and Antalya provinces in Turkey. The collected data were then tested through structural equation modeling (SEM). Findings revealed that foreign tourists had positive perceptions of culinary brand equity and loyalty attitudes as their self-congruity toward destination cuisines grew. Brand image and quality perception impacted gastronomic travel intentions, while brand awareness did not. It was further established that loyalty attitudes influenced gastronomic travel intentions.

Keywords: Self-congruity, destination cuisine, brand equity perception, loyalty attitude, gastronomic travel intention.

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1. Introduction

Gastronomic tourism is a crucial niche marketing instrument occupying a prominent place worldwide as a tourism type (Kodaş, 2020: 2). According to the World Tourism Organization survey, over 88% of its members believe that gastronomy is a strategic element in defining the destination brand and image, and over 67% say that their country has its gourmet brand (Gheorghe, Tudorache & Nistoreanu, 2014). It is, therefore, viewed as a significant element for creating competitive advantages in tourism (Özdemir, 2008: 3; Güzel-Şahin & Ünver, 2015: 64). Recent studies have suggested that gastronomic tourism is today's fastest-growing niche travel market (Wolf, 2006). In his research, Richards (2002) defines gastronomic tourism as a growing creative sector. Its increasing importance in tourism has riveted researchers to conduct studies on gastronomic tourism. (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Wolf, 2006). However, it might be insufficient to compare the nationwide and regional gastronomic tourism or measure satisfaction levels in future studies. In this respect, research on factors impacting gastronomic travel might contribute considerably to the field. In this context, self-congruity is considered a psychological factor that might affect tourists' intentions for gastronomic purposes. Therefore, this study used self-congruity in consumer research to answer the "why" of tourists' gastronomic travel intentions. In addition to functional qualities, identifying the impacts of symbolic ones, such as self-congruity, on gastronomic travel intentions was considered significant for literature contributions.

At the same time, within the scope of the marketing strategy, projecting the rich gastronomic cultures of destination cuisines and disseminating positive brand perceptions are considered essential (Güneş & Nizamoğlu, 2018: 28). Destination cuisines must have powerful brand equity in consumers' minds for competitive advantages in gastronomic tourism (Yoo & Donthu, 2001) since establishing brand equity is essential to brand creation (Keller, 2003: 399).

Brand equity refers to "the sum of the positive and negative opinions of consumers toward a brand" (Aktepe & Şahbaz, 2010: 70; Pitta & Katsanis, 1995: 56). Consumer-based brand equity provides managers with competitive advantages in developing effective marketing strategies (Yalçinkaya, 2018: 33-35; Yağmur & Kolukısa, 2016: 82). In competitive marketing strategies, many (Keller, 2003; Pappu *et al.*, 2005; Kodaş, 2020) acknowledge that brand value in the consumer's mind provides business advantages. In this sense, developing strategies by determining tourists' perceptions of these components is crucial (Kodaş, 2021: 1163). Identifying tourists' brand equity perceptions toward destination cuisines and the elements impacting their perceptions might thus yield significant competitive advantages for business managers in developing effective marketing strategies in gastronomic tourism.

On the other hand, loyalty results from consumer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1992). Creating consumer loyalty is considered to be the primary goal of brand management and one of the critical indicators of booming tourism (Boo *et al.* 2009: 222). Acquiring a new customer in the market is estimated to be five times costlier than retaining an existing one. Hence, developing customer loyalty in tourism is an important marketing strategy (Rojas & Alcocer, 2021: 2). This study views determining the influence of foreign tourists' loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines on their gastronomic travel intentions as essential to developing marketing strategies.

Many consider self-congruity as an element that might impact brand equity perceptions and the precursor of behaviors in consumer behavior (Rosenberg, 1979: 34; Shamah *et al.*, 2018: 446). Self-congruity theory emphasizes the role of product-self-congruity feelings (Kastenholz, 2010: 314). This theory posits that consumers develop more favorable perceptions and attitudes toward brands they identify with (Sirgy & Su, 2000: 135). Therefore, consumers avoid brands or products that contradict their selves (i.e., identity, culture, lifestyle, social status, prestige, and group affiliation) (Hogg, Banister & Stephenson, 2009: 150). In gastronomy literature, it is essential to understand the impact of brand

self-congruity on consumer attitudes and behaviors since consumers prefer foods, ethnic cuisines, or restaurants according to symbolic qualities rather than functional ones (Jamal & Goode, 2001: 482). Research (Allen, Gupta, & Monnier, 2008; Shin *et al.*, 2016; Lee & Hwang, 2014) has emphasized that self-congruity is a crucial psychological factor in consumers' eating behaviors, local food consumption, and ethnic cuisine preferences. Despite self-congruity's effect on ethnic cuisine preferences, eating behaviors, and restaurant selections suggested in previous studies, no studies investigated its impact on the perceptions of destination cuisine brand values and loyalty attitudes. Despite its significance in consumer behavior, research on self-congruity is scarce in the gastronomy literature (Orth & De Marchi, 2007: 220). Sop (2020) investigated the topical distribution of studies on self-congruity in tourism. His research revealed that self-congruity was examined mainly in destinations and hotels, urging its examination in diverse tourism contexts (Sop, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the impact of self-congruity theory on gastronomic travel intentions for its contributions to the literature.

In brief, this study evaluated foreign tourists' self-congruity with destination cuisines as a psychological element in their brand equity perceptions of and attitudes toward destination cuisines and gastronomy tourism. In this context, this study addressed the following questions: (1) How does self-congruity impact foreign tourists' brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines, loyalty attitudes, and travel intentions? (2) How do brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines (i.e., brand image, quality perception, and brand awareness) influence gastronomic travel intentions? (3) How do loyalty attitudes affect gastronomic travel intentions? Research findings are significant as they might contribute to a deeper understanding of self-congruity's impact on brand equity perceptions and loyalty attitudes and the influence of brand equity and loyalty attitudes on gastronomic travel intentions. Research-based suggestions are offered to managers in gastronomic tourism to develop marketing strategies.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

In its broadest sense, the self refers to how people perceive themselves (Solomon *et al.*, 1999). On the other hand, self-congruity is a psychological factor of the perceived congruence between the product's symbolic meaning and the selves of targeted consumers (Aaker, 1997). Grubb and Grathwol (1967) explain the relationship between symbols and consumer behavior with self-congruity theory. Self-congruity theory proposes that consumers support their selves with consumption objects. Individuals prefer products and services by evaluating them as the promoter of their image, the proof of their lifestyles, and the indicator of the social class to which they belong (Levy, 1959; Sirgy, 1997; Zorlu, 2003; Solomon, 2007). Consumers purchase products because of their functional properties and symbolic meanings (Armutlu & Üner, 2009; Hogg, Banister & Stephenson, 2009; Sirgy, 1997). In particular, the compatibility between the cuisine's symbolic values and the consumer's self-congruity might impact attitudes and behaviors toward ethnic cuisines (Sollen, 2015: 180).

Destination cuisines and foods have some symbolic meanings. The World Tourism Organization (2017) stresses that food should not only be considered a fad and trend but also a tool that reflects a nation's identity, traditions, and values. Sociologists and anthropologists also argue that a society's culinary culture and eating habits carry a deeper meaning, viewing it as a set of societal norms and a means of cultural expression (Harrington, 2005: 141). Yang, Lattimore, and Lai (2014) state that cuisine is a symbol that defines and differentiates the "us" from the "others." Accordingly, destination cuisines are also considered symbolic instruments reflecting the societal culture and natural environment, along with the food offered (Lin, Pearson & Chai, 2011: 3; Smith, 2007: 212; Gülen, 2017: 33). Societies with deep-rooted culinary cultures, such as French, Chinese, American, and Turkish cuisines, might particularly have fundamental differences and unique values. These values carry identity perceptions of given destinations. When people who consume food of any cuisine adopt its culture, society, and social status and see it as congruent with their image, their attitudes toward that cuisine might also positively change

(Smith, 2007: 212; Gülen, 2017: 33; Çapar & Yenipinar, 2016:101). Hence, these symbolic meanings attributed to cuisines correlate with individuals' values and self-congruity. The compatibility of symbolic meanings assigned to cuisines with individuals' selves might lead to positive perceptions and attitudes toward those ethnic cuisines.

Lee and Hwang (2014) refer to self-congruity as the psychological factor with the highest impact on ethnic cuisine preferences. Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (1996: 368) assert that food is psychologically significant in constructing the self, stating that "eating is constructing a self, quite literally." (Belk *et al.*, 1996: 368). Allen, Gupta, and Monnier (2008: 294) state that foods and beverages are assigned symbolic meanings (i.e., social culture, social status, lifestyles, and norms). Additionally, consumers' perceptions of their values as compatible with these symbolic meanings impact their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Paasavaara, Luomala, Pohjanheimo & Sandell, 2012: 11). Andersson, Getz, Vujicic, Robinson, and Cavicchi (2016) proved that reflected symbolic values and their compatibility with consumers' selves were closely related to gastronomic travel motivation and satisfaction.

The relevant literature review indicates that self-congruity is a critical psychological factor in restaurant loyalty and image perceptions (Line & Hanks, 2017), performance perceptions of restaurants (Kwun & Oh, 2007), service perceptions (Streukens & Andereassen, 2013), creative gastronomic travel intentions (Rico, Collado, Vijande & Bilgihan, 2022), local food purchases (Shin *et al.*, 2016), gustatory perceptions (Allen *et al.*, 2008), favorable and unfavorable gustatory experiences (Paasovaara *et al.*, 2012), and ethnic cuisine preferences (Lee & Hwang, 2014). The idea that the foods we consume and the cuisines we prefer shape our thoughts and perceptions of the world has recently become one of the most debated topics in popular culture (Kul, 2019: 57). This study posits that perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward ethnic cuisines might have been impacted by self-congruity, reflecting symbolic characteristics, apart from functional properties such as savor, taste, price, and quality.

2.2. Research Hypotheses

2.2.1. *The relationship between self-congruity, perceptions of culinary brand equity, and loyalty attitudes*

Consumers who use brands as an expression of identity avoid those that do not fit their identities. The self is an honest and sincere concept that describes subjective feelings and emotional experiences of one's true self (Mouillard *et al.* 2015: 174). Concerning the relationship between the self and brand compatibility (i.e., product and user image), consumers positively evaluate brands that they perceive as proximate to their selves and true (self) identities and negatively the brands as distant from their self-congruity. Self-congruity theory postulates that symbolic properties of products and brands strengthen and confirm the individual's self-perception. Accordingly, more similarity between the two concepts means higher preferences for that brand (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992: 394). Companies have, therefore, investigated how brands' symbolic meanings encourage the establishment of strong bonds with consumers and impact their reactions to brands (i.e., brand perception, attitude, recommendation, loyalty, and behavioral intentions). Research has confirmed that self-congruity considerably impacts consumer attitudes toward products or brands, perceptions of brand equity, willingness to purchase the brand, and brand preferences. In addition, other studies have indicated its impact on behaviors (i.e., brand satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication about the brand) (Sirgy, 2018: 198). It was, therefore, shown that an increase in the compatibility between consumers and brands facilitates consumers' persuasion, motivates them through their emotions to decide, and consequently, increases their favorable perceptions and attitudes toward brands (Rezza, 2018: 14).

Creating customer loyalty is accepted as the primary goal of brand management and a key indicator of variable tourism success (Boo *et al.*, 2009). Previous studies have tackled the development of customer loyalty as an essential marketing strategy in tourism, the impact of the destination's traditional dishes (Zhang *et al.*, 2021), traditional restaurants (Rojas and Alcocer, 2021), culinary experience (Agyeiwaah,

Otoo, Suntikul & Huang, 2018), food satisfaction, and destination's gastronomy image (Lai *et al.*, 2019) on loyalty attitudes.

Additionally, the studies examining the effect of self-congruity on loyalty attitudes (Sirgy, 2018) were destination-specific. On the other hand, this study was conducted within the scope of gastronomy and investigated self-congruity's impact on loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines. Hypothesis 2 was accordingly developed, considering that cuisine-self-congruity, a symbolic value, might affect loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines.

The following hypotheses were formulated based on the above information:

Hypothesis 1: Self-congruity (H1a: brand image, H1b: brand awareness, H1c: quality perception) positively impacts brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines.

Hypothesis 2: Self-congruity positively impacts loyalty attitudes.

2.2.2. The relationship between perceptions of culinary brand equity, loyalty attitudes, and gastronomic travel intentions

Destinations must create new marketing strategies to reach their targeted market shares in gastronomic tourism. In this sense, they must have powerful brand equity to build a strong brand in gastronomy. It is also necessary to fulfill the prerequisites of the brand equity measurement system to make the destination cuisine a brand, differentiate it from its competitors, and provide competitive advantages, which requires determining how brand equity is perceived by consumers, understanding its formation, identifying its performance, and obtaining information to discover its impact on behaviors (Zhang, Li, Liu, Shen & Li, 2021; Keller, 2003: 399; Yoo & Donthu, 2001: 2). In this context, some studies examined the relationship between brand equity perceptions of destinations, satisfaction, and revisit intentions and found positive interrelationships (Nam, Ekinci & Whyatt, 2011; Ferns & Walls, 2012; Aktaş, 2018). Other studies suggested that dimensions of brand equity perceptions might increase the brand equity of destinations and that brand equity might influence tourists' travel intentions (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Ooi, 2004). Some other studies revealed that a destination with high-quality brand equity might increase tourists' intrinsic motivation to visit that destination (Bianchi *et al.*, 2014). This study held that brand equity of destination cuisines might impact gastronomic travel intentions, and the following hypothesis was formulated.

Hypothesis 3: Brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines (H3a: brand image, H3b: brand awareness, H3c: quality perception) positively impact gastronomic travel intentions.

Brand loyalty is a favorable situation that results in repeat purchases when consumers are satisfied with the brand (i.e., goods and services) they have purchased (Kocaman & Güngör, 2012: 148). Accordingly, creating customer loyalty is acknowledged as the primary goal of brand management and a key indicator of touristic achievements (Boo *et al.*, 2009: 222; Rojas & Alcocer, 2021: 2). Studies in the literature showed that tourists' loyalty to a restaurant (Yang & Peterson, 2004) or destination (Zhang *et al.*, 2014) might influence their intentions to maintain future relationships (Rojas, Fernandez ve Sanchez, 2021: 1). Gastronomy literature shows that traditional dishes, culinary experiences, and satisfaction affect loyalty attitudes (Agyeiwaah, Otoo, Suntikul & Huang, 2019; Vujko, Petrović, Dragosavac, Ćurčić ve Gajić, 2017). Additionally, other studies found that tourists' loyalty to a specific brand or destination impacts their intentions for product re-purchases or destination revisits (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Baloğlu, 2001). Research also emphasized that tourists' culinary experiences and satisfaction should be increased, and their loyalty should be ensured to increase the demand for gastronomic tourism (Agyeiwaah *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, based on previous studies, it was thought that loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines might influence gastronomic re-travel intentions, and the following hypothesis was proposed.

Hypothesis 4: Culinary loyalty positively impacts gastronomic travel intentions.

2.2.3. The relationship between self-congruity and gastronomic travel intentions

Previous studies in gastronomy tourism focused mainly on motivation types explaining gastronomy tourism (Kim *et al.*, 2012), ignoring the psychological reasons underlying the driving forces of gastronomic travel intentions (Agyeiwaah *et al.*, 2019: 295). While past research in the tourism industry focused on what, when, where, and how tourists purchase, research on the “why” remained secondary (Sirgy & Su, 2000: 340). In this context, the concept of self in consumer research was used to help explain “why” tourists travel for gastronomic purposes.

Recent studies (Islam *et al.*, 2019; Sirgy & Su, 2000) have particularly underlined the importance of compatibility levels between the images of brands, products, or services and the consumer's self in predicting travel behaviors (Ekinci, Sirakaya & Preciado, 2013: 712). The topical distribution of research on self-congruity in tourism in Sop's (2020: 2604) study revealed an intensive focus on destinations and hotels, followed by restaurants, cafes, and coffee shops. Research demonstrated that self-congruity theory helped explain tourists' behaviors before and after visiting a destination (Sirgy & Su, 2000), hotel (Sop & Kozak, 2019), and restaurant (Jeong & Jang, 2018). However, research promoted self-congruity theory for its application to various tourism research contexts other than destinations or hotels (Sop, 2020: 2604).

In Rico, Collado, Vijande, and Bilgihan's study (2022: 406), self-congruity was evaluated as the most effective and driving motivation in creative gastronomy tourism experiences. However, despite the growing interest in self-congruity theory in tourism, studies tackling its impact on gastronomy tourism (Shin *et al.*, 2016; Shamah *et al.*, 2018; Rico, Collado, Vijande, & Bilgihan, 2022) have remained limited. This study aimed to exploit the concept of self-congruity in consumer research to help explain one of the underlying causes of gastronomic travel behaviors. Accordingly, the self-congruity theory, impacting travel intentions and behaviors, might also influence gastronomic travel intentions, leading to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5: Self-congruity positively impacts gastronomic travel intentions.

Eating is the most significant phenomenon human beings need to survive. Eating habits differ from society to society. Such habits are a cultural part of that society. Also, a society's cultural values influence its lifestyles and eating and drinking habits. Turkish culinary culture is among the most important cuisines in the world (Güler, 2010).

Turkey has a deep-rooted and versatile culinary culture that includes the original effects of local cuisines. It is well known that different societies have different cultures. In this sense, Turkish society varies from other communities according to food types, tastes, and characteristics (Turkish Cultural Foundation, 2023). Besides that, Turkish cuisine has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other cuisines. These can be historical background, various food-beverage processing methods and cooking and presentation styles, geographic and climatic conditions, differences in the foods consumed and the equipment used by societies, pre- and post-meal consumption habits, and collective eating traditions. Therefore, this shows that Turkish cuisine reflects the identity, culture, and community lifestyle it concerns.

This study evaluated self-congruity as a symbolic element impacting consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward destination cuisines. Homer and Kahle's (1988) theoretical framework posits that personal values influence consumer behaviors through less abstract intermediaries. The study's conceptual model was therefore created based on their theoretical framework. As displayed in Figure 1,

tourists' self-congruity was considered to impact their perceptions and attitudes toward destination cuisines, which might, in turn, influence their gastronomic travel intentions. In this respect, the model is grounded on a pattern that follows self-congruity, brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines, loyalty attitudes, and behaviors.

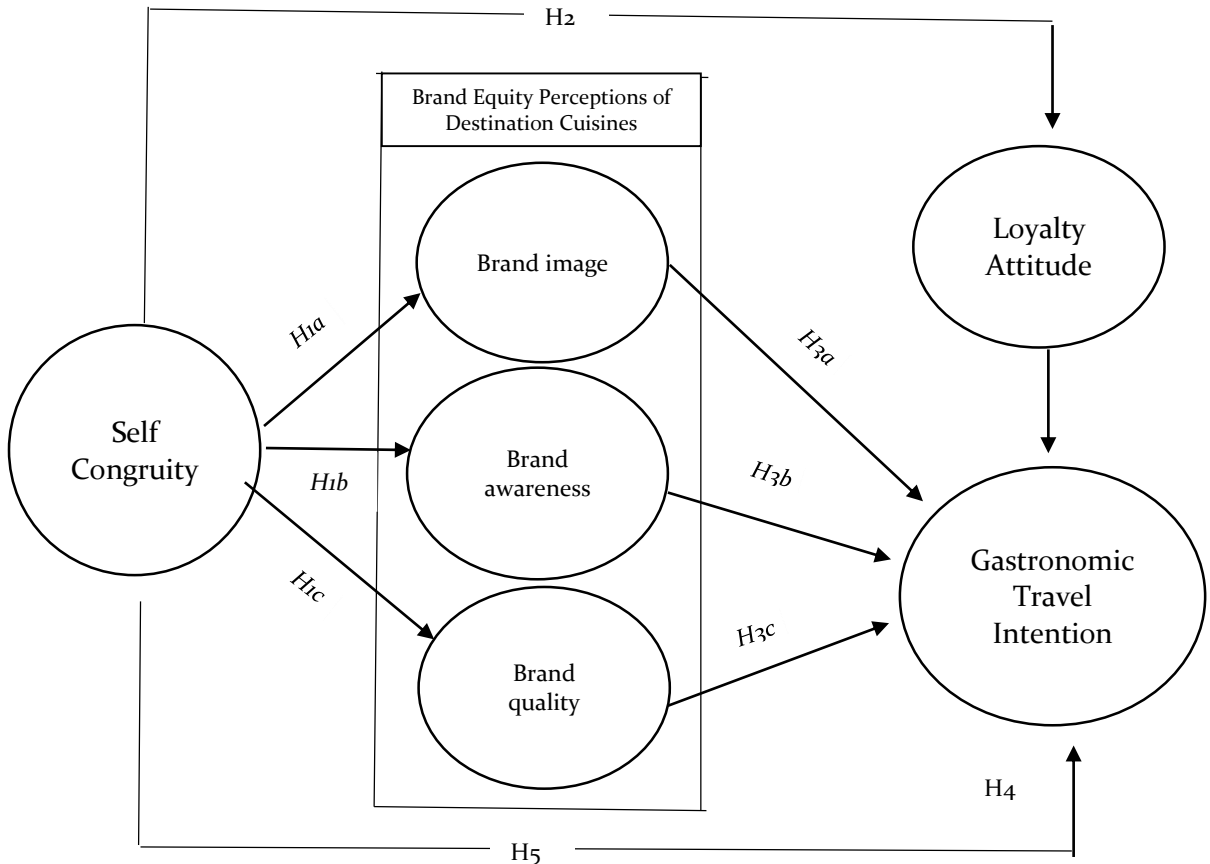


Figure 1. The conceptual model.

3. Materials and Method

3.1. Variable measurement

The study employed a 5-item scale adapted from Sirgy *et al.* (1997) to measure self-congruity. Brand equity perceptions of destination cuisines comprise brand image, brand awareness, and quality perception. This variable was measured through a scale containing 19 items, namely brand image (10), quality perception (6), and brand awareness (3), developed by Horng *et al.* (2012). Culinary loyalty was measured by Horng *et al.*'s (2012) 3-item scale. A 3-item scale developed by Lam and Hsu (2006) was used to measure gastronomic travel intentions. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree – 5: Strongly agree). Since the original language of the scales used in this study was English, they were used directly without any translation. However, the survey was also translated into Russian and German by a certified translator to make it easier for tourists from different nationalities to understand and to reach a sufficient sample size.

3.2. Survey procedure and sample

Foreign tourists visiting Turkey were expected to participate in the study. In this context, the data of the General Directorate of Statistics of the Republic of Turkey indicated that Istanbul and Antalya were

the first two most frequently visited provinces in 2022. The study's population comprised 27.499.230 foreign tourists visiting two destinations (i.e., Istanbul and Antalya) within the research scope. Since it was impossible to access the whole population, the study employed convenience sampling, a non-probabilistic sampling method. Data were collected from tourists in public spaces in Istanbul and Antalya. The questionnaire included a screening question to identify tourists who experienced Turkish cuisine. The study did not include the participants with no experience.

Claiming that different formulas and tables might be employed to determine sample size, Yamane (2001) asserted that 384 was sufficient for a population of more than one million. In congruence with the study's purpose, 720 surveys were collected through convenience sampling between March and July 2022.

Previous studies viewed the culinary experience for destination cuisines as significant in measuring self-congruity and perceptions of culinary brand equity (Horng *et al.*, 2012; Liu, 2020). The survey was, therefore, delivered to foreign tourists with destination cuisine experience.

Data analysis revealed incomplete surveys, constant marking of the same response items, the presence of underage participants, and the "Never" responses to Turkish cuisine consumption frequency, resulting in 142 surveys being excluded. Therefore, 578 valid surveys were evaluated. This study was conducted with the permission of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University Ethical Committee numbered E-27251.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of respondents

Demographic characteristics indicated a somewhat balanced distribution of gender among the respondents: 56.1% females and 43.9% males. Most of the respondents (40.9%) were aged between 26-40, followed respectively by 41 years and older (35.3%) and 18 years and older (23.9%). They were college (18.3%), university (37%), and M.A. and Ph.D. graduates (15.4%). The nationality distribution revealed forty-two nationalities consisting of German (21.8%), Russian (17.5%), and American (9.7%) visitors. The respondents reported their frequency of consumption of Turkish cuisine as follows: (12.2%) always, (17.5%), usually (29.9%) often, and sometimes (40.5%). The frequency of visits to the country demonstrated the following distribution: once (36.9%), twice (22%), three times (9.5%), and four times (31.7%).

4.2. Measurement model

Data were analyzed using SPSS 22 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and AMOS 26 (Analysis of Moment Structures) statistical analysis programs. This study adopted Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-stage approach to testing the validity and reliability of all constructs. First, Cronbach's alpha was computed for reliability. The reliability coefficient must be above 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978), with all constructs satisfying this requirement (self-congruity=0.867; brand image=0.921; brand awareness=0.848; quality perception=0.839; loyalty attitude=0.880; gastronomic travel intention=0.926).

Normally distributed data are needed to employ the structural equation model (Kline, 2011: 114). For this reason, necessary preliminary tests were made to determine the skewness and kurtosis coefficients of the data before analyses (Baloglu & Usakli, 2017). Skewness and kurtosis coefficients range between ± 1.5 in normally distributed data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Thus, it was established that the data were normally distributed and met the requirement of normal distribution for the structural equation model. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the validity of the measurement model ($\chi^2=1056.762$, $\chi^2/df=2.766$, $GFI=0.901$; $CFI=0.942$; $NFI=0.913$; $RMSA=0.055$ and $RMR=0.05$) (Table

1). As indicated in Table 1, factor loadings ranged from 0.504 to 0.916, meeting the recommended standards (Hair *et al.*, 2017). All constructs' composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.84 to 0.92, meeting the recommended standards (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). The average variance extracted (AVE) values in Table 1 are between 0.48 and 0.80. CR requires the examination of AVE values and the desired relevant values being 0.50 and above. AVE values below 0.50 are considered sufficient if CR values exceed 0.60 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981: 40). Hair *et al.* (2017: 138) assert that AVE values above 0.40 are acceptable. In this context, since the AVE values of the measurement model were found to be 0.40 and above, and the CR values above 0.82, the model satisfied the convergent validity requirement.

Table 1. Assessment of measurement model.

Items	Standard Loadings	R^2	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE
<i>Factor: Self-Congruity</i>		-	0.867	0.85	0.54
The image of Turkish cuisine is consistent with how I see myself.	0.749				
The image of Turkish cuisine reflects who I am.	0.782				
My image is consistent with the overall image of people who eat Turkish food.	0.851				
People similar to me consume Turkish food.	0.620				
The kind of person who typically eats Turkish food is very much like me.	0.684				
<i>Factor: Brand Image</i>		0.67	0.921	0.92	0.54
Turkey offers appealing food.	0.775				
Turkey offers appealing snacks.	0.690				
Turkey has many friendly cities suitable for food tourism.	0.764				
Visiting Turkey is a wonderful opportunity for sampling cuisine.	0.711				
Turkey has a relaxing dining atmosphere.	0.708				
Turkey has a rich food culture.	0.814				
Turkey has excellent dining facilities.	0.774				
Turkey's food service personnel are friendly.	0.683				
Turkish cuisine is diverse.	0.739				
Turkish cuisine is unique.	0.693				
<i>Factor: Brand Awareness</i>		0.58	0.848	0.85	0.65
Turkish food enjoys a good reputation.	0.740				
I can easily name famous Turkish dishes.	0.843				
When I think about cuisine, Turkish cuisine comes to mind immediately.	0.845				
<i>Factor: Brand Quality</i>		0.68	0.830	0.84	0.48
Turkey's food is better than that of similar destinations.	0.632				
Turkey's dining environment is clean.	0.694				
Few communication problems occur in Turkey's food tourism.	0.504				
Turkey's food tourism is offered at reasonable prices.	0.597				
Turkey offers high-quality cuisine.	0.845				
Turkey offers delicious cuisine.	0.822				

<i>Factor: Loyalty Attitude</i>		0.85	0.848	0.82	0.61
I would recommend others to visit Turkey for food tourism.	0.763				
I enjoy visiting Turkey for food tourism.	0.773				
I consider myself a loyal consumer of Turkish cuisine.	0.813				
<i>Factor: Gastronomic Travel Intention</i>		0.75	0.926	0.92	0.80
In the following year, I may visit Turkey again for food tourism.	0.916				
In the following year, I plan to visit Turkey again for food tourism.	0.903				
I wish to visit Turkey again for food tourism.	0.879				

* $p < .001$

To analyze whether the discriminant validity was established, HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait) values were computed. Although it was developed in the context of variance-based SEM (Henseler *et al.*, 2015), it was suggested and shown by Hosen *et al.* (2021) that it can be used in CB-SEM. As presented in Table 2, these values did not exceed the threshold of 0.90 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). These results, thus, supported that discriminant validity was established.

Table 2. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

Variables	BI	BA	BQ	LA	SC	GTI
Brand Image						
Brand Awareness	0.689					
Brand Quality	0.853	0.696				
Loyalty Attitude	0.762	0.765	0.812			
Self-Congruity	0.634	0.662	0.665	0.733		
Gastronomic Travel Intention	0.541	0.636	0.632	0.804	0.669	

BI: Brand Image; BA: Brand Awareness; BQ: Brand Quality; LA: Loyalty Attitude; SC: Self-Congruity; GTI: Gastronomic Travel Intention.

4.3. Structural model and hypotheses testing

The subsequent analysis step employed the Maximum Likelihood method to validate the hypotheses using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) software. In addition, researchers exploited the Bootstrap method with 5000 samples through the SPSS software program to increase the reliability of the results and examined the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Consequently, researchers determined that the fit indices of the structural model were acceptable ($\chi^2=1266.791$; degree of freedom=316; $\chi^2/df=4.009$, GFI=0.922; AGFI=0.907; CFI=0.958; RMSA=0.051). It was concluded that self-congruity considerably impacted brand image ($\beta=0.81$; $t=13.639$; $p < 0.001$), brand awareness ($\beta=0.75$; $t=12.435$), quality perception ($\beta=0.82$; $t=14.023$; $p < 0.001$), and loyalty attitudes ($\beta=0.51$; $t=3.573$; $p < 0.001$). However, it did not influence gastronomic travel intentions ($\beta=0.21$; $t=0.692$; $p > 0.05$). Accordingly, H1a, H1b, H1c, and H2 were supported, whereas H5 was not. While destination cuisine image ($\beta=0.36$; $t=2.968$; $p < 0.05$) and quality perceptions ($\beta=0.33$; $t=2.207$; $p < 0.05$) influenced gastronomic travel

intentions, destination cuisine awareness ($\beta=0.13$; $t=1.013$; $p>0.05$) did not. Accordingly, H3a and H3c were supported, whereas H3b was not. Destination cuisine loyalty affected gastronomic travel intentions ($\beta=0.36$; $t=5.261$; $p<0.001$), thus supporting H4.

Table 3. Hypothesis Results

Hypotheses	Standard Loadings (β)	t-value	Results
$H_{1a}: SC \rightarrow BI$	0.81	13.639*	Supported
$H_{1b}: SC \rightarrow BA$	0.75	12.435*	Supported
$H_{1c}: SC \rightarrow BQ$	0.82	14.023*	Supported
$H_2: SC \rightarrow LA$	0.51	3.573*	Supported
$H_{3a}: BI \rightarrow GTI$	0.36	2.968***	Supported
$H_{3b}: BA \rightarrow GTI$	0.13	1.013 ^{NS}	Not Supported
$H_{3c}: BQ \rightarrow GTI$	0.33	2.207***	Supported
$H_4: LA \rightarrow GTI$	0.67	5.261*	Supported
$H_5: SC \rightarrow GTI$	0.21	0.692 ^{NS}	Not Supported

* $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.05$, NS: No significant. "SC: Self-Congruity; BI: Brand Image; BA: Brand Awareness; BQ: Brand Quality; LA: Loyalty Attitude; GTI: Gastronomic Travel Intention".

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study employed self-congruity theory to investigate its impact on foreign tourists' perceptions of destination cuisine brand equity and loyalty attitudes. It also examined how perceptions of destination cuisine brand equity and loyalty attitudes influenced gastronomic travel intentions. The current study concluded that foreign tourists developed more positive perceptions of brand equity and loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines as the compatibility between destination cuisines and their self-congruity increased. This finding concurred with previous studies in the literature (Klabi, 2020; Frias *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Line & Hanks, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2014; Kwun & Oh, 2007).

Analyses revealed that culinary image and quality perceptions moderately influenced gastronomic travel intentions. However, brand awareness of destination cuisines did not affect gastronomic travel intentions. The findings supported studies suggesting that perceived culinary quality and image were effective in recommending a destination to others and promoting revisit intentions (Nisco *et al.*, 2015). Brand awareness of destination cuisines did not impact gastronomic travel intentions because gastronomic visits to a cuisine might be considered a prerequisite to creating awareness about that cuisine. Put concisely, the study suggested that gastronomic visits to Turkey might have influenced awareness of Turkish cuisine. Previous studies concluded that brand awareness formed after purchase (Söylemez, 2019: 43), leading to the inference that tourists might wish to perform gastronomic tourism activities for a cuisine they were unaware of.

In addition, loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines had a powerful positive impact on gastronomic travel intentions. This finding aligned with previous studies in the literature (Agyeiwaah, Otoo, Suntikul & Huang, 2019; Horng, 2012; Şengül, 2018; Thi, 2014; Jiang *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, it turned out that not losing loyal customers and attracting new ones might provide competitive advantages in gastronomic tourism.

Moreover, self-congruity had no significant effect on gastronomic travel intentions, suggesting similarities to the previous studies in the literature (Pratt & Sparks, 2014; Kwun & Oh, 2007; Na, 2014; Kastenholz, 2010). Similar studies revealed the indirect impact of self-congruity on behavioral

intentions through perceptions and attitudes. This study supported others and concluded that values (self-congruity) impacted behaviors through perceptions (brand equity) and attitudes (loyalty). The study further confirmed that foreign tourists' views of destination cuisines compatible with their self-congruity affected their perceptions of destination cuisine brand equity and loyalty attitudes and that symbolic benefits impacted functional benefits. It also concluded that positive brand equity perceptions and loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines significantly affected the formation of gastronomic travel intentions.

5.1. Practical implications

Foreign tourists tend to be loyal to brands they think reflect their values and develop positive attitudes toward these brands. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and meet target consumers' values-related expectations within the scope of brand positioning strategies to strengthen their brand equity perceptions of and loyalty to destination cuisines. For this, designing a positioning plan suitable for the symbolic value of destination cuisines to the self-congruity of the target audience is needed. Sector managers must create a customer inventory of tourists in the target market and acquaint themselves with them closely. They must also analyze the target audience profiles, particularly concerning concepts such as social class, status, and lifestyle, and design culinary presentations and experiences compatible with their self-congruity. Thus, foreign tourists might develop positive perceptions of image, quality, and awareness of destination cuisines and a high level of loyalty as their self-congruity with prestige values might symbolically increase.

Secondly, loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines significantly impacted gastronomic travel intentions, suggesting that the inability to create customer loyalty toward destination cuisines reveals that gastronomic tourism of destinations might be vulnerable under harsh competitive conditions. Gaining a good market in gastronomic tourism requires tourists to develop loyalty attitudes toward destination cuisines.

Image and quality had the highest impact on the gastronomic travel intentions of foreign tourists who have visited the country. It might, therefore, be beneficial for sectors to focus primarily on increasing image and quality perceptions of destination cuisines to gain competitive advantages in gastronomic tourism. Quality standards for destination cuisines should initially be established to achieve this, and quality consistency should be ensured by regularly checking food and beverage businesses. Secondly, the food and beverage quality and price offered must be equivalent. Setting standard pricing policies, particularly in first, second, and third-class restaurants, is recommended.

5.2. Theoretical implications

As in tourism, self-congruity theory was also theoretically validated in gastronomy. This study accordingly supported previous studies (Chon, 1992; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Beerli *et al.*, 2007; Ekinici *et al.*, 2013) and demonstrated that self-congruity was an important psychological factor in explaining tourists' perceptions and attitudes toward destination cuisines.

Second, the study concluded that values affected behaviors through perceptions and attitudes, considering that self-congruence influenced consumers' perceptions of brand equity and loyalty attitudes but not travel intentions. Homer and Kahle's (1988) theoretical hierarchy posits that personal values influence consumer behaviors through less abstract intermediaries (Homer & Kahle, 1988: 639), supported in our study.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Several research limitations are worth noting. Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) formed the basis of self-congruity by claiming that consumers associate the symbolic values of the products they buy with their

true selves. However, in later years, researchers such as Sirgy (1982), Markus and Nurius (1986), and Malhotra (1988) tackled self-congruity as a multidimensional concept. Thus, concepts such as ideal, social, and ideal social selves and the actual self emerged (Sirgy & Samli, 1985: 195). This study limited itself to only actual self-congruity. Other studies might, therefore, examine such dimensions as ideal, social, and ideal social self-congruity.

Second, the data examined in this study pertained specifically to Turkish cuisine. Other studies might use different ethnic cuisine samples and measure their reliability. The results obtained might then be compared with previous studies.

Third, various factors might affect culinary preferences, as listed by Köster (2009): perception of product characteristics (e.g., appearance, taste, smell, and texture), biological factors (e.g., age/sex, physical condition, immune system, and nutrition), situational factors (e.g., time), socio-cultural factors (e.g., cultural or economic impacts), and external product characteristics (e.g., risk perceptions). However, although psychological factors fundamentally influence human behaviors, studies handling their effects on eating behaviors and culinary preferences have remained limited in the literature. This study evaluated self-congruity as a psychological element underlying consumer perceptions and attitudes. Other studies might examine the effects of various psychological factors, such as identity and personal values. Fourth, in this study, symbolic meanings such as "social status, user image, societal reflections, lifestyles, and cultural compatibility" attributed to ethnic cuisines were limited to evaluating foreign tourists' selves with their congruity.

Future studies might separately investigate each factor's impact on measuring self-congruity. This study identified the effect of self-congruity on loyalty attitudes, determining that symbolic benefits considerably affected consumers' loyalty attitudes. Further studies might compare and explore the influence of both symbolic and functional benefits on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions. By examining the relationship between brand equity dimensions of destination cuisines, prospective researchers might create a brand equity model for destination cuisines and contribute significantly to the sector in brand management. Finally, prospective studies might inquire whether such dimensions as brand trust, satisfaction, and identification have a regulatory impact on the effect of foreign tourists' brand value perceptions toward destination cuisines on loyalty attitudes.

Disclosure statement

This study was compiled from the first author's doctoral thesis, "*Investigation of the Relationship between Self Congruity, Turkish Cuisine Brand Value and Loyalty and Gastronomy Travel Intention.*" The authors declared no potential conflict of interest.

APPENDIX*List of sources of statements*

Item	Statements	Source
<i>Self Congruity (SC)</i>		
SC ₁	The image of Turkish cuisine is consistent with how I see myself.	Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon, Claiborne & Berkman (1997).
SC ₂	The image of Turkish cuisine reflects who I am.	
SC ₃	My image is consistent with the overall image of people who eat Turkish food.	
SC ₄	People similar to me consume Turkish food.	
SC ₅	The kind of person who typically eats Turkish food is very much like me.	
<i>Brand Equity Perceptions of Destination Cuisines</i>		
<i>Brand Image (BI)</i>		
BI ₁	Turkey offers appealing food.	Horng, Liu, Chou & Tsai (2012)
BI ₂	Turkey offers appealing snacks.	
BI ₃	Turkey has many friendly cities suitable for food tourism.	
BI ₄	Visiting Turkey is a wonderful opportunity for sampling cuisine.	
BI ₅	Turkey has a relaxing dining atmosphere.	
BI ₆	Turkey has a rich food culture.	
BI ₇	Turkey has excellent dining facilities.	
BI ₈	Turkey's food service personnel are friendly.	
BI ₉	Turkish cuisine is diverse.	
BI ₁₀	Turkish cuisine is unique.	
<i>Brand Awareness (BA)</i>		
BA ₁	Turkish food enjoys a good reputation.	Horng, Liu, Chou & Tsai (2012)
BA ₂	I can easily name famous Turkish dishes.	
BA ₃	When I think about cuisine, Turkish cuisine comes to mind immediately.	
BA ₄	Turkish food enjoys a good reputation.	
BA ₅	I can easily name famous Turkish dishes.	
<i>Brand Quality (BQ)</i>		
BQ ₁	Turkey's food is better than that of similar destinations.	Horng, Liu, Chou & Tsai (2012)
BQ ₂	Turkey's dining environment is clean.	
BQ ₃	Few communication problems occur in Turkey's food tourism.	
BQ ₄	Turkey's food tourism is offered at reasonable prices.	
BQ ₅	Turkey offers high-quality cuisine.	
BQ ₆	Turkey offers delicious cuisine.	
<i>Loyalty Attitude (LA)</i>		
LA ₁	I would recommend others to visit Turkey for food tourism.	Horng, Liu, Chou & Tsai (2012)
LA ₂	I enjoy visiting Turkey for food tourism.	

LA ₃	I consider myself a loyal consumer of Turkish cuisine.
Gastronomic Travel Intention (GTI)	
GTI ₁	In the following year, I may visit Turkey again for food tourism. Lam and Hsu (2006)
GTI ₂	In the following year, I plan to visit Turkey again for food tourism.
GTI ₃	I wish to visit Turkey again for food tourism.

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