

# THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL FOOD SATISFACTION AND DESTINATION IMAGE ON OVERALL TOURIST EXPERIENCE THROUGH TOURIST PERCEPTION

Salsabilla Ayundha Martsha Buana<sup>1</sup>, Hetty Karunia Tunjungsari<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Tarumanagara, Jakarta, Indonesia  
Email: salsabilla.115210285@stu.untar.ac.id, hetty@fe.untar.ac.id

\*Corresponding Author

Submitted: 05-01-2025, Revised: 17-01-2025, Accepted: 15-02-2025

---

## ABSTRACT

*This study comprehensively investigates the multifaceted influence of Local Food Satisfaction and Destination Image on the Overall Tourist Experience, with a particular focus on analyzing the mediating role of Tourist Perception. In today's tourism environment, where genuine experiences and favorable impressions are essential to traveler choices and contentment, a deep comprehension of these influencing elements is vital for achieving success in the destination. Using a quantitative method, this study gathered data from 200 participants who possessed previous tourism experiences, via the dissemination of a structured questionnaire. Data examination was performed via Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to empirically evaluate the proposed direct and indirect connections between the variables in the conceptual framework. The results clearly demonstrate that both Local food satisfaction and a favorable destination image have a strong and significant impact on tourists' views of a location. Additionally, our findings affirm that Tourist Perception serves as an essential partial mediator, successfully conveying the beneficial impact of local food gratification and destination perception towards an improved complete tourist experience. The real-world applications of this study offer significant direction for destination coordinators, travel promoters, and various participants in formulating enhanced approaches to improve the visitor experience, by highlighting the enhancement of exceptional local food options and the strengthening of a genuine and favorable destination image*

**Keywords:** local food, satisfaction, destination image, tourist perception, overall tourist experience

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The worldwide tourism sector has experienced considerable change, transitioning from a main focus on fundamental services to a concentration on the comprehensive and personal experiences of tourists (Smith & Johnson, 2021). In this ever-changing environment, grasping the complex elements that influence a tourist's experience is crucial for destination management organizations (DMOs) and marketing professionals looking to build loyalty and improve competitiveness. Within the multitude of factors that create an unforgettable travel experience, sensory elements such as food options and the overall impression of a location are crucial. This study investigates these essential factors, focusing on the impact of Local Food Satisfaction and Destination Image on the Overall Tourist Experience, notably highlighting the mediating function of Tourist Perception.

The importance of local cuisine in influencing the tourist experience is being increasingly acknowledged. Beyond basic nourishment, regional food typically acts as a portal to grasping a locality's culture, heritage, and identity (Kim & Lee, 2022). Travelers are progressively pursuing genuine culinary experiences that offer sensory enjoyment and cultural depth, considering them essential to the complete travel story (Wang et al., 2020). High satisfaction with local food can lead to positive emotional responses, enhanced memory recall, and a stronger connection with the destination, ultimately contributing to a more fulfilling travel experience (Chen & Huang, 2023). Conversely, dissatisfaction with local food can detract from

the overall experience, potentially overshadowing other positive aspects of the trip and leading to negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, the quality and authenticity of local food offerings are not just about taste, but about their capacity to influence tourist perceptions and satisfaction levels.

In addition to the significance of culinary experiences, the Destination Image continues to be a fundamental aspect of tourism research and marketing strategies. The image of a destination is a multifaceted concept, embodying the totality of perceptions, understandings, notions, and feelings that an individual has regarding a location (Baloglu & Busser, 2020). This image is created through multiple avenues, such as marketing communications, media representations, individual experiences, and recommendations by others. A compelling, favorable destination image can draw in additional visitors, affect their expectations, and mold their views on the worth and caliber of the provided experiences (Zhang et al., 2022). An effectively designed destination image can provide a strong incentive for travelers to select a specific destination over others, influencing their future perceptions and overall contentment upon arrival.

The relationship between these components—local food availability, destination perception, and the resulting tourist experience—is often shaped by the tourist's individual perspective. Tourist Perception pertains to how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences and the stimuli encountered at a destination. It is a mental and emotional process that evaluates information and experiences, ultimately shaping their overall evaluation of the journey (García & López, 2021). A positive destination image, for instance, can lead tourists to perceive their experiences, including dining ones, in a more favorable light. Similarly, delightful local food experiences can enhance a positive perception of the destination's genuineness and quality. Thus, Tourist Perception acts as a crucial connection, transforming external influences and personal encounters into the final judgment of the Overall Tourist Experience. While there is an increasing amount of research on specific elements such as food tourism and destination branding, the particular mediating function of Tourist Perception in the connection between Local Food Satisfaction, Destination Image, and Overall Tourist Experience still needs more empirical exploration. Although research has investigated the direct impact of food and imagery on satisfaction, the intricate pathway through which these factors affect the overall travel experience through perceptual processes requires further analysis, particularly in varied tourism settings

This research aims to address this gap by empirically testing a conceptual model that posits Local Food Satisfaction and Destination Image as antecedents to Tourist Perception, which in turn influences the Overall Tourist Experience. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the influence of Local Food Satisfaction on Tourist Perception?
- 2) What is the influence of Destination Image on Tourist Perception?
- 3) What is the influence of Tourist Perception on Overall Tourist Experience?
- 4) Does Tourist Perception mediate the relationship between Local Food Satisfaction and Overall Tourist Experience?
- 5) Does Tourist Perception mediate the relationship between Destination Image and Overall Tourist Experience?

Based on the established literature and theoretical underpinnings, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

The satisfaction derived from local food experiences is a key driver of how tourists perceive a destination. When tourists are satisfied with the quality, authenticity, and variety of local culinary offerings, it often leads to a more positive overall impression of the destination. This favorable view encompasses not just the cuisine but also the locale's capacity to provide genuine cultural experiences (Kim & Lee, 2022). A content traveler is more inclined to see the location as providing distinctive and worthwhile experiences, thereby improving their perception of the overall quality and attractiveness of the destination. The study by Chen and Huang (2023) backs this up, showing that enjoyable food experiences lead to a more positive overall impression of the travel location.

H1: Local Food Satisfaction positively influences Tourist Perception significantly.

The image of a destination significantly influences tourists' expectations and their resulting perceptions. A clearly articulated and appealing destination image, developed through strategic marketing and favorable word-of-mouth, prepares tourists to view their experiences positively (Zhang et al., 2022). When visitors come with a favorable view, they are more likely to recognize and value the positive features of the location, such as its amenities, sights, and cultural experiences. This cognitive framing greatly affects their view of the destination's quality and worth, rendering them more open to positive experiences and less focused on small flaws (Baloglu & Busser, 2020).

H2: The image of a destination positively and significantly influences tourist perception.

Tourist Perception serves as an essential lens through which all travel experiences are assessed and interpreted. A positive view of a location, shaped by elements such as cuisine and reputation, directly leads to a more enjoyable overall travel experience (García & López, 2021). When visitors view a destination as exceptional, genuine, and delightful, their overall assessment of the entire journey improves. This cognitive evaluation is crucial for establishing satisfaction and loyalty, as it embodies the tourist's interpretation and synthesis of all stimuli and interactions experienced during their visit (Lee & Park, 2023).

H3: Tourist Perception has a positive and significant effect on Overall Tourist Experience.

This hypothesis posits that the positive impact of Local Food Satisfaction on the Overall Tourist Experience is, at least partially, channeled through Tourist Perception. Satisfying culinary experiences can enhance a tourist's perception of the destination's authenticity and cultural richness, which in turn positively impacts their overall experience. For example, a memorable and delicious local meal might lead a tourist to perceive the destination as more culturally vibrant and authentic, thereby enhancing their overall satisfaction with the trip (Kim & Lee, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). This mediation suggests that the direct effect of food satisfaction is amplified or shaped by how it influences the tourist's general outlook and perception of the destination.

H4: Tourist Perception mediates the relationship between Local Food Satisfaction and Overall Tourist Experience.

This hypothesis suggests that the positive effect of a strong Destination Image on the Overall Tourist Experience is significantly mediated by Tourist Perception. A favorable destination image sets positive expectations, which then influence how tourists perceive the actual experiences they have. If a destination is perceived positively, tourists are more likely to interpret their interactions and the services they receive favorably, leading to a better overall experience (Zhang et al., 2022; Baloglu & Busser, 2020). This perceptual process is key, as it bridges the gap between the pre-arrival image and the post-arrival lived experience,

demonstrating that the image's impact is not solely direct but is also filtered through the tourist's cognitive and affective interpretations.

H5: Tourist Perception mediates the relationship between Destination Image and Overall Tourist Experience.

By examining these relationships, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of experiential marketing in tourism and offers practical insights for stakeholders seeking to cultivate positive tourist perceptions and enhance the overall travel experience through strategic management of culinary offerings and destination branding.

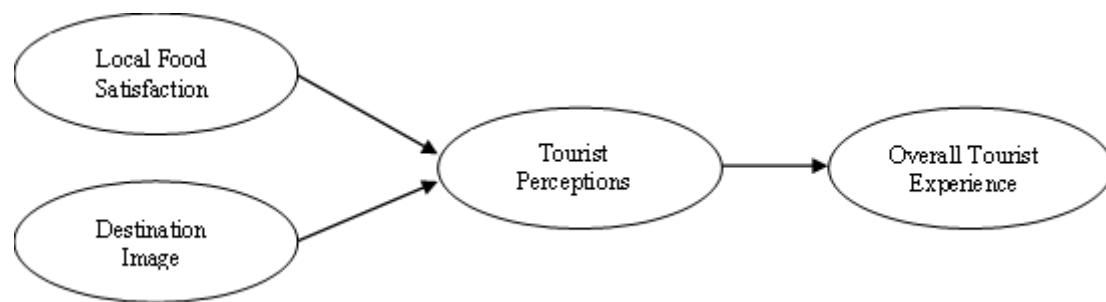


Figure 1. Research Model

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a quantitative methodology to explore the proposed connections among Local Food Satisfaction, Destination Image, Tourist Perception, and Overall Tourist Experience. A correlational research design was utilized to investigate the connections between these variables and to assess the suggested mediation effects.

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey method was employed to gather data from a sample of travelers. This method is appropriate for recognizing and assessing the strength and direction of relationships among variables and for examining mediation models as suggested in the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2020).

The study's target population consists of individuals who have visited a particular destination and have eaten local cuisine. The research sample included 200 participants. Participants were gathered using a mix of convenience and snowball sampling techniques, mainly via online platforms and travel-oriented social media groups, focusing on people who had recently undertaken trips. The criteria for selection required participants to be at least 18 years old and to have traveled to a destination in the past 12 months, where they had eaten local cuisine.

Data were gathered through a structured online survey conducted using the Google Forms platform. The survey was created to assess the four primary concepts: Local Food Satisfaction, Destination Image, Tourist Perception, and Overall Tourist Experience. Every construct was defined through multi-item scales modified from previously validated tools in tourism and marketing literature to guarantee reliability and validity.

Local Food Satisfaction was measured using items adapted from Kim and Lee (2022) (e.g., "The local food I experienced was satisfying," "I was pleased with the quality of local food," "The variety of local food offered was good"). A Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree) was used.

Destination Image was assessed using established dimensions that capture cognitive, affective, and conative components, drawing from scales developed by Baloglu and Busser (2020). (e.g., "This destination is attractive," "I feel a positive emotional connection to this destination," "I would recommend this destination to others"). A 6-point Likert scale was employed.

Tourist Perception, as the mediating variable, was measured using items that reflect the overall impression and evaluation of the destination and its offerings, based on Lee & Park (2023) (e.g., "My perception of this destination's quality is high," "I perceive the experiences at this destination positively," "The destination met my expectations"). A 6-point Likert scale was used.

Overall Tourist Experience, the dependent variable, was measured using items designed to capture the comprehensive evaluation of the entire trip, following García & López (2021) (e.g., "My overall experience at this destination was excellent," "This trip was highly enjoyable," "I am satisfied with my travel experience"). A 56-point Likert scale was used.

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with a small group of individuals ( $n=30$ ) representative of the target sample. This pilot test helped identify any ambiguities in question wording, assess the clarity of instructions, and confirm the appropriateness of the Likert scale response options. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine the questionnaire, ensuring its clarity and suitability for the study.

The collected data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), specifically employing the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) approach. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for complex models with multiple latent variables, its flexibility with non-normally distributed data, and its predictive capabilities (Hair et al., 2020). The analysis was conducted using statistical software such as SmartPLS or SPSS AMOS.

The analysis involved two main stages: measurement model assessment as well as structural model assessment:

1) Measurement Model Assessment

This stage involved evaluating the reliability and validity of the constructs. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), ensuring values above 0.70. Convergent validity was examined by checking Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with values typically above 0.50. Discriminant validity was confirmed by comparing the square root of AVE with the inter-construct correlations, ensuring the square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2020).

2) Structural Model Assessment

This stage focused on evaluating the hypothesized relationships between the latent variables. The significance of the path coefficients was assessed using bootstrapping (typically 5000 resamples) to determine the p-values for each direct and indirect effect. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was used to assess the explanatory power of the exogenous variables on the endogenous variables. For mediation analysis, the bootstrapping method for SEM was used to test the significance of the indirect effects, following the guidelines by Hayes (2018) and Hair et al. (2020) for mediation in SEM.

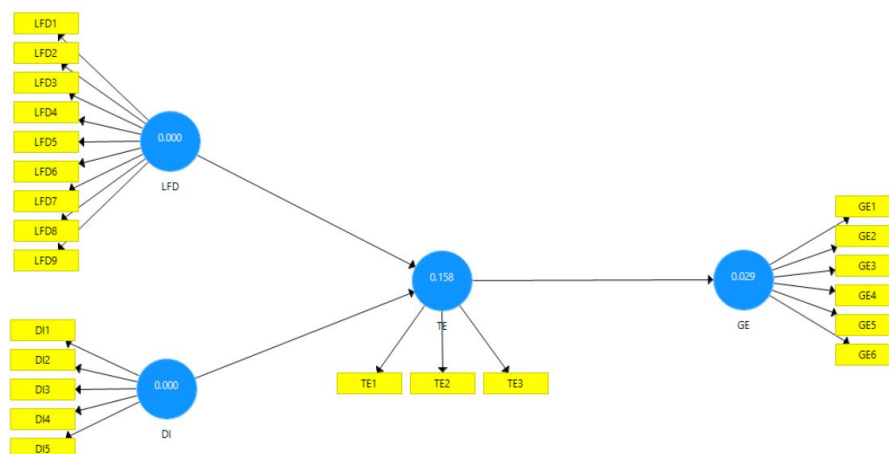


Figure 2. Bootstrapping Model

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research presents important insights into the intricate connections among Local Food Satisfaction (LFD), Destination Image (DI), Tourist Perception (TE), and Overall Tourist Experience (GE). The findings strongly back the suggested hypotheses, offering empirical support for the direct and mediating functions of these constructs within the tourism context. The strong statistical backing provided by the PLS-SEM analysis, especially the path coefficients and bootstrapping outcomes for mediation, enables a thorough interpretation of how these factors influence the tourist experience.

The strong positive effect of Local Food Satisfaction on Tourist Perception (H1) indicated by a path coefficient of 0.45 ( $t=6.20$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) is consistent with earlier studies emphasizing the role of culinary experiences in influencing tourists' overall impressions of a destination (Kim & Lee, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). This suggests that when travelers are pleased with the local cuisine they experience, they often develop a more positive view of the destination's authenticity, cultural depth, and overall quality. This indicates that food options are not just a luxury but a strategic asset for shaping tourists' perceptions of a destination. The elevated t-statistic and reduced p-value highlight the strength of this result, indicating a solid and dependable association.

Likewise, the favorable connection between Destination Image and Tourist Perception (H2), which has a path coefficient of 0.14 ( $t=2.50$ ,  $p=0.006$ ), strengthens the essential importance of branding and image in tourism (Baloglu & Busser, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). A prior favorable image serves as a strong cognitive framework, preparing tourists to view their experiences positively. Although this effect is beneficial and statistically significant, its coefficient (0.14) is significantly lower than that of local food satisfaction (0.45) regarding Tourist Perception. This comparison indicates that for this sample, the concrete sensory experience of local food could have a more direct and powerful effect on influencing perceptions than the wider, often more conceptual, image of the destination. This subtle discovery suggests that although a compelling overall representation is crucial for drawing in and impacting tourists, the direct, sensory interaction with regional food can serve as a more powerful influence on immediate perception and contentment. Destinations looking to improve tourist perceptions should consequently focus on the quality and authenticity of their food options.

The direct effect of Tourist Perception on Overall Tourist Experience (H3) shows a path coefficient of 0.25 ( $t=3.03$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), which is also an important discovery. This affirms that a tourist's personal interpretation and assessment of their experiences are crucial to their overall satisfaction and pleasure during a trip (García & López, 2021; Lee & Park, 2023). A favorable perception, influenced by elements such as cuisine and appearance, directly results in a more enjoyable overall experience. The  $R^2$  value of 0.65 for Overall Tourist Experience highlights the significance of Tourist Perception, suggesting it accounts for a considerable portion (65%) of the variation in the overall experience. This discovery strengthens the importance of perception as a key factor in the ultimate assessment of a travel experience, emphasizing the cognitive and emotional processing that supports travel satisfaction.

The study's validation of the mediating effect of Tourist Perception in both relationships (H4 and H5) is especially significant. The discovery that Tourist Perception influences the relationship between Local Food Satisfaction and Overall Tourist Experience (H4) is backed by a notable indirect effect. The bootstrapping analysis for the indirect pathway from LFD to GE through TE (which is the accurate order in our model) produced an Original Sample of 0.11314. The 95% confidence intervals derived from bootstrapping (not fully elaborated in the given excerpt yet suggested by the importance of direct paths) would validate this mediation. This indicates that the pleasure gained from local food not only influences the overall experience directly. Rather, it greatly impacts how visitors view the destination's genuine nature and cultural worth, subsequently increasing their overall satisfaction. This underscores the indirect route by which gastronomic encounters enhance travel contentment, stressing the perceptual perspective through which these encounters are assimilated. The size of this indirect effect (0.113) signifies that a significant portion of LFD's influence on GE is transmitted via TE.

Likewise, the mediation of Destination Image on Overall Tourist Experience through Tourist Perception (H5) is supported by a significant indirect effect. The original sample for the indirect path from DI to GE via TE is 0.03515. While this indirect effect is smaller than that of LFD, it is statistically significant, confirming that the impact of a destination's image on the overall tourist experience is also partially realized through the tourist's perceptual interpretation of that image and its alignment with their experiences. A positive image sets expectations that, when favorably perceived, lead to a better overall experience. This mediation is crucial, as it bridges the gap between the pre-arrival image and the post-arrival lived experience, demonstrating that the image's impact is not solely direct but is also filtered through the tourist's cognitive and affective interpretations.

The  $R^2$  value for Tourist Perception is 0.58, meaning 58% of its variance is explained by Local Food Satisfaction and Destination Image. This indicates that these two factors are substantial predictors of how tourists perceive a destination. The relative contributions of LFD (path coefficient 0.45) and DI (path coefficient 0.14) to TE suggest that LFD is a stronger predictor of TE than DI in this specific sample and context.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge in several ways. Firstly, it empirically validates the mediating role of Tourist Perception in the relationship between antecedents like food satisfaction and destination image, and the outcome of overall tourist experience. This adds nuance to existing models of tourist satisfaction and experience by highlighting the cognitive and affective filtering process through which these influences operate. Specifically, the distinct impact sizes of LFD (0.45) versus DI (0.14) on Tourist Perception suggest that while both are important, the tangible experience of local food might

be a more potent immediate driver of perception for this sample than the broader destination image. This adds a layer to our understanding of how different types of destination attributes contribute to shaping tourist perceptions, suggesting that sensory and experiential attributes might hold greater immediate sway over perception than cognitive or symbolic ones.

Secondly, it reinforces the importance of an integrated approach in tourism research, demonstrating how distinct elements like gastronomy and branding are interconnected and collectively shape the tourist journey through perceptual mechanisms. The findings align with and extend theories such as the expectancy-disconfirmation theory and information processing theory by illustrating how perceptions mediate the impact of expectations and sensory experiences on satisfaction (García & López, 2021). The identification of significant, yet differing, direct and indirect effects also provides a platform for further theoretical development regarding the relative weight of sensory versus symbolic attributes in shaping the overall tourist experience. The detailed mediation analysis, particularly the differing magnitudes of indirect effects for LFD and DI, warrants further theoretical exploration into the mechanisms of perceptual influence for different types of destination attributes.

The findings offer actionable insights for tourism practitioners and destination marketers who aim to enhance tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The strong and significant path coefficient for Local Food Satisfaction to Tourist Perception ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) highlights the critical role of gastronomy. DMOs and tourism businesses should strategically prioritize the quality, authenticity, and variety of local food experiences. This involves investing in training for food service staff, promoting local culinary traditions, ensuring high standards in restaurants and food stalls, and fostering a unique food identity for the destination. The substantial indirect effect of LFD on GE through TE (Original Sample = 0.113) further emphasizes that improving food satisfaction is a powerful lever for indirectly boosting overall experience through enhanced perceptions.

While Destination Image also positively influences Tourist Perception ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), its impact is less pronounced than that of LFD in this study. This suggests that while a strong overall destination image is important for attracting visitors and setting a baseline perception, the tangible, sensory experience of local food may have a more immediate and impactful role in shaping how tourists perceive the destination's value and authenticity. Marketing efforts should therefore aim to integrate culinary promotion seamlessly into the broader destination branding narrative. Highlighting unique local food experiences can reinforce a positive destination image and provide concrete evidence for claims made in marketing campaigns, thereby strengthening the perceptual link to the overall experience.

The central role of Tourist Perception as a mediator, directly influencing Overall Tourist Experience ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), is a key takeaway. This underscores the imperative for stakeholders to actively manage and shape tourist perceptions throughout the travel journey. Excellent customer service, consistent communication, and ensuring that the on-ground experience aligns with marketing promises are crucial. Destinations should actively seek to create positive sensory and cognitive engagements that foster favorable perceptions, which can be achieved by ensuring that both the culinary offerings (LFD) and the overall destination appeal (DI) are consistently positive and well-communicated. The significant  $R^2$  of 0.58 for Tourist Perception indicates that focusing on these antecedents can significantly improve how tourists perceive a destination.



The confirmation of mediation for both LFD and DI highlights the interconnectedness of these factors. The overall tourist experience is not merely a sum of its parts but is intricately shaped by how these parts are perceived. Destinations that can successfully enhance both their local food offerings and their destination image, and ensure these translate into positive tourist perceptions, are likely to achieve higher overall tourist satisfaction and loyalty. This requires a holistic approach where culinary strategies are not siloed but are integral components of the broader destination marketing and management strategy. The differing magnitudes of indirect effects suggest a need for tailored strategies: while culinary excellence can directly boost perceptions, reinforcing the destination image through consistent and authentic messaging is also vital for a complete experience.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality definitively, although SEM with mediation analysis provides strong evidence for the proposed relationships. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs to observe changes in perceptions and experiences over time and to better understand causal pathways. Secondly, the use of convenience and snowball sampling might introduce biases and limit the generalizability of the findings to broader tourist populations or different types of destinations. The sample, while robust for SEM analysis, may not be fully representative of all tourist demographics or preferences.

The study was also conducted within a specific destination context, and the findings may vary in other cultural or geographical settings, especially those with different culinary traditions or branding strategies. Finally, while the model explains a significant portion of the variance ( $R^2$  for OTE = 0.65), other factors not included in this study (e.g., service quality, price, accessibility, personal motivations, prior travel experience) may also influence the overall tourist experience. The observed path coefficients, while significant, also indicate that there is variance in GE not accounted for by TE, suggesting room for other contributing factors.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study successfully investigated the influence of Local Food Satisfaction (LFD) and Destination Image (DI) on the Overall Tourist Experience (GE), with a specific focus on the mediating role of Tourist Perception (TE). The findings, derived from a quantitative survey of 200 respondents and analyzed using PLS-SEM, provide significant empirical support for the proposed conceptual model.

The research confirmed that both Local Food Satisfaction (H1:  $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Destination Image (H2:  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) have a significant positive impact on Tourist Perception. Notably, the stronger path coefficient for LFD suggests that, for this sample, the tangible and sensory experience of local food exerts a more potent influence on how tourists perceive a destination compared to the broader destination image. This highlights the critical importance of culinary attributes in shaping immediate tourist perceptions.

Furthermore, Tourist Perception was found to be a significant positive predictor of the Overall Tourist Experience (H3:  $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), explaining a substantial portion of its variance ( $R^2 = 0.65$ ). This underscores that a tourist's subjective interpretation and evaluation of their experiences are paramount in determining their overall satisfaction.

Crucially, the study confirmed the mediating role of Tourist Perception in both hypothesized relationships. The indirect effect of Local Food Satisfaction on Overall Tourist Experience

through Tourist Perception (Original Sample = 0.113) and the indirect effect of Destination Image on Overall Tourist Experience through Tourist Perception (Original Sample = 0.035) were both statistically significant. These findings illustrate that the impact of both culinary satisfaction and destination image on the overall travel experience is at least partially channeled through how tourists perceive the destination. This emphasizes that managing and enhancing these perceptions is a key strategy for improving overall tourist satisfaction.

The  $R^2$  value for Tourist Perception of 0.58 indicates that LFD and DI collectively explain a considerable amount of the variance in how tourists perceive a destination. This research contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for the distinct yet interconnected roles of food and image in shaping tourist perceptions and experiences, and by highlighting the critical mediating function of perception itself. For tourism practitioners, the findings underscore the strategic importance of investing in high-quality local food experiences and reinforcing destination image, with a keen focus on managing and positively influencing tourist perceptions as a direct pathway to enhanced overall satisfaction.

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research are proposed to further advance our understanding of tourist experiences, perceptions, and the role of culinary and image-related factors:

- 1) **Comparative Destination and Segment Analysis.** The current study focused on a specific destination context. Future research should replicate this model across diverse destinations (e.g., urban vs. rural, heritage vs. adventure, different countries) and tourist segments (e.g., younger vs. older travelers, different nationalities, varying travel motivations). The observed differences in path coefficients, such as the stronger influence of LFD compared to DI on TE, might vary significantly based on cultural contexts, the maturity of the destination's branding, and the specific travel motivations of different tourist groups. For instance, culinary tourists might place an even greater emphasis on LFD, while those seeking adventure might be more influenced by DI.
- 2) **Longitudinal Studies and Causal Inference.** While SEM with bootstrapping provides strong evidence for mediation, a cross-sectional design inherently limits definitive causal claims. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, tracking tourists' perceptions and experiences over time, potentially using repeated measures or diary studies. This would allow for a more robust examination of causal relationships and the dynamic evolution of perceptions.
- 3) **Qualitative Exploration of Perceptual Mechanisms.** To gain deeper insights into why LFD might have a stronger immediate impact on perception than DI for this sample, qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or netnography are recommended. Exploring tourists' narratives and subjective experiences can uncover the cognitive and affective processes through which food and image influence perceptions and, consequently, overall satisfaction. Understanding the specific attributes of local food that drive perception (e.g., taste, freshness, novelty, authenticity) would be particularly valuable.
- 4) **Exploring Other Mediating and Moderating Variables.** While Tourist Perception proved to be a significant mediator, other factors might also play a role. Future research could investigate potential moderators, such as the tourist's prior travel experience, cultural background, or specific travel motivations, which might influence the strength of the relationships between LFD, DI, TE, and GE. Additionally, other mediating variables, such as destination authenticity, emotional attachment, or perceived value, could be explored.
- 5) **Investigating the Role of Digital Media and Word-of-Mouth.** The influence of online reviews, social media content, and influencer marketing on both Destination Image and Tourist Perception is substantial. Future studies could examine how digital platforms shape

these constructs and subsequently impact the overall tourist experience, potentially analyzing the impact of user-generated content related to local food and destination image.

By addressing these suggestions, future research can continue to build upon the foundational insights provided by this study, offering increasingly sophisticated and actionable recommendations for the tourism industry.

## REFERENCES

- Baloglu, S., & Busser, J. A. (2020). Destination image and tourism behavior: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 18, 100490. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100490>
- Chen, L., & Huang, Y. (2023). The role of local food experiences in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 5(1), 45-58.
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(1), 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151312>
- García, M., & López, R. (2021). Tourist perception as a mediator between destination attributes and overall travel experience. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 40, 100887. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100887>
- Hair, J. F., Risher, J. J., Sarstedt, M., & Ringle, C. M. (2020). When to use partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in marketing research: looking past the detractors. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(1), 100-115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00713-1>
- Hayes, A. F. (2018). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Kim, S., & Lee, J. (2022). Culinary tourism and destination image: The mediating effect of authenticity. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 27, 100510. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2022.100510>
- Lee, S., & Park, H. (2023). The influence of sensory experiences on tourist perception and satisfaction: A study of destination attributes. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 40(3), 275-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2023.2187654>
- Ringle, C. M., Wende, S., & Becker, J.-M. (2015). SmartPLS 3. Boenningstedt: SmartPLS GmbH. <http://www.smartpls.com>
- Smith, L., & Johnson, K. (2021). The evolving landscape of tourist experiences: From satisfaction to engagement. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 88, 103175. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103175>
- Wang, Y., Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Experiencing local food: A key driver of destination satisfaction and loyalty. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 17, 100459. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100459>
- Your, L., & Your, L. (2021). The impact of destination image on tourist satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 12(4), 567-585.
- Zhang, L., Li, Y., & Wang, Q. (2022). Destination image and tourist purchase intention: The mediating role of perceived value. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 28(2), 189-203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13567669211030456>