

The mediation effect of destination image on the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection: The case of Hatay**

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Local cuisine,
Destination image,
Destination selection,
Hatay.

This study aims to empirically test a model linking destination image, destination selection, and local cuisine elements. The study also analyzes the mediating effect of destination image on the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. The research data were collected from domestic tourists using a survey from the UNESCO Gastronomy City of Hatay of Türkiye. All four hypotheses suggested within the scope of the study were supported. Local cuisine elements and destination image significantly influence destination selection; herein, local cuisine elements affect destination selection more. Similarly, local cuisine elements significantly influence destination image. This study also reveals that destination image partially mediates the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. The study results are expected to help the researchers and managers understand the roles of local cuisine elements and destination image in destination selection in the tourism industry. The study is the first to explore the mediating relationship in link between local cuisine and destination selection in the tourism industry.

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1. Introduction

Meals consumed to address physiological needs are also helpful in meeting needs such as enjoyment, entertainment, and socialization; therefore, they play a significant part in destination selection (Henderson, 2009). The presentation of culinary traditions to tourists, along with local products, contributes to shaping the destination image in the minds (Halkier, 2012, pp.1). Favorable perceptions of regional cuisines are suggested to affect the destination image and selection in this context positively. On the other hand, tourists formulate an image in their minds through the information they obtain from various sources for destinations they have never traveled to. In line with these images, they choose among alternative destinations. Therefore, the destination image is a key component in the destination selection process (Khongrat, 2021, pp. 4). The literature on research variables infers that many studies examine the binary combinations of the concepts of local cuisine, destination image, and destination selection (Chi & Qu, 2008; Alderighi *et al.*, 2016; Fernández, Mogollón, & Duarte, 2017; Benli & Yenipinar, 2018; Choe & Kim, 2018; Çakır, 2020). However, there is no study identified to investigate the three variables together.

Based on the studies mentioned above, this study aims to look into the effect of the destination image on the

destination selection of local cuisine items. The research is anticipated to be significant in terms of filling a gap in the literature. Furthermore, it is expected that those interested in promoting Hatay as a tourist destination contribute to developing their marketing plans.

2. Literature Review

Local Cuisine Elements

The act of nutrition as a vital necessity since the existence of humanity has led to the creation of various rules on eating and drinking over time. With the emergence of social life, these rules have been shaped around the lifestyles, customs, and traditions of the societies and provided the formation of culinary culture (Cigirim, 2001; Halıcı, 1999, pp.9). Murcott (1983), one of the pioneers of researchers examining the relationship between food and culture, argued that the answers to questions such as what, how, and why societies eat, how food is cooked, and how it is presented could be given by looking at the material situation, social relations, and hierarchical structures of the society. The culinary tourist, who occupies the higher end of the food tourism interest continuum, is a special interest traveler whose passion for food is the main factor determining his way of life. The culinary tourist is likewise

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a cultural tourist, as eating and drinking are ultimately cultural activities. Therefore, the culinary tourist may be both a special interest tourist and a cultural tourist due to the evident overlap between food as a special interest component and a component of culture (Ashok, 2019, pp.124). Other scholars agree with this notion and propose that there is a strong link between cuisine and culture (Nadalipour *et al.*, 2022; Balıkçioğlu Dedeoğlu *et al.*, 2019, pp.110; Berno *et al.*, 2019, pp.19; Boutaud *et al.*, 2016, pp.1). In this sense, local dishes, which are thought to be discussed under the roof of culture, are the elements that bring intercultural differences to the fore the most (Hornig & Tsai, 2011, pp.289).

Local cuisine involves the customs, values, and ways of eating, drinking, and preparing food associated with a particular location (Sabbag, 2022). It is also recognized as a significant part of the implementation of sustainable development principles for destinations, as well as an enriching element of the visitor experience (Boyne & Hall, 2003, pp.133). Besides, the term is defined as a tourist attraction, which can create a wide range of marketing opportunities as well as increase the value of destinations (Du Rand & Heath, 2006, pp.206-207). Furthermore, local cuisines have a crucial place in destination recognition and branding, as well as in enhancing the destination’s image. In this context, local cuisines can serve as a promotional channel for destinations (Ashok, 2019; Alderighi *et al.*, 2016, pp. 324; Choe & Kim, 2018, pp.1). The tendency of tourists to pay more for local cuisine products is another important element of local cuisine (Ceritoğlu & Kalemci Schneider, 2010, pp.46). Additionally, buying local cuisine products as gifts is another notable factor (Buczowska, 2014). All of the aspects above make it possible to include local cuisines as a significant variable in choosing destinations and creating the destination image.

Destination Selection

Destinations are places that have the potential to attract travelers for tourism purposes (Cohen *et al.*, 2014; Yüksek, 2014, pp.2; Moscardo, 2009). Based on the literature, it is clear that various researchers classify destinations in different ways (macro, micro, near, far, weekend, summer, winter, etc.). (Buhalis, 2000, pp.101; Kotler *et al.*, 2009, pp.648; Güripek, 2013, pp.51). These classifications are mainly based on the “geographical and political location” of the destinations (countries, regions, continents, small settlements or cities, places with ethnic elements, states, or cities) and “attractiveness” (urban, rural, seaside, mountain, authentic third world, unique-exotic destinations). It is crucial to categorize tourist destinations into several sorts to make tourist travel easier. Besides, the physical appearance of the destinations, attraction centers, transportation facilities, accommodation facilities, food and beverage businesses, architectural features, infrastructure and superstructure conditions, location, culture, trends, and service quality affect destination selection (Buhalis, 2000; Grangsjö, 2003; Giritlioğlu &

Avcıkurt, 2010; Çakır & Küçükçambak, 2016; Sanyal & Hisam, 2019). As in the classification of destinations, some researchers consider the selection of destinations from different perspectives. Kotler *et al.* (2009, pp.219) compare the destination selection decision process to any consumer purchasing decision process in marketing science, while Rızaoğlu (2012) finds this view insufficient. According to Rızaoğlu, while more information is needed to purchase touristic products, more labor and time are spent. On the other hand, Mathieson and Wall (1982) examined destination selection in four dimensions; tourist profile, information about travel, destination characteristics, destination distance, and duration of the visit. In addition, researchers examine this process within the framework of tourism supply and demand (Huzeima & Salia, 2020). In line with the opinions of the researchers above, the conceptual framework of the factors affecting destination selection is presented in Figure 1.

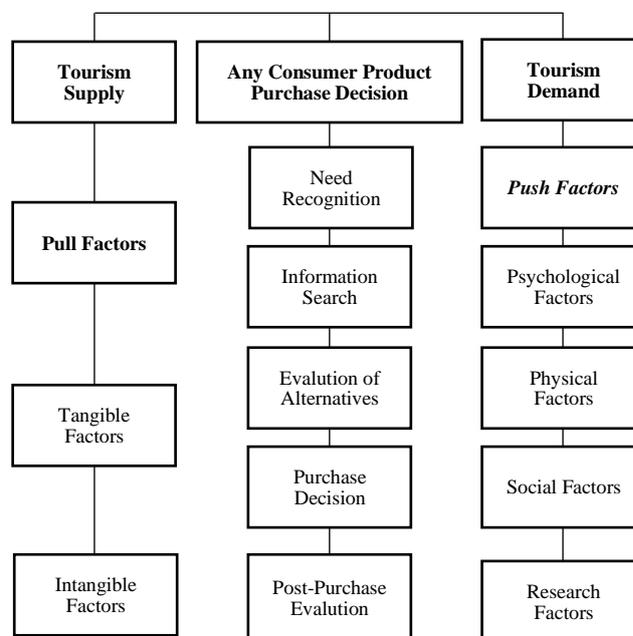


Figure 1. Factors affecting destination selection
Source: Authors

In light of this background information, the choice of destination has a complex structure. Therefore, it is thought to be more beneficial to benefit from the theory of the push-pull factors (Baloğlu & Uysal, 1996, pp.32), which is one of the most accepted theories in examining the travel motivations and behaviors of tourists. In addition to all these, the flexible structure of tourism demand and the inelastic structure of tourism supply may pave the way for the formation of many factors that may affect the selection of a destination.

Destination Image

Before the term “image” was generally accepted in tourism research, it had been investigated for decades in disciplines including social and environmental psychology,

marketing, and consumer behavior (Fridgen, 1987; Assael, 1984; Boulding, 1956). To this end, Hunt (1975), Gunn (1972), and Mayo (1973) introduced the idea of destination image into the field of tourist studies. Since then, it has grown to become one of the most extensively studied domains in the field. Motivation, interest, culture, emotion, personality, and a host of other factors play a fundamental role in how consumers choose where to travel, and they are closely linked to how people perceive a particular destination image (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010, pp.576). Hunt (1975) defines destination image as possible visitors' impressions of a destination in this context.

Gartner (1994, pp.191) discussed the three-dimensional destination image, which are cognitive, affective, and behavioral images. While the cognitive image is formed in light of the beliefs and knowledge that people have developed about the concrete features of the destination, the affective image expresses the abstract feelings felt about the destination. On the other hand, the behavioral (general) image is a more advanced dimension created when cognitive and affective images are combined. "Baloğlu and McCleary (1999) also examined the destination image in three dimensions within the framework of cognitive, affective, and general/behavioral image. Santos *et al.* (2013) define the cognitive image as the knowledge and beliefs people have about destination attractiveness, while Yaraşlı (2007) attributes the affective image as the individual's feelings about the destination as a result of emotional evaluations. In this regard, the general/behavioral image is related to how tourists behave due to the cognitive image formed by the information emitted by a destination and the affective image based on emotions (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2013, pp.790).

Destination image is relativistic and flexible; images vary from person to person, across time, in relation to other destinations, and concerning how close a destination is to a possible traveler (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000; Yaraşlı, 2007, pp.24-27).

Relationships Between Variables

Several researchers have looked into the relationship between local cuisine and destination choice. According to past research, some travelers perceive food as a "pull" factor and a reason to select a particular location (Su *et al.*, 2018). Morris *et al.* (2020) investigated tourists' attitudes towards local food on destination choice, travel motivation, satisfaction, and authenticity. The study concluded a clear and effective relationship between tourists' attitudes towards local food and their travel behaviors. In a similar vein, Şengül and Türkay (2016) discovered a substantial correlation between visitors' visit decisions and local cuisine elements. On the other hand, Stankov *et al.* (2019) found that destination selection is influenced by many factors as the local cuisine (88%), natural and historical resources of the country (76%), and cultural heritage (52%). Polat (2020) reported that the image of local food

has a positive and significant effect on the choice of destination in his study aiming to measure the regional culinary image of Kahramanmaraş province. Besides, food lovers may consider the local cuisine a traditional and genuine aspect of a destination's culture and heritage (Sims, 2009). The H1 hypothesis developed based on these studies is as follows:

H1: Local cuisine elements have a statistically significant positive effect on destination selection.

Local cuisine is an essential aspect of the marketing process of destinations, according to Du Rand and Heath (2006), and this factor has a substantial impact on the destination image. The effect of local foods on destination image and destination loyalty was investigated in a study conducted by Benli and Yenipinar (2018) on domestic tourists visiting Mersin. According to the study findings, local cuisine experiences positively impact destination image and loyalty. Moreover, Zain *et al.* (2018) researched the mediating role of local food consumption in the relationship between food and destination image. They focused on the local cuisine consumed by tourists and tried to figure out what aspects influence the destination image. According to their findings, local food intake acts as a mediating factor in the relationship between local food perception and destination image. The H2 hypothesis developed in light of this information is as follows:

H2: Local cuisine elements have a statistically significant positive effect on the destination image.

According to Nadeau *et al.* (2008), the perception of a destination changes when it has an image, which also impacts the decision-making process while choosing a destination. Rahman *et al.* (2017) found that when the destination loyalty variable has a significant mediating role, destination brand image is significantly related to destination selection. In a research of 460 Russian, British, and Turkish visitors visiting Marmaris, researchers found that the destination image had a significant positive impact on destination selection (Yüksel & Kılıç, 2016). Similarly, Ünal (2020), in his study to determine the factors affecting young people's destination choices, suggested that transportation, nightlife, entertainment, accommodation opportunities, and alternative touristic places positively affect young people's destination choices.

Based on these findings, the H3 hypothesis of the research was developed as follows:

H3: Destination image has a statistically significant positive effect on destination selection.

The H4 hypothesis, which considers the mediating role of destination image in the impact of local cuisine elements on destination selection (Baron & Kenny, 1986), was established using the following circumstances, and the study model is shown in Figure 2.

- Local cuisine elements must have an effect on the destination selection.

- Local cuisine elements must have an effect on the destination image.
- Destination image must have an effect on the destination selection.
- When the destination image is controlled, the effect of the local cuisine elements on the destination selection should be reduced or zeroed.

H4: The effect of local cuisine elements on destination selection is mediated by destination image.

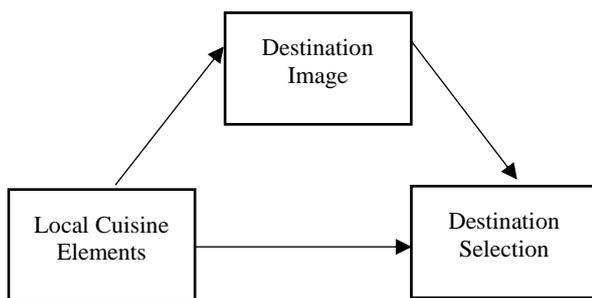


Figure 2. Research model

Source: Authors

3. Methodology

This study aims to research if the destination image influences destination selection by mediating the effect of local cuisine elements. The relational scanning model, one of the general scanning models, was used to construct the study in this context. The study population consists of domestic tourists visiting the Hatay destination of Türkiye between 2017-2021. Hatay was chosen as the research area because it is one of the provinces reviewed under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s Brand City Project in Turkey, and it was designated as a Gastronomy City under the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2017. The research sample consists of domestic tourists reached in numbers representing the population. According to data acquired from the Hatay Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, over 100.000 tourists visited Hatay annually between 2014 and 2019. However, according to the statistics of 2020, this number reduced to 39.976 (Hatay KTB, 2021). This decrease may have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in this case, the number of visitors was over 10.000, making it necessary to use the unlimited population sampling formula to determine the sample size. Considering the ratio maximizing the variance value ($p: 0.50$), 5% significance level, and 5% margin of error, the sample size was found to be 384 people ($n = pqz \cdot 2 \cdot a/e^2 = 1.962 \times 0.5 \times 0,5/0.052 = 3.8416 \times 0.25/0.0025 = 384$) (Ural & Kılıç, 2006, pp.47). Considering that questionnaires may not be used during the analysis phase, a total of 393 sample sizes were reached. Purposive sampling was selected as one of the non-probability sampling techniques in the sampling selection due to the

impossibility of reaching the entire population. In this method, the sample cross-section is determined by the judgments of the researcher (Coşkun *et al.*, 2015, pp.149).

In the research, the scale developed by Şengül and Türkay (2016) was used in the measurement of local cuisine elements, the scale designed by Chi and Qu (2008) and adapted by Benli and Yenipinar (2018) in the measurement of the destination image, the destination selection scale developed by Hsu *et al.* (2009) and translated into Turkish by Ustasüleyman and Çelik (2015) was used in this study. In the questionnaire designed in this context, there are 12 items for local cuisine elements, 26 for destination image, and 21 for destination selection. On a 5-point Likert scale, participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire items.

According to the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Iskenderun Technical University, approval for collecting research data was acquired, dated 26/01/2021, numbered 2187. The data was collected between January and March 2021 through online surveys, as the relevant period coincided with the “lockdowns” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys were shared with local tourists visiting Hatay on various social media platforms that are thought to be members of some groups on these platforms and well-known people in the field of travel, and their participation and support were requested.

Separate missing data analyses were conducted on the scales to identify whether there was missing data in the 393 surveys collected. The missing data was determined to have a random distribution and be in a modest amount as a result of this research (below 5%) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Following this procedure, new values were allocated to the missing data based on the series mean of the remaining data.

Multiple sling analysis was required since the data would be evaluated using multivariate statistical techniques. To that end, multiple sling analysis was performed for all three scales. Çokluk *et al.* (2012, pp.15) expressed that Mahalanobis distance values can be used to eliminate extreme values and provide the assumption of multivariate normality. The t-test approach was used to detect multiple outlier observations. In this approach, Mahalanobis values with a parameter number greater than the t-value at %01 are considered as the deviating unit (Kalaycı, 2010, pp.212). As a result of the analysis in question, 7 observations from the scale of local cuisine elements, 1 observation from the scale of destination image, and 3 observations from the scale of destination selection were removed. Following the multiple sling analysis, a multiple normal distribution analysis was conducted, and the data was confirmed for normal distribution. According to this analysis, the data were found to have normal distributions. Consequently, 382 observations were used to conduct subsequent analyses within the scope of the study.

4. Findings

The demographics of the 393 domestic tourists who participated in the study indicate that women account for 52.7 percent of the total, while males account for 47.3 percent. Singles make up 60.1%, and married 39.9%. The age variable shows that 51.4% of the participants are aged 28-39, while the education variable suggests that 51.7% have undergraduate education. Based on the participants' occupations, it was discovered that 34.9 percent work in the public sector, 27.2 percent in the private sector, and 38.4 percent earn between twice and three times the Turkish minimum salary (2324 TL) in 2020 (CSGB, 2020).

Reliability and Validity Analysis of Local Cuisine Elements, Destination Image Perception, and Destination Selection Scales

The internal consistency method was employed to assess measurement reliability, and exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the validity of the study. Therefore, the results of the exploratory factor analysis and the reliability analysis are merged under this title.

The standardized use of a scale and its capacity to produce accurate information necessitate it to have two important features, which are "reliability" and "validity" (Huck, 2007; Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005). Reliability refers to the degree to which a measurement of a phenomenon yields a stable and consistent result (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). In circumstances when the answers to the scale items are not labeled as "right" or "false," that is, 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient approach is one of the most commonly used methods to measure internal consistency (Whitley, 2002). It is advised that dependability should be at least 0.60 for an exploratory or pilot study (Straub *et al.*, 2004). Excellent reliability (0.70-0.90), high reliability (0.70-0.90), moderate reliability (0.50-0.70), and low reliability (0.50 and below) are the four reliability cut-off values proposed by Hinton *et al.* (2004). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the scales and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained using the split-half technique were utilized to analyze reliability levels for the scales used in this study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.894 for the entire "Local Cuisine Elements" scale (12 items). The scale can be regarded to be highly reliable based on this conclusion. Besides, the scale's reliability was tested using the split-half technique, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.887 for the first half and 0.749 for the second half. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.814 for the complete "Destination Image Perception" scale (26 items). From this point of view, the scale is regarded as highly reliable. The split-half technique was also used, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.802 for the first half of the scale and 0.789 for the second half. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the whole (21 items) of the "Destination Selection" scale, which is the second scale, is 0.839. According to this result, this scale is described as highly reliable. The Cronbach's

alpha coefficient of the first half of the scale was 0.775, and the second half was 0.811, as a result of applying the split-half technique. Moreover, since it was determined that there was no increase in Cronbach's Alpha coefficients in case of deletion of one of the items in the scales, item inference was not made.

The simplest definition of validity is "measuring what is intended to be measured" (Field, 2005). In the social sciences, factor analysis is one of the most extensively used approaches for determining construct validity (Watkins, 2018, pp.219; Henson & Roberts, 2006). According to Brown (2015, pp. 10), "*A factor is an unobservable variable that influences more than one observed measure and that accounts for the correlations among these observed measures. In other words, the observed measures are interrelated because they share a common cause (i.e., they are influenced by the same underlying construct); if the latent construct was partitioned out, the intercorrelations among the observed measures will be zero.*"

To establish how many components of the local cuisine elements, destination image, and destination selection scale items were collected in this study, exploratory factor analysis was used to verify the construct validity. Exploratory factor analysis is based on establishing factors as a result of combining related variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The literature emphasizes that some prerequisites should be met in order to perform exploratory factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Kozak, 2018; Büyüköztürk, 2018).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and the Bartlett sphericity test can be utilized to determine whether factor analysis can be performed on the collected data (Büyüköztürk, 2018, pp.136). The KMO coefficient indicates if the sample size is sufficient for factor analysis, and it ranges from 0 to 1. This value is expected to exceed .50. Value ranges used in the interpretation of the KMO coefficient are expressed as ".50-.70 moderate," ".70-.80 good," ".80-.90 very good," ".90+ excellent" (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is another test used to determine whether the data are suitable for factor analysis. Based on partial correlations, Bartlett's Test evaluates the existence or lack of a relationship between the variables (Büyüköztürk, 2018, pp.136).

In the factor analysis stage, factor extraction processes can be performed with many techniques (Çokluk *et al.*, 2012). Principal component analysis and the Varimax rotation approach were used in this study for factor extraction and factor analysis. If the same item is loaded on multiple factors (convergence) and the communality value is less than .40, the items with these characteristics should be reanalyzed without being included in the scale (Büyüköztürk, 2018; Kozak, 2018). In addition, the condition that a factor consists of at least three items should not be ignored (Kalaycı, 2010). Based on these conditions, factor analysis was performed on items with an eigenvalue

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis of local cuisine elements

	Load	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance	Mean	α
Local Cuisine Elements				3.912	
5. Local cuisine products are an important part of the region’s branding.	.853			4.144	
4. Local cuisine products are among the cultural elements of the region.	.850			4.175	
2. I prefer local food in places I visit.	.822			4.139	
1. Local cuisine products are a tool for getting to know societies and regions.	.818			4.018	
6. I prefer local foods more than other foods.	.814	5.382	59.794	3.890	0,910
7. Before I travel, I do research on the local cuisine products of my preferred holiday destination.	.755			3.783	
11. I buy local products as gifts in places I visit.	.727			3.863	
8. I prefer local products that I have knowledge about.	.689			3.874	
3. Local dishes are effective in my choice of holiday destination.	.590			3.322	
α Coefficient for the Entire Scale: 0.910					
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Sampling Adequacy: %93					
Total Variance Explained: (%): 59.794					
For Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity;					
Chi-Square: 2034.029					
sd: 36					
p<0.0001					

Source: Authors

above 1 and a factor load acceptance level, not below 0.45 (Straub *et al.*, 2004; Büyüköztürk, 2018).

The scale of local culinary elements was factored in the initial step. During the analysis, “9-I prefer local products that I have no knowledge about.” The communality of the item (0.273) was low and did not give a load value in the table. Considering that each factor should consist of at least three items, it was determined that the items “10-I can pay more for products called local food.” and “12-The money I spend on local products represents the largest part of my holiday expenses.” formed a factor together. Hence, excluding the relevant items from the analysis was deemed appropriate. The analysis process was carried out by excluding these three items of the scale. The results of the factor analysis regarding the local cuisine elements are presented in Table 1.

The fact that the explained variance exceeds 50% of the total variance is an important criterion of factor analysis (Yaşlıoğlu, 2017, pp.77). The total explained variance value of the single-factor local cuisine elements scale with 9 items is 59.794 percent, as shown in Table 1. The KMO value used in examining sample adequacy was determined as 93%. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity value is 2034.029, which is a significant value at the 0.0001 level, and the α coefficient for the whole scale is 0.910.

The destination image perception scale was subjected to exploratory factor analysis in the second step. The analysis

was repeated four times. The reasons for repetition are that some of the items overlap and the communality value is below .40. Some of them have a factor structure consisting of two items, take negative values, and do not give a load value in the table. The items that cause this situation in the first stage are the items “1-Safety” and “4-Climate”, which do not give a load value in the table. In the second stage, the item “9-Attractiveness of cultural activities (0.354) took a value below 0.40 of the communality value and did not load any factor in the table. It was also found that the items “10-Night life” and “11-Entertainment variety” created a factor consisting of two items. In the third stage, the items “15-Restaurant variety” and “24-Conformity of food and beverage prices” did not give a load value in the table, and in the fourth stage, the item “16-Diversity of cuisine culture” gave a negative value. As a result, eight items were removed from the scale. Table 2 contains information about the analysis.

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Table 2: Exploratory factor analysis of perceptions of destination images

	Load	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance	Mean	α
Price and Facilities (6 items)				3.465	
18. Variety of accommodation	.749	3.171	17.616	3.463	0.754
25. Availability of accommodation prices	.622			2.995	
20. Ease of transportation within the city	.612			3.312	
12. Benevolence of local people	.612			4.275	
26. Availability of prices from other activities	.575			3.152	
17. Variety of shopping opportunities	.535			3.594	
Natural and Historical Attractions (5 items)				4.170	
5. Natural beauties	.757	2.621	14.562	4.390	0.748
8. The impressiveness of the landscapes	.746			4.042	
7. Water resources (waterfall, stream)	.714			3.623	
13. Distinctive history	.569			4.599	
14. Classical (old) structures-buildings	.488			4.195	
Outdoor Activities (3 items)				1.893	
22. Variety of extreme sports	.899	2.429	13.494	1.686	0.789
21. Variety of water sports	.881			1.479	
23. Variety of recreational activities	.544			2.513	
Environment (4 items)				3.376	
2. Environmental Cleaning	.768	2.062	11.455	3.063	0.653
3. Calmness	.671			3.257	
6. Parks, gardens and green spaces	.575			3.342	
19. Ease of access to the city from outside	.513			3.743	

α Coefficient for the Entire Scale: 0.827

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Sampling Adequacy: %80

Total Variance Explained (%): 57.127

For Bartlett's Test of Sphericity;

Chi-Square: 2484.061

sd: 153

p<0.0001

Source: Authors

which is a significant value at the 0.0001 level, and the α coefficient for the whole scale is 0.910.

The destination image perception scale was subjected to exploratory factor analysis in the second step. The analysis was repeated four times. The reasons for repetition are that some of the items overlap and the communality value is below .40. Some of them have a factor structure consisting of two items, take negative values, and do not give a load value in the table. The items that cause this situation in the first stage are the items "1-Safety" and "4-Climate", which do not give a load value in the table. In the second stage, the item "9-Attractiveness of cultural activities (0.354) took a value below 0.40 of the communality value and did not load any factor in the table. It was also found that the items "10-Night life" and "11-Entertainment variety" created a factor consisting of two items. In the third stage, the items "15-Restaurant variety" and "24-Conformity of food and beverage prices" did not give a load value in the table, and in the fourth stage, the item "16-Diversity of cuisine culture" gave a negative value. As a result, eight

items were removed from the scale. Table 2 contains information about the analysis.

The four factors in the analysis explain 57.127% of the total variance. The KMO sample adequacy was found to be 80%, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was determined as 2484.061, which is significant at the 0.0001 level. The α coefficient for the whole scale was calculated as 0.827. When the factors on which the items are distributed are considered, the items show parallelism with the factors discussed in the literature. In this context, "Price and Facilities," "Natural and Historical Attractions," "Outdoor Activities," and "Environment" factors are thought to be exploratory in expressing the perception of Hatay's destination image.

The destination selection scale was subjected to exploratory factor analysis in the third step. The analysis was repeated twice. The overlapping of the items, the homogeneity value being below .40, and the factor structure consisting of two items caused the repetition of the analysis. In the first stage of the analysis, the

Table 3. Exploratory factor analysis for destination selection

	Load	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance	Mean	α
Tangible and Intangible Factors (9 items)				4.157	
15. Accommodation	.748			4.215	
14. Food quality and variety	.699			4.209	
21. Expectations	.666			4.215	
20. Benefit	.663			4.199	
17. Price	.657	4.224	26.401	4.178	0.848
13. Accessibility	.638			4.120	
18. Shopping opportunity	.613			3.725	
16. Personal security	.606			4.589	
19. Image of the destination	.595			3.969	
Research Factor (4 items)				3.636	
8. Meeting new people	.802			3.592	
11. Adventure quest	.703	2.166	13.536	3.757	0.655
2. Revealing talents	.583			3.233	
10. Cultural research	.551			3.963	
Psychological Factors (3 items)				4.017	
3. Seeking change	.688			4.089	
4. Relaxation	.678	1.878	11.740	4.194	0.669
1. Become distant	.673			3.77	

α Coefficient for the Entire Scale: 0.846
 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Sampling Adequacy: %88
 Total Variance Explained (%): 51.677
 For Bartlett's Test of Sphericity;
 Chi-Square: 1861.926
 sd: 120
 p<0.0001

Source: Authors

homogeneity value of the item “7-Visiting a friend (0.381)” was below .40, and the items of “9-Persuasion ability of tour guides” and “12-Night life and entertainment” overloaded more than one factor. Hence, the relevant items were excluded from the scale. Since the items “5-Medical treatment” and “6-Health and fitness” generated a two-item factor in the second stage, it was decided to delete all five items from the scale. Information on the analysis is given in Table 3.

Three factors in the analysis explain 51.677% of the total variance. As a result of the analysis, the KMO sample adequacy for a total of 16 items was 88%, and Barlett’s test of sphericity value was determined as 1861.926, which is significant at the 0.0001 level. The α coefficient for the entire scale is 0.846. When the factors on which the items are distributed are considered, the items show parallelism with the factors reported in the literature. In this context, the dimensions of “Tangible and Intangible Factors,”

“Research Factor,” and “Psychological Factors” are thought to be exploratory in expressing destination selection.

Correlation Analysis between Variables

The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine and predict the degree of association between the variables. Pearson correlation coefficient denoted by “r” is 1.00, a perfect positive relationship; -1.00, a perfect negative relationship, and a value of 0.00 indicates no relationship. Besides, 0.70-1.00 indicates a high level, 0.70-0.30 a medium level, and a 0.30-0.00 low-level relationship (Büyüköztürk, 2018, pp.32). In this study, the correlation analysis was carried out by considering the local cuisine elements, destination image, and destination selection scores. The values for the relevant analysis are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation values between variables

	Local Cuisine Elements	Destination Image	Destination Selection	Mean	Standard Deviation
Local Cuisine Elements	1.000			3.9122	.67388
Destination Image	.138**	1.000		3.6401	.70944
Destination Selection	.315**	.136**	1.000	4.0015	.39198

Source: Authors

Table 5. The effect of local cuisine elements on destination selection

Model 1	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
	B	Standard Error	Beta				
Constant*	3.284	.112		29.216	.000		
Local Cuisine Elements	.183	.028	.315	6.474	.000	1.000	1.000

*Destination Selection- (Dependent Variable) Constant; R: .315; R²: .099; Adjusted R²: .097; For Model F: 41.910; p: .000; DW: 1.805

Source: Authors

Table 4 shows that the level of correlation between variables ranges from .136 to .315. Considering the relationships between local cuisine elements, destination image, and destination selection, it was determined that there were positive relations between the bilateral relations of these three variables and for all coefficients $p < 0.01$. Additionally, the highest correlation is realized between the local cuisine elements and the destination selection ($r = .315$; $p < .01$) at a moderately positive level. The second highest correlation is between the destination image and the local cuisine elements ($r = .138$; $p < .01$) at a positive low level. When compared among themselves, it is inferred that the lowest relationship between the variables is between destination image and destination selection ($r = .136$; $p < .01$). Table 4 shows that these two variables have a positive and weak association.

Regression Analyzes between Variables

Regression analysis is a group of statistical methods that can be used to infer relationships between variables that are related to one another (Golberg & Cho, 2010, pp.1). The correlation between the independent and dependent variables is expressed with “R” in regression analysis. The symbol expressing the regression model’s true exploratory power is “Adjusted R²”. The adjusted R² tends to be smaller than the R² value (Coşkun *et al.*, 2015, pp.245).

The significance of the regression model is assessed with ANOVA. The “F” value’s magnitude indicates the model’s significance. On the other hand, the significance value indicates the probability that it may have arisen by chance or by mistake when the calculated F value is zero (Golberg & Cho, 2010).

Durbin-Watson (DW) Coefficient was used to test whether there is autocorrelation in the regression. The DW coefficient is expected to be valued between 1.5 and 2.5 (Maxwell & David, 1995; White, 1992). It is possible to encounter the multicollinearity problem in regression analysis. The multicollinearity problem is that there is a high level of correlation between the independent variables (Büyüköztürk, 2018, pp.100). VIF is a statistical approach that tests whether such a problem exists. A VIF=1 means that there is no multicollinearity problem, while a value between $1 < VIF \leq 5$ indicates a moderate multicollinearity problem (Hair *et al.*, 2016). Another value considered in

this regard is the tolerance value. The tolerance value is expected to be $> .10$ (Alpar, 2017; Daoud, 2017).

The Effects of Local Cuisine Elements on Destination Selection

Regression analysis was carried out to determine the effects of local cuisine elements on destination selection. The findings of the regression analysis regarding the related variables are presented in Table 5.

In Table 5, univariate regression analysis was used to statistically express to what extent the independent variable of local cuisine affects the dependent variable of destination selection. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) test is performed to get an idea about the significance of the regression model. According to the ANOVA test results, the significance level of the F value gives an idea about whether the model is appropriate. The fact that the value of F (41.910; $p = .000$) is significant (less than 0.05 at the 5% level) suggests that the model contributes significantly to explaining the dependent variable of destination selection. The fact that the R value is .315 indicates that there is a positive and moderate relationship between destination selection and local cuisine elements. The R² value indicates what percentage of the variance (change) of the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable. The R² value in Model 1 was calculated as .099. This means that local cuisine elements explain 9.9% of the variation in destination selection. In other words, knowing the local cuisine elements in estimating the destination selection allows estimation with an accuracy of 9.9%. DW coefficient (1.805) between 1.5 and 2.5 means no autocorrelation between the relevant variables. Since the tolerance and VIF values are 1, there is no multicollinearity problem.

Based on this information, the first hypothesis of the study, “H1: Local cuisine elements have a statistically significant effect on destination selection,” is supported.

The Effect of Local Cuisine Elements on the Destination Image

Regression analysis was carried out to determine the effects of local cuisine elements on the perception of the

Table 6. The effect of local cuisine elements on the destination image

Model 2	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
	B	Standard Error	Beta				
Constant*	3.070	.212		14.460	.000		
Local Cuisine Elements	.146	0.53	.138	2.724	.007	1.000	1.000

* Destination Image -(Dependent Variable) Constant;
R: .138; R²: .019; Adjusted R²: .017; For Model F: 7.420; p: .007; DW: 1.753

Source: Authors

destination image. The regression analysis findings regarding the related variables are presented in Table 6.

The fact that the value of F (7.420; p=.007) is significant (less than 0.05 at the 5% level) concludes that the model contributes significantly to explaining the dependent variable, the perception of the destination image. The fact that the R value is .138 indicates a positive and low-level relationship between the destination image and local cuisine elements. The R2 value in Model 2 was calculated as .019, which means that local cuisine elements can explain 1.9% of the change in the destination image. In other words, knowing the local cuisine elements in estimating the destination image allows estimation with an accuracy of 1.9%. DW coefficient (1.753), valued between 1.5 and 2.5, means no autocorrelation between these variables. Since the tolerance value is 1 and the VIF value is 1, there is no multicollinearity problem. This result supports that local cuisine elements affect the destination image.

In light of this information, the second hypothesis of the study, “H2: Local cuisine elements have a statistically significant effect on the destination image,” is supported.

The Effect of Destination Image Perception on Destination Selection

Regression analysis was carried out to determine the effects of destination image perception on destination selection. The findings of the regression analysis regarding the related variables are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. The effect of destination image on destination selection

Model 3	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
	B	Standard Error	Beta				
Constant*	3.728	0.104		35.799	0.000		
Destination Image	0.175	0.28	.136	2.678	0.008	1.000	1.000

*Destination Selection-(Dependent Variable) Constant;
R: .136; R²: .019; Adjusted R²: .016; For Model F: 7.172; p: .008; DW: 1.779

Source: Authors

The fact that the value of F (7.172; p=.008) is significant (less than 0.05 at the 5% level) suggests that the model contributes significantly to explaining the dependent variable of destination selection. The R value of .136 indicates a positive and low-level relationship between destination image perception and destination selection. The R2 value in Model 3 was calculated as .019. This means that destination image perception can explain 1.9% of the variation in destination selection. In other words, knowing the destination image perception in estimating the destination selection allows estimation with an accuracy of 1.9%. DW coefficient (1.779) between 1.5 and 2.5 means no autocorrelation between the variables in question. Since the tolerance value is 1 and the VIF value is 1, there is no multicollinearity problem. This result supports the effect of destination image perception on destination selection.

With regard to this information, the third hypothesis of the study, “H3: Destination image has a statistically significant effect on destination selection,” is supported.

The Mediating Effect of Destination Image in the Effect of Local Cuisine Elements on Destination Selection

The causality mechanism underlying the relationship between two other variables is explained and determined by a mediating variable. The mediating variable effect is referred to as the mediated or indirect effect when it is quantified. As it depicts an influence of X on Y that is transmitted indirectly through the mediating variable, it is known as the “indirect effect.” A direct effect of X on Y still persists even after accounting for the mediator;

Table 8. The mediation effect of destination image

Model 4	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	ANOVA		R ²	Adjusted R ²	Tolerance	VIF	DW
	Beta	SD.	Beta			F	Sig.					
	Constant*	3.124	.139				22.402					
Destination Image	.152	.027	.094	1.925	0.000	22.957	0.000	.108	.103	.981	1.000	1.832
Local Cuisine Elements	.176	.028	.302	6.168	0.002					.981	1.000	

*Destination Selection-(Dependent variable) Constant;

Source: Authors

therefore, if some but not all of the effect of X on Y is communicated through M, the effect is only partially mediated (MacKinnon, 2001 pp.9503-9504). If the mediation effect is detected, whether this effect is significant or not is determined by using the Sobel test. The fact that the z value of the Sobel test is more than ±1.96 indicates that the mediation effect is strong enough to be statistically significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Özoğul, 2017). Table 8 shows the regression analysis results regarding the mediating effect of the destination image on the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection.

In determining the mediation effect in the research, multivariate regression analysis was performed, and it was determined that the conditions stated by Baron and Kenny (1986) were met. According to these conditions, the effect of local cuisine elements (independent variable) on destination selection (dependent variable) in the first step (F=41.910; p=.000) was found to be statistically significant. In the second step, the effect (F=7.420; p=.007) of the local cuisine elements (independent variable) on the destination image perception (intermediate variable) was also found to be statistically significant. In the third step, the effect of destination image perception (mediating variable) on destination selection (dependent variable) (F=7.172; p=.008) was found to be statistically significant. In the fourth step, the mediation effect (F=22.957; p=.000) of the perception of destination image included in the model (mediating variable) in the effect of local cuisine elements (independent variable) on destination selection (dependent variable) was found to be statistically significant.

While the analysis is carried out between local cuisine elements and destination selection, destination image perception is included in the model, and the interpretation of the mediation effect according to the non-standardized coefficients (β) for the variables is given below.

Since the tolerance value was >.10 (.981) and the VIF value was 1, there was no multicollinearity problem between the variables in the model. Based on this data, tolerance and VIF values support the partial mediation effect of the perception of destination image in the destination selection of local cuisine elements.

When the destination image perception variable is included in the model in Table 8, it is seen that the non-standardized coefficient (β) value of the local cuisine variable decreases from .183 to .176. Besides, the significance of the effect of local cuisine elements on the selection of destination (p=0.002) does not disappear. Therefore, the perception of destination image partially mediates the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. The Sobel test was used to determine whether the mediating effect was significant (Soper, 2021). The significance of the Sobel test carried out means that there is a partial mediation effect in the relationship between destination image, local cuisine elements, and destination selection (z=2.47 p <.05).

The fourth hypothesis of the study, “H4: Destination image has a mediating role in the effect of local cuisine elements on destination selection,” is supported in light of this finding.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The utility of destination selection is considered an important platform that both practitioners and academicians have highlighted. Recently, it has been determined that researchers work on destination selection by focusing on issues such as technology (Ghaderi *et al.*, 2018; Ghosh & Mukherjee, 2022; Salanzadeh *et al.*, 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022), congress tourism (Jo *et al.*, 2019) medical tourism (Zolfagharian *et al.*, 2018; Mantas, 2020) and climate change (Ngxongo, 2021). In line with these studies, previous research on destination selection found many strategic suggestions and findings. However, limited consideration was given to how destination image mediates the link between local cuisine elements and destination selection.

The impacts of local cuisine elements and destination image on destination selection were investigated in this study. Although previous studies, including Morris *et al.* (2020), Stankov *et al.* (2019), and Şengül & Türkay (2016), examined the relationship between local cuisine and destination selection, the destination image is not included as a mediator.

The study contributes to the consumer behavior literature by clarifying the mediating role of destination image in the

relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. Although there are results in the past literature that local cuisine elements affect destination selection (Polat, 2020; Demir, 2011), it provides scant confirmation about how destination image affects destination selection. Furthermore, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2013) determined that destination choices are affected by gastronomy and local cuisine elements. On the other hand, Zağralı and Akbaba (2015) concluded that local foods do not have a decisive role in the destination selection of tourists visiting these places in their study specific to local and foreign tourists in the districts that attract the most tourists (Urla, Karaburun, Çeşme, Seferihisar districts of Türkiye). This difference can be attributed to the regional cuisine diversity and destination-specific attractions that have different characteristics depending on the cultural characteristics of the regions.

Benli and Yenipınar (2018) concluded that the local food experience positively affects the destination image. Also, Zain *et al.* (2018) examined the local food consumption effect on destination image. They obtained a positive relationship between local food and destination image. A similar study was conducted by Fernández *et al.* (2017) to determine the effect of tourists' food experiences on the destination image. According to study results, food-related experiences have a positive effect on the image of the destination. To this end, the findings of this study support previous studies.

Özersin (2019) examined the destination selection of tourists and the perception of the destination image of the district in his study of foreign tourists visiting the Çeşme district of İzmir. The study concluded that tourists' positive destination image perceptions positively affect destination selection. Another researcher focused on Baku of Azerbaijan within the scope of destination marketing and evaluated the effect of destination image on destination selection (Ilyasov, 2015) and concluded that the image of the destination influences a tourist's choice of destination. The findings of this study support the studies by Özersin (2019) and Ilyasov (2015). Moreover, this paper contributes to the existing theories in the context of tourism, marketing as well as gastronomy literature. The conceptual framework furthers the existing theory by depicting the relationships among local cuisine, destination image, and destination selection.

Recommendations for Tourism Industry Practitioners

The effects of local cuisine elements on destination selection were discovered within the scope of this study. Based on the results, promoting Hatay within the context of local cuisine elements can help the city distinguish itself from other Turkish tourist sites and gain a competitive edge. Another key finding of the study is that characteristics of local cuisine have an impact on the destination's image. Hatay's destination image can be strengthened by focusing marketing efforts on local food

products. Understanding the impact of destination image perception on destination selection could help Hatay become more appealing to potential tourists by improving the destination image. Given all of this information, it is believed that undertaking market strategies concentrating on both local cuisine aspects and Hatay's destination image could boost the destination's selectability, increase tourism revenue, and contribute to the local people's welfare.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

The data collection process in this research coincided with the COVID-19 epidemic in 2021; therefore, it was collected via the online questionnaire technique, one of the study's weaknesses. It is suggested that the data to be collected for future studies should be obtained using techniques such as face-to-face interview during the holidays. Besides, another limitation is that this study was carried out only for domestic tourists. This research can be applied to foreign tourists by using similar variables in the future. Because of the application, a comprehensive touristic picture of Hatay can be drawn from the perspectives of both local and foreign tourists within the context of the necessary variables, while differences between domestic and foreign tourists can also be highlighted. Another suggestion is conducting a similar study in UNESCO gastronomy cities outside Türkiye. Such a study could allow various comparisons to be made.

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INFO PAGE

The mediation effect of destination image on the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection: The case of Hatay

Abstract

This study aims to empirically test a model linking destination image, destination selection, and local cuisine elements. The study also analyzes the mediating effect of destination image on the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. The research data were collected from domestic tourists using a survey from the UNESCO Gastronomy City of Hatay of Türkiye. All four hypotheses suggested within the scope of the study were supported. Local cuisine elements and destination image significantly influence destination selection; herein, local cuisine elements affect destination selection more. Similarly, local cuisine elements significantly influence destination image. This study also reveals that destination image partially mediates the relationship between local cuisine elements and destination selection. The study results are expected to help the researchers and managers understand the roles of local cuisine elements and destination image in destination selection in the tourism industry. The study is the first to explore the mediating relationship in link between local cuisine and destination selection in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Local cuisine, Destination image, Destination selection, Hatay

Authors

Full Name	Author contribution roles	Contribution rate
Damla Duman:	Conceptualism, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization	70%
Çağrı Saçlı:	Conceptualism, Methodology, Supervision	30%

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