Destination Image and Relationship: The Moderating Role of Local Cuisine Experience

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Abstract

Destination branding has increased its importance in recent years due to intense competition in international tourism. As such, understanding of which attributes contribute to destination branding is especially important to identify and differentiate the destination. As a result, the purpose of this study is to explore the moderating role of local cuisine on the relation between destination image and relationship. In doing so, this study employed an empirical causal research design using structural equation modeling along with multi-group analysis. Data were collected from foreign travelers visiting İstanbul. Even the results did not confirm the moderating role of local cuisine experience, the study evidenced the direct and indirect effects of local food on image, satisfaction and trust. That is, from the point of destination branding, the current research validates the argument that local cuisine can be positioned as a separate peak experience rather than being a component of overall travel experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of international tourism has been increasing steadily. According to World Tourism Organization (2012), the number of international arrivals is expected to reach 1.8 billion by 2030 with a growth rate of 4.4% per year for emerging destinations and 2.2% per year for advanced ones. Based on these expectations, tourism industry has started to force destinations to adopt more effective marketing strategies. Of those strategies, destination branding is identified as the most crucial mean to position a destination in the minds of the travelers (Fyall and Leask, 2006). More specifically, to achieve a competitive advantage, destinations need to create a unique perceived image relative to competing markets (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001).

The image of a destination can be defined as "perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory" (Cai, 2002, p. 723). From the definition, it obvious that destination image is a complex concept including several attributes to project an impression of a place (Kim, 2014). Therefore, identifying a destination's distinctive attributes is considered to be the first step to develop a unique image of that particular place (Qu, Kim, and Im, 2011).

Based on the knowledge that destination product offerings include a variety of tangible and intangible attributes, local food can be identified as one of the distinctive factors contributing to destination experience (Chang, Kivela, and Mak, 2011; Horng and Tsai, 2010; Kim, Suh, and Eves, 2010; Quan and Wang, 2004). That is, local cuisine experience both positively influences the satisfaction with the destination (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Nield, Kozak, and LeGrys, 2000; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2001) and adds value to the image of the destination in the minds of the travelers (Boniface, 2003; Boyne, Hall, and Williams, 2003). Moreover, as suggested by Okumus, Okumus, and McKercher, (2007), incorporating local cuisine into marketing of destinations increase the value added to the image of a destination and Turkey still do not use its full potential of its food as a marketing tool.

As a result, built upon the conceptual model of Chen and Phou (2013) for destination relationship, this study assumes that as a peak travel experience, local food needs to be integrated into the research to analyze its effects on tourists' perceptions and behaviors (Quan and Wang, 2004). Hence, the purpose of this study is to understand the moderating role of local cuisine experience on the link between destination image and destination relationship of foreign travelers in terms of their trust and satisfaction with Turkey as well as attachment to Turkey.

As such, the specific objectives of the research are;

- To investigate the effect of destination image on destination satisfaction and trust.
- To explore the impact of destination satisfaction and trust on destination attachment.
- To analyze the moderating role of local cuisine experience on the relation between destination image on destination relation.

To the best of the knowledge, no previous study has addressed the moderating effect of local cuisine on the relation between destination image and relationship. Thus the main contribution of the current research is to provide valuable understanding of how local food could contribute to the destination image as well as its effect on developing destination relationship. Other than that, the proposed model helps to explore the impact of cognitive image on different components of destination relationship, namely the satisfaction and trust. Therefore, this study has valuable

implications for theory and practice. That is, this research provides insights about the role of local food in destination marketing literature as well as the managerial practices that can be undertaken based on study results.

Review of Literature

Destination Image and Destination Relationship

Destination image is a multi-dimensional concept that has been defined differently by various researchers. While Gartner (1994) argues that destination image is composed of cognitive, affective, and conative images; recent studies have defined the concept as having two dimensions, namely the cognitive and affective images (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Uysal, Chen, and Williams, 2000; Zhang, Fu, Cai, and Lu, 2014). That is, people mostly form the image of a place based on the cognitive and affective attributes of that destination. While cognitive evaluation involves the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about tangible attributes (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, and Hou, 2007; Qu et al., 2011), affective evaluation includes feelings and emotions that tourists holds about those attributes (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Martin & Bosque, 2008). Even some of the literature suggested that cognitive and affective images are correlated with each other hierarchically (Cai, 2002; Gartner, 1994), each could have a unique contribution to the total image (Qu et al., 2011). According to Keller (1998), tangible attributes are considered descriptive qualities that identify a brand. In other words, they reflect the consumers' beliefs about the product or service. As such, this study adopts the cognitive destination image for two reasons. First, the concept is observable, descriptive and measurable (Qu et al., 2011). Second, as suggested by Keller (1998), cognitive image is found to characterize a destination (Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997).

Regarding the effect of destination image on destination relationship, previous literature argues that the former positively influences the latter (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Chen and Phou, 2013; Martin and Bosque, 2008). Specifically, based on the relationship theory, Chen and Phou (2013) have developed the tourist-destination relationship, which proposes that a person's beliefs and knowledge determine his or her affective responses.

The concept is evolved from the idea that as consumers form relationships with products and services, travelers can also build relationships with destinations based on their specific features (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). In marketing, even the relationship quality is conceptualized as a higher order construct, which consists of satisfaction and trust (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Kim and Cha, 2002), recent research has started to measure the concept with three dimensions including the attachment as well (Chen and Phou, 2013; Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Geus, 2006). Likewise the recent research, this study has adopted the multidimensional view of brand relationship consisting of satisfaction, trust, and attachment.

Defined as the post-purchase evaluation of a purchase encounter (Oliver, 1980), satisfaction is usually explained by expectation-disconfirmation theory of Lewin (1938). That is, consumers' satisfaction stems from the comparison of actual performance with expectations. While the outcome of the purchase exceeds the consumers' expectations, consumers are believed to be satisfied. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that tourist satisfaction would be a function of the pre-travel expectations and post-travel experience (Chen and Chen, 2010). As such, destination satisfaction is defined as "the tourists' emotional reaction to the extent to which a specific destination is able to meet their travel needs and expectations (Chen and Phou, 2013, p. 271).

In the context of tourism, the literature has well documented the role of destination image on tourist satisfaction (Bigne, Sanchez, and Sanchez, 2001; Chen and Phou, 2013; Chi and Qu, 2008; Wang and Hsu, 2010). For example,

Lee, Lee, and Lee (2005) argue that tourists having a favorable image of the destination are more likely to develop positive perceptions regarding their experiences, which, in turn results in satisfaction. Similarly, Wang and Hsu (2010) has found that destination image has a significant impact on satisfaction. The common point of the most of these studies is the measurement of destination satisfaction by the summation of tourists' evaluation of destination attributes (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000). In other terms, it is the evaluation of destination performance based on tangible features. Thus, this study suggests cognitive image is to be more relevant to assess tourist satisfaction with a destination and proposes the following;

H1. Cognitive destination image has a direct and positive effect on destination satisfaction.

While satisfaction is the evaluation of the performance with the prior expectations, trust is about to have a confidence in an exchange partner (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman, 1993). In other words, it is the belief that the exchange partner has the necessary competence to fulfill its obligations in a relation (Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000). As suggested by Blau (1964), social exchange depends on the willingness to exert trust in other party's reliability and integrity. Thus, trust has been proposed to be one of the crucial components of relationship building (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Accordingly, destination trust is defined as "the tourist's willingness to rely on the ability of the tourism destination to perform its stated functions" (Chen and Phou, 2013, p. 271).

For the effect of image on destination trust, previous research has acknowledged the positive impact of image. Since tourists assess whether a destination would meet their expectations based on the knowledge and beliefs about the place, cognitive assessments are believed to affect the trust in a destination. Specifically, Hsu and Liping (2009) found that the positive image of a destination increases travelers' trust. Similarly, other studies have identified destination image as a significant predictor of trust for a destination (Loureiro and González, 2008; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol, 2002). That is, a positive destination image is believed to reduce the risk and uncertainty involved in decision making, thereby leading to a higher level of trust. As such, this study posits the following hypothesis;

H2. Cognitive destination image has a direct and positive effect on destination trust.

Similar to the image, tourists may develop trust for a destination as a result of their satisfaction with the place. In other words, previous studies have argued that individuals trust a brand if they are satisfied with the product or service (Lee and Back, 2008). As mentioned above, cognitive image has significant impact on affective responses of travellers. Specifically, destination image positively influences satisfaction of visitors (Chi and Qu, 2008). Further, as travellers have a more positive image of the destination, they are more likely to trust in destination brand about meeting their expectations (Hsu and Liping, 2009). That is, as destinations meet or exceed the expectations of tourists, the willingness of visitors to rely on destination brand might increase. As a result, the current research postulates the following relationship;

H3. Destination satisfaction has a direct and positive effect on destination trust.

As indicated before, tourist-destination relationship is offered to have three relevant dimensions, which are satisfaction, trust, and attachment. Even the satisfaction and trust is considerably important in relationship marketing, the ultimate goal of all marketing activities is to develop a strong link between the consumers and the brand (Hiscock, 2001). Most commonly named as brand attachment, the bond between the consumer and the brand is considered to be long lasting commitment (Esch et al., 2006). Similar to brand attachment, consumers may develop attachment to a place or a destination. Evolved from the concept of place attachment, which is defined as "an affective bond to a

particular geographical area and the meaning attributed to that bond" (Hosany, Prayag, Van Der Veen, Huang, and Deesilatham, 2017, p. 1081), destination attachment has increased its importance to understand relationship with destinations.

Chen and Phou (2013, p. 271) has defined destination attachment as "an affective bond, the emotional linkage of an individual tourist to a particular destination. Regarding the development of attachment to a destination, Changuklee, and Allen (1999) mention that individuals usually develop attachment to a place after their visits to that particular destination. That is, the process usually works through satisfaction and trust arising from the actual experience with the place. For instance, Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) has identified satisfaction is a significant predictor of emotional attachment. Similarly, Esch et al. (2006) and Hou, Lin, and Morais (2005) have evidenced the positive effect of satisfaction on place relationship. However, not only the satisfaction but also the trust explains the attachment in relationship marketing. As evidenced by recent research, trust evokes the feelings of confidence in a destination, which, in turn enhances the emotional attachment to that particular place (Chen and Phou, 2013; Esch et al. 2006). Thus, based upon these arguments, the following two hypotheses are proposed;

H4. Destination satisfaction has a direct and positive effect on destination brand attachment.

H5. Destination trust has a direct and positive effect on destination brand attachment.

The Moderating Role of Local Cuisine Experience

Destination branding is about creating a unique destination identity, which results in differentiating a destination from competing markets (Morrison and Anderson, 2002). Thus, two main purposes of destination branding are identification and differentiation. From the perspective of branding, identification is developed through expressing the desirable characteristics of a product to consumers. However, when applied to the destinations, it is the explication of tangible and intangible attributes specific to the place. In fact, the ultimate goal of creating a destination identity is to create an image in the minds of the visitors. In other terms, as suggested by Buhalis (2000), destinations need to understand their distinguished characteristics to create a point of differentiation for themselves. That is, destinations would better explore their unique tangible and intangible attributes.

Of those attributes, local food experience has been identified as one the potential points of differentiation (Boyne et al., 2003). Moreover, Quan and Wang (2004) took the role of local food one step further and argued that local cuisine experience is a peak rather than a supporting experience for destinations. Regarding to the conceptualization of the concept, most of the previous research have focused on the tourists' experience in food and beverage establishments to determine how they rate their local cuisine experience (Antun, Frash, Costen, and Runyan, 2010; Chang et al., 2011; Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Yüksel and Yüksel, 2001).

With reference to the factors in restaurant experience, food quality has been labeled as the most important attribute (Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Even applied to the context of tourism, food quality is offered to be one of the most important factors for both local cuisine and destination experience (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Yuksel, 2001). Other than the food itself, service quality also appears to be an important concern affecting dining experience. For local cuisine experience, service quality is about reflecting the cultural aspects by employees during the service delivery (Chang et al., 2011). In addition to food and service quality, the third attribute shaping the dining experience is the physical environment, or most commonly the atmosphere (Sulek and Hensley, 2004; Wall and Berry, 2007). Atmosphere is found to be especially important because it shapes the impression of the visitors when they first enter

the restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2010). Regarding its conceptualization for local cuisine experience, it is about how well the design, decoration, and ambiance reflect the local culture.

Even the recent research mostly evolved around these three dimensions mentioned in the preceding discussions, Antun et al. (2010) have argued that dining experience is a broader concept including social factors. That is, both the service employees as well as the other customers sharing the restaurant environment are offered to be a part of the food experience. Hence, in line with this argument, this research has also included social factors and conceptualized local cuisine experience as food quality, service quality, atmosphere, and social factors.

For the role of food in destination branding, Boyne et al. (2003) suggested local cuisine as an important attribute. Similarly, Hu and Ritchie (1993) argued food being one of the most important factors to determine the attractiveness of a destination. That is, local cuisine helps tourists to perceive the destination as attractive and to feel satisfaction with their travel. Moreover, specifically for Turkey, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) found that local food is one of the factors, which visitors give high importance in evaluating the country. Likewise, for Turkey, Yuksel (2001) identified the local food as the fourth important attribute affecting the visitors' satisfaction and return intention. This is because the point of difference leads to consumers' positive evaluation of the brand as well as attachment to the brand (Keller, 2008). That is, as tourists appreciate the local food, they are more likely to develop emotional identification and connection with a destination (Silkes, Cai, and Lehto, 2013).

As such, this study argues that as one of the most important attributes of a destination, local cuisine experience might have a moderating role for the effect of destination image on destination brand relationship. That is, as a part of tourist experience, local cuisine might serve as a brand association attribute to differentiate and identify a destination (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006). Hence, this study proposes the following hypotheses;

H6. Local cuisine experience positively moderates the relationship between destination cognitive image and destination satisfaction.

H7. Local cuisine experience positively moderates the relationship between destination cognitive image and destination trust.

As a result, based on the preceding discussions of the link between destination image and relationship, this study has developed the following conceptual model (see Figure 1) to understand the moderating role of local cuisine experience.

Figure 1. Conceptual Research Model
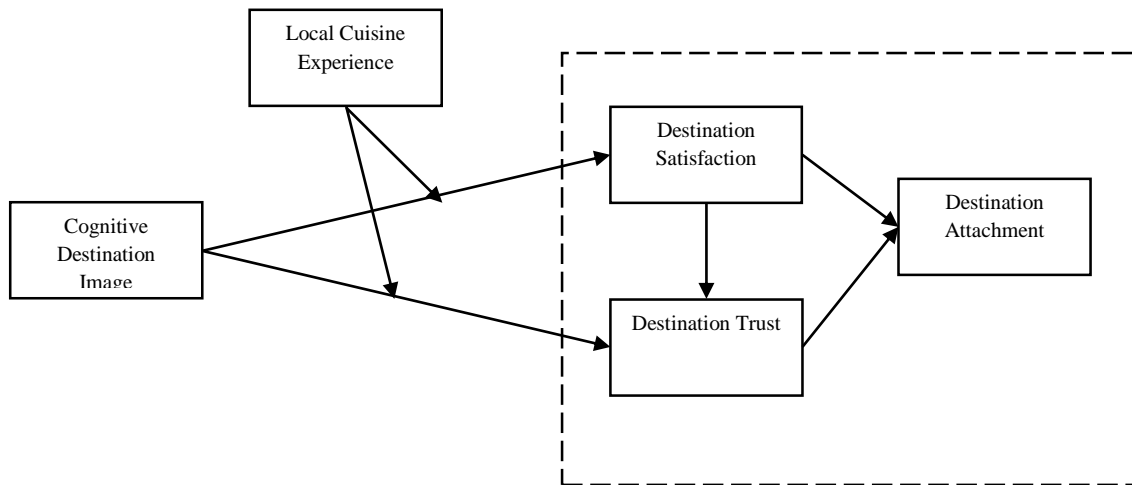
Methods

A quantitative empirical causal research design was employed to test the hypotheses and suggested conceptual model. To collect data, a structured questionnaire was administered to foreign travelers visiting İstanbul. The sample is selected via convenience sampling. Participants were asked to assess their brand related attitudes and behaviors on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The measures of cognitive image (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001), local cuisine experience (Wijaya, 2014), destination satisfaction, trust, and attachment (Chen & Phou, 2013) are adopted from previous studies.

The data were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and AMOS. In the first phase, descriptive analysis was conducted for frequency distribution of demographic factors. In the second phase, the hypothesized relationships was analyzed by structural equation modeling (SEM). Lastly, the moderating effect of local cuisine experience on the relationship between brand image and destination relationship has been tested using the procedure suggested by Hayes (2009) through multi-group analysis by AMOS.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

For the 248 participants, males accounted for 56.9% and females accounted for 43.1% of the sample. Regarding their ages, most of the respondents were either between 36 and 45 or above 46 representing 74.2% of the sample. While the remaining 8.5% of the participants were between 18 and 25, 17.3% of them were between 26 and 35 for their age groups. Lastly, 29% of the participants were single and 71% of the participants were married (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variable			N	%	
Gender	Female		107		43.1
	Male		141		56.9
	Total		248		100.00
Age	18-25		21		8.5
	26-35		43		17.3
	36-45		106		42.7
	46 or above		78	31.5	
	Total		248		100.00

Marital Status	Single	72	29.0
	Married	176	71.0
	Total	259	100.00

Measurement and Structural Model

First, the study conducted confirmatory factor analysis to assess the measurement quality of the scales. The goodness of fit indices indicated a good fit for the data based on the recommended cut off values (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The model fit statistics for the model were comparative fit index (CFI) = .917; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .908; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .060; and root mean square residual (RMR) = .064.

After testing the measurement model via CFA analysis, structural paths were tested by the structural model in order to test the proposed hypothesized relationships between constructs (see Table 2). As suggested by H1 and H2, the results supported the positive effect of destination image on satisfaction and trust (H1, $\gamma 11 = .770$, t = 7.460, p < .01; H2, $\gamma 21 = .603$, t = 3.705, p < .01). However, this study did not find a significant relation between destination satisfaction and trust failing to support H3. Lastly, while the hypothesized positive effect of satisfaction on destination attachment is validated by the findings (H4, $\beta 21 = .547$, t = 4.521, p < .01), the effect of trust on attachment was insignificant resulting in rejection of H5.

Moderating Effects of Local Cuisine Experience

The moderating effect of local cuisine experience on the relationship between cognitive destination image and destination satisfaction as well as trust was tested using the procedure suggested by Hayes (2009). However, the result could not provide significant support for the moderating effect of local food either for the relation between image and satisfaction ($\beta = .110$, $p \geq .05$) or image and trust ($\beta = .057$, $p \geq .05$). Accordingly, simple slope analysis were performed to assess any significant interaction (see Figure 2 and 3). As seen from the figures, the interaction effects were not supported by the analysis.

Figure 2. Moderating effect of cuisine experience on the link between destination image and destination satisfaction.

Table 2. Results of path analysis

Path to	Path from	H₀	Std. Coeff.	t-value
Direct Effects				
Destination Satisfaction	Cognitive Destination Image	**H1: Supported**	.770	7.460**
Destination Trust		**H2:Supported**	.603	3.705**
Destination Trust	Destination Satisfaction	H3: Not Supported	.174	1.008
Destination Attachment		**H4:Supported**	.547	4.521**
Destination Attachment	Destination Trust	**H5: Not Supported**	.041	.748

Note. p*<.05, p**<.01

Table 3. Results of Direct and Indirect Effects

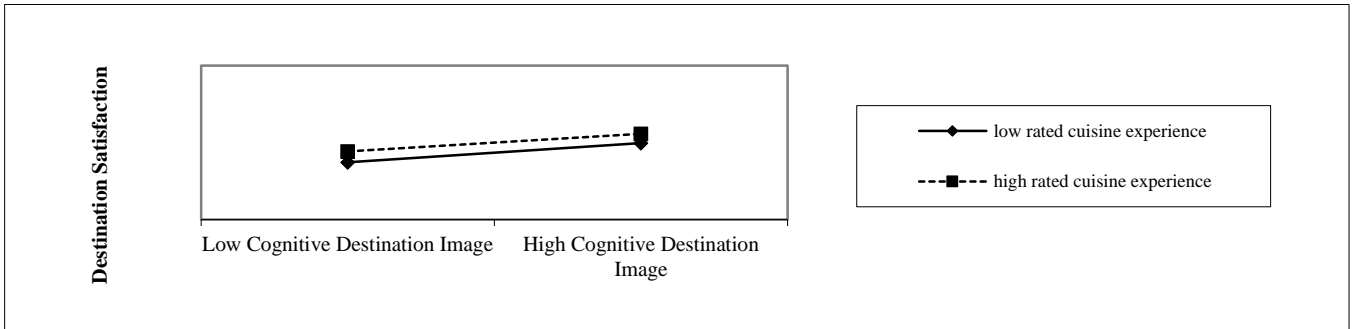| Path to	Path from	H₀	Std. Coeff.	t-value
Direct Effects				
Cognitive Destination Image	Local Cuisine Experience	**Supported**	.742	5.410**
Destination Satisfaction		Not Supported	.203	1.564
Destination Trust		**Supported**	.371	2.811**
Indirect Effects				
Destination Satisfaction	Local Cuisine Experience	**Supported**	.348	3.491**
Destination Trust		**Supported**		

Note. p*<.05, p**<.01

Figure 3. Moderating effect of cuisine experience on the link between destination image and destination trust.
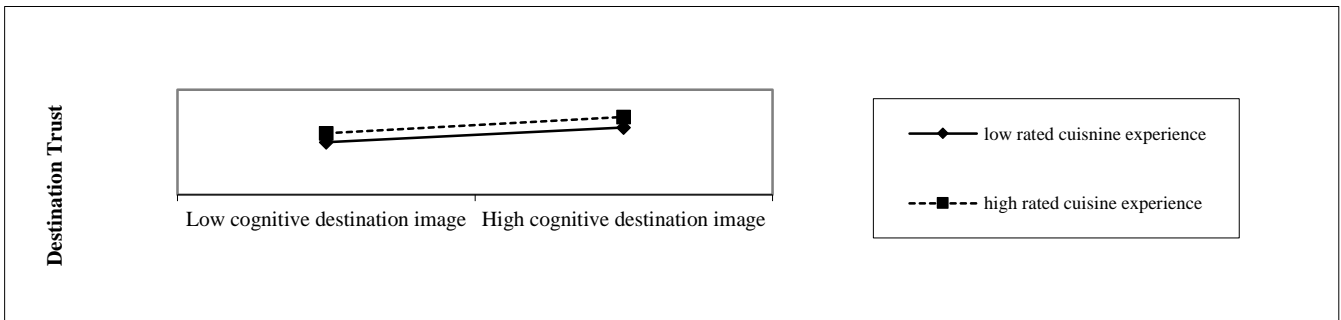
Since, the moderating effect of local cuisine experience is not evidenced; a new model was tested to analyze both the direct and indirect effects of cuisine experience through destination image on satisfaction and trust. The results of the path analysis for direct and indirect effects are provided in table 3. As it is shown in the table, local cuisine experience positively affected cognitive destination image of travelers. For the direct effect of cuisine experience on satisfaction and trust, only a positive significant effect on destination trust is validated. However, local cuisine experience is found to indirectly effect both trust and satisfaction of travelers through affecting their perceived image about the destination.

Conclusion and Discussions

The purpose of this research was to analyze the moderating role of local cuisine experience on the link between destination image and destination relationship. Even the study hypothesized a moderating effect; the results could not support the significant moderating role of local cuisine experience. However, this insignificant result also has implications in itself. That is, even local cuisine experience is considered a component of traveler's destination experience (Kivela and Crotts, 2006); local food could be positioned as a separate product for marketing a destination

(Horng and Tsai, 2010). Therefore, this finding is also in line with the arguments of Quan and Wang (2004) who proposes local food experience to be a peak rather than a supporting experience. That is, destinations could use local cuisine as a unique point of differentiation to attract tourists traveling for gastronomic purposes.

Furthermore, due to its insignificant moderating role, this study further analyzed the role of local food experience on destination image and destination relationship. More specifically, both direct and indirect effects of local food are analyzed to understand its influence on image, destination satisfaction as well as trust. At the end, the results prove local cuisine experience positively affects how travelers perceive the image for a destination. This finding is in line with the previous studies arguing for the impact of food experience on shaping travelers' image (Hjalager and Corigliano, 2000; Horng and Tsai, 2010). Similarly, Hu and Ritchie (1993) identified food as the fourth most important attribute determining destination attractiveness. Also specifically for Turkey, Yuksel (2001) found that food is one of the main reasons for visitors to go back to Turkey for another time. It is from this reason that local food could be used as a marketing and branding tool. In other terms, food experience might both complement the total destination experience as well as might serve as a distinguished product to diversify the destination offerings. Moreover, the findings also confirmed the indirect effect of food experience on destination satisfaction and trust through image. This result also compliments the previous research arguing for the role of image on trust and satisfaction (Chen and Phou, 2013). Moreover, the finding also supports the results of Guan (2012), which assert that local cuisine is a source of destination attractiveness and explains the satisfaction of travelers. That is, a highly rated local food experience helps to develop an emotional identification and connection with a destination (Silkes et al., 2013). As such, local food could also be used as a long-term relationship builder for destinations. In turn, the number of travelers can increase by both re-visitors and by the visitors suggesting the destination to the other potential people.

To sum up, the results of the research acknowledge the importance of local cuisine experience to shape the image of the destination and to increase the travelers' attachment to the destination. Thus, this study has implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the research has enhanced the conceptualization of local food experience and included social factors as a dimension. Moreover, to our best knowledge, this study is one of the first to analyze the moderating role of local cuisine on the link between destination image and relationship. Even the moderating effect is not justified, the results evidenced the direct and indirect role of local food in explaining destination image and satisfaction. Besides theoretical implications, the results have valuable insights for practice. First, both restaurateurs and destination management companies should put effort to position the local food in the minds of the travelers. More specifically, food should be more emphasized as a unique point of differentiation in promoting the destinations. Especially for Turkey, local cuisine, which has been offered to the fourth important factor contributing satisfaction and one of the main reasons for traveling the country, needs to be strategically integrated to marketing strategy. That is, specific regions with famous cuisines might throw food festivals and food related events as making food a main attraction point. Second, from an operational perspective, restaurant managers could design their menus, appearance of their employees as well as their interior design to reflect the unique cultural aspects of food and to offer a distinguished experience. As suggested by the results, local cuisine experience is not only limited to the food itself but also includes service and atmosphere reflecting the local culture. Lastly, it is better for destination management organizations to adopt a long-term perspective while using local food as a marketing tool. Specifically, local cuisine has an important role to influence long-term relationship of travelers. Therefore, it could be one of the

strategic tools to enhance foreign travelers' relation with the destination. As such, with a more special emphasis on food, destinations could both diversify their distinguished offerings and increase the number of long-term travelers as well as tourism earnings for the destination.

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