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Traditional Food Experience shaping Destination Loyalty among Tourists in Himachal Pradesh: The Mediating Role of Post-Consumption Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effect of tourists' traditional Himachali food experiences on their post-consumer satisfaction and loyalty toward Himachal Pradesh as a culinary tourist destination. It stated that food does not engender loyalty simply by being eaten. Instead, tourist's re-visitation, recommendation and positive comments were more likely to occur when they rated the experience of eating and drinking food at a destination as enjoyable, authentic, unique, well presented and associated with local culture. The analysis was based on a destination-based survey of tourists in major tourist locations of Himachal Pradesh, including Dharamshala, Manali, Shimla, Kullu, and Mandi. The paper emphasized three related constructs: traditional culinary experience, post consumption culinary evaluation, and culinary destination loyalty. Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the measurement structure, and regression and mediation analysis were used to test the relationships between constructs. The findings showed that traditional Himachali food had a positive impact on strengthening the tourists' loyalty toward the destination, especially when assessed positively after consuming the product. It is in the post-consumer evaluation that the link between the food experience and loyalty was established, thus creating an interpretive bridge. The paper suggests that the food culture of the Himachalis should not be expected to be just a service of hospitality but it can be an important aspect of the destination identity when tourists perceive it as a place, memorable and authentic cuisine.

The results are of practical importance to tourism authorities, destination management organisations, restaurants and hotel or hospitality businesses. Better representation of traditional food items, better information about local ingredients, food storytelling, food demonstrations, food trails, and authentic dining experience can help turn Himachali cuisine into a more powerful instrument of destination loyalty.

Keywords: Traditional food experience; Post-consumption evaluation; Destination loyalty; Himachali cuisine; Food tourism; Tourist loyalty

INTRODUCTION

In tourism, food has evolved from the peripheral service of the tour trip to a key element of the destination experience (Quan & Wang, 2004; Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Food goes beyond just being a nutritious necessity; it can also serve as a cultural and sensory medium that helps tourists comprehend the destination they are visiting (Richards, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). In food-tourism studies, local food is therefore studied not as a service element of the hospitality industry but as an identity and authenticity carrier and as a unique element of a tourist destination. This paper uses the concept of "traditional culinary experience" to refer to tourists' interaction with local food through food preparation, food service, the people associated with food production, the eating environment, and the cultural meanings attached to the act of consumption (Kim et al., 2009; Chang & Mak, 2018). In the case of Himachal Pradesh, this definition includes traditional Himachali recipes, locally available ingredients, region-specific cooking practices, culturally rooted eating places, and food encounters that allow tourists to connect with the destination's culinary identity (Sims, 2009; Richards, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018).

Previous research has presented that tourists' evaluation of destination cuisine influences destination perception, attitude, and future behavioural intention. Choe and Kim (2018) demonstrated that local food consumption value shapes tourists' attitudes, food destination image, and behavioural intention, while Choe and Kim (2019) identified the multidimensional nature of tourists' perceived local food value. Lee et al. (2020) and Martin et al. (2021) further showed that street-food experiences and iconic food experiences can influence destination image, word of mouth, and tourist intention. However, a more focused explanation is still required regarding how tourists' post-consumption evaluation of traditional food connects the food experience with later loyalty outcomes. Accordingly, post-consumption evaluation was positioned at the centre of the proposed model because tourists' later judgement of a food experience can shape whether they intend to revisit or recommend a destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Lai, 2020). When tourists evaluate traditional food as enjoyable, authentic, distinctive, valuable, and representative of the region, the experience is more likely to become memorable and loyalty-oriented (Antón et al., 2019; Lv et al., 2020). In this sense, traditional food does not influence destination loyalty only through consumption; its effect depends on how tourists interpret the experience after eating and how strongly they connect that experience with place (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Choe & Kim, 2018; Martin et al., 2021).

The context of this inquiry was aptly set against the backdrop of the state of Himachal Pradesh, as the place is mostly known as a tourism destination for mountains, climate, pilgrimage, adventure and cultural landscapes, while cuisine is rather less prominent as a resource for tourism. This background enabled the paper to explore the possibility that traditional regional food might be a driver of destination loyalty even if the region was not yet firmly established as a gastronomic region. Previous

research suggests that local food can strengthen authenticity, sense of place, and destination promotion, particularly for smaller or regionally distinctive tourism destinations (Sims, 2009; Okumus et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2018). The central argument was that traditional Himachali cuisine could strengthen tourist loyalty when visitors evaluated the food experience positively after consumption (Choe & Kim, 2018; Antón et al., 2019; Lv et al., 2020). In this context, the paper examined whether traditional regional cuisine could function as a loyalty-building tourism resource for a destination with an emerging food-tourism identity. The paper tested an evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model in which traditional culinary experience influenced culinary destination loyalty both directly and indirectly through post-consumption evaluation. Using a cleaned sample of 400 tourists and an exploratory factor-based measurement structure, the analysis developed a concise empirical framework for a regional food-tourism destination. The focus was not on adding additional constructs, but on clarifying the evaluative process through which traditional culinary experiences became relevant for tourist loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Food-tourism literature increasingly characterises traditional cuisine as both a symbolic resource and a sensory encounter. Quan and Wang (2004) argued that food may function not only as a supporting element of tourism but also as a peak experience within the journey. Kivela and Crofts (2006) similarly showed that gastronomy shapes the way visitors experience a destination. Sims (2009) associated local food with authenticity and sustainability, while Richards (2012) placed food in the broader context of tourism discussions on culture, creativity and experience. Further, Ellis et al. (2018) conceptualised food tourism in terms of identity, culture and place, while Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2019) considered the food destination as a "foodscape" in which tourists experience food at a tourist destination. In this study, traditional culinary experience refers to tourists' engagement with Himachali food through traditional meals, regionally rooted dining establishments, locally produced food items, and observed food-preparation practices during travel (Kim et al., 2009; Chang & Mak, 2018; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). Beyond the act of eating, food has cultural significance, represents local identity, conveys authenticity, and imparts meaning to tourists's understanding of the destination as a place (Quan & Wang, 2004; Sims, 2009; Richards, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018). Previous research indicates that local food experiences are influenced by cultural exposure, excitement, social influence, the destination food image, the sensory appeal of local food, familiarity, uniqueness, and perceived authenticity (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Kim et al., 2009; Chang & Mak, 2018; Choe & Kim, 2018). Traditional food experience in the context of the state of Himachal Pradesh is thus conceptualized as an experiential and interpretive experience in which tourists link food, place, culture and memory, rather than simply experiencing food as a functional act of consumption (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Richards, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018). Post consumption culinary evaluation included tourists' reflective judgement following consumption or experience of traditional food in the destination.

Post-consumption culinary evaluation referred to tourists' reflective judgement after consuming or encountering traditional food at the destination. This evaluation included perceived taste, presentation, authenticity, traditional ingredients, diversity of cooking methods, eating environment, and the extent to which cuisine represented the place. Babolian Hendijani (2016) found that food experience can influence tourist satisfaction, while Antón et al. (2019) argued that authenticity and cultural contrast shape memorable gastronomy experiences. Accordingly, the first hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Traditional culinary experience positively influences post-consumption culinary evaluation.

Culinary destination loyalty referred to favourable behavioural intentions linked with the culinary experience of a destination. It included willingness to revisit, recommend, speak positively about, and continue engaging with the destination's food. Destination loyalty is commonly associated with revisit and recommendation intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007). In food-tourism settings, sensory impressions and food-related satisfaction can also influence loyalty and word of mouth (Lai, 2020; Lv et al., 2020). When tourists evaluated a culinary experience positively after consumption, they were more likely to perceive the destination as memorable and worth recommending. Therefore, the second hypothesis was proposed:

H2: Post-consumption culinary evaluation positively influences culinary destination loyalty.

Traditional culinary experience may also influence loyalty directly. Local food can act as a destination-level cue that strengthens attachment to place and increases positive behavioural intention. Seo et al. (2017) find that destination food image influences intention to consume destination foods, while Tsai and Wang (2017) highlight the branding value of food-tourism experiences. Choe and Kim (2018) and Martin et al. (2021) also show that local and iconic food experiences may influence behavioural intention. Thus, the third hypothesis was proposed:

H3: Traditional culinary experience positively influences culinary destination loyalty.

The mediation logic of the present study rests on the idea that food experience becomes loyalty-generating through post-consumption interpretation. Tourists may encounter traditional cuisine during travel, but the loyalty effect depends on whether they later judge the experience as meaningful, authentic, distinctive, and representative of the destination. The mediator therefore explains how experience is translated into loyalty. Thus, the fourth hypothesis was proposed:

H4: Post-consumption culinary evaluation mediates the relationship between traditional culinary experience and culinary destination loyalty.

EVALUATION-MEDIATED CULINARY LOYALTY FORMATION MODEL

The paper proposed an evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model to explain how tourists’ engagement with traditional Himachali cuisine was converted into culinary destination loyalty. The model was based on the assumption that traditional cuisine did not automatically generate revisit or recommendation intention. Rather, loyalty emerged when tourists first experienced regional cuisine and then evaluated that experience positively in terms of taste, authenticity, presentation, traditional ingredients, uniqueness, and destination representativeness.

In this model, traditional culinary experience represented tourists’ direct engagement with Himachali food through regional dishes, traditional food outlets, culinary products, and food-related encounters at the destination. Post-consumption culinary evaluation represented the interpretive stage through which tourists judged the value and meaning of the consumed food experience. Culinary destination loyalty represented tourists’ willingness to revisit, recommend, speak positively about, and continue engaging with Himachali cuisine.

The model therefore treated culinary loyalty as a two-stage formation process. In the first stage, tourists encountered traditional cuisine as part of the destination experience. In the second stage, they interpreted and evaluated that experience after consumption. A favourable post-consumption evaluation then strengthened loyalty intentions. Thus, the model explained not only whether traditional culinary experience affected loyalty, but also how and why this effect occurred through tourists’ post-consumption judgement.

Conceptual Model

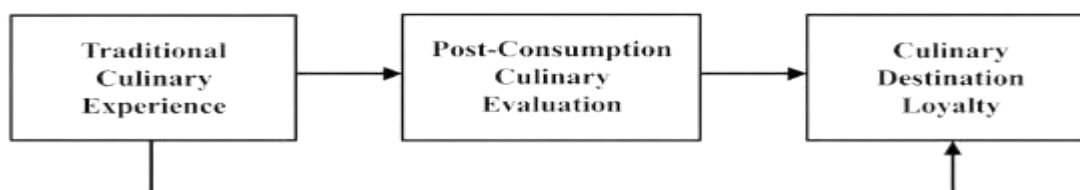


Figure 1. Evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model

Source: Author’s Conceptualization

Table 1. Hypothesised relationships in the evaluation-mediated model

Path type	Relationship tested	Hypothesis
Direct path	Traditional culinary experience -> Post-consumption culinary evaluation	H1
Direct path	Post-consumption culinary evaluation -> Culinary destination loyalty	H2
Direct path	Traditional culinary experience -> Culinary destination loyalty	H3
Mediated path	Traditional culinary experience -> Post-consumption culinary evaluation -> Culinary destination loyalty	H4

Source: Author’s conceptualisation.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was used to analyse the relationship between traditional food experience, post-consumption evaluation, and destination loyalty. Cross-sectional survey designs are commonly used in tourism and hospitality research when the objective is to examine tourists’ perceptions, evaluations, and behavioural intentions at a particular point in time (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Choe & Kim, 2018; Lai, 2020). The data were collected through a primary survey of tourists visiting Himachal Pradesh before March 2020. The survey was conducted in the major tourist hubs of Dharamshala, Manali, Shimla, Kullu, and Mandi. These locations were selected because they attracted tourists with varied travel motives and provided exposure to different forms of Himachali food culture. Destination-based tourist samples are appropriate for food-tourism research because they allow researchers to capture tourists’ food experiences in the actual travel setting rather than as abstract preferences outside the destination (Quan & Wang, 2004; Kim et al., 2009; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). After data cleaning, the final sample consisted of 400 tourists who had prior exposure to traditional Himachali food during their visit. Tourists without such exposure were excluded because post-consumption evaluation could be meaningfully assessed only among respondents who had consumed or encountered traditional food. The final sample therefore represented tourists who were able to provide informed assessments of their Himachali food experience across the five selected destinations.

The questionnaire explored the tourists’ food-related experiences, post-consumption evaluations, and loyalty intentions. Traditional culinary experience was measured through items related to engagement with traditional street-food outlets, dining venues preserving traditional culinary practices, restaurants offering regional Himachali specialties, and the purchase of traditional food products as culinary souvenirs. Post-consumption culinary assessment was evaluated using food presentation, traditional ingredients, eating environment, authenticity and diversity of cooking methods. Culinary destination loyalty was measured by intentions to revisit Himachal for food, try additional Himachali dishes, and recommend Himachali food to others. The retained items were evaluated for a coherent measurement structure for the proposed model using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The appropriateness of EFA was justified as the paper explored a focused empirical model of selected

food-tourism variables instead of verifying an existing measurement scale. The suitability of the data for EFA was determined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Bartlett, 1954; Kaiser, 1974). Items were kept due to theoretical relevance, acceptable primary factor loading and lack of excessive cross-loading. This approach was consistent with the guidance for the use of EFA in scale refinement and the development of measurement (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006; Hair et al., 2019).

Once the factor structure was determined, composite scores were obtained by averaging the items that were retained for each factor. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine the reliability. Pearson correlations were used to examine bivariate associations among the constructs. Finally, to test the direct and indirect effects, regression-based mediation analysis was employed. Traditional culinary experience was considered as the independent variable, post-consumption culinary evaluation as the mediator, and culinary destination loyalty as the dependent variable. The indirect effect was estimated by bootstrapping (Hayes, 2018). Common method bias was taken into account in the interpretation of the data as all responses were obtained with one questionnaire. This concern was minimized, but not eliminated, by factor analysis, item refinement, and theoretically distinct constructs. This limitation was therefore acknowledged in the final section of the paper (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 2. Profile of respondents and destination coverage (N = 400)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	20-40 years	131	32.8
	40-60 years	125	31.3
	Less than 20 years	72	18.0
	Above 60 years	72	18.0
Gender	Male	232	58.0
	Female	168	42.0
Nationality	Indian	345	86.3
	Any other	55	13.8
Purpose of visit	Vacations	145	36.3
	Recreation	104	26.0
	Honeymoon	68	17.0
	Business	50	12.5
	Religious	33	8.3
Frequency of visit	First visit	186	46.5
	Second visit	113	28.3
	Third visit	46	11.5
	More than three visits	55	13.8
Tasted Himachali traditional food	Yes	400	100.0
Destination visited*	Dharamshala	97	24.3
	Manali	136	34.0
	Shimla	185	46.3
	Kullu	160	40.0
	Mandi	104	26.0

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Note: Destination visited is a multiple-response variable; percentages therefore do not total 100.

Table 2 represents the final sample consisted of 400 tourists who had actual exposure to the traditional food of Himachal. There were 58.0% male and 42.0% female respondents. Domestic tourists formed 86.3% of the sample compared to 13.8% as international. Nearly two thirds of the respondents (60%) were in the age groups of 20-40 years and 40-60 years. The major travel motives were vacation and recreation. Repeat visitors collectively accounted for 53.5%, while the first time visitors accounted for 46.5%. This profile was suitable for a destination-based food-tourism profile due to the inclusion of both first and second time tourists who had tasted Himachali food during their travels. The study of tourists that were actually exposed to food was also significant as prior food-tourism studies have demonstrated that food consumption behaviors while on vacation are influenced by direct food exposure, previous food exposure, motivation, place context, and the memorable nature of the food experience (Mak et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2018).

Table 3. EFA suitability and variance explained

Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure	0.819	Suitable for factor analysis
Bartlett's test of sphericity	1420.248	$p < .001$
Number of retained factors	3	Consistent with the proposed model
Cumulative explained variance	57.90%	Acceptable for social-science survey data

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Table 3 explains the KMO value of 0.819 suggests that the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Bartlett's test was statistically significant, indicating that the correlation matrix of the items was not an identity matrix. The EFA identified a three-factor solution: traditional culinary experience, post-consumption culinary evaluation and culinary destination loyalty. The three factors retained accounted for 57.90% of the total variance, giving an empirical basis for the creation of construct scores and hypothesis testing. This interpretation is in line with the recommendations in exploratory factor analysis, which indicate that factors should be retained if they meet statistical criteria for adequacy, have a clear conceptual meaning, and form a coherent group of items (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Table 4. Retained items and rotated factor loadings

Item	Item description	CDL	TCE	PCCE
TCE1	Engagement with destination-based traditional street-food outlets		0.754	
TCE3	Preference for dining venues preserving traditional culinary practices		0.640	
TCE5	Engagement with restaurants offering regional Himachali specialties		0.748	
TCE7	Purchase of traditional food products as culinary souvenirs		0.681	
PCCE6	Evaluation of the visual presentation of Himachali dishes			0.739
PCCE8	Recognition of traditional ingredients in Himachali cuisine			0.730
PCCE12	Evaluation of the attractiveness of the eating environment			0.669
PCCE14	Perceived authenticity of Himachali culinary offerings			0.609
PCCE16	Perceived diversity of traditional cooking methods			0.556
CDL3	Intention to try additional types of Himachali food	0.811		
CDL5	Price-tolerant intention to revisit Himachal for food	0.821		
CDL7	Willingness to recommend Himachali food to others	0.803		

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Note: Only primary loadings are displayed for clarity. TCE = traditional culinary experience; PCCE = post-consumption culinary evaluation; CDL = culinary destination loyalty. Source: Author's computations based on primary data.

Table 4 enumerates the items retained showed a theoretically coherent three factor structure. Items representing direct engagement with Himachali cuisine loaded on the traditional culinary experience factor. The post-consumption culinary evaluation factor loaded items related to the judgement of presentation, ingredients, eating environment, authenticity and cooking-method diversity. Future culinary engagement, revisit intention, and recommendation intention loaded onto the culinary destination loyalty factor. Wherever possible, weak indicators and/or conceptually unstable indicators were eliminated prior to the establishment of construct scores, thus making the final measurement structure more transparent. The outcome matched the findings of food-tourism studies which see local cuisine as a complex process of travel and eating, not as a single eating experience, and as a mix of regional identity, tourist motivation, setting, authenticity and memorable experience (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Mak et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2018).

Table 5. Reliability, descriptive statistics, and correlations

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Traditional culinary experience	4	0.727	3.707	0.661	1.000		
Post-consumption culinary evaluation	5	0.755	3.477	0.650	0.455**	1.000	
Culinary destination loyalty	3	0.789	3.707	0.732	0.360**	0.444**	1.000

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Note: ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 explains the Cronbach's alpha for all retained constructs ranged between 0.727 and 0.789, which is an acceptable level of internal consistency. The mean scores were above the scale mid-point, indicating generally positive responses. There was a positive and significant relationship between the constructs. Relationships between traditional culinary experience and post-consumption culinary evaluation ($r = 0.455$, $p < .01$), and between traditional culinary experience and culinary destination loyalty ($r = 0.360$, $p < .01$) were found. Additionally, post-consumption culinary evaluation was found to be positively associated with culinary destination loyalty ($r = 0.444$, $p < .01$) which offers initial evidence in support of the proposed mediation logic.

Table 6. Regression results for direct and mediation paths

Model	Dependent variable	Predictor	Std. beta	SE	t	p	R2	F
Model 1	Culinary destination loyalty	Traditional culinary experience	0.360	0.047	7.686	< .001	0.129	59.079
Model 2	Post-consumption culinary evaluation	Traditional culinary experience	0.455	0.045	10.190	< .001	0.207	103.831
Model 3	Culinary destination loyalty	Traditional culinary experience	0.198	0.049	4.009	< .001	0.229	58.872
Model 3	Culinary destination loyalty	Post-consumption culinary evaluation	0.354	0.049	7.156	< .001	0.229	58.872

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

Table 6 defines the results from Model 1 confirmed the significant positive predictive value of traditional culinary experience on culinary destination loyalty with a beta coefficient of 0.360 ($p < .001$), which supported H3. For model 2, the result demonstrated that traditional culinary experience significantly predicted the post-consumption culinary evaluation (beta = 0.455, $p < .001$), thus supporting the H1. In Model 3, the coefficient of post-consumption culinary evaluation was significant with a higher magnitude (beta = .354, $p < .001$) than the coefficient of traditional culinary experience (beta = .198, $p < .001$). The logic of partial mediation was supported by the increase in explained variance and decrease in the direct coefficient. These results were consistent with studies suggesting that cuisine can contribute to destination competitiveness and tourist behavioural intention when food is presented as a meaningful cultural and experiential resource (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Mak et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2018).

Table 7. Bootstrapped mediation results

Effect	Standardised estimate	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Decision
Total effect: TCE -> CDL	0.360	0.259	0.451	Significant
Direct effect: TCE -> CDL controlling PCCE	0.198	0.087	0.309	Significant
Indirect effect: TCE -> PCCE -> CDL	0.161	0.104	0.226	Significant

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

The bootstrapped mediation analysis confirmed a significant indirect effect of traditional culinary experience on culinary destination loyalty through post-consumption culinary evaluation (beta = 0.161, 95% CI [0.104, 0.226]). Because the confidence interval did not include zero, H4 was supported. The direct effect also remained significant, indicating partial rather than full mediation. This interpretation was consistent with contemporary mediation literature, which recommends assessing the indirect effect directly through resampling-based confidence intervals rather than relying only on stepwise regression logic (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Zhao et al., 2010). In practical terms, tourists' engagement with Himachali cuisine strengthened culinary destination loyalty both directly and through favourable post-consumption evaluation.

Table 8. Hypothesis testing summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	Traditional culinary experience -> Post-consumption culinary evaluation	Supported
H2	Post-consumption culinary evaluation -> Culinary destination loyalty	Supported
H3	Traditional culinary experience -> Culinary destination loyalty	Supported
H4	Traditional culinary experience -> Post-consumption culinary evaluation -> Culinary destination loyalty	Supported;partial mediation

Source: Author's computation based on primary data

All four hypotheses were supported. The results indicated that traditional culinary experience was associated with both post-consumption culinary evaluation and culinary destination loyalty. They also showed that post-consumption culinary evaluation operated as a significant mechanism through which traditional culinary experience was translated into loyalty. The findings therefore supported the proposed evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model. This was consistent with the wider argument that food-tourism experiences become more powerful when tourists connect food with place identity, authenticity, memory, and destination meaning (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Horng & Tsai, 2012; Stone et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION

The findings supported the proposed evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model. Traditional culinary experience significantly influenced post-consumption culinary evaluation and culinary destination loyalty. This indicated that Himachali cuisine was not merely a background hospitality service but a meaningful component of the destination experience. The result was consistent with the view that food can operate as a peak and place-defining element of tourism experience (Quan & Wang, 2004; Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Findings also revealed that culinary destination loyalty was not only attributed to the experience of the local food, but also to how tourists perceived this experience after eating it. The food experience was more likely to foster tourist loyalty when it was seen as enjoyable, authentic, different, attractive, traditional, and a reflection of the destination. This interpretation was consistent with that of Antón et al. (2019) who highlighted the importance of authenticity and cultural contrast in memorable gastronomy experiences and with Lv et al. (2020) who associated sensory impressions with destination

loyalty. The direct relationship between culinary experience and tourists' loyalty was still significant, but the coefficient was lowered after the post-consumption evaluation, indicating that this relationship occurs through tourists' evaluative interpretations of the food experience.

Exploratory Factor based measurement results also strengthened the empirical basis of the paper. The three-factor structure obtained from the cleaned sample of 400 tourists corresponded with the proposed constructs, and the reliability estimates were acceptable. The use of EFA was appropriate because the paper developed a focused framework from selected survey variables rather than claiming full confirmation of a previously established scale. The measurement approach therefore provided a defensible exploratory basis for subsequent regression and mediation analysis. The findings were particularly relevant for Himachal Pradesh because the state is not yet globally recognised as a cuisine-led destination. The evidence suggested that Himachal Pradesh could still develop food-related destination loyalty if regional cuisine was made more visible, interpretable, and experiential for tourists. In this way, traditional Himachali cuisine can complement the state's existing strengths in mountain tourism, climate-based tourism, pilgrimage, adventure, and cultural travel.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, the paper presented a model for the relationship between traditional culinary experience and culinary destination loyalty, based on post-consumption culinary evaluation. In the literature, culinary image, satisfaction or food experience has been explored in relation to behavioural intention (Choe & Kim, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021). The present analysis extended this discussion by breaking down engagement with culinary experience and evaluation following consumption. This separation made understanding the transformation of food experiences into loyalty-oriented outcomes easier. The paper also broadened the food-tourism focus to a mountain destination in which tourism promotion has been traditionally dominated by landscape, climate, pilgrimage, adventure and cultural aspects, rather than local food products. Okumus et al. (2013) stated that local cuisine could be used to promote small tourist destinations, and Sims (2009) linked local food to authenticity and sense of place. The current results indicated that the value of traditional food was not only related to its availability, but also depended on the evaluations made by the tourists after eating them. The practical implication was that the Himachali cuisine should be promoted not just as a regular food service item but as part of the experience of the destination and its authorities as destination planner, restaurants, tourism management agencies and tourism business. This can be done by means of food trails, tasting menus, food festivals, cooking demos, menu based stories, and more community-based interpretation of local ingredients, and better presentations of local dishes. Stakeholders need to pay attention to both the availability of traditional food and the quality and interpretation of the culinary experience, as post-consumption evaluation was critical in the process of loyalty formation. Favourable evaluation can be promoted by clean dining areas, local ingredients, local culinary context of traditional dishes, careful presentation and authentic preparation methods. These improvements can help enhance recommendations, revisit intentions, and the culinary image of Himachal Pradesh.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper had several limitations. A cross sectional survey design was used to collect data, so one must be cautious of causal inferences. The analysis examined theoretically-based relationships rather than evidence of causation in an experiment. Same questionnaire was used to gather all the responses. While factor analysis, item refinement and theoretically distinct constructs were employed to minimize measurement overlap, the possibility to eliminate common method bias entirely could not be ruled out. The paper adopted the exploratory measurement structure using the technique of Exploratory Factor Analysis. This method was appropriate for the present purpose, but future studies could confirm the model by using confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modelling using an independent sample. Further comparative studies could be conducted on domestic and foreign visitors, first time and repeat visitors or various destinations of Himachal Pradesh. Qualitative research can be used for further elucidating the perception of tourists on specific dishes, ingredients, preparation methods and dining contexts in the Himalayan region of India. Also, longitudinal studies can be conducted to determine if destination evaluation continues to impact destination loyalty following post-consumption phases.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how traditional culinary experience affects culinary destination loyalty using post-consumption evaluation in the state of HP. The proposed evaluation-mediated culinary loyalty formation model was tested on a cleaned sample of 400 tourists who had consumed traditional Himachali food. The EFA outcomes confirmed a three-factor model: traditional culinary experience, post-consumption culinary evaluation and culinary destination loyalty. The proposed relationships were further confirmed using regression and mediation analyses. The influence of traditional culinary experience on destination loyalty was direct, while part of this influence was mediated by tourists' post-consumption evaluation. The findings showed that destination loyalty does not occur automatically as an outcome of the simple act of consumption of a traditional culinary experience. The factors that fostered loyalty included an enjoyable food experience, authenticity, distinctiveness, presentation, traditional ingredient connection, and destination representation. Culinary destination loyalty can thus be conceptualized as a sequential process in which tourists encountered food products of the region first, interpreted the food experience after consumption, and showed loyalty in terms of revisit intention, willingness to explore more Himachali food and recommending the food products to others. The findings revealed that by linking traditional cuisine with the rest of the tourism experience, traditional cuisine can boost the attractiveness of the destination for Himachal Pradesh. The state may not yet be a gastronomic hotspot, but Himachali cuisine can serve as an experiential and cultural value that can help in achieving destination loyalty. Therefore, by improving the visibility, interpretation, authenticity, and presentation of these dishes, Himachali tourism stakeholders might be able to translate food experiences into greater loyalty.

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