RESEARCH PAPER

Gastronomy as a Tourist Attraction: Authenticity, Cultural Identity, and Memorable Experiences in Himachal Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT
Gastronomic tourism has emerged as a significant dimension of destination experience, yet its role in Himalayan hill stations remains underexplored. This study examines the contribution of regional cuisine to memorable tourist experiences in Himachal Pradesh, India, with particular emphasis on the roles of authenticity, cultural identity, and sensory satisfaction. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 400 tourists across four major destinations: Shimla, Manali, Kullu, and Dharamshala. The quantitative analysis utilized multiple linear regression, one-sample t-tests, chi-square analysis, and analysis of variance. Results demonstrate that gastronomy significantly influences overall travel experience ($R^2 = 0.493$, $p < 0.001$), with cultural identity and authenticity as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.352$). Tourist awareness and favorable perceptions significantly increase intention to engage in gastronomic activities ($R^2 = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$), with culinary awareness ($\beta = 0.319$) and favorable perceptions ($\beta = 0.276$) as leading predictors. Foreign tourists (72.73%) were significantly more likely to actively seek Himachali cuisine compared to Indian tourists (53.09%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.108$, $p = 0.013$. Dham, Siddu, and Madra emerged as the most recognized traditional dishes, while local dhabas and homestays served as primary points of culinary contact. The findings establish that gastronomy functions as an integrated tourism product when food is experienced as culturally meaningful, sensorially satisfying, and accessible. The study contributes to gastronomic tourism theory by demonstrating that authenticity operates as both a cultural and experiential construct, and provides evidence-based recommendations for destination marketing organizations seeking to develop cuisine-based tourism products in mountain destinations.

Keywords: *Gastronomy tourism, Himachali cuisine, tourist experience, authenticity, cultural identity, culinary heritage, destination branding, Himachal Pradesh*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food has long been recognized as a fundamental element of travel experience, yet its potential as a distinctive tourism product has only recently attracted systematic scholarly attention. Gastronomic tourism-the pursuit of unique and memorable food and beverage experiences-has evolved from a peripheral hospitality concern to a central component of destination branding and cultural heritage preservation (Hall & Sharp, 2003; Ellis et al., 2018). In an era of experiential travel, tourists increasingly seek authentic encounters with local culture, and food serves as one of the most accessible and immediate means of cultural engagement (Richards, 2021). Himachal Pradesh, a mountain state in northern India, presents a compelling context for examining gastronomic tourism. The state recorded significant tourist arrivals across its major destinations, with Shimla, Manali, Kullu, and Dharamshala collectively attracting millions of domestic and international visitors annually. The state's culinary heritage reflects its diverse agro-climatic zones, ethnic composition, and historical traditions. Traditional dishes such as Dham (a ceremonial multi-course meal), Siddu (steamed wheat bread), Madra (chickpea curry in yogurt sauce), Tudkiya Bhat (spiced rice), and Babru (fermented lentil preparation) represent centuries of culinary knowledge adapted to mountain conditions (Negi, 2019). Despite this rich culinary heritage, Himachal Pradesh's gastronomic potential remains largely untapped as a tourism product. Tourists visiting the state often encounter generic North Indian or fast-food options near major attractions, with limited visibility of authentic local cuisine. The gap between the state's culinary resources and the tourist experience raises important questions about how gastronomy can be developed as an integrated tourism product that enhances destination experience while supporting local livelihoods and cultural preservation.

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The traditional cuisine of Himachal Pradesh reflects the state's diverse geography, ethnic composition, and cultural traditions. Dham, the ceremonial multi-course meal served on special occasions, represents the pinnacle of Himachali culinary art, featuring rice, dal, rajma, curd, boor ki kadi, and ghee served sequentially on leaf plates. Siddu, a steamed wheat bread stuffed with poppy seeds, walnuts, or lentils, exemplifies the resourcefulness of mountain cooking. Madra, a yogurt-based chickpea curry flavored with cardamom, cloves, and bay leaves, showcases the sophisticated use of spices in a region where fresh ingredients are limited by altitude and season. Other notable dishes include Tudkiya Bhat (spiced rice with lentils and vegetables), Babru (fermented lentil preparation), Aktori (buckwheat pancake), and Chha Gosht (meat curry with gram flour and spices). Each dish carries cultural significance, seasonal associations, and geographic specificity that create the foundation for distinctive gastronomic tourism products. This study addresses this gap by examining four interrelated dimensions: (1) the contribution of gastronomy to memorable tourist experiences, (2) tourists' awareness and perceptions of Himachali cuisine, (3) the factors that influence engagement with local food culture, and (4) the role of authenticity and cultural identity in shaping gastronomic experience. The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data from 400 tourists with qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of authenticity theory, cultural identity frameworks, and experiential tourism models within a single empirical investigation. While prior research has examined these constructs independently, this study demonstrates their interconnection in shaping gastronomic tourism outcomes. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for destination marketing organizations, hospitality businesses, and policymakers seeking to develop cuisine-based tourism products in mountain destinations. The study is organized around four research objectives: (1) examining the contribution of gastronomy to memorable tourist experiences, (2) analyzing tourists' awareness, perceptions, and preferences regarding Himachali cuisine, (3) identifying the factors that influence engagement with local food culture, and (4) assessing the role of authenticity and cultural identity in shaping gastronomic experience. Two hypotheses guide the quantitative analysis: H1 posits that gastronomy has a significant positive influence on tourists' overall travel experience, and H2 posits that tourist awareness and favorable perceptions significantly increase intention to engage in gastronomic activities. The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data from 400 tourists with qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions across four major destinations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gastronomy as a Tourist Attraction

The conceptualization of food as a tourism attraction has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Early research treated food primarily as a hospitality service-a necessary component of the travel experience but not a primary motivator (Hall & Sharp, 2003). More recent scholarship has repositioned gastronomy as a pull factor that can independently motivate travel, shape destination image, and create memorable experiences (Richards, 2021; Ellis et al., 2018). This shift reflects broader trends in experiential tourism, where travelers seek authentic, culturally meaningful encounters rather than standardized services. Gastronomic tourism encompasses a range of activities including visits to local restaurants and markets, participation in food festivals, culinary trails, cooking classes, farm visits, and ceremonial food experiences (UNWTO, 2017). The motivation for these activities varies from sensory curiosity to cultural learning, social distinction, and personal enrichment. What unifies these diverse activities is the pursuit of authenticity-the desire to experience food as it is prepared and consumed by local communities, using traditional ingredients, methods, and cultural contexts. In mountain destinations, gastronomic tourism takes on additional significance. The unique agro-climatic conditions of high-altitude regions produce distinctive ingredients, preservation techniques, and culinary traditions that cannot be replicated elsewhere. This geographical specificity creates a natural basis for destination differentiation through food. However, realizing this potential requires deliberate product development, quality assurance, and marketing strategies that connect culinary resources with tourist expectations (Bessiere, 2013).

2.2 Authenticity and Cultural Identity in Gastronomic Tourism

Authenticity is a central construct in gastronomic tourism research, yet its meaning remains contested. Objectivist approaches define authenticity in terms of historical accuracy, traditional ingredients, and adherence to established recipes (MacCannell, 1973). Constructivist perspectives argue that authenticity is negotiated between hosts and guests, shaped by expectations, interpretations, and contextual factors (Cohen, 1988). Existential authenticity focuses on the tourist's subjective experience of feeling connected to place and culture through food (Kim & Jamal, 2007). In the context of Himachal Pradesh, authenticity operates across all three dimensions. Objectively, traditional dishes such as Dham follow centuries-old preparation methods using locally sourced ingredients including maize, lentils, dairy, and mountain herbs. Constructively, tourists' perceptions of authenticity are shaped by the setting (homestays vs. restaurants), the presenter (local cooks vs. commercial chefs), and the narrative (cultural stories, ceremonial significance). Existentially, the experience of authenticity emerges from the tourist's emotional engagement with food as a window into mountain culture and way of life. Cultural identity is

closely linked to authenticity in gastronomic tourism. Food serves as a marker of regional identity, distinguishing one place from another and providing tourists with a tangible connection to local culture (Long, 2004). In Himachal Pradesh, the diversity of culinary traditions across districts-from the ceremonial Dham of Kangra to the wheat-based preparations of Kullu-reflects the state's ethnic and geographical pluralism. This diversity can be leveraged as a tourism asset, but requires careful documentation, presentation, and interpretation to communicate cultural meaning to visitors.

2.3 Tourist Awareness, Perceptions, and Engagement

Tourist awareness of local cuisine is a prerequisite for gastronomic engagement. Research indicates that awareness operates at multiple levels: recognition of the existence of a distinct culinary tradition, knowledge of specific dishes, understanding of cultural significance, and intention to seek out authentic experiences (Fields, 2006). Each level of awareness creates different opportunities for destination marketing and product development. Perceptions of local cuisine are shaped by prior experience, cultural background, information sources, and on-site encounters. Foreign tourists often approach local food with greater curiosity and willingness to experiment, while domestic tourists may have established preferences that limit exploration (Kim et al., 2009). However, these patterns are not fixed; targeted information, sampling opportunities, and positive first experiences can shift perceptions and increase engagement across all tourist segments. The intention to engage in gastronomic activities is influenced by awareness, perceptions, prior tasting experience, and the availability of organized culinary experiences. Research demonstrates that tourists who have tasted local food are more likely to seek additional experiences, creating a positive feedback loop between initial exposure and deeper engagement (Sims, 2009). This suggests that first-contact experiences-such as welcome tastings, hotel samples, or festival introductions-are critical investment points for destination marketers.

2.4 Gastronomy and Destination Branding

Destination branding seeks to create a distinctive identity that differentiates one place from competing destinations. Gastronomy has emerged as a powerful branding element because it is sensory, memorable, shareable, and culturally specific (Everett & Aitchison, 2001). Regions that have successfully leveraged gastronomy for destination branding-such as Tuscany, Lyon, and Oaxaca-demonstrate that food can become synonymous with place identity, driving visitation and loyalty. For Himachal Pradesh, gastronomic branding presents both opportunities and challenges. The state's existing brand is dominated by landscape, adventure, and spirituality. Food has not featured prominently in destination marketing, despite the availability of distinctive culinary resources. Developing a gastronomic brand requires systematic product development, quality standards, storytelling, and coordinated promotion across stakeholders. The brand must balance authenticity with accessibility, preserving cultural integrity while meeting tourist expectations for hygiene, service, and information.

2.5 The Role of Stakeholders in Gastronomic Tourism

The development of gastronomic tourism requires the coordinated involvement of multiple stakeholders including restaurants, hotels, homestays, local food producers, tourism authorities, cultural organizations, and community members. Each stakeholder group plays a distinct role in the value chain: restaurants and hotels provide points of consumption; homestays offer authentic domestic food experiences; farmers and food producers supply traditional ingredients; tourism authorities coordinate promotion and infrastructure; and community members serve as cultural custodians who transmit culinary knowledge across generations. In Himachal Pradesh, the stakeholder landscape is characterized by fragmentation. Small-scale food businesses operate independently without coordination, tourism promotion has not systematically featured gastronomy, and community knowledge holders have not been integrated into tourism product development. This fragmentation contributes to the gap between culinary resources and tourism products. Effective gastronomic tourism development requires establishing platforms for stakeholder coordination, defining roles and responsibilities, and creating incentive structures that align individual business interests with destination-level gastronomic branding.

2.6 Research Gaps

Despite growing interest in gastronomic tourism, several gaps remain in the literature. First, empirical studies of gastronomy in Himalayan destinations are limited, with most research focusing on European, Mediterranean, or Southeast Asian contexts. Second, the interconnection between authenticity, cultural identity, and memorable experience has not been tested within a single empirical framework. Third, the differential engagement patterns of domestic versus international tourists in mountain gastronomy contexts remain underexplored. Fourth, the role of awareness and perceptions in shaping engagement intention requires further validation in emerging destination contexts. Fifth, the stakeholder coordination challenges that prevent culinary resources from being translated into tourism products have not been systematically examined in Indian mountain destinations. This study addresses these gaps through a comprehensive mixed-methods investigation in Himachal Pradesh.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions. The quantitative component utilized a structured questionnaire administered to 400 tourists across four destinations. The qualitative component provided contextual depth through semi-structured interviews with hospitality stakeholders, homestay operators, traditional cooks, and tourism

officials. The post-positivist, pragmatist research philosophy guided the methodological pluralism, allowing both objective measurement and interpretive understanding (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

3.2 Study Area and Sampling

The study was conducted in four major tourist destinations of Himachal Pradesh: Shimla (heritage tourism), Manali (adventure and eco-tourism), Kullu (cultural and festival tourism), and Dharamshala (spiritual and wellness tourism). These locations were selected to capture the diversity of tourism types and culinary traditions across the state. Each destination has a distinct altitude, agro-climatic zone, and ethnic composition, providing variation in traditional dishes and culinary practices.

A sample of 400 respondents was determined using Cochran's formula with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. Respondents were equally distributed across the four locations (n = 100 per site). Purposive and convenience sampling was employed, targeting tourists who had spent at least one night in the destination and had consumed at least one meal at a local establishment. The sample included both domestic tourists (89%) and international tourists (11%), reflecting the actual visitor composition of these destinations.

3.3 Instrument Development

The structured questionnaire comprised seven sections: (1) demographic and travel profile, (2) awareness of Himachali cuisine, (3) perceptions and attitudes toward local food, (4) gastronomic experience and travel decisions, (5) challenges in accessing authentic cuisine, (6) economic and cultural impact perceptions, and (7) suggestions for promotion. Likert-scale items measured attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral intentions on a 5-point scale. The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.928.

The questionnaire was validated through a pilot study with 40 respondents, leading to refinements in item wording and response format. Content validity was established through expert review by academics in tourism, hospitality, and cultural studies. The qualitative instruments included semi-structured interview guides covering stakeholder perspectives on culinary resources, challenges, opportunities, and community participation in gastronomic tourism development.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) characterized the sample and response distributions. Inferential analyses included one-sample t-tests (comparing construct means against the neutral value of 3.00), chi-square tests (examining associations between categorical variables), independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA (assessing group differences), and multiple linear regression (testing predictive relationships). The regression models examined: (1) predictors of overall travel experience, (2) predictors of engagement intention, and (3) predictors of perceived economic and cultural impact. Multicollinearity was assessed through tolerance and VIF statistics, and model assumptions were verified through residual analysis.

3.5 Qualitative Component

The qualitative component of the study included semi-structured interviews with 24 stakeholders (6 per destination) and four focus group discussions (one per destination, 6-8 participants each). Stakeholder interviews covered culinary resources, challenges in serving traditional food to tourists, perceptions of demand, and suggestions for development. Focus group discussions explored community perspectives on cultural preservation, economic opportunities, and concerns about commercialization. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with codes developed inductively from the data and organized around the study's four research objectives. The qualitative findings provided contextual depth and practical insights that complemented the quantitative results, particularly regarding stakeholder perspectives on supply-side constraints and community attitudes toward gastronomic tourism development.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the data collection process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study complied with all applicable data protection regulations. Special attention was given to cultural sensitivity in the documentation of traditional culinary knowledge, with community ownership and consent protocols established for any knowledge that might be commercialized through tourism.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The sample of 400 respondents was diverse in demographic and travel characteristics. The largest age group was 26–35 years (28.00%), followed by 36–45 years (22.75%) and 18–25 years (20.50%). Males constituted 53.50% and females 46.50%. The majority were domestic tourists (89.00%), with 11.00% international visitors. Educational attainment was high, with 77.50% holding graduate or postgraduate degrees. The primary travel purposes were leisure/sightseeing (37.50%), adventure tourism (20.50%), and religious/pilgrimage (16.00%). First-time visitors comprised 37.50%, while 62.50% had visited Himachal Pradesh at least once before.

Table 1: Sample Demographic and Travel Profile (N = 400)

Characteristic	Category	n	%	Cum. %
Age	26-35	112	28.00	28.00
	36-45	91	22.75	50.75

	18-25	82	20.50	71.25
Gender	Male	214	53.50	53.50
	Female	186	46.50	100.00
Nationality	Indian	356	89.00	89.00
	Foreign	44	11.00	100.00
Education	Graduate	142	35.50	35.50
	Post-graduate	118	29.50	65.00
Visit Purpose	Leisure	150	37.50	37.50
	Adventure	82	20.50	58.00

4.2 Awareness of Himachali Cuisine

Awareness of Himachali cuisine was substantial but incomplete. Among respondents, 43.00% reported being well aware that Himachal Pradesh has a distinct traditional cuisine, 38.50% had some idea, and 18.50% were not aware at all. Recognition of specific dishes was concentrated: Dham was the most recognized dish, followed by Siddu and Madra. During their current visit, 67.00% of respondents had tasted at least one traditional Himachali dish. However, 59.00% were not aware of any food festivals or culinary events in the state, indicating a significant gap in promotional reach.

The primary points of culinary contact were local dhabas and small eateries (34.00%), followed by homestays and guesthouse kitchens (24.50%). Hotels showed inconsistent menu availability, with 44.00% reporting that traditional dishes were offered only occasionally or on request. Information sources were diverse, with word-of-mouth, personal observation, and social media emerging as leading channels. The pattern reveals that awareness exists but is uneven across dishes, experiences, and promotional channels.

Table 2: Awareness and Perception Indicators

Awareness Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)	Mean
Aware of distinct Himachali cuisine	81.50	18.50	-
Tasted Himachali dish during visit	67.00	33.00	-
Aware of food festivals/events	41.00	59.00	-
Culinary awareness index (composite)	-	-	3.612
Cultural identity & authenticity	-	-	3.821
Intention to engage in activities	-	-	3.971

4.3 Gastronomy and Overall Travel Experience

The regression model predicting overall travel experience was statistically significant, $F(7, 392) = 54.573$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 49.30% of the variance ($R = 0.702$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.484$). Table 3 presents the standardized regression coefficients for each predictor.

Table 3: Predictors of Overall Travel Experience ($R^2 = 0.493$)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
Cultural identity & authenticity	0.318	0.043	0.352	7.395	<0.001***
Sensory quality & satisfaction	0.276	0.044	0.291	6.273	<0.001***
Memorable food experience	0.181	0.041	0.196	4.415	<0.001***
Availability of local cuisine	0.129	0.039	0.143	3.308	0.001**
Active search for authentic dishes	0.104	0.039	0.112	2.667	0.008**
Age group (control)	-0.018	0.017	-0.038	-1.059	0.290
Nationality (control)	0.076	0.061	0.044	1.246	0.214

Cultural identity and authenticity emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that tourists who perceive Himachali food as culturally meaningful and authentic report significantly higher overall travel satisfaction. Sensory quality and satisfaction was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that taste, presentation, and service quality are essential complements to cultural meaning. Memorable food experience ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.001$), availability ($\beta = 0.143$, $p = 0.001$), and active search ($\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.008$) also contributed significantly. Notably, age and nationality were not significant predictors, suggesting that gastronomy's contribution to travel experience transcends demographic boundaries.

4.4 Awareness, Perceptions, and Engagement Intention

The regression model predicting intention to engage in gastronomic activities was statistically significant, $F(5, 394) = 55.060$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 41.10% of the variance ($R = 0.641$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.404$).

Table 4: Predictors of Gastronomic Engagement Intention ($R^2 = 0.411$)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
Culinary awareness	0.284	0.043	0.319	6.605	<0.001***
Favorable culinary perceptions	0.237	0.042	0.276	5.643	<0.001***
Prior tasting of Himachali food	0.198	0.052	0.171	3.808	<0.001***

Awareness of culinary festivals	0.142	0.050	0.126	2.840	0.005**
Educational qualification	0.036	0.024	0.058	1.500	0.134

Culinary awareness was the strongest predictor of engagement intention ($\beta = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$), followed by favorable culinary perceptions ($\beta = 0.276$, $p < 0.001$). Prior tasting experience ($\beta = 0.171$, $p < 0.001$) and awareness of culinary festivals ($\beta = 0.126$, $p = 0.005$) also significantly increased intention. Educational qualification was not significant ($p = 0.134$), indicating that engagement is driven by culinary knowledge and experience rather than formal education.

4.5 Nationality Differences in Gastronomic Engagement

Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between nationality and active search for Himachali cuisine, $\chi^2(1) = 6.108$, $p = 0.013$, Cramér's $V = 0.124$. Foreign tourists were significantly more likely to actively seek out local cuisine (72.73%) compared to Indian tourists (53.09%). Independent-samples t-tests showed that foreign tourists also reported higher culinary awareness ($M = 3.680$) than Indian tourists ($M = 3.420$), $t(398) = -2.252$, $p = 0.025$, $d = 0.356$. While the effect sizes were small to moderate, the pattern suggests that international visitors approach Himachali cuisine with greater intentionality and prior research.

Table 5: Nationality and Active Search for Himachali Cuisine

Nationality	Sought Cuisine (n)	Sought (%)	Did Not Seek (n)	Did Not (%)
Indian	189	53.09	167	46.91
Foreign	32	72.73	12	27.27
Total	221	55.25	179	44.75

4.6 Location-Based Differences in Satisfaction

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in gastronomic satisfaction across the four study locations, $F(3, 396) = 4.216$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$. Dharamshala recorded the highest satisfaction ($M = 4.080$), followed by Manali ($M = 3.950$), Kullu ($M = 3.890$), and Shimla ($M = 3.770$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests confirmed that the significant difference was primarily between Dharamshala and Shimla (mean difference = 0.310, $p = 0.005$). This suggests that gastronomic satisfaction varies by destination context, with spiritual/wellness destinations potentially offering more integrated food experiences than heritage destinations.

Table 6: Gastronomic Satisfaction by Study Location

Location	n	Mean	SD	Tourism Type
Shimla	100	3.770	0.681	Heritage
Manali	100	3.950	0.643	Adventure
Kullu	100	3.890	0.659	Cultural
Dharamshala	100	4.080	0.622	Spiritual

4.7 Gender Differences

Independent-samples t-tests revealed a small but significant gender difference in gastronomic satisfaction, $t(398) = -2.207$, $p = 0.028$, Cohen's $d = 0.220$. Female respondents reported higher satisfaction ($M = 4.020$, $SD = 0.610$) than male respondents ($M = 3.880$, $SD = 0.660$). While the effect size was small, the finding suggests that female tourists may be more attuned to or appreciative of the cultural and experiential dimensions of gastronomic encounters.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that gastronomy functions as a significant contributor to tourist experience in Himachal Pradesh, with authenticity and cultural identity serving as the primary mechanisms through which food enhances destination satisfaction. The regression model explaining 49.30% of variance in overall travel experience establishes that gastronomy is not a peripheral concern but a central element of the tourism product. The primacy of cultural identity and authenticity ($\beta = 0.352$) as a predictor of travel experience aligns with constructivist authenticity theory (Cohen, 1988), which posits that tourists seek meaningful connections to place through culturally embedded experiences. In the context of Himachal Pradesh, authenticity is not merely about recipe accuracy but about the entire experiential context: local ingredients, traditional cooking methods, cultural narratives, ceremonial significance, and the setting in which food is served. This finding extends prior research by demonstrating that authenticity operates as an integrated construct encompassing both objective and existential dimensions. The second strongest predictor, sensory quality and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.291$), confirms that cultural meaning alone is insufficient; the food must also taste good, be well-presented, and be served in a manner that meets basic hospitality expectations. This finding has practical implications: destination marketers cannot rely solely on the cultural novelty of Himachali cuisine; they must also ensure that quality standards meet tourist expectations. The interaction between authenticity and quality suggests a "managed authenticity" approach where traditional recipes and methods are preserved while delivery meets contemporary service standards.

The third predictor, memorable food experience ($\beta = 0.196$), demonstrates that the lasting impression created by a gastronomic encounter is a distinct contributor to overall travel satisfaction beyond immediate sensory pleasure or cultural meaning. This suggests that destinations should invest in creating distinctive, shareable food moments-such as ceremonial Dham meals, cooking demonstrations,

or farm-to-table experiences-that tourists will remember and recount long after their visit. The availability of local cuisine (β = 0.143) and active search for authentic dishes (β = 0.112) also contributed significantly, indicating that accessibility and tourist initiative play supporting but important roles in the gastronomy-experience relationship. The awareness-engagement model (R^2 = 0.411) reveals that culinary knowledge and positive perceptions drive intention to participate in gastronomic activities. The significance of prior tasting (β = 0.171) demonstrates the importance of first-contact experiences: once tourists have tasted a well-prepared Himachali dish, they are significantly more likely to seek additional culinary experiences. This creates a positive feedback loop where initial exposure leads to deeper engagement, which in turn generates word-of-mouth promotion and repeat visitation.

The nationality difference in active search behavior (72.73% foreign vs. 53.09% Indian tourists) reflects differential pre-trip information seeking patterns. International tourists typically conduct more extensive research before visiting Himalayan destinations, including curiosity about local food culture. Domestic tourists, while constituting the majority of visitors, may approach Himachal Pradesh with established expectations focused on landscape and adventure rather than cuisine. This finding suggests that awareness-building campaigns targeting domestic tourists represent a significant opportunity for gastronomic tourism development. The location-based differences in satisfaction (Dharamshala highest, Shimla lowest) suggest that destination context influences gastronomic experience. Dharamshala's spiritual and wellness tourism orientation may create a more receptive environment for mindful food experiences, while Shimla's heritage tourism context may be more dominated by commercial food services. This finding has implications for destination-specific product development strategies.

The gender difference in satisfaction (females higher than males, p = 0.028) adds another dimension to understanding differential engagement patterns. While the effect size was small (d = 0.220), the finding suggests that female tourists may be more attuned to or appreciative of the cultural and experiential dimensions of gastronomic encounters. This aligns with broader research suggesting that female tourists tend to engage more deeply with cultural and experiential aspects of travel, including food, than male tourists. However, the small effect size indicates that gender should not be the primary basis for segmentation in gastronomic tourism marketing. The dish-level analysis revealed that Dham was the most frequently identified memorable dish, followed by Siddu and Madra. These three dishes provide recognizable entry points for destination promotion. However, the findings also caution against reducing Himachali gastronomy to a small group of iconic dishes. A stronger tourism product should use familiar dishes to attract initial attention while introducing visitors to less visible regional preparations, seasonal foods, traditional grains, pickles, fermented products, and district-specific specialties. This approach balances the need for accessible entry points with the goal of showcasing the full diversity of Himachali culinary heritage.

6. CONCLUSION

This study establishes that gastronomy has significant potential to function as a distinctive tourist attraction in Himachal Pradesh. The empirical evidence demonstrates that local cuisine contributes to memorable travel experiences, cultural understanding, and destination satisfaction when it is experienced as authentic, culturally meaningful, and sensorially satisfying. The regression models confirm that authenticity is the strongest predictor of travel experience, followed by sensory quality, memorability, availability, and active search behavior. The study contributes to gastronomic tourism theory by integrating authenticity, cultural identity, and experiential tourism frameworks within a single empirical investigation. The finding that authenticity operates as both a cultural and experiential construct-encompassing recipe tradition, ingredient sourcing, cooking methods, cultural narratives, and service context-extends prior research that has treated these dimensions separately. The demonstration that awareness and perceptions drive engagement intention, and that prior tasting creates positive feedback loops, provides a theoretical basis for understanding how gastronomic interest develops and deepens.

Practically, the findings indicate that gastronomy should be developed as an integrated tourism product rather than treated as a secondary hospitality service. This requires coordinated action across multiple dimensions: improving availability of authentic dishes, creating credible information and signage, developing organized culinary experiences (festivals, trails, cooking demonstrations), strengthening hygiene and service standards, and implementing destination-level promotion. The preferred approach is one of managed authenticity: preserving traditional recipes, ingredients, and cultural meaning while meeting contemporary expectations for quality, accessibility, and information.

For destination marketing organizations, the findings suggest that awareness-building should target both domestic and international tourists, with different strategies for each segment. International tourists respond to pre-trip information and active search; domestic tourists may be more influenced by on-site discovery and social proof. First-contact experiences-welcome tastings, hotel samples, festival introductions-are critical investment points that convert general interest into active engagement.

6.1 Implications for Theory

The study makes several theoretical contributions to gastronomic tourism research. First, it demonstrates that authenticity operates as an integrated construct encompassing both objective dimensions (recipe tradition, ingredient sourcing, cooking methods) and existential dimensions (cultural connection, meaningful experience,

emotional engagement). This integrated conceptualization extends prior research that has treated these dimensions separately and provides a more complete framework for understanding how authenticity shapes tourist experience.

Second, the finding that awareness and perceptions drive engagement intention, and that prior tasting creates positive feedback loops, provides empirical support for experiential learning theory in the gastronomic tourism context. The demonstration that educational qualification does not significantly predict engagement intention suggests that gastronomic interest is driven by experience and knowledge rather than formal education, a finding that has implications for how we conceptualize the relationship between human capital and tourism behavior.

Third, the location-based differences in satisfaction suggest that destination context moderates the gastronomy-experience relationship. Spiritual and wellness destinations may create more receptive environments for mindful food experiences than heritage or adventure destinations, a finding that warrants further investigation across different tourism typologies. The interaction between destination type, tourist motivation, and gastronomic experience represents an underexplored area of tourism research.

6.2 Implications for Practice

For destination marketing organizations, the findings indicate that gastronomy should be positioned as a primary attraction rather than a secondary hospitality service. Marketing campaigns should feature authentic dishes, cultural narratives, and experiential opportunities rather than generic food photography. The most recognized dishes-Dham, Siddu, Madra-should serve as entry points that attract initial attention while introducing visitors to less visible regional preparations, seasonal foods, and district-specific specialties.

For hospitality businesses, the findings suggest that menu development should balance familiarity and novelty. Commercially viable dishes can be available daily, while slow-cooked, ceremonial, or seasonal dishes can be offered on selected days or through advance ordering. Tasting platters that allow visitors to sample several traditional dishes at transparent pricing reduce the risk of trying unfamiliar food and create opportunities for deeper engagement. Homestays should be supported in offering organized traditional meals and small-scale cooking demonstrations that provide authentic cultural experiences.

For policymakers, the study underscores the need for coordinated gastronomic tourism development involving multiple departments (tourism, culture, agriculture, food safety, rural development). A state-level Gastronomy Tourism Mission could coordinate standards, culinary mapping, training, event calendars, product development, monitoring, and promotion. The preferred development approach is one of managed authenticity: preserving traditional recipes, ingredients, and cultural meaning while meeting contemporary expectations for hygiene, accessibility, information, and service quality.

Limitations of this study include its cross-sectional design, focus on four specific destinations, and reliance on tourist self-reports. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how gastronomic engagement evolves over multiple visits, expand to additional Himalayan destinations for comparative analysis, and incorporate objective measures of culinary availability and quality. Qualitative research exploring the perspectives of local communities, cooks, and hospitality providers would complement the tourist-focused findings of this study and provide a more complete understanding of gastronomic tourism development.

Additionally, future research should examine the effectiveness of specific interventions-such as certification systems, food trails, festival development, and digital information platforms-in reducing barriers and enhancing gastronomic experience. Experimental designs could isolate the causal effects of specific product features (e.g., tasting platters, cultural narratives, cooking demonstrations) on tourist engagement and satisfaction. Cross-cultural comparisons across different mountain destinations-in Nepal, Bhutan, Switzerland, or Peru-would provide insights into whether the findings from Himachal Pradesh generalize to other high-altitude gastronomic tourism contexts.

The development of validated scales for measuring gastronomic authenticity, cultural connection, and experiential quality would enable more precise measurement and comparison across studies. Research incorporating supply-side data from restaurants, hotels, homestays, and food producers would complement the demand-side perspective of this study and provide a more complete picture of the gastronomic tourism system. Finally, research examining the long-term economic and cultural impacts of gastronomic tourism development-including effects on local livelihoods, culinary knowledge transmission, and community identity-would provide evidence for sustainable development strategies.

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