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The Role Of Gastronomy Image in the Effect Of Brand Awareness and Perceived Service Quality on Willingness To Pay More in Restaurants ***

Restoranlarda Marka Farkındalığı ve Algılanan Hizmet Kalitesinin Daha Fazla Ödeme İsteği Üzerine Etkisinde Gastronomi İmajının Rolü

ABSTRACT

Tourists seeking to move away from standardized tourist experiences due to globalization are increasingly turning to experiencing local culture and daily life practices in the destinations they visit. In this context, gastronomy tourism has become a significant element in the development and competitiveness of destinations. This study examines the role of gastronomy image in the influence of brand awareness and perceived service quality on the willingness to pay more in restaurants. Gaziantep, known for its developed culinary culture and gastronomy tourism, was chosen as the research site for this research. The study analyzed 441 valid survey data obtained from tourists who visited restaurants ranked in the top 10 on TripAdvisor between December 2021 and May 2022. SPSS and SmartPLS programs were used for data analysis, and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied. The findings show that brand awareness and perceived service quality positively and significantly influence gastronomy image. Furthermore, perceived service quality also has a positive and significant effect on willingness to pay more. However, brand awareness and gastronomy image were not found to have a significant effect on willingness to pay more. Finally, it was determined that gastronomy image did not have a mediating effect on the relationships between the variables.

Keywords: Gastronomy Image, Brand Awareness, Perceived Service Quality, Willingness to Pay More, Gaziantep

ÖZ

Küreselleşmenin etkisiyle standartlaşan turistik deneyimlerden uzaklaşmak isteyen turistler, ziyaret ettikleri destinasyonlarda yerel kültürü ve gündelik yaşam pratiklerini deneyimlemeye yönelmektedir. Bu doğrultuda gastronomi turizmi, destinasyonların gelişimi ve rekabet gücü açısından önemli bir unsur hâline gelmiştir. Bu çalışmada, restoranlarda marka farkındalığı ve algılanan hizmet kalitesinin daha fazla ödeme isteği üzerindeki etkisinde gastronomi imajının rolü incelenmiştir. Araştırmanın uygulama alanı olarak gelişmiş mutfak kültürü ve gastronomi turizmiyle öne çıkan Gaziantep seçilmiştir. Araştırma kapsamında, Aralık 2021–Mayıs 2022 tarihleri arasında TripAdvisor'da ilk 10'da yer alan restoranları ziyaret eden turistlerden elde edilen 441 geçerli anket verisi analiz edilmiştir. Verilerin analizinde SPSS ve SmartPLS programları kullanılmış; kısmi en küçük kareler yapısal eşitlik modellemesi (KEKK-YEM) uygulanmıştır. Bulgular, marka farkındalığı ile algılanan hizmet kalitesinin gastronomi imajını pozitif ve anlamlı biçimde etkilediğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca algılanan hizmet kalitesinin daha fazla ödeme isteği üzerinde de pozitif ve anlamlı etkisi bulunmaktadır. Buna karşın marka farkındalığı ve gastronomi imajının daha fazla ödeme isteği üzerindeki etkisi anlamlı bulunmamıştır. Son olarak gastronomi imajının, değişkenler arasındaki ilişkilerde aracılık etkisine sahip olmadığı belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gastronomi İmajı, Marka Farkındalığı, Algılanan Hizmet Kalitesi, Daha Fazla Ödeme İsteği, Gaziantep

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***Bu çalışma için Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi Bilimsel Etik ve Yayın Kurulu'nun 07/07/2021 tarih ve 2100032226 Protokol numaralı toplantısında alınan 282 sıra sayılı karar uyarınca Etik Kurul onayı alınmış ve çalışma, Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Gastronomi ve Mutfak Sanatları Anabilim Dalında, ikinci yazarın danışmanlığında birinci yazar tarafından hazırlanarak Mayıs 2024'te tamamlanan "Restoranlarda Marka Farkındalığı ve Algılanan Hizmet Kalitesinin Daha Fazla Ödeme İsteği Üzerine Etkisinde Gastronomi İmajının Rolü" başlıklı doktora tezinden üretilmiştir.

Introduction

While eating and drinking are basic needs for the survival of living beings, it has evolved from a purely physiological need into a multi-dimensional structure encompassing pleasure, experience, and cultural meanings, in line with changing social conditions and consumption patterns. In this respect, food and beverage elements have become an important component of the tourism sector as well, because today, gastronomy is no longer just a secondary activity in the tourism sector; it has become a primary motivator for destination selection and a competitive tool (Akar, Ögel & Medetoğlu, 2024; Onur & Yazıcıoğlu, 2024; Dordai, Becze & Roman, 2026).

The relationship between gastronomy and tourism has existed for many years, but today gastronomy is considered a strategic element that enables the differentiation of destinations. The shift of tourists towards more unique, local, and authentic experiences instead of standardized experiences has made gastronomy a significant attraction in destination marketing. In this context, food is considered a key element that provides differentiation between destinations and businesses (Kivela & Crotts, 2006) and one of the fundamental or complementary components of travel motivation (Quan & Wang, 2004). While Quan and Wang (2004) state that food is one of the key elements that enhance destination image; Karim (2006) and Ritchie, Tung and Ritchie (2011) state that gastronomic elements influence tourists' destination preferences and contribute to destination image.

Destinations position their local culinary cultures as brand values in order to differentiate themselves and increase their competitiveness in the global market (Akar et al., 2024; Onur & Yazıcıoğlu, 2024). In this context, restaurants are important touchpoints where the gastronomic offerings of the destination are presented to tourists and where the local culinary experience is enjoyed. (Zhu et al.,2024). In this highly competitive environment, the way for restaurant businesses to stand out is to build strong brand awareness among consumers and offer a high perceived service quality. Brand awareness represents a business's presence and recognition in the consumer's mind, forming the first step in the decision-making process. On the other hand, perceived service quality is a result of consumers' subjective evaluations of the excellence of the service offered. On the other hand, perceived service quality positively and significantly affects destination brand image (Nuralam et al., 2025). However, it can be argued that in the relationship between awareness and perceptions of quality and economic outcomes, the transformation of these elements into a holistic gastronomic image in the consumer's mind can play a significant role.

Drawing on the food image literature, this study considers gastronomy image as a construct expressing consumers' perceptions and mental representations of the food and cuisine offered within a gastronomic experience (Lai et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020).Within the framework of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, it is accepted that external stimuli influence individuals' cognitive and emotional internal states, leading to behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In the context of gastronomy, Akar et al. (2024), using the S-O-R model, demonstrated that gastronomy information presentation quality on social media positively affects the cognitive and emotional gastronomy destination image. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2024), revealed that tourists' perceived values regarding food experiences positively influence the perceived destination image, and that destination image plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between perceived values of food experiences and revisit intention. Furthermore, Lai et al. (2020) showed that cognitive and emotional food image components can significantly predict tourists' behavioral intentions. These findings indicate that gastronomy image can play a significant role in transforming stimuli related to the gastronomic experience into consumers' cognitive and emotional evaluations, and in reflecting these evaluations in behavioral outcomes. Accordingly, in the present study, brand awareness and perceived service quality are considered as external stimuli, gastronomy image as the consumer's internal cognitive and emotional state, and the willingness to pay a higher price as a behavioral response.

Aaker (1991), who developed the customer-based brand equity approach, defined perceived quality as one of the fundamental dimensions of brand equity and stated that perceived quality can provide businesses with the advantage of differentiating themselves from competitors and demanding higher prices. Especially for restaurant businesses operating in the service sector, perceived service quality is not only a factor that increases customer satisfaction but also a strategic factor contributing to businesses achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Expanding on this approach, Netemeyer et al. (2004) revealed that perceived quality is one of the fundamental antecedents that directly influences consumers' willingness to pay a price premium for a brand. These findings show that consumers are more inclined to accept higher prices when they perceive a product or service as being of higher quality.

However, the process explaining consumers' willingness to pay more is not limited solely to perceived quality. In the context of gastronomy tourism, the gastronomy image of destinations also plays a significant role in shaping this behavior. Local foods, cooking techniques, and regional flavors are fundamental elements that differentiate the culinary culture of destinations and contribute to the formation of the destination's gastronomic identity (Rozin & Rozin, 1981). The resulting positive gastronomy image strengthens the destination's marketability and positively influences consumers' perceptions of the destination (Long, 2004). Recent research also shows that gastronomy image, geographically indicated products, and sustainable production practices can increase consumers' willingness to pay more (Anis et al., 2023; Erekalo et al., 2025; Lokman & Buyruk, 2025). However, the existing literature has not yet reached a consensus on the underlying mechanisms through which consumers' willingness to pay more is formed. Some studies explain willingness to pay more through perceived quality (Netemeyer et al., 2004), while others suggest that brand experience and brand loyalty are the determining factors (Erwin & Saragih, 2025). In the context of gastronomy destinations, studies that address brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more within the same model are limited. In particular, how brand awareness and perceived service quality shape gastronomy image and how this relationship affect willingness to pay more has not been sufficiently clarified. Accordingly, this study examines the role of gastronomy image in the effect of brand awareness and perceived service quality on willingness to pay more. The research was conducted based on data obtained from domestic tourists visiting Gaziantep. It is thought that this study, conducted specifically in Gaziantep, an important destination in terms of gastronomy tourism, will contribute to filling the gap in the relevant literature and offer important implications for the marketing strategies of gastronomy destinations.

1. Literature Review and Hypothetical Model

1.1. Theoretical Basis

This study examines the impact of brand awareness and perceived service quality on consumers' willingness to pay more in restaurants focusing on the concept of gastronomy image. The theoretical basis of this study is built upon Brand Equity Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. In Brand Equity Theory, willingness to pay more is one of the most fundamental indicators of brand loyalty and brand value; a loyal customer base is willing to pay a higher price for the benefits offered by the brand compared to its competitors. Perceived service quality is directly related to the prestige and reputation of the brand (Aaker, 1996b; Keller, 2013). Keller (1993), in his Customer-Based Brand Equity model, defines brand awareness (recall and recognition) as the first and indispensable step in brand knowledge. According to Keller, brand awareness ensures that the brand is included in the consumer's consideration set. While brand awareness alone is not sufficient, when combined with strong, positive, and unique brand associations, it positively influences the consumer's response to marketing activities (such as price increases) (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2013).

In this study, the behavioral mechanism is explained through the S-O-R model. According to the original model developed by Mehrabian & Russell (1974), environmental stimuli (S) affect the individual's emotional state (O), and this state results in approach or avoidance behaviors (R) (Jang & Namkung, 2009). Jacoby (2002), re-examining the S-O-R model in the context of

consumer behavior, emphasizes that individuals' behavior is shaped not so much by objective reality, but by how they perceive and interpret stimuli. According to this model, the organism stage refers to the internal evaluation process in which external stimuli are assessed through the consumer's cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes. Jang and Namkung (2009) adapted the S-O-R model to the restaurant context, considering food quality, service quality, and the physical environment as key external stimuli influencing consumer evaluations. Their research findings show that these stimuli primarily affect consumers' emotional states, and these internal states then shape behavioral intentions such as revisiting and recommending. In this study, the S-O-R model is adapted to the context of gastronomy tourism; brand awareness and perceived service quality are treated as external stimuli that shape consumers' perceptions of a destination, while gastronomy image represents the organism by reflecting consumers' internal evaluation of these stimuli. Willingness to pay more is conceptualized as the behavioral response resulting from this evaluation process. Accordingly, while Brand Equity Theory explains why brand awareness and perceived service quality are important to consumers, the S-O-R model offers a complementary theoretical framework explaining how these stimuli are transformed into a willingness to pay more through consumers' internal evaluations.

1.1.1. Brand Awareness

A brand can be explained as a combination of tangible and intangible elements that are intended to generate recognition and identity while also establishing the reputation of a product, service, individual, place, or organization (Sammut-Bonnici, 2014). In this sense, a brand reflects certain values, culture, identity, and also the user of the product. Based on this view, a brand can distinguish companies and products from one another and influence how customers perceive both the business and the product (Kavak & Karabacakoğlu, 2007).

Brand awareness, as a fundamental component of brand equity, refers to the extent to which a brand exists in the consumer’s mind. It has been defined in multiple ways across the literature. Brand awareness reflects the strength of a brand’s presence in the consumer’s memory (Aaker, 1996a). It is also described as consumers’ ability to recognize and recall a brand under different conditions based on their performance in identification tasks (Kotler et al., 2009). Valkenburg and Buijen (2005) further argue that active and passive knowledge of a brand together constitute brand awareness. As noted by Erdil and Uzun (2010), there is a clear relationship between awareness and purchasing behavior, as consumers need to have some level of knowledge about a product in order to be willing to purchase it. Therefore, brand awareness has become an important variable in many tourism and gastronomy studies due to the highly competitive nature of the sector (Kim & Kim, 2004; Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011; Şengül, 2018; Mokhtar, Othman & Ariffin, 2019; Oğuz, Haseki & Buzcu, 2019; Utami & Jannah, 2019; Bernarto et al., 2020; Kodaş, 2021; Jiang et al., 2023).

Brand awareness plays a particularly critical role in experience-oriented services such as restaurants and gastronomy tourism. The inability to fully evaluate services before purchase leads to uncertainty and perceived risk in the decision-making process for consumers (Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993). Therefore, consumers tend to reduce perceived risk by preferring brands they are familiar with and recognize. According to Keller (1993), brand awareness facilitates the formation and recall of brand associations by enabling consumers to recognize and remember the brand, thus creating the necessary cognitive foundation for the development of brand image. In this context, it is considered that brand awareness in the context of gastronomy tourism can contribute to shaping consumers' perceptions of the gastronomic experience and gastronomy image. Especially in gastronomy tourism, since tourists cannot directly evaluate the quality of service in an unfamiliar destination before experiencing it, brand awareness plays a significant role in building trust and shaping restaurant preferences. According to Berry (2000), since services are inherently intangible, consumers cannot fully evaluate service quality before purchasing. Therefore, one of the fundamental functions of service brands is to reduce perceived risk and build trust in the purchasing decision. Brand awareness and brand knowledge facilitate the

decision-making process, especially in experience-oriented services such as restaurants and gastronomy tourism, by enabling consumers to develop familiarity with the business.

1.1.2. Perceived Service Quality

Services differ fundamentally from physical goods, as they emerge through human interaction and exchange rather than existing independently, and are primarily characterized as intangible benefits that satisfy specific needs (Kayastha, 2011; Palmer, 2014). Due to their inherent properties, such as intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability, services are experienced rather than physically possessed, which makes their evaluation more complex compared to tangible products (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Zeithaml, 1981). These characteristics also imply variability in performance and simultaneous production and consumption, where provider as well as customer contribute to the service outcome (Üner, 1994). As a consequence, although these characteristics make services difficult to evaluate, the growing importance of the service sector has increased the emphasis on quality, particularly in competitive environments where firms seek to meet customer expectations and sustain profitability (Kozak & Aydın, 2018), which in turn highlights the role of perceived service quality as a key determinant shaped by customers' evaluations and experiences.

Service quality, much like the concept of service itself, is difficult to define due to the diverse perspectives in the literature, with early studies initially focusing on product quality before shifting toward services (Akbaba & Kılınç, 2001). It is generally understood as the outcome of a comparison between customers' expectations and their actual service experiences, encompassing both the service process and its outcome (Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Given its inherently intangible nature, the concept is more commonly addressed as perceived service quality, which reflects customers' subjective evaluations (Akbaba & Kılınç, 2001). As a result, measuring perceived service quality has become increasingly important in competitive service industries, and it has been widely examined in tourism and gastronomy research (Dean, Morgan & Tan, 2002; Kayaman & Araslı, 2007; Hu, Kandampully & Juwaheer, 2009; Timur, 2018; Aksaray & Ateş, 2019; Uslu & Karabulut, 2019; Kocagöz & Eyitmiş, 2020; Setyawan, Mugiono & Hussein, 2020; Solunoğlu, 2020; Davras & Özperçin, 2021; Yalçın, 2021; Yeşildağ & Özkök, 2021; Eren, Uslu & Aydın, 2023).

1.1.1. Gastronomy Image

Food and beverages are an essential part of daily life and have increasingly become a central component of tourism activities. While dining was once considered a secondary element of travel, it has evolved into a primary motivation for tourists, driven by changing consumption patterns, the search for new experiences, and the growing importance of leisure and pleasure-oriented activities (Boniface, 2016). In this context, the concept of gastronomic image can be understood through destination image, which reflects tourists' knowledge, emotions, and overall impressions of a place (Baloglu & McClearly, 1999). Accordingly, gastronomic image refers to tourists' overall attitudes toward a destination's food and culinary offerings, encompassing cognitive elements such as local dishes, dining customs, and eating habits, and affective elements as well such as the symbolic meanings associated with food (Chang & Mak, 2018).

Gastronomic image has also been defined as tourists' perceptions of a destination's food offerings, especially local cuisine (Lòpez-Guzmàn & Sànchez-Cañizares, 2012; Eren, 2018), as well as their beliefs, emotions, and impressions concerning food, beverage establishments, and culinary culture (Eren, 2019). Food serves as a symbol of cultural identity, communication, and social status (Frochot, 2003), and local cuisine plays a key role in connecting tourists with the destination both during and after their visit (Sims, 2009). Beyond being a source of enjoyment, consuming local food represents a cultural experience and an important attraction for destinations (Bessière, 1998). Supporting this, official statistics indicate that in 2023, expenditures on food and beverages by domestic and international tourists visiting Turkey increased by 33.2% compared to the same period of the previous year, highlighting the growing economic significance of gastronomy within tourism (TÜİK, 2023). Given its role in differentiating destinations and enhancing competitiveness, gastronomic image has become a widely examined construct in

tourism and gastronomy research (Seo, Yun & Kim, 2014; Chang & Mak, 2018; Majid et al., 2018; Bezirgan, 2019; Suna & Alvarez, 2019; Cinnioğlu & Gündoğdu, 2023).

1.1.2. Willingness to Pay More

In highly competitive markets, businesses aim to sustain customer preference and continuity, because this reduces risk and increases profitability, while customers tend to repeatedly choose brands that meet their expectations and may even accept paying higher prices (Dölarslan & Özer, 2014). Willingness to pay more has been defined as customers' readiness to continue purchasing despite price increases or to pay a premium for a preferred brand (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996), as well as the maximum price they are willing to pay for a product (Wertenbroch & Skiera, 2002). It is also considered a key indicator of brand loyalty and a reflection of behavioral intention in consumption decisions (Aaker, 1996b; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Shin et al., 2017).

Furthermore, emotional attachment, trust, and satisfaction play a crucial role in shaping customers' willingness to pay more, as strong relational bonds with a brand can lead consumers to prioritize it despite higher costs (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). In this context, satisfied and loyal customers are more likely to continue purchasing even in the face of price increases, which reinforces the importance of differentiation and long-term customer relationships for businesses (Güven & Sarıışık, 2014; Homburg, Koschate & Hoyer, 2005). Existing studies indicate that willingness to pay more is typically examined alongside other variables rather than as a standalone construct, and is most commonly associated with themes such as sustainability, green practices, and environmental awareness, although it has also been linked to local foods, packaged products, and branding contexts (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Srinivasan, Anderson & Ponnavolu, 2002; Netemayer et al., 2004; Amendah & Park, 2008; Aryal et al., 2009; Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014; Yu, Gao & Zeng, 2014; Zia & Sohail, 2016; Shin et al., 2017; Yıldız, 2019; Bakır & Safarzade, 2020; Nicolau et al., 2020; Linnes et al., 2022). In the context of gastronomy tourism, willingness to pay more is not a behavior that can be explained solely by the functional characteristics of the product or service. Tourists can view gastronomic experiences as holistic experiences that are not limited to food consumption but contribute to their overall experience of the destination. Therefore, gastronomy is seen not only as an element that satisfies nutritional needs, but also as an integral component of the destination experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Similarly, Ellis et al. (2018) reveal that culture and authenticity are among the key research themes in the gastronomy tourism literature, and that food is considered an important tool in tourists' interaction with the place. This suggests that gastronomic experiences can have functional, experiential and symbolic value, and so that tourists may be inclined to accept higher prices accordingly. Indeed, research conducted on Michelin-starred restaurants shows that consumers' willingness to pay more stems not only from high-quality food or service, but also from the uniqueness, prestige, hedonic value, level of interest in gastronomy, and knowledge of gastronomy have all been shown to influence the choice of gastronomic experience. Findings from Kiatkawsin and Han (2019) reveal that consumer evaluations of gastronomic experiences and interest in gastronomy, particularly in the context of Michelin-starred restaurants, are significantly correlated with a willingness to pay more (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). Therefore, willingness to pay more in gastronomy tourism is not merely an economic decision based on the quality of the food or service offered; it can be considered a reflection of the cultural, symbolic, and experiential value that tourists attribute to the destination and the gastronomic experience.

According to Aaker (1991), perceived quality is the consumer's subjective evaluation of the overall superiority or excellence of a product or service. In the context of service businesses, this evaluation is shaped by customers' perceived service quality. In this study, gastronomy image is considered as the organism (O) component, representing consumers' cognitive evaluations and holistic perception of the gastronomic experience. In the S-O-R model, organism (O) represents the individual's internal psychological responses to external stimuli. According to Jacoby's (2002) reinterpretation, this process encompasses cognitive and emotional evaluations (Mehrabian &

Russell, 1974; Jacoby, 2002). According to Keller (1993), brand awareness facilitates the formation of brand associations by increasing the brand's accessibility in the consumer's memory, thus creating the necessary cognitive foundation for the development of brand image. According to the Brand Equity approach, consumers attribute more value to brands they believe to have higher quality and stronger brand value. This can increase their willingness to pay premium prices (Aaker, 1991; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Brand awareness contributes to the formation of expectations and first impressions regarding the gastronomic experience by enabling consumers to recognize and remember the brand (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996b). This cognitive foundation about the brand can be considered one of the antecedents shaping consumers' gastronomy image. Perceived service quality is one of the key stimuli influencing how consumers evaluate the gastronomic experience holistically. In the context of restaurants, positive evaluations of service quality have been shown to affect consumers' internal cognitive and emotional processes (Jang & Namkung, 2009). Accordingly, it is considered that positive perceptions of service quality can contribute to the formation of the gastronomy image. Therefore, gastronomy image represents a cognitive process in which external stimuli such as brand awareness and perceived service quality are transformed into a holistic evaluation in the consumer's mind, laying the groundwork for behavioral outcomes.

Building on the theoretical basis, brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more can be considered as interrelated constructs within the tourism and gastronomy context. The literature suggests that these variables collectively influence consumers' perceptions and behavioral tendencies rather than operating in isolation. Therefore, previous studies examining the relationships among these variables are presented in the following section to establish the basis for hypothesis development.

1.2. Hypothetical Model

The proposed model of this study is based on explaining how brand awareness and perceived service quality influence willingness to pay more, shaped through gastronomy image. As summarized in the previous section, brand awareness increases consumer familiarity and mental accessibility to the business, while perceived service quality shapes consumers' overall evaluations of the service offered by the business. It is expected that the evaluations formed in consumers' minds by these variables contribute to the shaping of the gastronomy image. A strong gastronomy image is expected to positively influence consumers' overall evaluations of the destination and gastronomy offering, strengthening their tendency to accept a higher price. Accordingly, gastronomy image is considered as a mediating mechanism playing a role in the relationship between brand awareness, perceived service quality, and willingness to pay more. Within this conceptual framework, the direct and indirect relationships between the variables have been evaluated in light of existing literature and theoretical foundations, and the following hypotheses have been developed.

Although the relationship between brand awareness and gastronomy image has not been directly examined, previous studies indicate that gastronomy image is a significant component of destination image and that gastronomy tourism itself can serve as a major attraction (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Choe & Kim, 2018; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Wang, 2015). Furthermore, studies investigating the effect of brand awareness on image present mixed findings, with some reporting limited influence (Bilgin, 2018), while others demonstrate a positive and significant effect (Aberdeen, Syamsun & Najib, 2016; Setyawan, Mugiono & Hussein, 2020; Büyükdağ, 2021).

Regarding the relationship between perceived service quality and gastronomy image, a substantial body of research across different sectors suggests that service quality positively influences image perceptions. For instance, service quality has been found to enhance hotel image (Hu, Kandampully & Juwaheer, 2009), positively affect brand image in retail contexts (Mai & Cuong, 2021), and significantly influence restaurant image (Uslu & Karabulut, 2019). These findings are further supported by other studies (Oliveira, Saldanha & Vong, 2020; Davras & Özperçin, 2021; Eren, Uslu & Aydın, 2023; Manyangara, Makanyeza & Muranda, 2023).

The relationship between brand awareness and willingness to pay more has also been examined in prior research. Brand awareness increases the likelihood of a brand being considered and preferred by consumers (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble & Donthu, 1995; Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012; Pouramid and Iranzadeh, 2012). Several studies further indicate that brand awareness has a positive effect on consumers' willingness to pay more (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014; Munir et al., 2017; Utami and Jannah, 2019; Oppong, Owusu & Owusu-Ansah, 2022). However, this relationship has been relatively underexplored in the context of gastronomy.

Similarly, perceived service quality has been associated with willingness to pay more, as customers who perceive higher quality are more likely to maintain their preferences even in the face of price increases (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014; Munir et al., 2017; Utami & Jannah, 2019). In restaurant settings, while improving service quality can provide competitive advantage (Headley & Choi, 1992; Lewis, 1989), it may also increase operational costs (Tse, 2001), and studies examining its direct impact on willingness to pay more remain limited.

In terms of the relationship between gastronomy image and willingness to pay more, although direct empirical studies are scarce, research on image and brand image suggests a positive effect on consumers' willingness to pay a premium (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Johansson, 2014; Hibban & Wahyudi, 2022; Oppong, Owusu & Owusu-Ansah, 2022; Sevira & Widodo, 2023). Additionally, food image has been shown to positively influence revisit intention (Lertputtarak, 2012), and strong brands are often associated with higher willingness to pay (Augusto & Torres, 2018). These findings suggest that a favorable gastronomy image may lead consumers to be more willing to pay higher prices.

When these relationships are considered together, it is thought that gastronomy image can play a role as an independent variable and as an explanatory mechanism in the relationship between brand awareness, perceived service quality, and willingness to pay more as well. Brand awareness can form the starting point of perceptions about a business by increasing the consumer's familiarity and mental accessibility to the business. However, brand recognition and recall by the consumer may not be sufficient to accept a higher price alone; it is important that this cognitive familiarity translates into a positive image of the business and the gastronomic attributes offered. Similarly, while perceived service quality shapes consumers' evaluations of the service offered by the business, it is thought that the overall image formed regarding the business and gastronomic offerings can play a role in transforming these evaluations into a tendency to accept a higher price. From the perspective of the S-O-R model, while brand awareness and perceived service quality initiate the consumer's mental evaluation process as external stimuli, gastronomy image represents the organismal stage where these stimuli are given meaning by the consumer and transformed into a holistic perception. It is expected that the positive gastronomy image resulting from this internal evaluation will translate into a behavioral response from the consumer in the form of accepting a higher price. Therefore, gastronomy image is conceptualized as a mediating mechanism that explains the effect of brand awareness and perceived service quality on willingness to pay more and helps to understand how these effects occur.

However, a review of the existing literature reveals limited attention to the combined effects of brand awareness and perceived service quality on willingness to pay more within the context of gastronomy. More importantly, empirical evidence on how these variables shape willingness to pay more through gastronomy image is limited. In particular, the contribution of brand awareness and perceived service quality to the formation of gastronomy image, and the role of gastronomy image as a mechanism that transforms these perceptions into willingness to pay more, have not been sufficiently examined holistically in existing research. While previous studies have addressed the relationships between consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes in a gastronomic context (Chi et al., 2010), this study examines these relationships within a holistic model that considers the mediating role of gastronomy image. In this respect, the study contributes to the literature by addressing the effects of brand awareness and perceived service quality on willingness to pay more not only through direct relationships but also through indirect effects that

may arise via gastronomy image. The model generated for this set of relationships can be seen in Figure 1. Also, based on the literature reviewed above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1: Brand awareness has a positive and significant effect on gastronomy image.

H_2: Perceived service quality has a positive and significant effect on gastronomy image.

H_3: Brand awareness has a positive and significant effect on willingness to pay more.

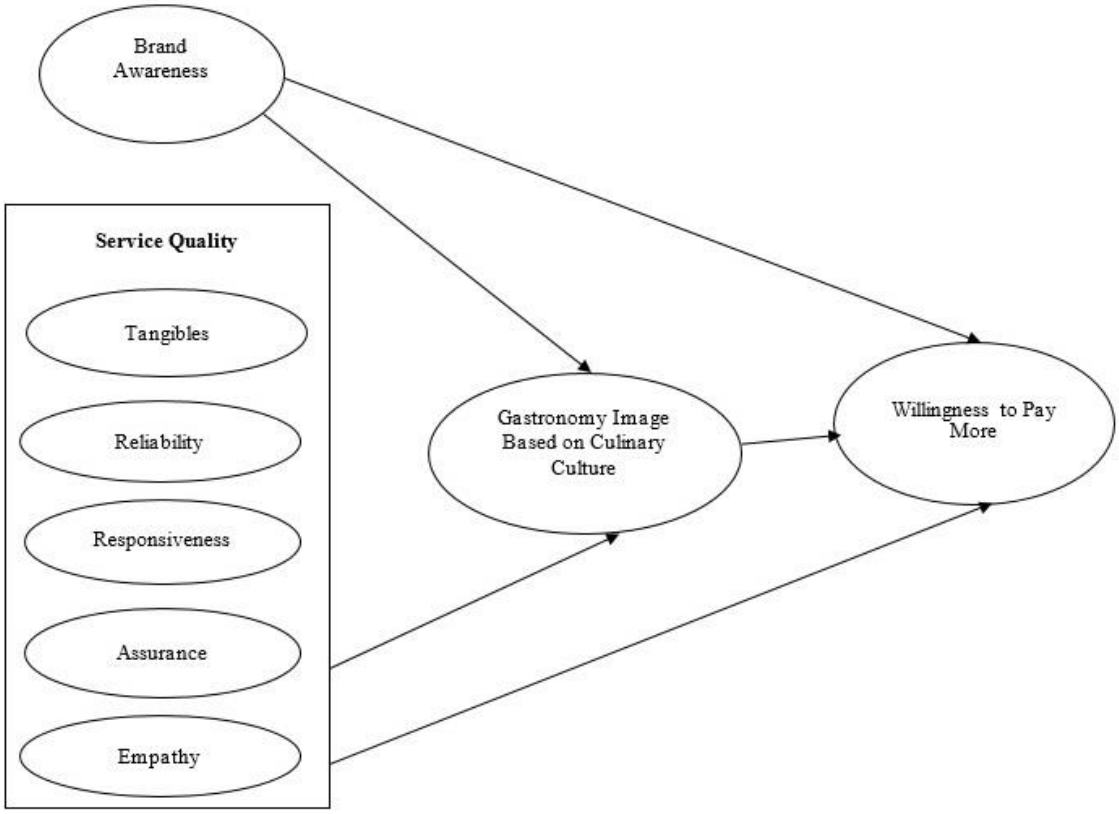
H_4: Perceived service quality has a positive and significant effect on willingness to pay more.

H_5: Gastronomy image has a positive and significant effect on willingness to pay more.

H_6: Gastronomy image mediates the relationship between brand awareness and willingness to pay more.

H_7: Gastronomy image mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and willingness to pay more.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Source: Own elaboration

2. Method and Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research method, defined as research aiming to obtain precise and generalizable results through numerical data. Quantitative research is characterized by repeatable observations and measurements, an emphasis on objectivity, and the use of mathematical and statistical analysis techniques (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2017). One of the primary data collection tools in this approach is the questionnaire, defined as a form designed to gather the necessary data for research. Questionnaires are widely used due to their ability to collect large amounts of data in a short time (Karagöz, 2017). Accordingly, a questionnaire was used in this study for primary data collection. In addition, secondary data related to variables such as brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more were obtained from electronic databases, books, and periodicals.

2.1. Measurement Scale

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section of the questionnaire included items measuring the independent variables (brand awareness and perceived service quality), the mediating variable (gastronomy image), and the dependent variable (willingness to pay more) while the second section gathered demographic information such as gender, age, education level, and monthly income. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The study aimed to assess tourists' levels of agreement regarding brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more. Previously validated measurement tools were adopted: brand awareness based on Sean Hyun and Kim (2011), perceived service quality based on Kayaman and Araslı (2007), gastronomy image based on Wang (2015), and willingness to pay more based on Netemeyer et al. (2004). In adapting the scales to the Turkish form, a translation and back-translation procedure was applied, and the linguistic and conceptual suitability of the items was submitted to the evaluation of field experts. Necessary adjustments were made in line with expert opinions. Furthermore, the scale items were adapted to the context of gastronomy tourism and Gaziantep restaurants. These adaptations were carried out to ensure the suitability of the items to the research context while preserving their original conceptual meaning. As an example of contextual adaptation, the phrase "This [hotel] has up-to-date equipment" from SERVQUAL was adapted to the restaurant context and used as "*This restaurant has up-to-date equipment*." In the gastronomy image scale, the phrase "offers variety of foods" has been adapted to "*Gaziantep cuisine offers variety of foods*," reflecting the destination and culinary context of the research. Similarly, in the brand awareness scale, the phrase "I am aware of this restaurant brand" has been adapted to the context of Gaziantep restaurants, becoming "*I am aware of the restaurants in Gaziantep*." Likewise, in the willingness to pay more scale, the phrase "I am willing to pay a lot more for (brand name) than other brands of (product category)" has been adapted to reflect a comparison of restaurants across destinations rather than brands, becoming "*I am willing to pay a lot more for the restaurants in Gaziantep than the restaurants in different destinations*."

The gastronomy image scale was adapted from the scale developed by Wang (2015), based on the works of Ab Karim and Chi (2010) and Lertputtarak (2012). Although the original scale consisted of three dimensions and 18 items, only six items from the "culinary culture" dimension were used in this study. The retention of this dimension and the exclusion of the other two dimensions are based on evaluations regarding both the conceptual and research context. The scale items were submitted to the opinions of field experts to evaluate their suitability for the context of Gaziantep's gastronomy tourism and restaurant-focused research. As a result of this evaluation, it was assessed that some items related to the quality of food and beverage services significantly overlapped in content with the items in the perceived service quality scale, and thus could weaken the conceptual distinction between the two constructs. In addition, it was observed that some items in the gastronomy activities dimension related to specific gastronomic activities such as wine tours and street markets, which do not have a direct equivalent in the restaurant-focused Gaziantep context of this study. Therefore, the six items in the "culinary culture" dimension, which more directly align with the purpose and context of the research, have been retained. This measurement choice is also consistent with the fact that the image of destination gastronomy can be addressed with different scopes and conceptualizations in the literature. Ab Karim and Chi (2010) examined destinations' perceptions of gastronomy through the food image. Lai et al.(2019), on the other hand, discussed the conceptualization of the food image, the role of food and cuisine in the formation of destination brand image, and the different dimensions of the food image. When these studies are considered together, it is seen that the gastronomy image of a destination can be conceptualized not only through the entirety of gastronomic activities but also through food, cuisine, and perceptions related to them. Accordingly, it is not claimed in the present study that the gastronomic image is fully represented by the three-dimensional structure in Wang (2015). Instead, the gastronomy image has been operationalized within a more specific

scope, reflecting consumers' general perception of the characteristics of Gaziantep cuisine, in line with the context and purpose of the research on Gaziantep restaurants. Therefore, the measure used represents the culinary/food-related dimension of the gastronomy image. However, the conceptual variable in the study is called "gastronomy image" because the six items used encompass perceptions not only of a specific food or gastronomic activity, but also of multiple fundamental characteristics of Gaziantep cuisine, such as food variety, food quality, use of local products, presentation appeal, cooking methods, and taste. Therefore, "gastronomy image" in this study is limited to a culinary-focused measure of gastronomy image related to Gaziantep cuisine, rather than a complete equivalent of Wang's (2015) three-dimensional structure.

Perceived service quality was measured using the SERVQUAL scale originally developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) and later adapted by Kayaman and Araslı (2007). The scale consists of 22 items across five dimensions and in this study, a high-order construct was used. The evaluation of the five dimensions of SERVQUAL under a higher-order service quality construct has also been examined in previous research. Wang et al. (2010) tested the SERVQUAL model using a higher-order factor analysis approach, examining the modeling of service quality as a second-order construct. Similarly, Wilkins et al. (2007) examined the structure of service quality in the context of hospitality and presented empirical findings suggesting that service quality can be evaluated holistically as a second-order dimension. Accordingly, the original five-dimensional structure of the SERVQUAL scale has been preserved in this study; the dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy have been modeled under a reflective second-order construct representing overall perceived service quality. Thus, while the conceptual separation of the five dimensions is maintained, perceived service quality is treated as a general higher-order construct in the research model. When the results of the first-level measurement model are examined, it is seen that the factor loadings for the five dimensions range between 0.790 and 0.890. The AOV values of the physical characteristics, reliability, enthusiasm, assurance, and empathy dimensions are 0.683, 0.677, 0.736, 0.709, and 0.740, respectively; the composite reliability (CR) values are 0.896, 0.913, 0.893, 0.907, and 0.934; Cronbach's alpha (CA) values were calculated as 0.845, 0.881, 0.819, 0.862, and 0.912. These values indicate that the five first-order dimensions have sufficient convergent validity and internal consistency. In the second-order measurement model, the loadings of the physical tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy dimensions on perceived service quality ranged from 0.816 to 0.915. The AOV value of the second-order construct was found to be 0.792, the composite reliability value 0.950, and the Cronbach's alpha value 0.934. These results show that the five first-order dimensions strongly reflect the second-order construct representing perceived service quality, and that this higher-level construct has sufficient convergent validity and internal consistency.

Brand awareness was measured using a four-item, single-factor scale adapted by Sean Hyun and Kim (2011) from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Willingness to pay more was measured using a three-item scale developed by Netemayer et al. (2004). All constructs were assessed using a five-point Likert scale.

2.2. Research Location, Population & Sampling and Data Collection

The population of this study consists of domestic tourists who have visited at least once the top 10 restaurants in Gaziantep listed on Tripadvisor. Online platforms have become essential marketing tools for tourism businesses, particularly for highly rated restaurants (Ramon, Cristobal, & Marine-Roig, 2019). As one of the largest global travel platforms operating in 49 markets and 28 languages, Tripadvisor hosts over 859 million reviews and receives approximately 463 million monthly visitors (Tripadvisor, 2022). Online reviews play a significant role in shaping consumer decisions by providing both information and recommendations, thereby reducing perceived risk in purchasing behavior (Özcan, 2010; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). Therefore, the use of Tripadvisor as a basis for defining the study population is considered appropriate, particularly given the inclusion of brand awareness as a key variable.

Gaziantep was selected as the research location due to its rich gastronomic heritage and cultural diversity. The city has hosted numerous civilizations and reflects the culinary influences of Mesopotamia, enriched by its historical role as a trade route connecting Anatolia and Arab regions (Gökırmaklı et al., 2017). With more than 400 traditional dishes, diverse cooking techniques, and distinctive ingredients, Gaziantep represents a unique gastronomic destination (Türkiye Kültür Portalı, 2022; Güzelbey, 2018). Its culinary significance has been internationally recognized through its inclusion in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2015, making it one of the first cities globally and the first in Turkey to receive this designation (UNESCO Türkiye Milli Komisyonu, 2022). Additionally, the city has 108 geographically indicated gastronomic products registered by the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office (Türk Patent ve Marka Kurumu, 2026). These characteristics make Gaziantep a suitable context for examining gastronomy-related variables.

Since it is not feasible to reach the entire population, a sample was selected. In multivariate analyses, the recommended sample size is at least ten times the number of measurement items (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2017). Given that the study includes 37 items across four variables, the minimum sample size required is 370. Additionally, based on established sample size tables, a minimum of 384 participants is suggested for large populations at a 95% confidence level (Bartlett, Kotrlik & Higgins, 2001; Gürbüz & Şahin, 2017). Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), the minimum sample size was calculated as 103 (Power = 0.80; $f^2 = 0.15$; $\alpha = 0.05$). Since the minimum sample size resulting from G*Power was lower than the values derived from the other sample size criteria, the higher threshold of 384 participants was used to determine the final sample size.

A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed due to practical constraints (Kumar, 2011; Karagöz, 2017). Data were collected over a six-month period starting in December 2021 through surveys distributed in selected food and beverage establishments, direct contact with tourists who had visited the identified restaurants, and face-to-face administration in tourist-dense areas. A total of 455 questionnaires were collected; after excluding 14 invalid responses, 441 valid responses were retained for analysis. This sample size exceeds the recommended thresholds, indicating sufficient representativeness of the population.

2.3. Assumptions and Limitations

This study, which examines the role of gastronomy image in the relationship between brand awareness, perceived quality, and willingness to pay more, is based on several assumptions and limitations. First, it is assumed that Tripadvisor rankings reasonably reflect tourists' evaluations and preferences. It is also assumed that the selected scales and population are appropriate for the aims of the study, that the sample is representative of the population, and that the analytical techniques employed are suitable for achieving the research objectives.

The study also has several limitations. As required by the research design, the sample consists only of tourists who visited the top ten restaurants listed on Tripadvisor at the time of the study, which constitutes the primary limitation. In addition, data collection coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and economic fluctuations, resulting in data being collected during a period of relatively low tourist activity. Data collection was conducted over a six-month period beginning in December 2021, and the findings are limited to tourists who visited the city and the selected restaurants during this period. Finally, some older participants were reluctant to complete face-to-face questionnaires due to the pandemic, leading to higher participation among younger tourists, which represents another limitation of the study.

2.4. Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling was used in the analysis of the data. For this study, the use of structural equation modeling called Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was preferred. PLS-SEM is used in tourism (Usakli and Küçükergin, 2018), marketing (Sarstedt et al., 2022), human resources (Ringle et al., 2018), psychology (Willaby et al., 2015), and many other fields (Kaufmann and Gaeckler, 2015; Sarstedt et al., 2014). Researchers may

offer different justifications for using PLS-SEM (Sarstedt et al., 2022; Usakli and Küçükergin, 2018). Several reasons exist for choosing this technique within the scope of this thesis.

Firstly, PLS-SEM is an effective tool in estimating complex models. In this thesis model, the number of variables and the number of relationships between variables are large. For this situation, the PLS-SEM is a suitable tool (Hair, Risher et al., 2019). Secondly, the research was conducted using second-order constructs. PLS-SEM offers different alternatives for second-order measurement (Sarstedt et al., 2019). For this reason, the use of PLS-SEM is present (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Thirdly, the use of PLS-SEM stands out in examining the mediation effect (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Within the scope of this study, there are also two mediation hypotheses. Thus, it is understood that PLS-SEM is a suitable tool in the analysis of this thesis model. Two software programs were used in the analysis of the data. SPSS was used for frequency determination. SmartPLS software was used for PLS-SEM analysis (Ringle, Wende et al., 2015).

1. Results

1.1. Demographic Characteristics

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Respondents (f=441)	
	F	**%**
Gender		
Female	255	57,8
Male	186	42,2
Age		
18-25 years old	139	31,5
26-33 years old	147	33,3
34-41 years old	155	35,1
Education Level		
Primary	9	2
High School	101	22,9
Associate Degree	44	10
Bachelor's Degree	193	43,8
Postgraduate	94	21,3
Monthly Income		
3000 TL and below	117	26,5
3001 TL-6000 TL	67	15,2
6001 TL- 9000 TL	110	24,9
9001 TL and above	147	33,3
Total	441	100

Source: Own elaboration

The responses of the participants to the demographic questions in the survey form are presented and evaluated in Table 1. It was observed that women constituted 57.8% of the total participants, while men constituted 42.2%. Looking at the age distribution in the table, participants aged 34-41 are more numerous than those in other groups (35.1%). However, considering that 31.5% of the participants are in the 18-25 age range and 33.3% are in the 26-33 age range, it is understood that the distribution of participants in the study is quite close to each other.

Looking at the education levels of the participants, it is observed that the largest group, 43.8%, consists of those with a bachelor's degree. The next largest groups are those with a high school degree (22.9%) and those with a postgraduate degree (21.3%). Those with associate's degrees and primary education account for 12% of the participants.

To summarize the income levels of the participants included in the study, those with an income of 9,001 TL and above constitute 33.3% of the total participants. This group is followed by participants with an income of 3,000 TL and below, whose proportion was calculated as 26.5%. Those with an income between 6,001 TL and 9,000 TL constituted 24.9% of the total participants, while those with an income between 3,001 TL and 6,000 TL constituted 15.2%.

1.2. Findings Regarding Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling

The results of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) are examined under two main headings, as recommended in the literature (Garson, 2016; Hair et al., 2011, 2017; Hair, Risher et al., 2019; Usakli and Küçükergin, 2018). First, the measurement model results are presented, including evidence for validity and reliability. Then, evaluations of the endogenous construct, including hypothesis testing, are presented. However, since the use of second-level constructs in perceived service quality is involved in these processes, the relevant procedure was followed.

In the examinations conducted via PLS-SEM, a two-stage approach was adopted in the second-level measurement. According to the discrete two-stage approach; first, estimation was made with a measurement model that only considers first-level constructs. In this stage, estimation was made by connecting the sub-dimensions to the relevant constructs, taking into account the construct found in the hypotheses. In the second stage, structural scores for first-level constructs related to perceived service quality were recorded, and predictions were made using this data at the second level (Sarstedt et al., 2019).

1.2.1. Outer Model (Measurement Model)

Within the scope of PLS-SEM, the outer model was evaluated according to the rules suggested by Hair et al. (2017). All items were measured reflectively. Therefore, the rules regarding reflective measurement were followed. In order to make the measurement more accurate, constructs consisting of multiple statements were included in the model (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2. Outer Model Results (First-Order Level)

Variables & Items	Loadings	AVE	CR	CA
Gastronomy Image				
Gaziantep cuisine offers variety of foods.	0,707	0,517	0,864	0,810
Gaziantep cuisine offers good quality of foods.	0,806			
Gaziantep cuisine offers regionally produced foods to tourists.	0,545			
Gaziantep cuisine offers attractive food presentation.	0,806			
Gaziantep cuisine offers different cooking methods.	0,665			
Gaziantep cuisine offers delicious food.	0,752			
Service Quality				
Tangibles				
This restaurant has up-to-date equipment.	0,821	0,683	0,896	0,845
This restaurant's facilities are visually appealing.	0,862			
This restaurant's employees are well dressed and appear neat.	0,805			
The appearance of the items used during the service process in this restaurant is keeping with the type of food provided.	0,816			
Reliability				
This restaurant promises to serve by a certain time, it does so.	0,799	0,677	0,913	0,881
When the customers have problems, this restaurant is sympathetic and reassuring.	0,824			
This restaurant provides the right service the first time.	0,847			
This restaurant provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	0,830			
This restaurant attaches importance on providing error-free service.	0,813			
Responsiveness				
Employees in this restaurant tell customers exactly when services will be performed.	0,800	0,736	0,893	0,819
Customers in this restaurant receive prompt service from this restaurant's employees.	0,880			
Employees of this restaurant are always willing to help customers.	0,890			
Assurance				
Customers can trust employees of this restaurant.	0,864	0,709	0,907	0,862
Customers feel safe in their transactions with this restaurant's employees.	0,878			

Employees of this restaurant are polite.	0,834			
Employees of this hotel are knowledgeable enough to answer questions.	0,790			
Empathy				
Employees of this restaurant give customers indiviual attention.	0,860			
Employees of this restaurant are always meet customers' requests and needs.	0,860			
Employees of this restaurant give personal attention to customers.	0,864	0,740	0,934	0,912
This restaurant has customers' best interests at heart.	0,863			
Employees of this restaurant understand the specific needs of customers.	0,853			
Brand Awareness				
I am aware of the restaurants in Gaziantep.	0,845			
I know what the restaurants in Gaziantep are like.	0,879			
Some characteristics of the restaurants in Gaziantep come to my mind quickly.	0,839	0,730	0,915	0,877
I can recognize the restaurants in Gaziantep among other destinations.	0,854			
Willingness to Pay More				
I am willing to pay a higher price for the restaurants in Gaziantep than the restaurants in different destinations.	0,942			
I am willing to pay 5% or 10% more for the restaurants in Gaziantep than the restaurants in different destinations.	0,935	0,876	0,955	0,929
I am willing to pay a lot more for the restaurants in Gaziantep than the restaurants in different destinations.	0,931			

Source: Own elaboration

As shown in Table 2, within the scope of convergent validity, both outer loadings were examined and the explained mean variance (AOV) was calculated and evaluated (Hair et al., 2017). Outer loading values are expected to exceed 0.70. Upon examination of the values, it is understood that this criterion was met for a significant portion of the loadings. However, one statement under the category of responsiveness was removed due to its negative impact on the evaluation of the outer model (Hair et al., 2017). However, other statements between 0.4 and 0.7 were retained in the model as they did not have a negative impact (Hair et al., 2017). AVE values must be above 0.50 for each construct. When the necessary examination was performed in Table 2, it is seen that all values exceed 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). These findings indicate that convergent validity has been achieved.

To determine internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) values were used. A value between 0.70 and 0.95 is recommended. This value is only slightly above 0.95 for the variable 'willingness to pay more'. Therefore, it can be said that the relevant criterion is met for CR values (Hair et al., 2017). CA values were also found to be above 0.70 (Hair, Black et al., 2019). Therefore, the investigations related to the external model were continued through discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (First-Order Level)

	WTP	**AWR**	**TAN**	**GASTIMA**	**RELI**	**EMP**	**ASSU**	**RESP**
WTP	**0,936**							
AWR	0,297	**0,855**						
TAN	0,499	0,302	**0,826**					
GASTIMA	0,313	0,416	0,481	**0,719**				
RELI	0,456	0,342	0,672	0,496	**0,823**			
EMP	0,558	0,337	0,665	0,457	0,787	**0,860**		

ASSU	0,530	0,346	0,631	0,447	0,798	0,824	**0,842**	
RESP	0,496	0,359	0,661	0,474	0,819	0,780	0,747	**0,858**

Source: Own elaboration - **Note:** 1- WTP: Willingness to Pay More; AWR: Brand Awareness; TAN: Tangibles; GASTIMA: Gastronomy Image; RELI: Reliability; EMP: Empathy; ASSU: Assurance; RESP: Responsiveness. 2- The values in bold represent the square roots of the AVE values.

Table 3 presents the first-order level analysis of the discriminant validity results according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to this criterion, the square root of the AVE value must be higher than the correlation values for the construct under assessment (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Examining Table 3 shows that this criterion is met and discriminant validity is achieved. Therefore, the second-level model analysis was conducted.

Table 4. Outer Model Results (Second-Order Level)

Items	**Loadings**	**AVE**	**CR**	**CA**
Variables				
Tangibles	0,816			
Reliability	0,915			
Responsiveness	0,901	0,792	0,950	0,934
Assurance	0,900			
Empathy	0,914			

Source: Own elaboration

Perceived service quality, included in the model as a second-level construct, is measured using five elements as shown in Table 4. These measurements are also reflective, and therefore the evaluation is based on the criteria mentioned above. The AVE value is above 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), and the CR and CA values were calculated as 0.95 and 0.934, respectively. In other words, these values are within the expected range (Hair, Black, et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2017).

Table 5. Discriminant Validity (Second-Order Level)

	WTP	**AWR**	**GASTIMA**	**QUA**
WTP	**0,936**			
AWR	0,297	**0,855**		
GASTIMA	0,313	0,416	**0,719**	
QUA	0,572	0,379	0,529	**0,890**

Source: Own elaboration-Note: 1- WTP: Willingness to Pay More; AWR: Brand Awareness; GASTIMA: Gastronomy Image; QUA: Perceived Service Quality.
2- The values in bold represent the square roots of the AVE values.

To evaluate the discriminant validity of second-order constructs, the F-L criterion was used, as in the first-order analysis. For all dimensions, the square root of the relevant AVE value is above the relevant correlation values. Therefore, discriminant validity was also ensured at the second level (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

1.2.2. Inner Model (Structural Model)

The outer model has been examined at both the first and second levels. These examinations have shown that there are no obstacles to examining the internal model. Therefore, this section focuses on the inner model.

Table 6. Inner Model

Hypothesis	**Effect**	**β [Confidence Interval]**	**p**	**Decision**	f^2
H_1	AWR→GASTIMA	0,252 [0,116;0,379]	0,000	Accepted	0,082
H_2	QUA→GASTIMA	0,434 [0,315;0,550]	0,000	Accepted	0,242
H_3	AWR→WTP	0,098 [-0,014;0,197]	0,064	Rejected	0,011
H_4	QUA→WTP	0,542 [0,452,0,632]	0,000	Accepted	0,305
H_5	GASTIMA→WTP	-0,015 [-0,145;0,106]	0,817	Rejected	0,000
R^2 GASTIMA:0,34 WTP:0,34					

Source: Own Elaboration- **Note:** 1- WTP: Willingness to Pay More; AWR: Brand Awareness; GASTIMA: Gastronomy Image; QUA: Quality

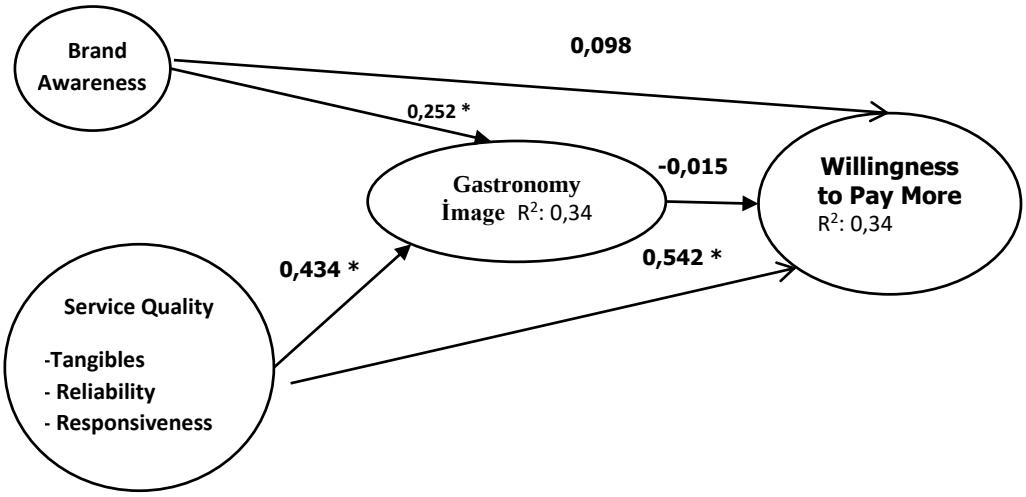
As part of the investigations into the inner model, VIF values were examined to determine whether a multicollinearity problem exists. The VIF values ranged from 1.168 to 1.503. This finding indicates that all values remained below 5. Therefore, it is understood that there is no multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2011, 2017).

Calculations were performed with 5000 subsamples for the bootstrappinging process. Thus, the significance of the path coefficients could be examined (Hair et al., 2011). Brand awareness positively and significantly affects the gastronomy image (β=0,252 [0,116; 0,379], p<0,05). Therefore, H_1 is supported. The effect of perceived quality on the gastronomy image is significant and positive, as expected (β=0,434 [0,315; 0,550], p<0,05). This finding supports H_2. The effect of brand awareness on the gastronomy image was found to be small based on the f^2 values. However, the effect of perceived quality on the gastronomy image is moderate (Cohen, 1992). The R^2 value for the gastronomy image was calculated as 0,34.

When the effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay more was examined, this effect was found to be statistically insignificant (β=0,098 [-0,014; 0,197], p>0,05). Therefore, H_3 is not supported. Perceived service quality positively affects willingness to pay more (β=0,542 [0,452; 0,632], p<0,05). This finding indicates that H_4 is supported. The effect detected here is moderate (Cohen, 1992). Gastronomy image does not significantly affect willingness to pay more (β=-0,015 [-0,145; 0,106], p>0,05). Therefore, H_5 is not supported. The R^2 value for willingness to pay more was found to be 0.34.

In addition to the direct effects described above, the study aimed to examine mediating effects in two different relationships. The decision tree proposed by Zhao et al. (2010) was used for mediation analysis. H_6 indicates that gastronomy image has a mediating effect in the relationship between brand awareness and willingness to pay more. Therefore, the indirect effect was examined first. The effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay more through gastronomy image was found to be insignificant (β=-0,004 [-0,046; 0,024], p>0,05), and as seen in Table 6, the direct effect of brand awareness on willingness to pay more is also insignificant. Therefore, no mediating effect was detected (Zhao et al., 2010), and H_6 was not supported. Using the same procedure, the mediating effect of gastronomy image was examined in the relationship between perceived service quality and willingness to pay more. The indirect effect in this relationship is insignificant (β=-0,006 [-0,061; 0,048], p>0,05), but the direct effect is significant. In this case, only the direct effect is present (Zhao et al., 2010), and H_7 is not supported. The results of the research model are summarized below.

Figure 2. The results of the research model



Note: * p<0,05

Conclusions and Discussion of the Results

This study examined the relationships between brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more, specifically in Gaziantep destination. According to the analysis results, brand awareness was found to have a positive and significant effect on gastronomy image, thus supporting hypothesis H_1. This finding indicates that tourists tend to prefer restaurants they are familiar with and have high brand recognition. As Sean Hyun and Kim (2011) and Loomis (2013) stated, consumers have a tendency to choose familiar brands and prefer well-known businesses to reduce risk perception. In the context of a destination, this mechanism can be explained by its function of reducing uncertainty regarding gastronomic offerings that tourists have not yet fully experienced. Well-known restaurants can be perceived as more predictable options for tourists, and this familiarity can contribute to more positive expectations regarding the quality of the food offered by the restaurant and the overall quality of the gastronomic experience. Thus, brand awareness can function not only as a factor in recognizing the restaurant but also as a signal of information and trust that shapes tourists' evaluations of gastronomic offerings in the destination. Particularly in the context of Gaziantep, positive familiarity and trust towards the restaurant brand can be reflected in tourists' overall evaluations of the quality, variety, and other distinctive features of the local cuisine. The results obtained support the studies of Aberdeen, Syamsun and Najib (2016), Setyawan, Mugiono and Hussein (2020), and Büyükdağ (2021). Although brand awareness had a positive and statistically significant effect on gastronomy image, the effect size was relatively small. This finding is broadly consistent with Bilgin (2018), who reported a significant but relatively small effect of brand awareness on brand image.

Another important result of the study is that perceived service quality positively and significantly affects the gastronomy image. The acceptance of hypothesis H_2 shows that the quality of service offered in restaurants is an important element in the formation of the destination's gastronomic perception. As Okumuş and Duygun (2008) stated, meeting customer expectations in terms of service quality leads to the development of a positive perception of the destination. This finding supports the studies of Oliveira, Saldanha and Vong (2020), Davras and Özperçin (2021), Islamy, Trisnawati and Rahayu (2022), Eren, Uslu and Aydın (2023), and Manyangara, Makanyeza and Muranda (2023). It is also consistent with the findings of Hu, Kandampully and Juwaheer (2009) and Uslu and Karabulut (2019) regarding the tourism and food & beverage sector.

The study found that perceived service quality has a positive and significant effect on the willingness to pay more, thus supporting hypothesis H_4. This result indicates that restaurants offering quality service may continue to be preferred by customers despite price increases. As Headley and Choi (1992) and Lewis (1989) stated, service quality provides a competitive advantage. Furthermore, according to Bolton and Myers (2003), customers are more tolerant of price changes when they receive quality service. This finding is similar to the results of Anselmsson, Bondesson, and Johansson (2014), Munir et al. (2017), and Utami and Jannah (2019).

In contrast, it was determined that brand awareness did not have a significant effect on the willingness to pay more, and hypothesis H_3 was rejected. Although brand awareness is generally accepted as important in purchasing decisions (Aaker, 1991), awareness of restaurants in Gaziantep did not increase tourists' willingness to pay more. The fact that this relationship has not emerged in the context of Gaziantep's gastronomy may be related to the fact that tourists, when evaluating restaurants, attach importance both to brand awareness and to the characteristics of the gastronomic experience itself. Indeed, Kim et al. (2020) revealed that in the context of gastronomy tourism, tourists seek information and gastronomic experiences, and that these experiences are shaped by factors related to both the tourists and the environment in which the experience takes place. This finding suggests that in gastronomic destinations, consumers may consider not only their familiarity with the restaurant brand but also the characteristics of the experience itself when evaluating restaurants. Therefore, while a restaurant's recognition facilitates the consumer's understanding of the restaurant and their inclusion in the evaluation process, it may not alone

create a willingness to pay a higher price. Especially in a destination with a distinct gastronomic identity like Gaziantep, it may be possible that consumers evaluate the price they are willing to pay based on the local gastronomic experience itself and the value they attribute to this experience, rather than on the recognition of the restaurant brand. In other words, the perception that a gastronomic experience is valuable may not necessarily lead to a willingness to pay a higher price for that experience based on brand awareness. This is consistent with the fact that although brand awareness has a positive and significant effect on gastronomy image, it does not have a significant direct effect on willingness to pay more. This finding parallels the study by Sevira and Widodo (2023), but differs from the findings of Anselmsson, Bondesson, and Johansson (2014), Monavvarian, Asgari, and Hoseinabadi (2015), Munir et al. (2017), Utami and Jannah (2019), and Oppong, Owusu, and Owusu-Ansah (2022).

Similarly, hypothesis H_5 was rejected because gastronomic image did not have a significant effect on willingness to pay more. It is noteworthy that despite Gaziantep being the first city to be included in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of gastronomy, its gastronomic image did not increase willingness to pay. There are a limited number of studies in the literature that directly examine the relationship between gastronomy image and willingness to pay more. However, while the studies of Anselmsson, Bondesson, and Johansson (2014), Saad et al. (2017), Hibban and Wahyudi (2022), Oppong, Owusu, and Owusu-Ansah (2022), and Sevira and Widodo (2023) show that image has a positive effect on willingness to pay; Tamara et al. (2021) stated that the effect of image is insignificant. The findings of this study are consistent with Tamara et al. (2021).

The study also examined the mediating effect of gastronomy image. It was determined that gastronomy image did not have a mediating effect on the relationship between brand awareness and willingness to pay more, thus rejecting hypothesis H_6. Similarly, it was found that gastronomy image did not have a significant mediating effect on the relationship between perceived service quality and willingness to pay more, and hypothesis H_7 was not supported. According to the approach of Zhao et al. (2010), only a direct effect can be said to exist in this case. The fact that gastronomy image, despite being perceived highly, did not have an effect on willingness to pay can be attributed to the fact that the data collection process of the research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing rules, capacity limitations implemented in restaurants, increased costs, and high inflation rates (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021; Turkish Statistical Institute, 2022) during the pandemic may have increased tourists' price sensitivity. As Gandhi (2022) stated, inflation can directly affect consumers' eating-out behavior. Therefore, even if tourists preferred to have a gastronomic experience, they may have been hesitant about paying more.

Theoretical Implications

Numerous studies in the literature examine the relationship between brand awareness, perceived service quality, and image (Kayaman & Araslı, 2007; Bernarto et al., 2020; Setyawan, Mugiono and Hussein, 2020; Solunoğlu, 2020; Kodaş, 2021). Similarly, the concept of gastronomy image has been addressed with different dimensions such as gastronomic image, food image, and destination food image (Chang & Mak, 2018; Chatterjee & Suklabaidya, 2020; Lai et al., 2019; Wang, 2015).

However, studies examining the effect of gastronomy image on willingness to pay more are quite limited. In particular, no study has been found that evaluates brand awareness, perceived service quality, gastronomy image, and willingness to pay more within a holistic model. Furthermore, research examining the mediating role of gastronomic image is also limited in the literature. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by addressing the relevant variables within the same model. One of the striking aspects of the research is that despite the high perception of gastronomy image, it does not have a significant effect on willingness to pay more. This indicates that simply creating a strong image may not be sufficient for gastronomic destinations; factors

such as economic conditions, crisis periods, and price perception are also decisive in consumer behavior.

Practical Implications

The research findings offer several managerial implications for restaurant businesses in Gaziantep. Firstly, since brand awareness has a positive impact on gastronomy image, it is crucial for businesses to differentiate themselves from competitors. Increased visibility at festivals, sponsorship activities, social responsibility projects, and university events can enhance brand awareness.

Because perceived service quality affects both gastronomic image and the willingness to pay more, businesses need to sustainably improve their service quality. Analyzing customer feedback regularly, increasing staff training, using digital reservation systems, and developing data analytics applications can improve customer experience. Furthermore, maintaining employee motivation is essential for the sustainability of service quality. The research results show that gastronomy image alone is not sufficient to create willingness to pay more. Therefore, businesses need to carefully determine their pricing policies. Especially during periods of economic crisis and inflation, price control is crucial for the sustainability of the destination. Additionally, restaurants developing interactive cooking workshops, chef events, and experience-oriented service models can increase the perceived benefit for tourists, contributing to willingness to pay more.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has some limitations. Firstly, the research data was collected during a period when the COVID-19 pandemic was intensely felt. During this period, capacity restrictions were implemented in restaurants, economic conditions worsened, and tourist mobility decreased. This situation may have affected participants' price perceptions and willingness to pay more. Another limitation is that the research was conducted only in the city center of Gaziantep. Studies in different gastronomic destinations could allow for comparisons between destinations. In addition, the fact that the research was conducted between December 2021 and May 2022 limits the impact of seasonality on the results. Similar studies conducted during the summer months may yield different results. Future research could examine customer price elasticity in restaurants with different service quality levels. In addition, the effects of perceived benefit, customer experience, loyalty programs, and digital service applications on willingness to pay more could be investigated. Furthermore, considering the gastronomy image together with different variables and testing it in different destinations would make significant contributions to the literature.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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