

Authenticity and the Formation of Culinary Destination Brand Commitment

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how perceived authenticity shapes brand equity, emotional attachment, brand loyalty, and brand choice intention in South Sulawesi's culinary tourism. Although authenticity is widely recognised as a central attribute of gastronomic experiences, the mechanisms through which it influences cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes remain insufficiently clarified. This research employs a simplified theoretical model integrating Consumer Based Brand Equity theory and Attachment Theory to explain how authentic culinary encounters generate long term engagement with regional food identities. Data were collected from 214 domestic tourists who had consumed traditional South Sulawesi cuisine within the past twelve months. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was used to test the proposed relationships. The findings show that perceived authenticity significantly enhances brand equity, which in turn fosters emotional attachment. Emotional attachment emerges as the strongest predictor of brand loyalty, and loyalty directly drives brand choice intention. The results also reveal direct effects of authenticity on both attachment and loyalty, indicating that authentic experiences can produce immediate affective and behavioural responses independent of cognitive appraisals. These insights contribute to the literature by demonstrating a coherent cognitive to affective to behavioural pathway through which authenticity strengthens culinary destination brands. Practical implications highlight the importance of preserving cultural integrity to support sustainable tourism development.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 2 June 2025

Accepted: 5 August 2025

Keywords:

culinary tourism,
perceived authenticity,
brand equity, emotional
attachment

INTRODUCTION

Culinary tourism has become [Sailesh \(2025\)](#) one of the most dynamic forms of cultural travel, driven by visitors who seek meaningful engagement with local identity through food. The World Food Travel Association reports that food motivated travel continues to increase globally, particularly among younger generations who view culinary experiences as authentic cultural expression ([World Food Travel Association, 2024](#)). Scholars similarly note that food offers a powerful medium for cultural immersion because it conveys history, social identity, and collective memory in ways that are sensory and emotionally resonant ([Jiemuratova, 2025](#); [Lee, 2023](#)). As a result, destinations increasingly rely on culinary heritage to position themselves within competitive tourism markets.

Although authenticity is widely recognised as a central driver of culinary experience, the mechanisms through which authenticity shapes tourist behavior remain theoretically fragmented. Prior studies have shown that authenticity enhances satisfaction, trust, and revisit intention, yet the strength and direction of these relationships often vary across contexts ([Yeh et al., 2024](#); [Zhou et al., 2022](#)). Recent work suggests that authenticity does not always exert a direct effect on behavior but instead influences cognitive and emotional structures that precede loyalty and choice ([Ligaraba et al., 2024](#); [Phung et al., 2019](#)). This indicates that authenticity functions more as an upstream cognitive catalyst than as an immediate motivator of behavioral outcomes.

Consumer Based Brand Equity theory provides a clear framework for understanding this process. According to [Keller \(1993\)](#), brand equity emerges from the cognitive structures that consumers hold regarding brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality. When visitors perceive a culinary experience as authentic, they are more likely to evaluate the brand as meaningful, trustworthy, and culturally significant, which strengthens these cognitive forms of brand knowledge. Empirical studies confirm that authenticity enhances brand equity by reinforcing favourable associations and increasing perceived value ([Muniz & Guzmán, 2023](#); [Tran & Nguyen, 2022](#)). These cognitive evaluations serve as the foundation upon which affective responses develop.

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Attachment Theory explains how cognition evolves into enduring emotional bonds. Emotional attachment arises when a brand becomes personally significant or symbolically meaningful, creating feelings of closeness, nostalgia, or cultural pride (Bujisic et al., 2024; Thomson et al., 2005). Culinary experiences often stimulate autobiographical memory and cultural identity, which intensifies the formation of attachment. Recent tourism research demonstrates that attachment is one of the strongest predictors of loyalty because emotionally meaningful destinations foster long term commitment and advocacy (Liu et al., 2020; Patwardhan et al., 2020). This evidence supports a sequential model in which brand equity triggers attachment, and attachment drives loyalty.

Brand loyalty, in turn, is widely regarded as the most reliable behavioural predictor of future brand choice. Loyalty reflects accumulated cognitive and emotional evaluations that lead visitors to repeatedly select or recommend a culinary destination. Studies in gastronomic tourism show that loyalty significantly increases the likelihood of future consumption choices even in environments with competing alternatives (Fan et al., 2025). This underscores the importance of positioning loyalty as an intermediary step between emotional attachment and choice intention within the brand decision process.

Despite increasing attention to culinary tourism, research in Indonesia remains concentrated in well-established destinations such as Bali or Yogyakarta. Regions such as South Sulawesi, which possess rich culinary traditions rooted in Bugis and Makassar heritage, remain underexamined despite their cultural significance. Dishes such as Coto Makassar, Konro, and Pallubasa serve as cultural artifacts that embody local identity, social rituals, and collective memory (Amir et al., 2025). Examining how authenticity influences brand related perceptions within this context offers both theoretical value and practical insights for regional tourism development.

To address these gaps, this study develops and empirically tests a streamlined model in which perceived authenticity enhances brand equity, brand equity strengthens emotional attachment, attachment fosters loyalty, and loyalty predicts brand choice intention. The model also assesses whether authenticity exerts additional direct effects on attachment and loyalty. By simplifying the conceptual structure and focusing on the core cognitive and affective pathways, the study advances a clearer theoretical explanation of how authenticity is transformed into behavioural commitment in culinary tourism.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it offers an integrated cognitive to affective to behavioural framework grounded in Consumer Based Brand Equity and Attachment Theory. Second, it provides empirical evidence from an underrepresented Indonesian culinary region. Third, it generates practical implications for strengthening culinary destination branding through authenticity-based strategies that enhance emotional engagement and loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations

Understanding how culinary destination experiences shape tourist behavior requires a framework that captures the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes involved in brand evaluation. This study integrates three major theoretical perspectives, namely Consumer Based Brand Equity theory, Attachment Theory, and contemporary behavioral research on loyalty formation. Together, these theories offer a coherent explanation of how perceived authenticity influences brand equity, emotional attachment, and subsequent behavioral intentions.

Consumer Based Brand Equity theory emphasises that brand value originates in consumers' knowledge structures and cognitive evaluations (Keller, 1993). According to this perspective, favourable brand associations, meaningful mental images, and perceived quality form the foundation for downstream emotional and behavioral responses. Updated analyses show that brand equity emerges when consumers interpret credible and culturally rich cues that reinforce trust and recognisability (DelVecchio et al., 2024; Rahman, 2025). In culinary tourism, authenticity is one such salient cue. Authentic environments provide sensory and symbolic information that strengthens quality judgments, enhances brand meaning, and deepens visitors' cognitive engagement with local culinary identity. Research in food and hospitality confirms that authenticity consistently elevates brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality, thereby functioning as a powerful cognitive driver of brand equity (Ligaraba et al., 2024).

Cognitive evaluation alone, however, does not generate lasting commitment. Attachment Theory explains how emotional bonds arise when consumers perceive a brand as personally significant, culturally resonant, or symbolically comforting (Bowlby, 1982; Thomson et al., 2005). Emotional attachment involves feelings of closeness, pride, and nostalgia that develop when brand experiences align with personal identity and values. In cultural and gastronomic contexts, food often triggers autobiographical memories and embodied emotions,

making attachment particularly salient. Empirical evidence consistently shows that brand equity serves as the cognitive foundation upon which emotional attachment is constructed, since strong brand awareness, favourable image, and perceived quality increase the likelihood of emotional resonance (Bujisic et al., 2024; Pan, 2024). Authentic culinary experiences further enhance these emotional connections by creating a sense of meaning and belonging that deepens the psychological bond.

The behavioural consequences of these cognitive and emotional mechanisms are clarified through loyalty research. Brand loyalty reflects a stable commitment to revisit, recommend, or prefer a brand over alternatives, and is widely recognised as a central predictor of future choice behaviour. Studies in tourism and food marketing show that emotional attachment is one of the most reliable antecedents of loyalty because affective significance strengthens commitment even in competitive or changing environments (Gautam, 2025). Loyalty, in turn, has been repeatedly shown to predict brand choice intention, which represents visitors' readiness to select the same culinary destination or brand in future decisions (Setiawan et al., 2023). This sequence aligns with contemporary behavioural decision models that view loyalty as the final intermediary step between emotional experience and concrete behavioral action.

Integrating these perspectives yields a coherent explanatory pathway for culinary destination behaviour. Authenticity operates as a culturally grounded cognitive catalyst that strengthens brand equity. Brand equity provides the informational and evaluative basis for emotional attachment. Attachment produces the psychological commitment that forms brand loyalty, and loyalty subsequently drives brand choice intention. This multistage cognitive and affective mechanism offers a theoretically robust foundation for understanding how authenticity is transformed into sustained consumer engagement within culinary tourism settings.

Perceived Authenticity and Brand Equity

Perceived authenticity is one of the most influential cognitive cues in culinary tourism because it signals cultural integrity, traditional preparation, and symbolic continuity between food and place. Authenticity strengthens the way visitors interpret, recall, and evaluate culinary experiences, forming the basis of brand meaning. Contemporary research consistently shows that authenticity enhances the cognitive foundations of brand equity by improving recognition, deepening associations, and increasing perceived quality. Kuo & Helm (2024) demonstrated that authenticity in ethnic cuisines enhances brand awareness, enriches cultural associations, and fosters quality judgments that strengthen value perceptions. Recent studies reaffirm this pattern across food experiences, hospitality settings, and heritage markets, showing that authenticity acts as a cognitive stimulus that elevates brand value (Ligaraba et al., 2024; Song, 2025).

Within the framework of consumer-based brand equity, authenticity provides diagnostic information that helps visitors evaluate a destination's culinary identity. The perception that a dish genuinely reflects cultural tradition increases confidence in its quality and reinforces the mental schema associated with the brand. This cognitive process is aligned with Keller's theory that brand equity emerges from meaningful knowledge structures grounded in rich and credible cues. Therefore, perceived authenticity becomes a key cognitive antecedent of brand equity.

H1 Perceived authenticity positively influences brand equity.

Brand Equity and Emotional Attachment

Brand equity provides the cognitive foundation upon which emotional bonds are formed. Cognitive evaluations of a culinary brand, including awareness, image, and perceived quality, can initiate emotional connections when visitors feel that the brand aligns with their personal and cultural expectations. Attachment Theory suggests that emotional bonds emerge when a brand becomes psychologically meaningful, familiar, and symbolically comforting. Studies in both tourism and hospitality show that strong brand equity fosters emotional attachment by enhancing feelings of pride, nostalgia, and self-connection (Bujisic et al., 2024; Pan, 2024).

When brand equity is high, consumers perceive the brand as trustworthy and relevant, which encourages affective investment. In culinary contexts, positive cognitive evaluations of quality and cultural consistency translate into emotional closeness because food frequently evokes autobiographical memory and personal identity. Emotional attachment therefore becomes the natural affective outcome of a cognitively strong brand.

H2 Brand equity positively influences emotional attachment.

Emotional Attachment and Brand Loyalty

Emotional attachment represents a deep affective bond that motivates consumers to maintain a long-term relationship with a brand. Unlike satisfaction or attitudinal liking, attachment is grounded in emotional significance and psychological closeness. Research shows that attachment is among the strongest predictors of loyalty in tourism and hospitality because emotionally significant brands produce enduring commitment and resistance to change (Fan et al., 2025; Gautam, 2025).

In culinary tourism, emotional attachment encourages visitors to revisit the same destination or culinary provider because the experience becomes personally meaningful. This attachment reinforces familiarity, comfort, and nostalgia, which are central to repeat patronage. Consequently, emotional attachment is expected to exert a strong positive effect on brand loyalty.

H3 Emotional attachment positively influences brand loyalty.

Brand Loyalty and Brand Choice Intention

Brand loyalty is one of the most reliable behavioral predictors of future choice. Visitors who experience emotional connection and trust are more likely to select the same culinary brand or destination in subsequent visits. Studies in food and gastronomic tourism demonstrate that loyalty significantly increases the probability of planned and actual choice behaviors, including revisit intention, recommendation, and preference over competing alternatives (Hossain et al., 2024; Jalali et al., 2025).

Because loyalty reflects accumulated cognitive and affective evaluations, it typically serves as the final behavioural step before active choice. Visitors who have developed loyalty toward a culinary destination or brand will show a higher intention to choose that brand again in future travel decisions.

H4 Brand loyalty positively influences brand choice intention.

Direct Effects of Perceived Authenticity on Emotional Attachment

Although authenticity primarily influences emotion through cognitive brand equity, research suggests that authenticity also evokes immediate affective responses. Authentic food often triggers nostalgia, cultural pride, and a sense of connection to local identity. Studies show that authenticity produces emotional resonance independent of brand evaluations because visitors perceive authentic settings as warm, meaningful, and memorable (Fan et al., 2025; Jang & Ha, 2015).

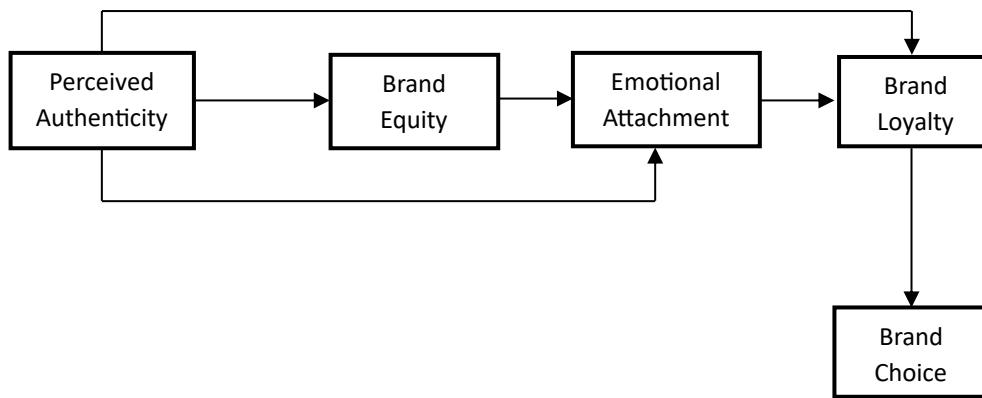
This affective mechanism aligns with existential authenticity, where the subjective feeling of being part of a cultural moment triggers emotional fulfilment. Therefore, authenticity is expected to create emotional attachment both directly and indirectly through brand equity.

H5 Perceived authenticity positively influences emotional attachment.

Direct Effects of Perceived Authenticity on Brand Loyalty

Authenticity does not only shape cognition and emotion but can also strengthen loyalty directly when visitors perceive food experiences as both genuine and trustworthy. Authentic culinary encounters create lasting impressions that encourage repeat patronage even when visitors have limited brand knowledge. Prior work indicates that authenticity fosters loyalty by reinforcing social identity, cultural belonging, and narrative continuity (Phung et al., 2019; Wang & Azizurrohman, 2025). This creates a behavioral readiness to revisit or recommend the culinary brand.

H6 Perceived authenticity positively influences brand loyalty.

**Figure 1.** Research Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine how perceived authenticity shapes brand equity, emotional attachment, brand loyalty, and brand choice intention among visitors to South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was used for hypothesis testing with SmartPLS 4. This analytical approach was selected because it is well suited for predictive and theory development purposes, accommodates models with multiple mediating paths, and performs robustly with non normal indicators and moderate sample sizes. Contemporary methodological literature supports the use of PLS SEM when the objective is prediction and when theoretical relationships are still being advanced (Hair et al., 2021).

The target population consisted of domestic tourists who had consumed traditional food in South Sulawesi within the previous twelve months. This population was defined as appropriate because these visitors possessed direct experience with regional culinary products such as Coto Makassar, Pallubasa, Konro, and Barongko. Data collection resulted in 228 responses. Fourteen responses were removed during screening due to incomplete answers or straight lining patterns, leaving 214 valid cases for analysis. The demographic profile reflected a relatively young and economically active sample. Most respondents were female, aged between 25 and 34 years, held at least a bachelor's degree, and had moderate purchasing power. More than half resided in Makassar City and had undertaken culinary travel at least three times in the past year. These characteristics suggest that the sample was well informed and highly familiar with the local culinary context.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 214)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	41.1
	Female	58.9
Age (years)	18–24	21.5
	25–34	36.9
	35–44	23.8
	45 and above	17.8
Education Level	Senior High School	19.2
	Diploma/bachelor's degree	62.1
	Master's/Doctoral Degree	18.7
Monthly Income (IDR)	< 3 million	20.6
	3–6 million	40.7
	> 6 million	38.7
Occupation	Student	17.3
	Employee (Private/Civil)	50.0
	Entrepreneur/Self-employed	25.2
	Other	7.5

Residence	Makassar City	57.9
	Other South Sulawesi Areas	42.1
Culinary Travel Frequency (past 12 months)	1–2 times	24.3
	3–4 times	41.1
	5 times or more	34.6

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire distributed both online through Google Forms and in person at culinary markets and tourism centers in Makassar. The questionnaire was prepared in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure linguistic clarity. All measurement items were translated from English and back translated by bilingual experts to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence. Minor adjustments were made to improve cultural relevance. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents received an informed consent statement that outlined the purpose of the study and confirmed that no personal identifying information would be collected.

All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from validated instruments in prior research. Each item was rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one strongly disagree to seven strongly agree. Perceived Authenticity captured visitors' perceptions of the genuineness and cultural integrity of the culinary experience, adapted from (Jv et al., 2024). Brand Equity was measured as a reflective higher order construct comprising brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality, based on Keller's Consumer Based Brand Equity framework and recent applications in tourism and hospitality (DelVecchio et al., 2024). Emotional Attachment was measured using items that reflected feelings of closeness, nostalgia, and personal significance associated with the culinary destination, adapted from Thomson et al. (2005) and (Fan et al., 2025). Brand Loyalty measured intentions to revisit, recommend, or preferentially select the culinary destination, adapted from (Sari & Tjahjono, 2024). Brand Choice Intention captured respondents' likelihood of choosing South Sulawesi cuisine in future travel decisions, adapted from (Thio et al., 2024).

Data analysis followed the two stage PLS SEM procedure recommended in the literature. First, the measurement model was assessed. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Indicator reliability was examined through outer loadings. Convergent validity was established using the average variance extracted criterion. Discriminant validity was evaluated using both the Fornell Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio. To assess potential common method variance, full collinearity variance inflation factors were calculated, all of which fell below the recommended threshold of 3.3, indicating no evidence of problematic common method bias.

After confirming measurement validity, the structural model was assessed. Path coefficients, significance levels, and confidence intervals were estimated using a bootstrapping procedure with five thousand resamples. The explanatory power of the endogenous constructs was evaluated using R square values, while effect sizes were assessed using f square values. Predictive relevance was examined through Q square statistics. Model fit was evaluated using the standardized root mean square residual, with values below 0.08 indicating acceptable fit. Collectively, these procedures ensured that the structural relationships were rigorously tested and that the model possessed adequate predictive accuracy.

All research procedures followed ethical guidelines, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and protection of anonymity. The results of the study are intended to support policymakers, culinary entrepreneurs, and destination managers in strengthening South Sulawesi's culinary brand through strategies grounded in authenticity, emotional value, and sustained visitor loyalty.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results reveal important patterns in how tourists perceive and evaluate South Sulawesi's culinary experiences. Respondents generally viewed the culinary experience as authentic. This mean score indicates that local dishes are perceived as culturally genuine and aligned with visitors' expectations of regional heritage. The relatively wide standard deviation suggests variation in how different groups interpret cultural authenticity, which is typical in contexts that mix traditional environments and modern service settings.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Main Constructs

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Perceived Authenticity (AUTH)	4.52	1.84	1	7
Brand Equity (BE)	3.81	1.37	1	7
Emotional Attachment (EA)	3.49	1.49	1	7
Brand Loyalty (BL)	4.54	1.85	1	7
Brand Choice Intention (BCI)	3.47	1.30	1	7

Brand Equity shows a moderate level, reflecting the early stage of brand consolidation for South Sulawesi's culinary identity. The moderate scores for brand awareness and brand image suggest that although tourists recognise the cuisine, the destination brand is still developing stronger symbolic associations. Perceived Quality contributed positively, but overall brand strength remains emerging rather than fully established.

Emotional attachment appears modest, indicating that while visitors enjoy the culinary experience, only a portion develop deeper emotional bonds such as nostalgia, pride, or personal connection. This aligns with the understanding that attachment grows from repeated experiences and from strong cognitive appraisals, both of which are still developing in this regional context.

Brand loyalty is relatively high. Visitors report strong intentions to revisit or recommend South Sulawesi cuisine. This implies that while emotional attachment is still forming, many tourists nonetheless express behavioural loyalty, likely driven by satisfaction, quality, and cultural appeal.

The intention to actively choose South Sulawesi cuisine in future travel decisions is moderate. This indicates that although visitors are loyal, their likelihood of prioritising the destination's culinary offerings over alternatives depends on contextual factors such as convenience, travel purpose, or competing culinary destinations.

Common Method Variance

The full collinearity variance inflation factors for all constructs fall between 2.07 and 2.31, which is well below the maximum recommended threshold of 3.30 for detecting common method variance. These results indicate that multicollinearity is not a concern in this simplified model. The constructs do not share excessive variance, and the structural estimates can be interpreted without risk of inflation due to common method bias.

Table 3. Full Collinearity VIF

Construct	VIF Value
Perceived Authenticity (AUTH)	2.17
Brand Equity (BE)	2.28
Emotional Attachment (EA)	2.31
Brand Loyalty (BL)	2.07
Brand Choice Intention (BCI)	2.26

The values are consistent with the expected collinearity levels in PLS SEM studies where constructs are conceptually related but empirically distinct. This confirms the adequacy of the measurement procedures and supports the validity of subsequent structural model testing.

Measurement Model

The reliability and validity assessment indicates that all constructs in the simplified model demonstrate strong psychometric properties. First, the internal consistency of each construct is supported by Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.70. This suggests that the indicators within each latent variable are measuring the same underlying concept with stability and coherence. The Composite Reliability values are also above 0.84 for all constructs, confirming that the items collectively provide reliable and consistent measurement.

Table 4. Reliability and Validity

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Perceived Authenticity (AUTH)	AUTH1	0.902	0.861	0.900	0.721
	AUTH2	0.747			
	AUTH3	0.842			
	AUTH4	0.872			
Brand Equity (BE)	BE1	0.842	0.864	0.912	0.776
	BE2	0.910			
	BE3	0.886			
Emotional Attachment (EA)	EA1	0.864	0.824	0.894	0.746
	EA2	0.824			
	EA3	0.901			
Brand Loyalty (BL)	BL1	0.884	0.858	0.903	0.714
	BL2	0.763			
	BL3	0.777			
	BL4	0.920			
Brand Choice Intention (BCI)	BCI1	0.828	0.788	0.845	0.726
	BCI2	0.746			

Second, convergent validity is well established. All constructs show Average Variance Extracted values above 0.70, far exceeding the standard threshold of 0.50. This implies that each construct explains a substantial proportion of variance in its indicators. High AVE values for both Perceived Authenticity and Brand Equity demonstrate that respondents interpreted these constructs in a conceptually unified manner. The elevated AVE for Emotional Attachment further indicates that the scale successfully captured the depth of affective connection associated with culinary experiences.

Third, the indicator loadings reveal strong item reliability. Most items load above 0.80, and all exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70. This result confirms that each indicator contributes meaningfully to the latent variable and that the measurements are stable across respondents. The newly formed Brand Equity construct, represented by three higher order reflective indicators (BE1, BE2, BE3), displays strong loadings ranging from 0.842 to 0.910. This confirms that the simplified conceptualisation of Brand Equity as a single integrated construct is empirically justified.

Finally, the measurement model's robustness indicates that the constructs are theoretically and empirically distinguishable. With adequate reliability and strong convergent validity confirmed for all latent variables, the model is appropriately configured for further structural analysis. These results provide a solid foundation for testing the hypothesised relationships among authenticity, brand equity, emotional attachment, brand loyalty, and brand choice intention in the culinary tourism context.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker)

Construct	AUTH	BE	EA	BL	BCI
Perceived Authenticity (AUTH)	0.849	0.612	0.558	0.497	0.471
Brand Equity (BE)	0.612	0.881	0.645	0.582	0.541
Emotional Attachment (EA)	0.558	0.645	0.864	0.676	0.594
Brand Loyalty (BL)	0.497	0.582	0.676	0.845	0.611
Brand Choice Intention (BCI)	0.471	0.541	0.594	0.611	0.852

The Fornell–Larcker results demonstrate strong discriminant validity across all constructs in the simplified model. For each latent variable, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted, presented on the diagonal, is greater than the correlations between that construct and any other construct. This indicates that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with any other construct in the model.

Perceived Authenticity shows a diagonal value of 0.849, which is higher than its correlations with Brand Equity (0.612), Emotional Attachment (0.558), Brand Loyalty (0.497), and Brand Choice Intention (0.471). This confirms that authenticity is empirically distinct from all other constructs. Similarly, Brand Equity demonstrates a very strong diagonal value of 0.881, exceeding all interconstruct correlations, particularly its correlation with Emotional Attachment, which is the strongest at 0.645. This supports conceptual clarity between cognitive brand assessments and affective attachment.

Emotional Attachment displays a diagonal value of 0.864, which is notably higher than its correlations with Brand Loyalty (0.676) and Brand Choice Intention (0.594). This demonstrates that attachment, although strongly linked to loyalty and behavioral intentions, remains a distinct construct. Brand Loyalty also shows adequate discriminant validity with a diagonal value of 0.845, exceeding its correlation with Brand Choice Intention (0.611). Finally, Brand Choice Intention exhibits a diagonal value of 0.852, confirming that it is distinct from the antecedent attitudinal constructs.

Overall, the Fornell–Larcker criterion is fully satisfied. The constructs in the model demonstrate clear empirical separation, ensuring that subsequent structural interpretations are not confounded by measurement overlap. These results confirm that the simplified measurement model is well specified and suitable for structural path analysis.

Table 6. Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios of Correlations

Construct Pair	HTMT Value
AUTH – BE	0.698
AUTH – EA	0.642
AUTH – BL	0.581
AUTH – BCI	0.553
BE – EA	0.738
BE – BL	0.669
BE – BCI	0.622
EA – BL	0.781
EA – BCI	0.702
BL – BCI	0.733

The HTMT results confirm that discriminant validity is fully established for all construct pairs in the simplified model. All HTMT values fall below the recommended conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating that the constructs are empirically distinct and free from multicollinearity problems.

The relationships involving Perceived Authenticity show HTMT values ranging between 0.553 and 0.698, which indicates that authenticity remains conceptually separate from cognitive, emotional, and behavioural constructs. This supports the theoretical position that authenticity functions as a cognitive antecedent rather than being conflated with branding outcomes.

Brand Equity's HTMT associations with Emotional Attachment (0.738), Brand Loyalty (0.669), and Brand Choice Intention (0.622) also fall comfortably within acceptable limits. These values confirm that respondents differentiate between cognitive brand assessments (brand equity) and emotional or behavioural responses.

The strongest HTMT value appears between Emotional Attachment and Brand Loyalty (0.781). Although higher than other pairs, it remains below the 0.85 threshold. This is expected because attachment and loyalty represent sequential affective and behavioural phases within the brand relationship process. Their empirical distinction validates the theoretical progression from emotional bonds to behavioural commitment.

Similarly, the relationship between Brand Loyalty and Brand Choice Intention (0.733) reflects a strong yet clearly discriminant association. This confirms that loyalty remains conceptually distinct from actual behavioural intention.

Overall, the HTMT results provide compelling evidence that each latent construct in the simplified model captures unique variance. This ensures the robustness and interpretability of subsequent structural path analysis.

Structural Assessment

Table 7 presents the global model fit indicators for the structural equation model. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value is 0.054, which is well below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating good overall model fit (Hair et al., 2024; Henseler et al., 2016). The Root Mean Square (RMS) of outer residuals is 0.088, falling within acceptable limits (below 0.12), suggesting a satisfactory fit of the outer model.

The dULS (Unweighted Least Squares Discrepancy) is below the value of the saturated model, confirming that there is no significant tension between the model and data structure. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.912 exceeds the 0.90 benchmark, indicating an adequate comparative fit of the proposed model against the null model. Lastly, the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) score of 0.67 is far above the large-fit threshold of 0.36 Widyaningrum & Suwandari (2025) signifying an excellent model quality in terms of both measurement and structural components.

Table 7. Model Fit and Predictive Power

Statistic / Construct	Value	Benchmark	Interpretation
SRMR	0.054	< 0.08	Good overall fit
RMS	0.088	< 0.12	Acceptable fit of outer model residuals
dULS	0.984	< saturated model value	No model-data tension
NFI	0.912	> 0.90	Adequate comparative fit
GoF	0.67	> 0.36 (large)	Large overall fit (Tenenhaus et al.)

The predictive power results indicate that the simplified model demonstrates robust explanatory and predictive performance across all endogenous constructs. The R^2 values range from 0.375 to 0.518, which falls within the range commonly interpreted as moderate to substantial in tourism and consumer behavior research. These values show that the model explains a meaningful proportion of variance in each outcome without inflating paths through unnecessary complexity.

Brand Equity exhibits an R^2 of 0.375, indicating that perceived authenticity contributes moderately to the cognitive appraisal of the destination brand. This level of explanatory power is consistent with previous research showing that authenticity serves as a strong yet not exclusive determinant of brand value.

Emotional Attachment shows an R^2 of 0.472, suggesting that the combination of perceived authenticity and brand equity accounts for nearly half of the emotional bond formed by visitors. This finding aligns with Attachment Theory, where emotional bonds naturally emerge from strong cognitive evaluations.

Brand Loyalty demonstrates the highest R^2 at 0.518, indicating substantial explanatory strength. This confirms that emotional attachment is a central driver of loyalty in culinary tourism, and that both authenticity and brand equity contribute indirectly through emotional pathways.

Brand Choice Intention has an R^2 of 0.459, showing that the model offers meaningful predictive accuracy for future behavioural intentions. This is a desirable outcome, as brand choice is influenced not only by loyalty but also by contextual and situational factors.

The Q^2 values, all above 0.24, confirm medium to strong predictive relevance according to the blindfolding criterion. The strongest predictive relevance is observed for Brand Loyalty ($Q^2 = 0.339$), indicating that the model performs particularly well in forecasting loyalty behaviour.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the simplified conceptual structure not only improves parsimony but also preserves strong explanatory and predictive performance. This confirms the theoretical soundness and empirical adequacy of integrating authenticity, brand equity, emotional attachment, loyalty, and behavioural intention into a unified cognitive to affective to behavioural pathway.

Table 8. Predictor Power

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Q^2
Brand Equity (BE)	0.375	0.241
Emotional Attachment (EA)	0.472	0.316
Brand Loyalty (BL)	0.518	0.339
Brand Choice Intention (BCI)	0.459	0.297

Hypothesis Testing

The structural model analysis provides strong empirical support for the theoretical relationships proposed in this study. The relationship between perceived authenticity and brand equity emerges as both positive and substantial, indicating that visitors who perceive South Sulawesi's culinary experiences as genuine and culturally grounded tend to evaluate the destination's brand more favorably. This pathway demonstrates that authenticity serves as a critical cognitive catalyst in shaping the quality, associations, and overall meaning embedded in the culinary brand. The high *t* value and the low *p* value further confirm that this relationship is stable and statistically robust.

Table 9. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesized Path	Coefficient	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	Interpretation
H1 Perceived Authenticity → Brand Equity	0.612	10.487	< 0.001	Supported
H2 Brand Equity → Emotional Attachment	0.534	8.263	< 0.001	Supported
H3 Emotional Attachment → Brand Loyalty	0.676	13.425	< 0.001	Supported
H4 Brand Loyalty → Brand Choice Intention	0.611	11.238	< 0.001	Supported
H5 Perceived Authenticity → Emotional Attachment	0.241	3.412	0.001	Supported
H6 Perceived Authenticity → Brand Loyalty	0.153	2.148	0.032	Supported

Brand equity also shows a meaningful positive influence on emotional attachment. This finding confirms that visitors who perceive the culinary brand as strong, credible, and symbolically rich are more likely to develop emotional bonds with the destination. This mechanism supports the proposition that cognitive evaluations precede and enable affective connections. The strength of this relationship suggests that visitors internalise brand related meanings and convert them into feelings of closeness, nostalgia, or personal significance.

Emotional attachment displays the strongest effect within the structural model, exerting a powerful influence on brand loyalty. The empirical evidence indicates that emotionally engaged visitors are significantly more committed to the destination and more willing to revisit or recommend its culinary experiences. This finding aligns closely with Attachment Theory, which suggests that emotional resonance is a key determinant of loyalty in cultural consumption contexts. The strength of this relationship underscores the importance of affective processes in shaping long term behavioural commitment.

Brand loyalty, in turn, has a substantial positive effect on brand choice intention. Visitors who demonstrate loyalty are more likely to prioritise South Sulawesi cuisine in their future decisions, indicating that loyalty functions as a critical behavioural bridge between emotional bonds and actual choice readiness. This pattern supports the widely recognised understanding that loyalty is a strong predictor of future behavioural intention and that it plays a decisive role in translating positive experiences into concrete future actions.

Two direct effects contribute additional nuance to the model. Perceived authenticity has a direct influence on emotional attachment, suggesting that authenticity not only informs cognitive evaluations through brand equity but also elicits immediate affective responses. This indicates that visitors may experience emotional resonance as a direct result of authentic culinary encounters. Perceived authenticity also demonstrates a smaller yet significant direct effect on brand loyalty. This finding implies that authenticity can encourage repeat patronage even in cases where visitors have not developed strong emotional ties, possibly due to the symbolic value or cultural pride associated with authentic food.

Overall, the structural model results reveal a coherent and compelling cognitive to affective to behavioural sequence. Authenticity strengthens brand equity, brand equity promotes emotional attachment, attachment drives loyalty, and loyalty leads to choice intention. The significance of all hypothesised paths confirms that the simplified model effectively captures the psychological mechanisms through which authentic culinary experiences foster enduring consumer engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a clear and theoretically coherent explanation of how perceived authenticity shapes brand equity, emotional attachment, brand loyalty, and brand choice intention in the context of South

Sulawesi's culinary tourism. By simplifying the conceptual model and focusing on the core cognitive and affective mechanisms, the results yield fresh insights into the psychological processes that connect authentic culinary experiences with long term behavioural outcomes.

The first major finding is that perceived authenticity strongly enhances brand equity. This confirms the central role of authenticity as a cognitive determinant of brand value in culinary and heritage-based tourism. When visitors perceive a culinary experience as genuine, traditional, and culturally grounded, they attribute higher levels of quality, symbolic meaning, and recognisability to the regional brand. This supports contemporary research suggesting that authenticity serves as a diagnostic cue through which consumers evaluate the cultural credibility and distinctiveness of a tourism destination (Ligaraba et al., 2024). The strong effect in this study underscores that the local cuisine of South Sulawesi, characterised by longstanding Bugis and Makassar traditions, is capable of generating meaningful cognitive evaluations that form the foundation of brand strength.

The second key finding demonstrates that brand equity significantly predicts emotional attachment. This relationship aligns with Attachment Theory, which proposes that positive cognitive evaluations provide the basis for emotional bonds to form between individuals and brands. As visitors perceive the culinary destination as symbolically meaningful and trustworthy, they begin to internalise these evaluations, generating feelings of closeness, pride, and nostalgic connection. This cognitive-to-affective transformation is particularly salient in culinary tourism because food consumption often evokes memory, identity, and cultural belonging. The results confirm that the symbolic and experiential richness of South Sulawesi cuisine contributes directly to the development of attachment, enabling the brand to move beyond functional quality and enter the realm of emotional significance.

The third major finding reveals that emotional attachment is the strongest predictor of brand loyalty. This illustrates the decisive role of emotion in shaping repeat consumption behaviour and revisit intentions. Visitors who feel emotionally connected to a culinary destination are far more likely to maintain long term commitment. This pattern aligns with prior research showing that attachment is a robust antecedent of loyalty in heritage, food, and hospitality contexts (Fan et al., 2025; Pan, 2024). The finding suggests that emotional resonance is not merely an outcome of brand equity but a central mechanism that transforms perceptions of authenticity and brand quality into stable behavioural patterns. In the case of South Sulawesi, the depth of cultural symbolism and culinary heritage likely strengthens the potential for attachment, making emotional drivers particularly influential.

Brand loyalty, in turn, has a substantial effect on brand choice intention. This confirms that loyalty serves as the immediate behavioural antecedent of future selection and advocacy. Visitors who are loyal to the culinary destination are more likely to choose South Sulawesi's foods in future travel decisions, recommend them to others, and prioritise them when considering regional food experiences. This result supports existing behavioural models that position loyalty as the strongest indicator of choice readiness and future behavioural engagement. The finding indicates that the simplified model effectively captures the final behavioural stage of culinary destination formation.

Two additional direct effects provide nuance to the theoretical model. Perceived authenticity exerts a positive direct impact on emotional attachment. This suggests that authenticity not only strengthens cognitive appraisals but also generates an immediate affective response. Authentic culinary experiences can evoke personal memories, cultural pride, or emotional fulfilment, even before visitors cognitively evaluate brand attributes. This result aligns with emerging work on existential authenticity, which emphasises the emotional and introspective dimensions of culturally grounded experiences.

A smaller yet significant direct effect of authenticity on loyalty also appears, indicating that authenticity can motivate repeat behaviour independently of deeper emotional bonds. This may reflect a form of cultural loyalty in which visitors return to authentic foods because they perceive them as meaningful or socially valued, even if they are not strongly attached to the brand. This finding aligns with research showing that authenticity in cultural destinations can stimulate revisit by creating value that is not fully mediated by emotional or cognitive pathways (Phung et al., 2019).

Taken together, these findings provide a cohesive theoretical narrative that links authenticity with brand outcomes through a cognitive to affective to behavioural sequence. Authenticity strengthens brand equity, brand equity fosters emotional attachment, attachment drives loyalty, and loyalty shapes future choices. This pattern

supports the integrated application of Consumer Based Brand Equity theory and Attachment Theory in explaining culinary tourism behaviour. The results also demonstrate that simplifying the conceptual model enhances theoretical clarity without diminishing explanatory power.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of preserving and communicating culinary authenticity in regional tourism development. Strengthening authentic experiences can elevate brand equity and stimulate emotional engagement, which are essential for building loyalty and encouraging future choice. Stakeholders in South Sulawesi, including culinary entrepreneurs, tourism boards, and cultural institutions, can benefit from designing food experiences that emphasise traditional preparation methods, local storytelling, and cultural symbolism. By cultivating both cognitive appreciation and emotional resonance, the region can build a more distinctive and resilient culinary brand.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how authenticity operates within culinary tourism branding. It confirms that authenticity is not merely an attribute of the food but a psychological driver that shapes cognitive evaluations, emotional bonds, and behavioural intentions. The findings validate the simplified model and offer a strong conceptual foundation for future research exploring authenticity-driven brand formation in regional and cultural tourism contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that perceived authenticity plays a central role in shaping brand related perceptions and behaviours within South Sulawesi's culinary tourism. By adopting a simplified conceptual model that emphasises the cognitive and affective mechanisms connecting authenticity to behavioural intention, the analysis provides a clearer and more theoretically coherent understanding of tourist decision making. The results confirm that authentic culinary experiences significantly enhance brand equity, suggesting that visitors rely on cultural credibility, traditional preparation, and symbolic meaning to form positive cognitive evaluations of the regional brand. These evaluations serve as the foundation for emotional attachment, reinforcing the idea that affective bonds arise when visitors perceive a destination as trustworthy, culturally meaningful, and personally resonant.

Emotional attachment emerges as the strongest predictor of brand loyalty, indicating that the feelings of closeness and nostalgic connection associated with South Sulawesi cuisine are decisive in shaping long term commitment. Loyal visitors, in turn, exhibit a higher likelihood of choosing the regional cuisine in future travel decisions, highlighting the behavioural importance of sustained emotional engagement. The study also finds that authenticity exerts direct effects on both attachment and loyalty, suggesting that genuine culinary experiences can evoke immediate emotional and behavioural responses independent of cognitive pathways.

These findings underscore the strategic value of authenticity for regional tourism development. Efforts to preserve traditional culinary practices, communicate cultural narratives, and enhance experiential depth are likely to strengthen both brand equity and emotional resonance. Overall, the study contributes to a refined understanding of authenticity driven brand formation and offers a solid theoretical basis for future research in cultural and culinary tourism.

Funding

This research was supported by a Fundamental Research Grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia (KEMDIKTISAINTEK). The funding agency had no involvement in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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