



The Mediating Role of Brand Image in The Impact of Food Authenticity on Regional Identity: The Case of Gaziantep

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the effect of food authenticity on regional identity and the mediating role of brand image in this effect. The convenience sampling method and survey technique were used in this study, which was carried out within the scope of the quantitative research model and relational research design. The relationships between the variables were analyzed through correlation and bootstrap regression analysis using data obtained from 400 domestic tourists aged 18 and over who visited Gaziantep. Correlation analysis results revealed that food authenticity has positive significant relationships with food identity and brand image, and food identity has a positive significant relationship with brand image. Regression analysis findings presented that brand image has a mediating effect on the positive and significant relationship between food authenticity and food identity perceptions. The regression analysis results of our research demonstrated that brand image has a mediating effect on a positive and significant relationship between food authenticity and food identity perception. This indicates that the relationship between participants' food authenticity perception levels and food identity perception levels is strengthened by the effect of brand image, and that brand image plays a decisive role in food identity perceptions by shaping consumers' perceptions of authenticity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, authentic foods are accepted as a clear reflection of intercultural interaction and regional identity (İflazoğlu, 2023). In this context, food authenticity reflects a region's cultural richness and history, creating a regional identity specific to the area. Similarly, while regional identity is shaped in connection with the traditions, language, history, and culture-specific to a particular geography, it plays an important role in the effort to preserve and emphasize the uniqueness of the region. Brand image in local cuisines is shaped by the perceptions created by brands that represent the food culture of a region (Doğanlı, 2020). Considering that authentic foods refer to foods prepared as a result of a specific artisanal process, with products and processes used in a specific region by an ethnic, national, or local group (Lu & Fine, 1995), the best example of brand image in food is geographical indication registered products. Geographically indicated foods with a positive brand image create trust and loyalty among consumers by emphasizing authenticity and supporting regional identity. While this interaction between the three elements strengthens the regional identity of an area, it also offers significant potential in terms of economic development and gastronomy tourism (Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Gheorghe, Tudorache & Nistoreanu, 2014; Balıkoğlu, Kılıç & Bozok, 2020; Baran & Karaca, 2021). In addition, understanding these dynamics is of critical importance in preserving the sustainability and authenticity of local culinary cultures. When Turkish Patent Institute data is examined, it is understood that many cities have registered their unique foods. Registrations made in this context, called geographical indications, are considered as an important step towards creating a brand image. One of the ways to turn a product into a brand is geographical indication registration (Özdemir, 2020). Products with geographical indications, which form a part of the regional identity, play an important role in marketing and branding by promoting the products and ensuring their transfer to future generations in their original forms and the sustainability of the cultural heritage, as well as contributing to the promotion and tourism activities of the region where they are produced (Sarıpek & Samet Çevik, 2020). In this regard, brand image, which has an ever-increasing importance, has become a factor in numerous destinations to strengthen their competitive position in today's conditions and distinguish themselves from other destinations. It is thought that it is important to evaluate geographically indicated foods, which contain many dimensions such as continuity, authenticity, virtue, connection, aesthetics, reality, control, and connection, within the scope of brand image. Therefore, the current study aims to determine the effect of Gaziantep's geographically indicated authentic foods on regional identity and the mediating role of brand image in this process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regional Identity

Identity is an important concept that connects individuals, provides social unity, brings them together on a common ground, and emphasizes the sense of belonging. An individual's identity includes the way a person defines himself, understands himself, and relates to his environment. On the other hand, identity also carries a social dimension. The identity elements that an individual has are generally related to the norms, values, and cultural characteristics of the society (Gül, Cesur, & Bostan, 2019). More clearly, identity is an important phenomenon in the cultural and social context, because it strengthens the sense of belonging by providing social integrity while connecting individuals. Regional identity refers to individuals creating their realities within the society they live in (Lin, 2009). According to Ariza (2007), regional identity is a whole of behaviors, beliefs, and social thoughts that make individuals a part of the

community. With a similar perspective, Norton (2006) emphasizes regional identity as a concept in which an individual establishes a relationship with members of a certain social group based on a common history, language, and worldview. In this context, regional identity includes concrete and intangible values that have unique characteristics and have accumulated throughout the historical process by individuals living in a certain region (Gül, Cesur, & Bostan, 2019). In the context of tourism, regional identity is one of the important elements that determine the basic character of destinations. Beyond tourist attractions, the regional identity of a destination contributes to its perception as a brand by emphasizing the unique characteristics of that region. A region's unique cultural characteristics, traditions, food, handicrafts, and other elements positively affect the brand image of the destination. Therefore, when the regional identity of a destination is associated with the lifestyles, values, and cultural heritage of the people in the region, the brand image is strengthened.

Brand Image

The concept of brand image is closely related to concepts such as brand identity, brand personality, brand awareness, brand importance, brand attitude, brand reputation, and destination image in the literature. These terms are often used interchangeably and refer to dimensions used to understand brand image. In general, in brand image definitions, brand image includes the perceptions created in the minds of consumers (Dağ, 2020). The concept of brand image is defined by Gardner and Levy (1955), "products have not only a physical existence but also a social and psychological structure. Therefore, it has gained momentum with the definition of "consumers' emotions, thoughts, and attitudes toward brands create a brand image within their mental structures" (Keong & Baharun, 2017). Zhang (2015) defined brand image as consumers' general perceptions and feelings about a particular brand. In this context, the emotional bonds that consumers establish with brands and the brand images they create play a critical role in purchasing decisions and shape brand preferences.

The similarity of local cuisines of different destinations makes it difficult to distinguish and highlight the local products from the products of competing destinations. These similarities in local cuisines make it difficult for destinations to emphasize their cultural heritage and brand themselves. A basic way to differentiate yourself in local cuisines is to create a strong brand image. Destinations with a strong brand image become preferable in the minds of consumers by succeeding in distinguishing their local cuisine from competing destinations. In particular, geographical indication has been playing a central role in the marketing strategies of destinations in recent years. Geographical indication registration emphasizes the geographical origin of local products and helps destinations stand out with their unique flavors and cultural heritage. In addition, it creates a strong bond in the subconscious of consumers, strengthening the brand image of the destination and distinguishing it from other destinations (Baran & Karaca, 2020; Saripek & Samet Çevik, 2020; Tanrikulu & Doğandor, 2021).

Foods with geographical indications within the scope of authenticity

The term authenticity is generally explained with concepts such as original, real, genuine, unique, or as an element from the past (Taylor, 1991; Heitmann, 2011). From a food perspective, authenticity emerges as a feature that reflects the origin and culture of food by combining traditional and local elements (Sims, 2009). Authentic foods are foods that have been identified with and associated with a particular region throughout history (Clifford, Robinson & Arcodia, 2009).

Similarly, Pratt (2007) defines authentic foods as foods prepared using original food products grown in the region, showing regional belonging, existing continuously from past to present, and reflecting the local culture of the region to which they belong. Although the determinants of the authenticity of foods vary from culture to culture, foods that reflect the unique cultural values of countries or regions are seen as authentic (Jang, Ha & Park, 2012). In this context, the important features that distinguish authentic food from other foods are that it emerges as a result of social accumulation, bears traces of local culture, is produced manually by local people, and is grown in the region where it originates (Pratt, 2007). According to Borghini (2013), authentic food must have a sustainable feature with a special bond between person, place, and recipe. This situation can best be explained by geographically indicated foods (İflazoğlu, 2023).

In recent years, the concept of geographical indication has gained importance in many aspects (marketing, tourism, agriculture, gastronomy, etc.), but the use of geographical names to describe products in a particular region is a very old tradition. For example, to emphasize the products of the region, definitions such as Corinthian wines, Naxos almonds, and Sicilian honey were used in Ancient Greece in the 4th century BC, Egyptian dates, and Brindisi oysters during the Roman Empire (Bertozi, 1995). The legal protection of geographical indications, which is considered as one of the intellectual property rights, covers a process dating back to 13th century Europe (Gökovalı, 2007). A geographical indication is a sign that indicates a product that is identified with the region, area, region, or country of origin in terms of distinctive quality, reputation, or other characteristics. If all or essential qualities of a product originate from natural and human elements belonging to a certain geographical area, the geographical indications, in this case, are called "*name of origin*". Geographical indications, which are the subject of products that are identified with a certain geographical area due to their distinctive quality, reputation, or other characteristics, and at least one of the production, processing, or other processes must take place within the specified geographical area, are called "*geographical indications*". The process of protecting local products through geographical indications in Turkey started with Decree Law No. 555 issued in 1995, and the registration of geographical indications is carried out by the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, which is authorized in this regard (Türk Patent ve Marka Kurumu, 2024).

Gaziantep is located at the north-western tip of Mesopotamia and at the intersection of Turkey's Mediterranean and Southeastern Anatolia Regions. Therefore, it contains a rich gastronomic heritage that shows the transitivity of Mediterranean and Continental climates (Karataş, Aksu, & Deniz, 2023). Gaziantep, the gastronomy city with an important position in Turkey's rich culinary culture, stands out as a destination with a high degree of recognition for its unique flavors and traditional dishes.

Table 1. Geographically indicated foods in Gaziantep cuisine

Number	Product Group	Number of Geographically Indicated Products
1	Meals and Soups	51
2	Bakery and Pastry Products, Desserts	17
3	Processed and Unprocessed Fruits, Vegetables and Mushrooms	14
4	Seasonings and Flavorings for Foods, Sauces, and Salt	5
5	Other products	4
6	Chocolate, Confectionery, and Derivative Products	2
7	Honey	1
8	Cheeses	1
Total		95

When the geographically indicated foods in Gaziantep cuisine were examined (Table 1), it was seen that there are a total of 95 products in 8 categories (Türk Patent ve Marka Kurumu, 2024). The most notable category among registered products includes meals and soups, with 51 different products. Gaziantep's gastronomic richness stands out with the diversity in this category. Geographically indicated products of Gaziantep cuisine are authentic products that reflect the cultural and geographical characteristics of the region. Geographically indicated foods play a key role in preserving Gaziantep's local identity and strengthening its brand image.

Creating hypotheses between variables

In this research, the concepts of food authenticity, food identity, and brand image were discussed in a triple relationship. In this context, it was examined whether brand image is a statistically significant mediator variable in the relationship between food authenticity and food identity. Figure 1 shows the research model of the study.

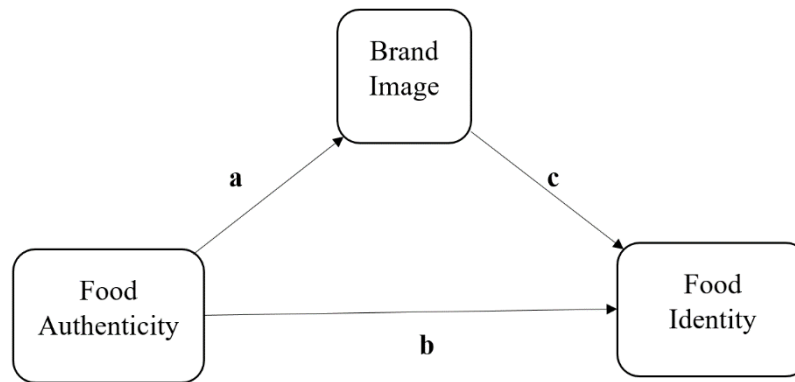


Figure 1. Research Model of the Study.

The research hypotheses created to test the relationships between concepts are presented below.

H1: *Food authenticity positively affects brand image.*

H2: *Food authenticity positively affects the perceptions of food identity.*

H3: *Food authenticity and brand image together positively affect food identity.*

H4: *Brand image has a mediating role in the relationship between food authenticity and food identity perceptions.*

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, which was conducted to determine the effect of food authenticity on regional identity and the mediating role of brand image in this effect, firstly, information about the sample and the scales used was included; then, the necessary analyses regarding the research model were made. In this context, missing value, outlier, and distribution tests were applied to the data regarding the research sample. Additionally, the data was examined whether there was a common method variance problem. After this process, validity and reliability analyses were conducted for the scales used. Existing relationships between the variables in the research model were examined with Pearson correlation analysis. The mediating effect of brand image on the relationship between food authenticity and regional identity was tested with regression analysis based on the Bootstrap method.

The population of this research, which was conducted within the quantitative research model and relational research design, consists of domestic tourists visiting the province of Gaziantep. Tourism statistics for 2023 indicate that this universe consists of approximately 847 thousand 88 people (Gaziantep İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2024). Data were collected through face-to-face surveys based on the convenience sampling method. Since the number of individuals making up the universe can be determined (Baş, 2013), the surveys were applied to 407 participants, and 400 usable surveys were included in the research. In the research, a survey form consisting of two parts was used as a data collection tool. In the first part of the form, there are four questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. In the second part of the form, there are scales including food authenticity (Sidali et al., 2021), regional identity (Zhang et al., 2022), and image (Baloğlu and Mangaloğlu 2001). The scales were in the form of a five-point Likert type (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Partially Agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis conducted to ensure the validity of the scales used in the research are presented in Table 2 below. The compliance value ranges in the table were arranged taking into account the prescribed standards (Meydan & Şeşen, 2011).

Table 2. Factor Analysis Results

Scales	Items	Factor Loadings	Explained Variance (%)	Eigenvalue	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Food Authenticity (FA)	FA1 FA2 FA3 FA4 FA5 FA6 FA7 FA8 FA9 FA10 FA11 FA12 FA13 FA14	0,663 0,639 0,670 0,697 0,503 0,613 0,680 0,672 0,699 0,599 0,639 0,580 0,606 0,503	63,06	3,79	0,798 (p = 0,000)
Food Identity (FI)	FI1 FI2 FI3 FI4 FI5 FI8 FI10 FI11	0,681 0,677 0,683 0,674 0,716 0,556 0,795 0,771	61,76	30,8	0,879 (p = 0,000)
Brand Image (BI)	BI6 BI8 BI9 BI10 BI11	0,518 0,671 0,863 0,917 0,929	67,13	3,96	0,813 (p = 0,000)

The scales used in the research were subjected to factor analysis using the varimax orthogonal rotation method. As a result of the analysis, it was seen that the scales exhibited one-dimensional structures. Some statements were removed from the scales because they had factor loadings less than 0.5. It was determined that the factor loadings of the other items in the scales were between 0.518 and 0.929. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha values of the scales ($\alpha > 0.70$;

$p=0.000$) are at the desired levels, and it was found that the food authenticity scale explains 63.06% of the total variance, the food identity scale explains 61.76% of the total variance, and the brand image scale explains 67.13 of the total variance. Considering the mentioned data, it was understood that the scales are valid and reliable.

4. RESULTS

Table 3 contains data regarding the demographic information of the participants. According to these data, it can be stated that 50.5% of the participants were female, 52.75% were single, 35.50% were between the ages of 35-44, and 40.25% had bachelor's degrees.

Table 3. Findings Regarding the Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Gender	n	%
Male	197	49,25
Female	203	50,75
Marital Status		
Married	211	52,75
Single	189	47,25
Age		
18-24	74	18,50
25-34	87	21,75
35-44	142	35,50
45-54	41	10,25
55 or older	56	12,50
Educational Level		
Primary School	17	4,25
High School	103	25,75
Associate's Degree	87	21,75
Bachelor's Degree	161	40,25
Postgraduate	32	8,00,
Total	400	100

The table below gives Pearson correlation coefficients to test the relationships between the variables of food authenticity, food identity, and brand image.

Table 4. Findings Regarding the Correlation Analysis

Variables	x	s.d.	FA	FI	BI
FA	4,009	0,531	1	0,498	0,496
FI	3,986	0,677		1	0,659
BI	4,116	0,737			1

* $p \leq .00$

Considering the correlation coefficients for the variables in Table 4, it was understood that food authenticity has positive and significant relationships between food identity (0.498) and brand image (0.496), and food identity has a positive and significant relationship with brand image (0.659) at the 0.00 significance level.

Regression analysis based on the Bootstrap method was performed to test the research hypotheses. In the analyses, the Process Macro method developed by Hayes (2018) was used because it allows mediation tests to be performed practically and easily. 5000 resampling options were chosen using the Bootstrap technique. In mediation effect analyses conducted using the technique in question, the values in the 95% confidence interval obtained must not include the zero value for the hypotheses to be supported (MacKinnon, et al. 2004). The findings of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 5. Findings Regarding the Regression Analysis

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Brand Image (BI)</i>			<i>Food Identity (FI)</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
<i>Research Model</i>						
<i>Food Authenticity (FA)</i>	.6882**	.5447	.8057	.2905*	.1793	.4022
<i>Brand Image (BI)</i>	-	-	-	.5017*	.4078	.5999
<i>R²</i>		.2458			.4733	
<i>Indirect Bootstrap Effect</i>	Food Authenticity → Brand Image → Food Identity <i>b</i> = .3453, % 95 BCA CI [.2729, .4220]					
	F(1; 397)= 129.36; p< .001			F(2;396)= 177.95; p< .001		

In testing the hypotheses, firstly, regression analysis findings showing the effect of the independent variable food authenticity (FA) on the mediator variable brand image (BI) were included. According to the findings, food authenticity was found to significantly and positively affect brand image ($\beta = .6882$, 95% CI [.5447, .8057], $t = 11.373$, $p < .001$). Food authenticity explains approximately 25% ($R^2 = .2458$) of the variation in brand image. In this case, **H1** was supported.

In the second stage (the model that takes into account a model without a mediating variable (BI)), it was aimed to determine the effect of food authenticity interaction (FA) on food identity (FI), that is the total effect (These findings are not included in Table 3). Accordingly, it was understood that food authenticity had a positive and significant effect on food identity in the absence of brand image ($\beta = .6357$, 95% CI [.5238, .7476], $t = 11.133$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis **H2** was supported.

Third, the joint effects of the mediating variable, brand image (BI), and food authenticity, on the outcome variable, food identity (FI), were tested. It was observed that brand image significantly and positively affected food identity ($\beta = .5017$, 95% CI [.4078, .5999], $t = 3.874$, $p < .001$). Food authenticity and brand image together explain approximately 47% ($R^2 = .4733$) of the variation in food identity. Hypothesis **H3** was supported.

In the fourth stage, the indirect effect of food authenticity on food identity through the mediating variable brand image was examined. The findings showed that the indirect effect of food authenticity interaction on food identity was significant, thus brand image mediated the relationship between food authenticity and food identity ($\beta = .3453$, 95% BCA CI [.2729, .4220]). The indirect effect value (.3453) is interpreted as the food identity level of the participants with a high level of food authenticity perception being .3453 units higher than the other participants. In this context, it is possible to state that the **H4** hypothesis was supported.

5. CONCLUSION

This research was conducted with the aim of determining the effects of food authenticity on participants' food identity perceptions and examining the mediating effect of brand image in this relationship. The population of the research consists of domestic tourists aged 18 and over who visit Gaziantep. The sample group of the research was determined by convenience sampling method. The data was collected using the survey technique. Correlation and regression analyses were used to test the research hypotheses. As a result of the analysis of the data obtained, the following results were obtained. When the results of the correlation analysis were examined, it was understood that food authenticity has positive and significant relationships with food identity (0.498) and brand image (0.496), and food identity has a positive relationship with brand image (0.659). Regression analysis findings presented that brand image has a mediating effect on the positive and significant relationship between food authenticity and food identity perceptions. This means that the relationship between participants' food authenticity perception levels and food identity perception levels is strengthened thanks to the brand image. When the research results were evaluated in general, it can be said that food authenticity helps us understand the complex relationships between brand image and food identity perceptions. In particular, it was observed that there is a connection between the perceptions that consumers form when experiencing authentic foods and brand image. The positive perception created by consumers of an authentic and traditional local dish on a restaurant's menu provides important clues about the reliability, quality, and reputation of the brand. From a practical perspective, brands' focus on original and local recipes to emphasize the authenticity of their products appears to have a positive impact on consumers' brand image. A restaurant can provide its customers with an authentic experience through a meal prepared using local ingredients and served with traditional cooking techniques. This allows customers to see the restaurant not just as a dining destination, but also as an authentic and unique brand. In this case, brand image shapes brand preferences and increases the value of the brand by associating consumers' real experiences with the brand.

In addition, it is of great importance for brands to determine their communication strategies by taking into account their impact on brand image and gastronomic identity perceptions. In particular, food brands can influence consumers with advertising campaigns that highlight the origin and production processes of their products. Such campaigns contribute to the perception of the brand not only as a supplier of products but also as a cultural and emotional identity. Consumers can absorb with emotional attachment the information presented about the history of the brand and how the products are produced. In this context, it is possible to state that brand image strengthens brand loyalty and shapes consumer preferences positively by enabling consumers to develop an emotional relationship with the brand.

This research was conducted in Gaziantep, which is preferred as a gastronomy city by UNESCO. It is thought that conducting similar studies with different sample groups in different destinations that stand out with their local food identity will shed light on different dimensions of the relationship between food authenticity and food identity.

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