

The Role of Local Gastronomy in Enhancing Destination Image and Sustainable Tourism in Malang City

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ABSTRACT

Local gastronomy is an essential part of cultural identity and plays a strategic role in strengthening the attractiveness of a tourism destination. The city of Malang possesses a rich variety of traditional culinary heritage that has great potential to enhance its destination image and support sustainable tourism development. This study aims to analyze the role of local gastronomy in improving destination image and its contribution to sustainable tourism in Malang. The research employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory design. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to tourists visiting Malang and analyzed to identify the relationships among the studied variables. The results indicate that local gastronomy significantly contributes to shaping a positive destination image and promoting sustainable tourism through economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Authentic culinary experiences strengthen local cultural identity, increase tourist satisfaction, and foster destination loyalty. Therefore, the development of local gastronomy can serve as an effective strategy for building sustainable tourism branding in Malang City.

Keyword: destination branding; destination image; local gastronomy; sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has evolved into one of the key drivers of Indonesia's creative economy. Modern tourism trends are no longer solely focused on visiting natural or cultural attractions but also emphasize authentic experiences that incorporate local elements, including culinary traditions. In this context, gastronomy — as the art, culture, and knowledge of food has become an essential element in strengthening destination image and enhancing the competitiveness of tourist areas (UNWTO, 2023).

Gastronomy is not only related to eating activities but also encompasses the understanding of history, food processing techniques, local ingredients, and the cultural meanings behind each dish (Hjalager, 2022). Therefore, gastronomic tourism can provide emotional and educational experiences for tourists while serving as a medium for introducing the identity and character of a region. In the context of sustainable tourism development, gastronomy has great potential to support the economic, social, and environmental dimensions by involving local communities, utilizing local food ingredients, and preserving culinary heritage.

Malang City is one of East Java's leading tourist destinations, known not only for its natural beauty and cool climate but also for its rich traditional culinary diversity. Various typical dishes such as Bakso Malang, Rawon Nguling, Cwie Mie, Tempe Mendol, and traditional market snacks serve as unique attractions for both domestic and international tourists.

These culinary products not only offer distinctive flavors but also contain historical and cultural values that reflect the identity of Malang's local community.

However, the enormous potential of local gastronomy has not been fully optimized as part of a sustainable tourism branding strategy. Gastronomy promotion efforts tend to be individual and fragmented, carried out mainly by culinary entrepreneurs rather than being integrated into a comprehensive city branding concept that highlights Malang's culinary uniqueness. In addition, the limited number of national-scale culinary events and the lack of cultural storytelling in culinary promotions make Malang's gastronomic wealth less widely exposed. In fact, gastronomy plays a strategic role in strengthening a destination's unique, authentic, and sustainable image.

From a sustainable tourism perspective, local gastronomy can serve as an effective instrument in creating economic value for local communities, strengthening the independence of culinary MSMEs, and preserving traditional food resources and recipes. Therefore, it is essential to empirically examine how local gastronomy contributes to the formation of destination image and tourism sustainability.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the role of local gastronomy in enhancing destination image and sustainable tourism in Malang City. The study is expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for local governments, culinary entrepreneurs, and tourism stakeholders in developing a sustainable, gastronomy-based destination branding strategy with global competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Gastronomy and Gastronomic Tourism

Gastronomy is not only understood as the art of cooking but also includes the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of eating practices (Hjalager, 2022). In the tourism context, gastronomy refers to travel experiences centered around a region's distinctive foods and beverages — including aspects of taste, cooking techniques, and cultural values (Richards, 2020). Gastronomic tourism has developed into one of the leading forms of experience-based tourism, contributing to local income generation and cultural preservation (UNWTO, 2023). Furthermore, Okumus, Koseoglu, and Bilgihan (2020) emphasize that gastronomic tourism can be an effective strategy for strengthening destination branding, as tourists tend to associate culinary experiences with a place's identity. Thus, gastronomy serves not only as a tourism attraction but also as a powerful cultural communication instrument.

Gastronomy as an Instrument of Destination Image

Destination image refers to tourists' perceptions of a place, formed through experience, information, and symbolic representation (Prayag, 2020). In recent years, several studies have revealed that local gastronomy plays a crucial role in shaping a positive destination image (Kim & Ellis, 2021). Authentic local gastronomy provides unique impressions and differentiates destinations from others. For instance, a study by López-Guzmán et al. (2022) in Spain demonstrated that local cuisine is a key factor influencing tourists' visit decisions and satisfaction. Therefore, strong gastronomic promotion can enhance a destination's brand equity and competitiveness (Yurtseven & Kaya, 2023).

Gastronomy and Sustainable Tourism

Within the framework of sustainable development, gastronomy contributes significantly to the three main pillars — economic, social, and environmental. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2021), the development of local-based culinary practices encourages sustainable supply chains, reduces food waste, and improves local community welfare. Horng et al. (2022) highlight that strengthening local gastronomy supports the empowerment of culinary MSMEs and the preservation of traditional food resources. Moreover, gastronomy enhances tourists' awareness of sustainability, especially when dining experiences are accompanied by cultural storytelling, the use of local ingredients, and environmentally friendly practices (Sims & Hall, 2023).

Local Gastronomy and Malang City Branding

Malang City possesses significant potential for developing gastronomic tourism due to its rich culinary heritage and community creativity. However, according to Wahyuni & Santoso (2023), this potential has not been optimally managed within a city branding strategy. Collaboration among government, businesses, and the community remains limited, resulting in an underdeveloped image of Malang as a gastronomic destination. Strengthening local gastronomy can be a strategic approach to building a sustainable brand identity for Malang City. The integration of culinary promotion, food festivals, and local cultural storytelling is expected to reinforce the city's destination image and attract tourists who seek authentic experiences (Wijaya, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative descriptive–verificative approach with the aim of analyzing the influence of local gastronomy on destination image and sustainable tourism in Malang City. The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to objectively measure the relationships among variables through numerical data collection and statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This research design is also explanatory in nature, as it seeks to explain the extent to which local gastronomy (independent variable) affects destination image and sustainable tourism (dependent variables).

The study was conducted in Malang City, East Java Province, which is recognized as one of Indonesia's primary culinary destinations. The location was selected purposively, considering the city's rich traditional culinary heritage and strong potential for gastronomic tourism development. The research was carried out from May to August 2025, encompassing instrument development, data collection, and data analysis phases.

The population of this research consisted of domestic and international tourists who visited Malang City and had experienced local culinary products (such as Bakso Malang, Rawon Nguling, Tempe Mendol, and traditional marketsnacks).

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with the following respondent criteria:

- (1) at least 17 years of age,
- (2) having visited Malang City at least once within the last 12 months, and
- (3) having tried Malang’s local culinary specialties.

The sample size was determined using the formula proposed by Hair et al. (2022), requiring a minimum of 5–10 times the number of indicators used in the questionnaire. With a total of 25 indicators, the minimum required sample ranged between 125 and 250 respondents. In this study, 200 respondents were selected to ensure representative results.

The research utilized two types of data:

1. Primary data, obtained through the distribution of Likert-scale (1–5) questionnaires to respondents.
2. Secondary data, gathered from literature reviews, tourism reports, documents from the Malang City Department of Culture and Tourism, and publications related to gastronomy and tourism destinations.

Data were collected using both online (Google Forms) and offline (printed questionnaires) methods. Before distribution, the research instrument underwent the following tests:

1. Validity test, using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation with an acceptable threshold of $r > 0.3$.
2. Reliability test, using Cronbach’s Alpha, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered as reliable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 200 respondents, all of whom were tourists who had visited Malang City and experienced local culinary products. The results of the descriptive analysis are summarized as follows:

Table 1. Characteristics Respondent

Characteristics	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	46.5
	Female	53.5
Age	17–25 years	42.0
	26–35 years	36.5
	Above 35 years	21.5
Origin of Tourists	Domestic	87.0
	International	13.0
Frequency of Visits to Malang	Once	31.5
	2–3 times	44.0
	More than 3 times	24.5

Sources : Primary Data Process 2025

The majority of respondents were young tourists (17–35 years old) and domestic visitors, indicating that the younger segment has a high level of interest in local gastronomy as part of their travel experience in Malang City.

Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

Local Gastronomy (X)

The average perception score of respondents toward the local gastronomy variable was 4.28, categorized as *very good*.

The indicator with the highest score was culinary authenticity (4.42), followed by culinary experience (4.30), community involvement (4.17), and culinary promotion (4.12). These findings indicate that tourists perceive Malang’s traditional cuisine as having distinctive flavors and strong cultural value, although the aspect of culinary promotion still requires improvement.

Destination Image (Y₁)

The average score for the destination image variable was 4.21, categorized as *good*. The most prominent indicators were culinary uniqueness (4.35) and strong city identity (4.20). This suggests that local gastronomy contributes significantly to the positive perception of Malang City’s image as a culinary tourism destination.

Sustainable Tourism (Y₂)

The average score for the sustainable tourism variable was 4.18, also categorized as *good*. The highest indicator was positive economic impact on local communities (4.36), followed by preservation of local ingredients (4.24). Meanwhile, the environmental aspect received a relatively lower score (3.95), indicating the need to strengthen eco-friendly practices within the culinary industry.

Table 2. Instrument Validity and Reliability Test

Variable	Number of Indicators	r-value (min–max)	Cronbach’s Alpha	Description
Local Gastronomy (X)	10	0.421–0.812	0.911	Valid & Reliable
Destination Image (Y ₁)	8	0.436–0.798	0.893	Valid & Reliable
Sustainable Tourism (Y ₂)	7	0.459–0.805	0.902	Valid & Reliable

Sources : Primary Data Process 2025

All items had correlation values greater than 0.30 and Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients above 0.70, confirming that the research instruments were both **valid and reliable** (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

Classical Assumption Test

The normality test (Kolmogorov–Smirnov) showed a significance value of $0.072 > 0.05$, indicating that the data were normally distributed. No issues of multicollinearity ($VIF < 10$) or heteroscedasticity were detected, suggesting that the model met the assumptions required for regression analysis.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

To examine the influence of Local Gastronomy (X) on Destination Image (Y₁) and Sustainable Tourism (Y₂), a multiple linear regression model was applied.

Table 3. The Effect of Local Gastronomy on Destination Image

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-value	Sig.	Description
Local Gastronomy (X)	0.652	10.784	0.000	Significant

Sources : Primary Data Process 2025

The R² value = 0.426, meaning that 42.6% of the variation in destination image is influenced by local gastronomy, while the remaining **57.4%** is affected by other factors such as accessibility, facilities, and tourist attractions. This result demonstrates that the better the management of local gastronomy, the more positive the destination image becomes in tourists’ perceptions.

Table 4. The Effect of Local Gastronomy on Sustainable Tourism

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-value	Sig.	Description
Local Gastronomy (X)	0.587	8.462	0.000	Significant
Destination Image (Y ₁)	0.268	3.745	0.001	Significant

Sources : Primary Data Process 2025

The R² value = 0.512, indicating that 51.2% of the variation in sustainable tourism is explained by local gastronomy and destination image. These findings show that destination image serves as a partial mediating variable between local gastronomy and sustainable tourism.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis Code	Hypothesis Statement	Significance Result	Conclusion
H ₁	Local gastronomy has a significant effect on destination image.	Sig. 0.000 < 0.05	Accepted
H ₂	Local gastronomy has a significant effect on sustainable tourism.	Sig. 0.000 < 0.05	Accepted
H ₃	Destination image mediates the effect of local gastronomy on sustainable tourism.	Sig. 0.001 < 0.05	Accepted

Sources : Primary Data Process 2025

The results indicate that local gastronomy plays a crucial role in shaping destination image and supporting tourism sustainability in Malang City. Authentic flavors, the use of local ingredients, and community involvement are dominant factors contributing to a positive tourist experience. Furthermore, a strong destination image was found to reinforce the relationship between local gastronomy and sustainable tourism. When tourists perceive Malang as a destination with a distinctive and authentic culinary identity, they tend to support cultural preservation and local economic development. These findings are consistent with the studies of Kim & Ellis (2021) and Horng et al. (2022), which assert that gastronomy functions as a cultural ambassador in sustainable destination development strategies.

Discussion

The Role of Local Gastronomy in Destination Image

The results indicate that local gastronomy has a significant effect on destination image, with a significance value of $p = 0.000$ and a coefficient of $\beta = 0.652$. This finding demonstrates that the stronger the local gastronomic character of a region, the more positive the destination image perceived by tourists.

This finding aligns with the studies of Kim & Ellis (2021) and López-Guzmán et al. (2022), which emphasize that local cuisine plays an essential role in shaping destination perception. Tourists tend to associate authentic culinary experiences with a destination's uniqueness and cultural identity. In the context of Malang City, the presence of traditional dishes such as *Bakso Malang*, *Rawon Nguling*, *Cwie Mie*, and *Tempe Mendol* reinforces the city's image as a destination with a strong and memorable culinary identity.

Furthermore, Richards (2020) argues that food serves as a cultural symbol representing the values, history, and lifestyle of local communities. Therefore, when tourists enjoy Malang's local cuisine, they not only appreciate the taste but also gain a cultural experience that enriches their perception of the city. Thus, local gastronomy functions as a cultural marker, strengthening the place identity and destination image of Malang.

The Influence of Local Gastronomy on Sustainable Tourism

Regression analysis shows that local gastronomy significantly affects sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.587$; $p = 0.000$). This finding indicates that the development of local-based gastronomy contributes to the three pillars of sustainability — economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

From an economic perspective, strengthening the local culinary sector can create employment opportunities, increase community income, and support culinary MSMEs. This finding is consistent with Horng et al. (2022) and UNWTO (2023), who highlight that local gastronomy has a multiplier effect on the regional economy by engaging local supply chains — from farmers and ingredient suppliers to food entrepreneurs.

From a social and cultural perspective, local cuisine plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and enhancing community pride in regional identity (Hjalager, 2022). In Malang's context, the participation of local communities in managing traditional food stalls, culinary festivals, and tourism promotion activities represents social involvement that supports community-based tourism sustainability.

From an environmental perspective, local gastronomy encourages the use of local food ingredients and reduces dependence on imported products. However, the study revealed that the environmental dimension received a relatively lower score (3.95), indicating the need for continuous education on food waste management and eco-friendly practices within Malang's culinary sector. This aligns with Sims & Hall (2023), who emphasize that the success of sustainable gastronomic tourism depends on integrating green practices across the food supply chain.

The Mediating Role of Destination Image in the Relationship Between Gastronomy and Sustainability

The findings also reveal that destination image partially mediates the relationship between local gastronomy and sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.268$; $p = 0.001$). This means that local gastronomy not only has a direct impact on tourism sustainability but also exerts an indirect influence through the enhancement of destination image.

This result supports the argument of Prayag (2020), who states that destination image acts as a crucial bridge linking tourist experiences (including culinary experiences) with tourist loyalty and visit sustainability. A positive image formed through authentic gastronomic experiences enhances tourist satisfaction, increases revisit intention, and encourages word-of-mouth promotion.

In the case of Malang City, this implies that developing local culinary experiences not only increases tourist numbers but also shapes a long-term positive perception of Malang as a sustainable tourism destination. Hence, gastronomy can be positioned as a strategic component of sustainability-oriented destination branding.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study reinforces the destination image theory (Prayag, 2020) and the sustainable tourism model (UNWTO, 2023) by demonstrating that local gastronomy serves as a strategic variable linking cultural aspects, tourist experiences, and destination sustainability. The findings provide empirical evidence that food experience holds symbolic power in shaping the image and value of a tourism destination (Okumus et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study contributes to the development of experiential marketing theory in tourism, emphasizing that culinary experiences can serve as a medium for communicating identity and promoting destinations.

Practical Implications

Practically, the study offers several recommendations for the Malang City Government and the Tourism Office:

1. Integrate gastronomy into city branding strategies, highlighting culinary identities such as *Bakso Malang Heritage* or the *Malang Food Street Festival*.
2. Provide training and mentoring for local culinary entrepreneurs to strengthen product innovation while preserving authenticity and cultural value.
3. Encourage the implementation of sustainable culinary practices, such as food waste management, the use of organic local ingredients, and reducing single-use plastics.
4. Develop a community-based gastronomic tourism ecosystem, for instance through food trail tours, gastronomy maps, and annual culinary events that showcase the cultural stories behind Malang's traditional dishes.

Through these strategies, gastronomy can become a key driver in shaping Malang City's image as a globally competitive sustainable culinary destination.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited to tourists within Malang City and does not deeply explore other factors such as digital promotion, visual experiences on social media, or international tourist perceptions.

Therefore, future research is recommended to:

1. Employ a more complex Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach, incorporating additional mediating or moderating variables (e.g., destination attachment or perceived authenticity).
2. Adopt mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into cultural narratives and tourists' perceptions of Malang's local cuisine.

CONCLUSION

Based on the quantitative findings obtained from tourists visiting Malang City, several key conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. Local gastronomy plays a significant role in shaping the destination image of Malang City. The uniqueness of flavors, presentation techniques, and cultural values embedded in traditional dishes such as *Bakso Malang*, *Rawon Nguling*, and *Tempe Mendol* serve as essential elements in creating authentic tourist experiences. These characteristics have a direct impact on tourists' positive perceptions of Malang as a destination with a strong culinary identity.
2. Local gastronomy makes a tangible contribution to sustainable tourism development. Through the empowerment of local culinary actors, the utilization of regional food ingredients, and culture-based promotion, the gastronomy sector creates sustainable economic, social, and environmental impacts. However, environmental aspects still require greater attention, particularly in food waste management and the implementation of green practices within the culinary industry.

3. Destination image mediates the relationship between local gastronomy and sustainable tourism. Positive culinary experiences not only enhance tourist satisfaction but also strengthen revisit intentions and encourage tourists to recommend Malang to others. Thus, destination image serves as a strategic link between the cultural power of gastronomy and the sustainability of the tourism sector.

Overall, local gastronomy can be positioned as a strategic instrument for sustainable tourism branding. The authenticity of flavors and the cultural narratives behind each of Malang's traditional dishes represent strong branding potential for enhancing destination competitiveness. Gastronomy is not merely about food consumption, but also functions as a medium of cultural communication, creative economy development, and regional identity reinforcement.

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