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Gastronomic Perception and Satisfaction Domestic Tourists in Mexico

Edgar Rojas-Rivas¹; Jazmín Zaragoza-Alonso²; Manuel F. Suárez-Barraza³; Laura Eugenia Tovar-Bustamante⁴

¹ Universidad de las Américas Puebla. edgar.rojas@udlap.mx. ORCID: 0000-0002-3881-2480

² Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. jaz.zara.al88@gmail.com

³ Universidad de las Américas Puebla. manuel.suarez@udlap.mx

⁴ Universidad Anáhuac, Doctorado Internacional en Turismo. laura.tovarb@anahuac.mx. ORCID: 0000-0001-7287-1970

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Abstract: Mexico's gastronomic richness is a key factor in attracting domestic and international tourists. This study examines domestic tourists' perceptions of gastronomy in a Mexican destination and analyses the effects of motivation and gastronomic experience on satisfaction. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire in two cities of Puebla, Mexico, obtaining 333 valid responses. The instrument was validated using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, while a projective word-association technique identified perceptions of local gastronomy. The findings revealed thirteen categories describing tourists' gastronomic perceptions. Structural equation modelling showed that motivation positively influences gastronomic experience and tourist satisfaction, while gastronomic experience has a strong positive effect on culinary satisfaction. The results contribute to a better understanding of gastronomy's role in tourism experiences and provide practical insights for destination management and promotion in Mexico. The finding highlight the importance of developing distinctive gastronomic tourism products that enhance destination attractiveness and support the sustainable appreciation of local culture through food.

Keywords: domestic tourism, gastronomic satisfaction, gastronomic tourism, Mexico, structural equation modeling

Percepción y satisfacción gastronómica de los turistas domésticos en México

Resumen: La riqueza gastronómica de México constituye un factor clave para atraer turistas nacionales e internacionales. Este estudio examina las percepciones de los turistas nacionales sobre la gastronomía de un destino mexicano y analiza los efectos de la motivación y de la experiencia gastronómica en la satisfacción. Se aplicó un enfoque de métodos mixtos: los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario autoadministrado en dos ciudades de Puebla (México), con 333 respuestas válidas. El instrumento se validó mediante análisis factoriales exploratorios y confirmatorios, y una técnica proyectiva de asociación de palabras permitió identificar las percepciones sobre la gastronomía local, a partir de las cuales surgieron trece categorías. El modelo de ecuaciones estructurales mostró que la motivación influye positivamente en la experiencia gastronómica y en la satisfacción, mientras que la experiencia gastronómica ejerce un fuerte efecto positivo sobre la satisfacción culinaria. Los resultados contribuyen a comprender mejor el papel de la gastronomía en las experiencias turísticas y aportan conocimientos prácticos para la gestión y promoción de destinos mexicanos. Asimismo, subrayan la importancia de desarrollar productos turísticos gastronómicos distintivos que mejoren el atractivo del destino y apoyen una apreciación sostenible de la cultura local a través de la gastronomía.

Palabras Clave: turismo doméstico, satisfacción gastronómica, turismo gastronómico, México, modelo de ecuaciones estructurales

1. INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy is a concept that offers valuable insights into the food culture of destinations, as it encompasses not only the production and service of food, but also a wide range of elements that visitors seek during their travels. It functions as a powerful medium for providing authentic experiences, being closely linked to the sensory qualities of local foods, the identity and heritage of the destination, iconic dishes and beverages. Additionally, gastronomy involves the preparation methods and culinary techniques that contribute an educational dimension for both consumers and tourists. Moreover, its biological importance in providing essential nutrients for the functioning of the human body should not be overlooked (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020; Carvache-Franco et al., 2021).

Gastronomic tourism is associated with travel experiences that are primarily or secondarily motivated by the consumption of local food, visits to agri-food fairs, restaurants or gastronomic festivals in the destinations (Su et al., 2020). This form of tourism has attracted growing academic attention and numerous empirical studies have analyzed it from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives in recent years (Okumus et al., 2018). However, despite the extensive body of literature on gastronomic tourism (Sujood et al., 2024), there is still limited information on this topic in Latin American countries (López-Guzmán et al., 2017, González et al., 2019, Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021; Carvache-Franco et al., 2021; Esparza et al., 2022), especially in Mexico, a country with a rich and important gastronomy. The situation becomes even more complex when considering domestic tourism, where studies focusing on tourists' perceptions and satisfaction with local gastronomy are especially scarce (Lebrun & Bouchet, 2024).

Several studies have examined the relationship between gastronomy and tourism in different contexts, including Spain (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023; Valverde-Roda et al., 2023), Pakistan (Ullah et al., 2022), Perú (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021; Esparza et al., 2022), Ecuador (López-Guzmán et al., 2017), or Thailand

(Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). These studies highlight how gastronomy contributes to destination image, tourist motivation and the creation of memorable experiences. However, there are significant differences in gastronomic destination preference and consumption between international and domestic tourists, as domestic tourists are more interested in seeking unique and authentic experiences, avoiding standardized environments in destinations (Lebrun & Bouchet, 2024), particularly, after the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic tourism has gained relevance for the economic development of countries and is a very little explored area in the framework of gastronomic tourism.

Moreover, there is a limited understanding of how motivation related to destination gastronomy is associated with the experience and satisfaction among domestic tourists in Mexico, a country renowned for its gastronomic wealth due to its biodiversity, identity, and socio-cultural richness, and where traditional cuisine has been listed as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020). In this context the objective is to study the gastronomic perception among domestic tourists of an emblematic gastronomic destination in Mexico and analyze the effect of motivation and gastronomic experience on their satisfaction level.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Gastronomic perception in destinations

Perceptions of gastronomy encompass tourists' beliefs, ideas, impressions, and expectations that tourists hold regarding food, dishes, restaurants, and the culinary culture of destinations. These perceptions significantly influence tourists' decision-making processes, shaping their behavior and overall satisfaction with gastronomic experiences. Moreover, gastronomic perceptions play a crucial role in fostering tourists' loyalty and their intention to revisit destinations (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017).

Destination gastronomy represents a powerful instrument for tourism marketing, as it contributes to the formation, reinforcement, and differentiation of a destination's image and brand. Understanding tourists' gastronomic perceptions is therefore essential to strengthen the competitiveness and uniqueness of destinations (Peštek & Činjurević, 2014). Likewise, gastronomy functions as a medium through which tourists' expectations of destinations are shaped and reaffirmed both before and after their trips. For instance, visitors to Italy often seek authentic pasta or pizza; those traveling to France anticipate tasting fine wines; and tourists visiting Spain may look forward to enjoying Serrano ham and cheese. Similarly, in Mexico, tourists frequently seek tacos, mezcal, or tequila as distinctive gastronomic experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

Destination gastronomy comprises various attributes that capture tourists' interest and significantly influence their gastronomic motivation, experiences, and overall satisfaction (Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019). The authenticity of food and beverages, for example, stands out as essential in shaping memorable gastronomic tourism experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Furthermore, the singularity of local ingredients, traditional dishes, elaboration techniques or products with quality certifications influence tourists' perception of local gastronomy (Chang & Mak, 2018).

Therefore, the perception of the gastronomic attributes of destinations can significantly influence gastronomic experience and satisfaction (Chen et al., 2024). If tourists have a positive perception of the destination's gastronomy, they are likely to seek experiences associated with the destination's gastronomy

such as visiting fairs, festivals or tasting traditional foods and dishes of the destination. Moreover, that perception may be confirmed or disconfirmed after the visit among tourists, affecting satisfaction and loyalty for the destination's gastronomy (Chatterjee & Suklabaidya, 2021). In the context of domestic tourism, understanding tourists' perceptions of local gastronomy can provide valuable information for management and marketing organizations to consolidate and increase the competitiveness of destinations.

Qualitative techniques are very useful for studying tourists' perceptions of the gastronomic image of destinations, particularly projective methods (Chang & Mak, 2018; Mohamed et al., 2024; Rojas-Rivas et al., 2025). Through these techniques, participants are asked to express their opinion about the gastronomic image of a destination, freely expressing their ideas and thoughts without the restriction of a quantitative questionnaire. The word association technique is part of projective methods and is based on a procedure of asking for the first four words, ideas, or thoughts about a specific stimulus, in this case about the gastronomic image of a destination. Therefore, this projective technique can provide valuable information on the gastronomic perception of domestic tourists.

2.2. Motivation and experience in gastronomic tourism

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Fields (2003) highlighted the increasing demand for gastronomic experiences among tourists, noting that more travelers are motivated to choose destinations offering distinctive culinary options. In this regard, the World Tourism Organization states that this form of tourism should be promoted more (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019), as it is a fundamental pillar of tourism development in destinations (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021).

Table 1 presents a brief review of international studies that have examined motivations, experiences and satisfaction in the context of gastronomic tourism. Most of these studies have focused on international tourists or on samples combining both domestic and international visitors, with none specifically addressing domestic tourists. This research seeks to fill this gap, particularly given that domestic tourists often report higher levels of satisfaction with the gastronomic offerings of destinations compared to their international counterparts (Lesić, 2019).

Table 1. Main studies that analyze the motivations, experiences and satisfaction associated with the gastronomy of the destinations

Reference	Constructs of study	Place and sample studied	Main findings
López-Guzmán et al. (2017)	Attitude, motivation (food experiences, culture, socialization) and satisfaction. Cluster analysis was used on the variables analyzed.	The sample was composed of international tourists at an international food festival (n = 478). The study was conducted in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador.	Three segments of tourists were identified. The level of satisfaction among the tourist segments is significantly associated with culinary motivations. Gastronomic satisfaction is influenced by the motivation of socialization and new food experiences.
Berbel-Pineda et al. (2019)	Motivation, Experience, Satisfaction and Loyalty. These constructs were analyzed using structural equation modelling.	The sample was composed of national and international tourists (n = 325). The study was conducted in Seville, Spain.	Motivation positively influences the dining experience. Likewise, the gastronomic experience positively influences satisfaction and loyalty for the destination's gastronomy.
González et al. (2019)	Motivational factors (interpersonal relationships, cultural experience, sensory appeal, health concern, excitement) and their relationship with gastronomic satisfaction.	The sample was composed of foreign tourists, mainly from the American continent (n = 370). The study was carried out in the city of Oruro, Bolivia.	Three segments of tourists were identified based on their gastronomic motivations. The motivations of sensory appeal, cultural experience and health concern had the greatest influence on gastronomic satisfaction.
Agyeiwaah et al. (2019)	Motivation, Experience, Satisfaction and Loyalty. These constructs were analyzed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)	The sample consisted of international culinary tourists interested in cooking classes (n = 300). The study was conducted in the city of Chiang Mai, Thailand.	The motivation of culinary tourists influences the culinary experience and satisfaction associated with the destination. Likewise, culinary experience influences tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. A mediating effect of the experience and satisfaction constructs was identified.
Rodríguez-Gutierrez et al. (2020)	Gastronomy motivations, attitude toward culinary experience and gastronomy satisfaction. The constructs were analyzed using structural equation modeling.	The sample was composed of national and international tourists (n = 615). The study was conducted in the creative city of Popayan, Colombia.	Gastronomic motivations (cultural experience, sensory appeal, health concerns, interpersonal aspects and excitement) influence destination satisfaction.
Carvache-Franco et al. (2021)	Motivational factors (cultural, physical and social) and their relationship with satisfaction. EFA was conducted. The relationship between motivations and satisfaction was analyzed using Spearman correlations.	The sample was composed of national and foreign tourists over 18 years of age (n = 436). The study was conducted in the coastal destination of General Villamil Playas, Ecuador.	The three motivational factors influence satisfaction with the destination's cuisine. The physical motivational factor had the strongest relationship with satisfaction.
Cordova-Buiza et al. (2021)	Gastronomic motivations and satisfaction. Cluster analysis was used to identify groups of tourists.	The sample was composed of international tourists who visited the Virgen de la Candelaria festival (n = 190). The study was conducted in Puno, Peru.	Three groups of tourists differed in their gastronomic motivations about the destination. In addition, the groups presented different

Reference	Constructs of study	Place and sample studied	Main findings
Ullah et al. (2022)	Motivation, gastronomic experience, satisfaction with the destination and loyalty. These constructs were analyzed using CFA and linear regression.	The sample was composed of national and international tourists (n = 307). The study was conducted in the northern areas of Pakistan.	levels of satisfaction with the destination's gastronomy. Gastronomic motivations positively influence the culinary experience. In addition, the gastronomic experience influences satisfaction and loyalty. Satisfaction towards the destination influences tourist loyalty to a greater extent.
Esparza et al. (2023)	Gastronomy, overall experience, satisfaction and loyalty. These constructs were analyzed using SEM.	The composition of the sample is not mentioned; it is inferred that the sample was composed of national and international tourists (n = 190). The study was conducted in Lima, Peru.	The effect of the gastronomy construct positively influences overall experience and satisfaction. In addition, overall experience and satisfaction positively influence destination loyalty. Gastronomic motivations, gastronomic experience and destination satisfaction influence destination loyalty. Food motivation influences experience, which in turn influences destination satisfaction. Destination satisfaction has a strong influence on the loyalty of tourists and has a mediating effect between gastronomic experience and loyalty.
Moral-Cuadra et al. (2023)	Motivation, Experiences, Satisfaction and Loyalty in a World Heritage City. These constructs were analyzed using EFA and SEM.	The sample consisted of international tourists to an internationally recognized heritage city (n = 710). The study was conducted in Cordoba, Spain.	Three segments of tourists were identified as having different motivations. Satisfaction was strongly related to gastronomic motivations.
Valverde-Roda et al. (2023)	Gastronomic motivations and satisfaction. Cluster analysis was used to identify groups of tourists. Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to relate gastronomic motivations and satisfaction.	The sample was representative of national and international tourists at a UNESCO heritage site (n = 1612). The study was carried out in Granada, Spain.	The gastronomic experience significantly influences destination satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, gastronomic satisfaction has a greater influence on tourists' loyalty to the destination.
Tagmanov et al. (2024)	Gastronomy experience and satisfaction, destination satisfaction and loyalty. Constructs were evaluated through CFA and SEM	The sample was composed of foreign tourists (n = 392). The study was conducted in Kazakhstan.	

Currently, there is more information on the motivations that drive tourists' choice of destinations based on their gastronomy. For example, Agyeiwahh et al. (2019, p. 297) emphasize that cuisine is one of the main attractions for tourists in Hong Kong. In Peru, about 60% of tourists choose the destination for its gastronomy, in addition to natural attractions like Machu Picchu (Farje, 2017). Berbel-Pineda et al. (2019) state that approximately 15% of tourists are primarily motivated by gastronomy when selecting a destination. Also, at least 40% of European tourists who visit international destinations do so with gastronomy as a key

reason (Nikolić et al., 2020). Domestic tourists also show high levels of motivation with respect to the local gastronomy of the destinations (Kim et al., 2019; Sthapit et al., 2023).

Gastronomic tourism motivations are associated with the desire for authenticity and memorable experiences (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). According to the push-pull framework, push factors represent internal motivations of tourists, such as exploring new foods, increasing the knowledge of gastronomy, engaging socially, and immersing themselves in cultural experiences. Pull factors, in contrast, relate to destination attributes, including diverse culinary offerings, renowned restaurants, lively festivals, agri-food routes, and high-quality local products (Su et al., 2020). Several studies have highlighted different motivations within the framework of gastronomic tourism (Rodríguez-Gutierrez et al., 2020; Valverde-Roda et al., 2023). Tourists' interests are driven by the authentic experiences in destinations with distinctive food and beverages that serve as primary and secondary motivations, reflecting tourists' deep interest in exploring and experiencing the gastronomy of the destinations (Sthapit et al., 2023).

In terms of experiences, gastronomic tourism is often linked to tourists' participation in culinary routes, festivals, cooking classes, visits to food markets, and other gastronomy-focused events (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). For example, during gastronomic festivals tourists are actively seeking authentic experiences, viewing gastronomy as a gateway to understanding the destination's culture and enhancing social connections (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). Domestic tourists similarly pursue novel culinary experiences to explore and engage with the local culture (Sthapit et al., 2023). Despite the relevant role of gastronomy in destinations, there is very limited information on the motivations for gastronomy in Mexican destinations among domestic tourists. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H₁: Motivation positively influences the gastronomic experience among domestic tourists in the context of gastronomic tourism in Mexico

2.3. Motivation and satisfaction in gastronomic tourism

Satisfaction is an evaluative judgement after having consumed a product or service (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021). In the tourism industry, it reflects the emotional state post-experience, whether positive or negative (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023). In gastronomic tourism, satisfaction involves assessing both the affective and cognitive dimensions of the destination experience, which can leave a lasting impression on tourists (Rodríguez-Gutierrez et al., 2020).

The relationship between motivation and satisfaction has been widely examined among international tourists across various destinations. For example, Su et al. (2020) identified a positive relationship between motivation and satisfaction among culinary tourists in Thailand. Conversely, Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al. (2020) reported a significant mediating effect of attitudes toward the culinary experience on the relationship between gastronomic motivation and satisfaction. Moral-Cuadra et al. (2023) analyzed the influence of four motivators on gastronomic satisfaction in Córdoba, Spain, and found that gastronomic motivations positively affect tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

However, satisfaction levels may differ between domestic and international tourists, Lesic (2019) established that domestic tourists were more satisfied regarding the gastronomic offer of a destination in Croatia compared to international tourists. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H₂: Motivation positively influences gastronomic satisfaction among domestic tourists in the context of gastronomic tourism in Mexico

2.4. Experience and satisfaction in gastronomic tourism

The gastronomic experience encompasses cultural and culinary elements, including food preparation, service quality, and the overall taste of dishes in gastronomic destinations. The quality of this experience, whether positive or negative, plays a critical role in shaping tourist satisfaction and loyalty toward the destination (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023). Moreover, a positive gastronomic experience not only enhances tourist satisfaction but also has the potential to extend their stay, benefiting small and medium enterprises in the destination (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019).

Tourist satisfaction is formed through the evaluation of various components of the destination, including gastronomy, accommodation, attractions, restaurants, markets, among others. Gastronomic experiences reflect all facets of a destination's food culture, such as cuisine styles, food quality, consumption practices, culinary beliefs, and preparation techniques. A negative gastronomic experience can lead to dissatisfaction, significantly impacting the gastronomic image and overall perception of the destination (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). The positive influence of the gastronomic experience on satisfaction has been demonstrated in previous studies (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019; Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2022; Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023; Tagmanov et al., 2024). Consequently, it is expected that gastronomic experience will positively influence satisfaction among domestic tourists in Mexico. Thus, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H₃: Experience positively influences gastronomic satisfaction among domestic tourists in the context of gastronomic tourism in Mexico.

2.5. Mediating effect of experience on gastronomic motivation and satisfaction

Gastronomic experiences play a central role in shaping destination image and in influencing tourists' motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty, often acting as a mediator between motivation and satisfaction (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). For instance, Agyeiwaah et al. (2019) examined the mediating effect of experience on motivation and satisfaction among international culinary tourists, finding that tourists were motivated by the desire to learn local cooking styles and ingredients, and that the learning experience served as a mediator between motivation and satisfaction in culinary tourism. These authors argue that culinary tourism experiences arise from tourists' motivations, and that satisfaction is shaped by the gastronomic experience at the destination. Similarly, Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al. (2020) investigated the mediating effect of culinary experience on the relationship between culinary motivations and gastronomic satisfaction in Colombia.

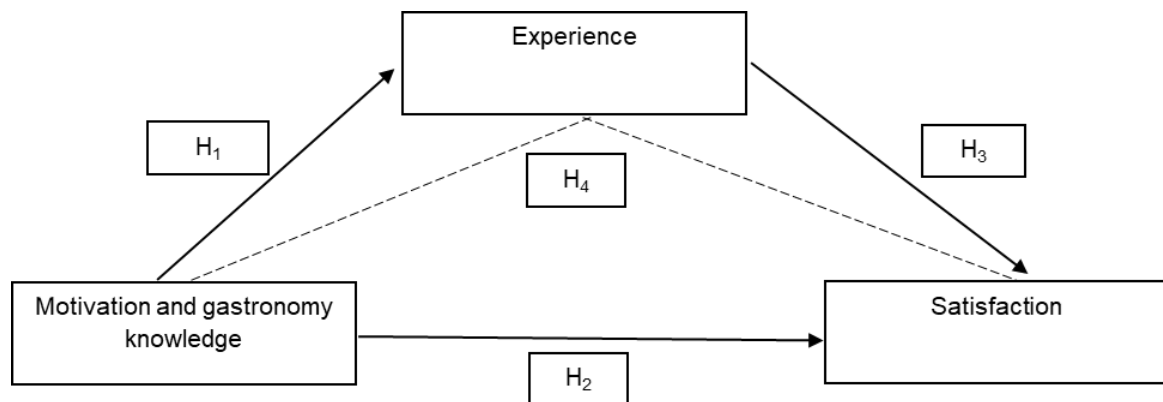
However, in the context of domestic tourists, the mediating effect of the gastronomic experience on motivation and satisfaction remains unexplored. Based on the above, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H₄: Experience has a mediating effect on gastronomic motivation and satisfaction among domestic tourists in Mexico.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model with respect to the constructs of motivation, experience and gastronomic satisfaction, including the mediating role of gastronomic experience on motivation and satisfaction. While various studies also examine tourist loyalty concerning these constructs, our primary

objective is to understand the influence of motivation and experience on gastronomic satisfaction. Furthermore, this study analyses gastronomic perceptions of local gastronomy in Mexico.

Figure 1. Theoretical model in the proposed constructs



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Place and participants

A convenience sampling (Guerrero et al., 2010) was employed using a self-administered questionnaire distributed in public locations across two cities in Puebla, Mexico, that is recognized for its rich gastronomy, which attracts both national and international tourists. At the International Tourism Fair (FITUR) in Madrid in 2023, the city of Puebla was named Ibero-American Capital of Gastronomic Culture (Hernández, 2023). In the same year, Puebla received more than 6 million tourists and 16 million visitors in the main destinations of the state. In 2024, just over 6.5 million domestic and international tourists arrived, representing a 4% increase in tourist numbers compared to 2023. From January to September 2025, there was a 6% increase in tourist arrivals compared to the same period in 2024 (Datatur, 2025). This state offers a variety of dishes, restaurants, and annual festivals celebrating traditional foods, such as the renowned Chiles en Nogada.

The survey was conducted between November 2022 and July 2023, encompassing peak tourist seasons in the cities of Puebla and San Pedro Cholula. These cities are located approximately 2 hours from the country's capital, and at least 3 out of 10 tourists are motivated by the destination's gastronomy (Acle-Mena et al., 2020). Participants included domestic tourists aged 18 and above who expressed interest in participating. The sample size was calculated at a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5.43%, establishing 327 participants to be surveyed (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019). In total, 333 participants were surveyed, who gave their consent to participate in the study. They were informed that the information would be used for academic purposes only. This study was approved by the Research Department of the Universidad de las Américas Puebla.

3.2. Questionnaire and measurement scales

A questionnaire was designed and applied on the Microsoft Forms® platform. It consisted of three sections aimed at collecting participants' perceptions and attitudes about the destination's gastronomy. The first section utilized the word association technique (de Andrade et al., 2016; Gambaro, 2018). Participants had to write the first four words, ideas or phrases that came to mind with the stimulus "Gastronomy of Puebla".

Several methods like the repertory grid (Chang & Mak, 2018) and multiple attribute instruments (Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Chen et al., 2024) have been used to study gastronomic perceptions in destinations, qualitative techniques such as projective methods have been underutilized in exploring the image and perception of tourist destinations (Prayag, 2007; Hindley et al., 2015), particularly in gastronomic contexts. Projective methods offer valuable insights into tourists' perceptions, expectations, and beliefs that influence their behaviors. These methods establish that by presenting a stimulus such as a word or photo, it is possible to access the deepest thoughts, feelings, attitudes and motivations of consumers and tourists (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2023).

Among the projective methods, associative techniques such as the WA are the most versatile. In this approach, participants spontaneously mention the first words of a stimulus such as a word or phrase. Free word association has been widely applied across diverse fields of research (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2024; Relja et al., 2023; Chene et al., 2024; Playfoot et al., 2024; García-Barron et al., 2024) and offers considerable potential for studying gastronomic tourism. Specifically, it provides a valuable tool for understanding domestic tourists' perceptions of gastronomy at destinations.

In the second section, an attitudinal questionnaire with 11 items assessed motivation, experience, and gastronomic satisfaction associated with the destination. Items were adapted from previous studies (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019; Rodriguez-Gutierrez et al., 2020; Mora et al., 2021; Ullah et al., 2022; Moral-Cuadra et al. 2023). Participants rated these constructs on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 5. Detailed descriptions of the items are provided in Table 4. The satisfaction construct comprised of five items, while experience and motivation each included three items (Table 4). In the third section, the sociodemographic and travel behavior characteristics of the participants in the destination were collected.

3.3. Data analysis

Regarding the projective technique of the WA, all ideas, phrases, or words mentioned by the participants were placed in an Excel database for subsequent categorization into higher-level categories, following the methodological procedures of other authors (Gómez-Corona et al., 2016; Rojas-Rivas et al., 2025). During this process, connectors were eliminated, terms were standardized and then grouped into categories. Two researchers with at least two years of experience in word grouping individually categorized the words according to their meaning or synonym. They then reached a consensus on the name and final structure of the categories (De Andrade et al., 2016; Relja et al., 2023).

To determine the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on gastronomic perceptions, the identified categories were analyzed through correspondence analysis (CA). CA allows the analysis of the relationship between the rows and columns of a contingency table to obtain a graphical representation, in this case on the perception of the destination's gastronomy with the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

The attitudinal questionnaire was analyzed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The latent structure of the questionnaire was analyzed with EFA using the principal components method with varimax rotation to simplify the interpretation of factors and maximize the variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was used to assess sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was employed to examine the correlation matrix ($p < 0.05$) (Field, 2017). Cronbach's Alpha was used to confirm the reliability and validity of the constructs ($>$

0.70). The skewness and kurtosis of the variables were evaluated, which should be between -2 and +2. The mean and standard deviation were used as measures of central tendency and dispersion of the questionnaire items (Table 4).

The structure of the constructs was then confirmed through CFA using the maximum likelihood method in the measurement model. Goodness-of-fit indices were used to evaluate the model fit, including the Chi-square test/degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF < 3.0), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI), all of which should exceed 0.90. The Root Mean Square Residual (RMSR) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were also used as measures of model fit (< 0.05). Convergent validity of the model was assessed using factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) (> 0.50), and construct reliability (CR) (> 0.70) (Wen et al., 2018; Mohamed et al., 2022).

Finally, the proposed theoretical model ($H_1 - H_4$) was analyzed with SEM. Hypotheses were tested using the t-test ($p < 0.05$), and the regression coefficient was used to determine the relationships between constructs. Discriminant validity of the model was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Ahmed et al., 2023). Statistical analyses were performed using XLSTAT 2014, SPSS and AMOS 2023 software.

4. RESULTS

The sample was composed of 333 participants, with 46% men and 54% women. The majority (31%) were between 18 and 35 years old, with only three participants not reporting their age. 64% of the sample had undergraduate or graduate education. 83% of the participants indicated it was not their first visit to the destination, with their stay ranging from 1 to 7 days; eight participants did not report the length of their stay. Most of the sample were domestic tourists from Central Mexico (50%), 26% from states in the south-southeast of the country and 24% from the north and west (Table 2).

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

	Frequency n = 333	%
Gender		
Women	180	54
Men	153	46
Age		
18 – 25	102	31
26 – 35	74	22
36 – 45	59	18
46 or more	95	29
No response	3	1
Educational level		
Low	12	4
Medium	107	32
High	214	64
First time visiting		
Yes	69	19
No	269	81
Days of travel		
1 – 3 days	143	43
4 – 7 days	129	39
More than 8 days	53	16
No response	8	2
Place of origin		
Central Mexico	166	50
North – west	81	24
South southeast	86	26

4.1. Perceptions of the destination's gastronomy

Through the WA technique, thirteen categories were identified that reflect gastronomic perceptions of the destination among domestic tourists. The categories identified are based on the methodological processes previously reported in the literature, as well as the names and words that formed them (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020). The most frequent categories are related to the hedonistic attitudes and sensory attributes of the food, which appeal to tourists. Additionally, the category "Local culture" highlights Puebla as a significant culinary reference in Mexico. Tourists perceive this destination as offering a wide variety of foods, highlighting emblematic dishes such as *Mole Poblano* and *Chiles en Nogada*, as well as traditional snacks (*antojitos*) and confectionery (*Dulcería tradicional*) (Table 3).

Table 3. Categories identified with the WA technique

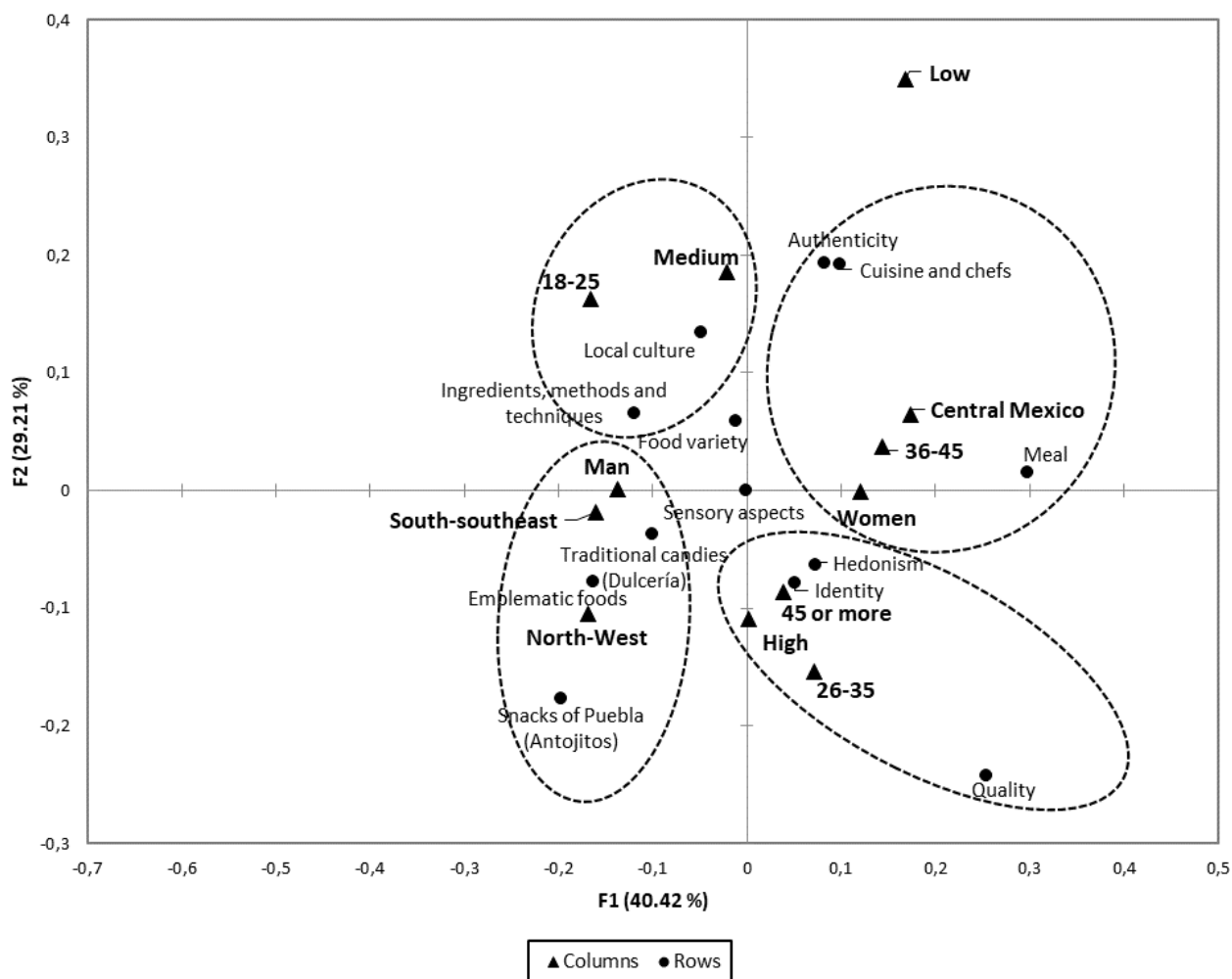
Category	Main words or terms of the category	%
Hedonism	Yummy, rich, delicious, exquisite, pleasure, appetizing	41
Sensory aspects	Taste, flavors, texture, textures, color, colors, sweet, spicy, colorful, creamy	31
Local culture	Culture, customs, tradition, traditions, <i>talavera</i> , traditional, convents, churches	29
Food variety	Variety, variability, diversity, varied, diversity of dishes, dishes	23
Emblematic dishes	Mole, <i>mole poblano</i> , <i>chile en nogada</i> , <i>nogada</i>	20
Snacks (<i>Antojitos</i>)	<i>Cemita</i> , <i>chalupa</i> , <i>chalupas</i> , <i>memelas</i> , <i>chalupas</i> , <i>molotes</i> , <i>tacos arabes</i>	15
Traditional food	Food, traditional food, artisanal, typical, typical of the region	12
Ingredients, methods and techniques	Chili, chilies, corn, seasoning, pomegranate, spices, rice, preparation, prepared, elaborate, presentation	12
Identity	History, legacy, ancient, Mexico, Puebla	12
Quality	Good, quality, excellent, excellence, satisfaction	8
Traditional candies (Dulceria tradicional)	Candies, sweet potato, typical candies, poblano candies, typical candies	8
Cuisine and chefs	Cuisine, art, chef, gourmet, seasoning	8
Authenticity	Unique, original, authentic, different, prestigious, the best.	7

The remaining categories indicate that the destination's gastronomy is perceived as an integral component of traditional Mexican cuisine, associated with specific ingredients, methods, and preparation techniques. In addition, the gastronomy of the destination is viewed as both high-quality and authentic. The analysis of categories identified through the WA technique revealed differences across sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, educational level, and place of residence. For example, women referred more frequently to the *Hedonism* category than men, whereas men mentioned categories related to ingredients, preparation processes, and the destination's traditional snacks (*antojitos*) more often. Furthermore, older and more highly educated participants tended to express stronger hedonic attitudes toward the destination's gastronomy, while younger participants were more inclined to associate it with sensory attributes.

The CA clearly shows the differentiation between the categories obtained according to the sociodemographic variables of the participants. This information is very useful for the destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and can be used to enhance their gastronomic image. The first factor explained 40.42% of the inertia of the contingency table, while the second factor 29.21%. Women, coming from central Mexico and between 36 and 45 years of age, were positioned closer to the categories of Meal, Authenticity and Cuisine and Chefs. Tourists with a higher educational level and older were closer to the Identity, Quality and Hedonism categories. Travelers from the northern and southern regions of the country associated more

with the categories referring to emblematic foods, traditional candies (*Dulcería tradicional*) and *Antojitos* of Puebla. Finally, younger tourists with a medium educational level associated more with the categories of Culture, Food Variety, as well as food preparation methods and techniques of the destination.

Figure 2. Correspondence Analysis regarding the perception of gastronomy in the destination



4.2. Motivation, experience and gastronomic satisfaction

The EFA was conducted using the 11 items from the three constructs. The factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and the factor loadings were greater than 0.70. Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating adequate correlation among the variables. The satisfaction factor explained 33.687% of the variance, with a reliability of 0.919. The experience factor accounted for 19.115% of the variance ($\alpha = 0.774$). The motivation and gastronomy knowledge factor explained 21.047% of the variance, also showing satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = 0.829$). Gastronomic experience was rated highest in importance (4.50 ± 0.519), followed by gastronomic satisfaction (4.47 ± 0.560) and motivation (3.81 ± 0.753) (Table 4).

Table 4.

Table 4. Results of the EFA of the attitudinal questionnaire on gastronomy

Reference	Construct	Mean	SD	F1	F2	F3	Variance explained	α
	Gastronomic satisfaction	4.47	0.560					
Berbel-Pineda et al. (2019)	S1 - I consider that the gastronomy I have tasted in Puebla has fulfilled my expectations	4.43	0.630	0.774			33.687	0.919
Mora et al. (2021)	S2 - I believe that Puebla's gastronomy is tasty and varied	4.55	0.640	0.818				
Kivela & Crotts (2006); Esparza et al. (2023)	S3 - Overall, I was satisfied with the gastronomy I consumed during my visit to Puebla	4.48	0.647	0.853				
Moral-Cuadra et al. (2023)	S4 - The food I tasted from Puebla's gastronomy was exquisite	4.48	0.633	0.843				
Kivela & Crotts (2006)	S5 - Compared to my place of origin, I consider that Puebla's gastronomy has a greater variety of dishes	4.42	0.670	0.785				
	Gastronomic experience	4.50	0.519					
Berbel-Pineda et al. (2019); Mora et al. (2021)	E1 - It is important for me to experience the gastronomic culture when I visit a place	4.52	0.628		0.757		19.115	0.774
Ullah et al. (2022)	E2 - When I travel somewhere I like to go to restaurants outside the hotel or where I am staying	4.49	0.614		0.778			
Mora et al. (2021)	E3 - When I travel somewhere I like to try the gastronomy in the markets or traditional places	4.50	0.633		0.751			
	Motivation and gastronomy knowledge	3.81	0.753					
Rodriguez-Gutierrez et al. (2020); Mora et al. (2021)	M1 - My main motivation to visit Puebla was for its gastronomy	3.71	0.898			0.811	21.047	0.829
Kivela & Crotts (2006)	M2 - I describe myself as someone who is knowledgeable about food and cooking in general	3.80	0.885			0.851		
Kivela & Crotts (2006); Moral-Cuadra et al. (2023)	M3 - Before visiting Puebla, I already knew information about its gastronomy	3.92	0.834			0.822		
	Total						73.849	0.893

Note:

On the other hand, CFA was carried out with the maximum likelihood method and convergent validity was estimated with factor loadings, AVE and construct reliability (CR). Most of the items of the constructs

exceeded the recommended factor loadings (>0.70). The AVE was above 0.5 for all constructs, and construct reliability ranged from 0.782 to 0.920. The fit indices were as follows: GFI = 0.969, AGFI = 0.950, NFI = 0.972, and CFI = 0.992. Additionally, the RMR = 0.015, RMSEA = 0.036, and p -value = 0.038 were within acceptable ranges for covariance estimates. The complete values obtained from the CFA are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. CFA on the constructs of motivation, experience and gastronomic satisfaction of the destination

Factor	Item	Standardized load	S.E.	t-Value	CR	AVE
Satisfaction	S_1	0.777	0.56	15.964	0.920	0.697
	S_2	0.847	0.55	18.021		
	S_3	0.870	0.55	18.738		
	S_4	0.866	0.54	18.608		
	S_5	0.811	-	-		
Experience	E_1	0.822	0.77	13.555	0.782	0.549
	E_2	0.596	0.72	10.232		
	E_3	0.785	-	-		
Motivation and gastronomy knowledge	M_1	0.761	0.78	13.244	0.830	0.619
	M_2	0.802	0.78	13.710		
	M_3	0.797	-	-		

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted CR = Construct reliability **Note:** $\chi^2/df = 58.448, = 41$; CMIN/DF = 1.426; GFI = 0.969; AGFI = 0.950; NFI = 0.972; CFI = 0.992; RMR = 0.015; RMSEA = 0.036; $p = 0.038$

Regarding the SEM, the goodness-of-fit indices of the model were adequate: NFI = 0.976; CFI = 0.995; RMR = 0.015; RMSEA = 0.028; $p = 0.122$, which indicates an adequate fit of the model showing a significant relationship between the constructs (Figure 3). It should be noted that a covariance between two errors (SATE1 <-> SATE3) was performed to improve the model (Lim & An, 2021). Table 6 shows the factor loadings of the structural equation model.

Table 6. Structural model in relation to motivation, experience, and gastronomic satisfaction

Factor	Item	Standardized load	AVE	CR
Satisfaction	S_1	0.796	0.704	0.922
	S_2	0.843		
	S_3	0.883		
	S_4	0.863		
	S_5	0.806		
Experience	E_1	0.823	0.549	0.782
	E_2	0.595		
	E_3	0.785		
Motivation and gastronomy knowledge	M_1	0.761	0.619	0.830
	M_2	0.802		
	M_3	0.797		

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted CR = Construct reliability. **Note:** $\chi^2/df = 50.596, = 40$; CMIN/DF = 1.265; NFI = 0.976; CFI = 0.995; RMR = 0.015; RMSEA = 0.028; $p = 0.12$

The discriminant validity of the model was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). The square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlations between each pair of constructs. Additionally, the HTMT values for the constructs were below the theoretical threshold (< 0.85). These results suggest that both the convergent and discriminant validity of the model were satisfactory (Table 7).

Table 7. Construct reliability and convergent and discriminant validity.

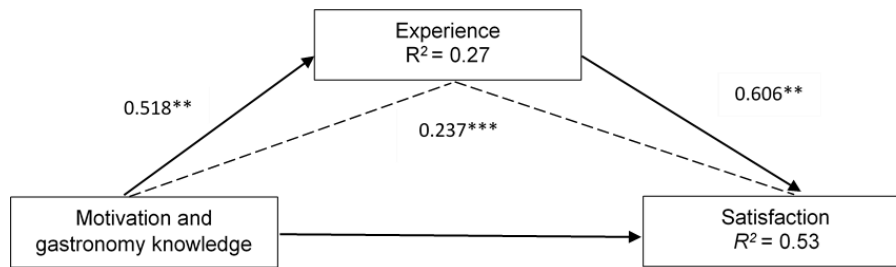
a) For-nell and Larcker criterion					
	1	2	3	AVE	CR
1. SAT	0.839	-	-	0.704	0.922
2. EXP	0.610 (0.781)	0.741	-	0.549	0.782
3. M&GK	0.456 (0.675)	0.424 (0.651)	0.787	0.619	0.830
b) Hete-rotrait-Mono-trait ra-tio (HTMT)					
	SAT	EXP	M&GK		
1. SAT					
2. EXP	0.722	-	-		
3. M&GK	0.670	0.529	-		

Note: in bold are the values of the square root of the AVE value, below are the correlations between the constructs and in the parentheses is the square root of the correlations between the constructs.

The testing of the four hypotheses was significant, revealing a positive relationship between motivation and gastronomic experience (H_1) in the context of gastronomic tourism in Mexico ($\beta = 0.518$, $t = 7.524$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, a positive relationship was found between motivation and gastronomic satisfaction (H_2) ($\beta = 0.194$, $t = 3.156$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, H_3 established a positive relationship between experience and gastronomic satisfaction ($\beta = 0.606$, $t = 8.479$, $p = 0.000$). The verification of these hypotheses reflects the direct relationship among the constructs.

Furthermore, the results establish the mediating effect of experience on gastronomic motivation and satisfaction supporting H_4 ($\beta = 0.237$, $t = 5.100$, $p = 0.000$) (Table 8). This is because the direct effect between motivation and satisfaction remains significant even when the mediating effect of experience is incorporated into the model. The testing of the hypotheses highlights the significant effect between the constructs of motivation and satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of experience as a key element of tourist satisfaction and a likely factor for loyalty for return to the destination. The R^2 value indicates that the constructs of experience and motivation have a predictive capacity of 53% with respect to gastronomic satisfaction associated with the destination.

Figure 3. Structural equation model



Note: $\chi^2/df = 50.596, = 40$; CMIN/DF = 1.265; NFI = 0.976; CFI = 0.995; RMR = 0.015; RMSEA = 0.028; $p = 0.122$

Table 8. Structural equation model path analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized path coefficient	t-Value	Results
H1	M&GK EXP	0.518	7.524***	Supported
H2	M&GK SAT	0.194	3.156**	Supported
H3	EXP SAT	0.606	8.479***	Supported
H4	M&GK EXP SAT	0.237	5.152***	Supported

5. DISCUSSION

This study contributes the first comprehensive analysis of gastronomic perception among domestic tourists, examining the role of gastronomic motivation, experience, and satisfaction in a destination renowned for its culinary richness in Mexico. Consequently, this study contributes to the limited body of literature addressing gastronomic perception and satisfaction in Mexico, particularly among domestic tourists (Lebrun & Bouchet, 2024), so this study addresses this knowledge gap in the literature on gastronomic tourism (Ullah et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2023; Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023; Valverde-Roda et al., 2023).

The findings revealed 13 categories that reflect domestic tourists' perceptions of the cuisine of Puebla, a place renowned for its gastronomic richness in Mexico.. These results align with prior studies emphasizing hedonism, sensory aspects, authenticity, and quality as crucial components of a destination's gastronomic image (Seo & Yun, 2015; Chang & Mack, 2018). Authenticity emerges as a pivotal factor in constructing a destination's gastronomic image of (Xu et al., 2022). Furthermore, this research identified other relevant elements influencing gastronomy perception, including food variety and emblematic culinary products, among others (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020).

These results have substantial implications for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and marketing strategies. The efforts of organizations for management institutions have increasingly focused on process innovation and continuous improvement to develop gastronomically appealing services (Suárez-Barraza & Damian, 2015). In that sense, results highlight the importance of understanding and promoting the gastronomic perception of tourists, particularly emphasizing the hedonic value that tourists seek when experiencing foods in gastronomic destinations (Chang et al., 2022).

Likewise, it stands out that gastronomic perception is also influenced by the sociodemographic characteristics and place of origin of domestic tourists in Mexico. The CA (Figure 2) allowed to analyze the relationship between the perceptions perceived by tourists, highlighting the relationship and dependence between some sociodemographic factors, which is important for decision-making for the development of gastronomic tourism promotion. The results obtained highlight the role of women in relation to the

importance they give to food, the authenticity of the cuisine and the chefs, and show that the educational level is relevant in the elements of identity, quality and hedonism. As for tourists with a medium level of education and young people, they associate gastronomy with cultural factors related to variety and awareness of methods and preparation techniques, showing interest in these factors. Therefore, it is crucial to promote the gastronomy of the destination with the specific expectations and characteristics of tourists.

On the other hand, the structural model showed a significant relationship of motivation and experience on gastronomic satisfaction, contributing significantly to our understanding of how motivation and experience influence gastronomic satisfaction (Agyeiwahh et al., 2019; Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021; Ullah et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2022; Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023), particularly among domestic tourists. Furthermore, the gastronomic experience had a mediating effect on motivation and satisfaction (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Therefore, stakeholders involved in food service and production within the destination should strive to offer unique experiences to tourists. This presents an excellent opportunity to enhance the promotion of food fairs and festivals that provide distinctive and memorable experiences for tourists.

The constructs of motivation and experience can predict up to 53% gastronomic satisfaction associated with the destination. These results agree with other research: for instance, in Peru, satisfaction was predicted at 39.4% (Esparza et al., 2022), in Colombia at 34.4% (Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020), in Seville, Spain at 32% (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019), and in Córdoba, Spain at 22.5% (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2023). One of the most significant contributions of this study is that gastronomic satisfaction tends to increase among domestic tourists, in contrast to previous studies that primarily focused on international tourists (Table 1) (Lebrun and Bouchet, 2024). Therefore, the high levels of gastronomic satisfaction may be associated with positive perceptions of the destination (Lesic, 2019). This insight should prove valuable for other gastronomically rich destinations in Mexico, aiming to ensure tourist satisfaction with their gastronomic offerings.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was to study the gastronomic perceptions of domestic tourists in a Mexican destination and analyze the effect of motivation and gastronomic experience on their satisfaction. The results identified 13 categories, of which hedonism, sensory aspects, local culture, authenticity, and quality are important elements in the gastronomic image of this destination. Furthermore, the positive effect of motivation and gastronomic experience on satisfaction with the consumption of tourism products is recognized.

Therefore, those involved in the management of the destination should consider using these results in improvement efforts strategies and actions as motivators for the attraction of the destination, as well as in activities that generate authentic experiences for tourists, which can increase the competitiveness of the destination and promote the gastronomy through tourism policies and programs such as *Pueblos Mágicos*, which is a tourism policy in Mexico that recognizes cities or destinations that possess cultural richness, including food and beverages. The results are of great relevance for the promotion and consolidation of gastronomic destinations, as domestic tourists represent an important market for destinations. In addition, after the restrictions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic tourism acquired great importance due

to its contribution to the recovery of the local economy of the destinations. Domestic tourists are more aware and respectful of the local culture than international tourists.

It is important that future studies integrate the loyalty construct and analyze the relationship between the constructs proposed in this study, thus strengthening the image and brand of Puebla as a gastronomic destination in Mexico. Some of the limitations of the study are that it was conducted with domestic tourists in two tourist destinations in Puebla, Mexico. Future studies could corroborate the results of this research among domestic tourists in other national and international contexts, in addition to exploring other factors that influence satisfaction and loyalty to the destination's gastronomy.

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