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Tourist **Preferences** for **Regional Food**: A Study on **Food Neophobia** and **Consumption Value** Factors

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Abstract | In recent years, tourism has experienced significant growth with a focus on traditional and nutritious regional food, allowing local farmers and service providers to establish distinct regional identities. However, despite their curiosity about regional food and beverages, tourists often exhibit hesitance in trying these offerings. This research represents the first comprehensive attempt to analyse tourists' purchasing behaviour concerning regional food in Nainital, India, renowned for its organic and therapeutic staple foods. This paper adopts a scientific approach to investigate tourists' intentions to purchase regional food and explores the moderating impact of food neophobia (FN) within the framework of the theory of consumption values (TCV). Data were collected through a survey of 266 tourists. The results indicate that Functional Value (FV), Social Value (SV), and Emotional Value (EMV) significantly and positively influence tourists' purchase intention (PI) towards regional food. Moreover, both FV and SV are moderated by food neophobia in their relationship with purchasing intentions. This study offers valuable insights into consumer food choices, enabling entrepreneurs and decision-makers to accurately assess the likelihood of tourists purchasing regional products.

Keywords | Food neophobia, regional food, Tourist, Purchasing intention, theory of consumption values

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1. Introduction

Regional food, also known as local or national food, reflects the culinary traditions of a particular region, whether national, state-level, or local (Thakur & Kumar, 2018). It is important to note that regional food is intrinsically linked to regionally grown produce and is deeply rooted in agriculture (Dangerfield et al., 2021). Exploring an alternative viewpoint on the subject, Seufert et al. (2017) and Watanabe et al. (2020) consider the regional food market as one of the most impactful contributors to economic prosperity and social cohesion within rural communities. Moreover, Nordin et al. (2023) and Isa et al. (2020) highlight the significant increase in demand for regional cuisine among international tourists, driven by a growing emphasis on health and environmental concerns. On the other hand, sustainable eating practices and responsible tourism are also gaining importance within the travel industry (Dias et al., 2023). However, Gupta et al. (2020) argues that despite the increasing popularity of regional food among tourists, there remains a dearth of quality literature on consumer preferences and behavioural intentions, particularly in the domain of indigenous food groups.

Folgado-Fernández, Campón-Cerro and Hernández-Mogollón (2019) also acknowledge the economic potential of premium regional products, yet they also raise concerns about the limited research available on consumption values and purchase behaviour. Researchers Barska and Wojciechowska-Solis (2018) in their study suggest that by investigating the multi-dimensional factors such as price, quality, social value, and emotions, one can better understand consumer purchase behaviour towards novel food products. This concept is strongly supported by researchers such as Araujo (2021) and Rousta and Jamshidi (2020), who have successfully utilised consumption values in food and tourism studies.

Another important addition to this study is Food Neophobia (FN), which is a food-related personality trait. Pliner and Hobden (1992) define FN as a reluctance to try new culinary experiences. According to Mascarello et al. (2020), FN is the most significant trait while investigating ethnic and novel foods and hence cannot be neglected. Meanwhile, FN has been a focal point in numerous studies primarily centred around nutrition, health, and gastronomy (D'Souza, 2022; Pawan et al., 2020; Romaniw et al., 2020). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first attempt to utilize FN as a moderator in examining the intention to purchase regional food.

Additionally, the dearth of research in developing countries like India, particularly in analysing tourist intentions toward regional food, is another significant motivation for this study. While various studies have delved into regional food in developed nations, a noticeable research gap exists in developing nations like India (Yfantidou & Matarazzo, 2017).

Moving forward, Nainital was selected as the research site after careful consideration of essential study elements. Nainital, a district in the Kumaon division nestled in the Himalayas, is renowned for its natural lakes and tourist attractions and is widely referred to as the Lake District. Religious tourism contributes substantially to the region's tourism revenue (Kumar et al., 2018). The regional food of this terrain is renowned for its therapeutic properties, thriving at high altitudes amidst extraordinary topography, making it a global attraction for international travellers in pursuit of diverse cultural, therapeutic, and pilgrimage encounters (Rawal & Sah, 2017). The region's primary crops, such as finger millet, soy, kulthi daal, and red rice, are extremely rich in nutrition and organically grown, contributing to the distinctive flavour of the local food (Meena & Sharma, 2019).

In the course of selecting the research framework for the study, previous research has predominantly utilised behavioural theories to investi-

gate consumers' attitudes and intentions regarding regional food (Wenzig & Gruchmann, 2018; Chamoli et al., 2021). However, these theories often focus on causal processes and overlook critical elements such as perceived values (Shin et al., 2018). Building on this premise, the current study explores consumption values (FV, SV, EMV), aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of tourists' motivations and preferences related to regional food consumption. By adopting this theoretical framework, the study strives to offer a more detailed perspective on the determinants influencing behaviour, going beyond mere intentions and attitudes (Choe & Kim, 2018).

This study also aims to provide valuable insights to assist tourism practitioners, policymakers, and regional food producers in effectively promoting regional food among global tourists, especially in mountainous destinations. Furthermore, the implications of the research extend beyond the regional context, as the findings are relevant for enhancing sustainable food consumption practices and contributing to broader sustainability objectives within the global tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Consumption Values (TCV)

In today's global landscape and with the growing expectations of tourists, it is crucial to understand and nurture consumer values deeply. This pursuit holds importance in establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage pertaining to the travel industry (Choe & Kim, 2018). TCV, formulated by Sheth et al. (1991) significantly contributes to both theoretical and practical execution by providing insights into why a consumer chooses to purchase or not purchase a product, category of the product, or brand based on the perceived value. TCV presents an opportunity to enhance and expand our comprehension of various consumption behaviours, spanning a wide array of goods and services including food (Yuan et al., 2022) Additionally, TCV provides an approach to meeting the needs by enabling a thorough evaluation of consumer values and their impact on tourists' decision-making processes. (Jang, 2021).It also offers a unique perspective for exploring how consumers decide about products and services (Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017). Within this model, FV, SV, and EMV influence consumer decision-making (Tanrikulu, 2021). Thus, by integrating TCV as the baseline framework, this study establishes a solid foundation for examining the relationship between consumer values and their decision to purchase regional food in a more holistic manner.

2.2. Functional Value of Regional Food

Functional value is a significant component impacting consumer preferences regarding regional foods. FV pertains to the value consumers attribute to a product or service based on its inherent qualities and operational efficiency (Waseti & İrfangolu, 2022). Many studies have investigated the impact of FV on consumer behaviour. Research conducted by Kushwah et al. (2019) and Kim et al. (2018) has highlighted a significant correlation between FV and Behavioural Intentions (BI). In the realm of food-related research, FV has been used as a metric representing quality, price, and health aspects, particularly in studies focused on regional foods (Hermiatin et al., 2022).

As an illustration, Hong et al. (2021) and Konuk (2019) have investigated FV on organic foods, entailing factors like knowledge, cost-effectiveness, and health benefits. The appeal of regional-produced foods goes beyond organic offerings. As highlighted by van Bussel et al. (2022), factors such as flavour, cultural significance, novelty, and ethical considerations also play a significant role in consumer purchasing decisions. To substantiate

this argument, Nainital's unique topography, characterised by high-hill vegetation, fulfils all these attributes due to its organic cultivation and therapeutic qualities (Maikhuri et al., 2015).

Consequently, under the umbrella of FV this study strives to evaluate the quality, flavour, nutritional value, and affordability of regional foods among consumers. Hence, positing the subsequent hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: FV positively influences Nainital regional food PI.

2.3. Social Value of Regional Food

The social value associated with tourism products plays a significant role in contributing to revenue (Choe & Kim, 2019; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Social value is perceived as the utility gained from an alternative's association with specific social groups, which can be favourably or unfavourably correlated with demographic characteristics (Furukawa et al., 2019).

A buyer's SV reflects the image they want to project within their social circle when selecting goods and services. Research by Shin et al. (2021) has demonstrated that social influences positively impact tourists' intentions regarding food choices. Hogreve et al. (2021) also emphasise the role of social value factors when parents make food choices for their children. Additionally, the status and recognition individuals derive from their tourism experiences, particularly related to regional food consumption (Stone & Zou, 2023) and sharing their trip experiences (Abbasi et al., 2023), contribute to SV. Tourists also perceive prestige in dining at featured restaurants as a source of SV (Liu et al., 2022).

From the perspective of tourists and their interest in regional delicacies, SV signifies the prestige, acceptance, and enhancement of self-image that buyers gain when purchasing regional food products (H. Lee et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study anticipates that the use of regional products also foster consumer pride, ultimately driving them to make more purchases. Hence, it can be concluded that:

Hypothesis 2: Social Value positively influences Nainital regional food PI.

2.4. Emotional Value (EMV) of Regional Food

Emotional value refers to the subjective feelings or emotions that a product or experience evokes in a consumer (Moreno-Lobato et al., 2021). Another way to gain EMV is to engage with or strengthen certain emotions or causes, it is measured by the profile of thought associated with the alternative. EMV is extracted from emotional sentiments or sensations that goods or services elicit (YQ Low et al., 2022). It seeks to fulfil a person's psychological or emotional requirements (Rendall et al., 2022). EMV stands out as a behavioural intention because individuals may not consciously seek emotional benefits from their consumption experiences, yet they are likely to unintentionally experience positive or negative emotions, which significantly influence subsequent decision-making (Saine & Zhao, 2021). Similarly, Biondi and Camanzi (2020) categorise hedonic orientation and novelty as two pivotal components of EMV. Since regional food is often characterised by novelty, it inherently appeals to travellers, establishing a strong correlation between regional food and EMV. In the same vein, environmentally conscious tourists may exhibit a positive inclination toward choosing regional food over conventional commercial options (Sgroi, 2023). Besides that, Chang et al. (2021) argued that individuals are more inclined to procure regional foods if they feel emotionally connected to them. Rahnam (2017) found that emotional and nostalgia-driven inclinations boost consumption value, elevating post-purchase behavioural intention.

Furthermore, research by Khan and Mohsin (2017) implies that EMV plays a pivotal role in shaping individual perceptions regarding eco-friendly products, including regional items. This influence subsequently affects their intentions to make environmentally conscious purchases. However, Bou Saada et al. (2021) contend that emotions play a primary role in shaping consumer behaviour, thus exerting a notable impact on a person's inclination to buy environmentally friendly products such as regional products. Consequently, we propose the subsequent hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: EMV positively influences Nainital regional food PI.

2.5. Food Neophobia

Food neophobia, defined by Pliner and Hobden (1992), pertains to a person's reluctance to try new foods, encompassing various dishes, delicacies, and culinary adventures. Studies have categorised food neophobia in food and tourism into two primary categories: high and low FN (Damsbo-Svendsen et al., 2017). Those with low FN display greater openness while exploring known and unfamiliar dishes, leading to a more diverse culinary experience (S. Lee et al., 2019). On the contrary, Siddiqui et al. (2022) suggest that individuals with high FN show a minimum inclination towards trying new dishes. The significance of FN as a moderator becomes particularly pronounced when considering tourists and their engagement with novel foods (Akbar et al., 2019). According to Lai et al. (2020), regional food offers a unique culinary experience that deeply connects with consumers' FN. Moreover, it also acts as an important moderator, especially in studies focused on novel food and tourism (Freire & Gertner, 2020). This association highlights the significant influence of FN on consumer preferences for regional food, emphasising its profound impact on the culinary landscape.

The literature on this subject also revealed that consumers displaying higher levels of FN are generally less inclined to travel than individuals with lower food neophobia tendencies (D'Souza, 2022). In addition, different levels of FN are linked to diverse mental and behavioural characteristics, including factors such as trust and overall well-being (Huang et al., 2019). To address these traits, fostering the importance of food awareness is evident, as it can reduce FN and enhance the dining pleasure of tourists (Hatisaru et al., 2023). In earlier studies with the same focus, food neophobia has consistently been emphasised as a central and decisive factor influencing the relationship between purchase intention and subsequent purchasing behaviour (Debnath et al., 2020; Jaeger et al., 2017). This underscores the importance of FN in influencing tourists' food preferences, their alignment with purchasing decisions, and their role as a crucial determinant in shaping tourists' perceived values and food choices (Dimitrovski & Crespi-Vallbona, 2017).

Hence, considering the points discussed above, we put forth the subsequent hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: FN has a moderating impact on the relationship between tourist FV and PI toward regional food.

Hypothesis 5: FN has a moderating impact on the relationship between tourist SV and PI toward regional food.

Hypothesis 6: FN has a moderating impact on the relationship between tourist EMV and PI toward regional food.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Establishing the Conceptual Model

In this study, TCV emerges as the most suitable framework for assessing tourists' intentions to purchase regional food because it offers a com-

prehensive perspective, addressing factors beyond causal processes essential for evaluating the product's perceived value. This approach accounts for various elements contributing to tourists' purchasing decisions, making it more appropriate for the study's objectives (Shin et al., 2018). Considering the literature review, this study extracts three independent consumption variables: FV, SV, and EMV, and one dependent variable: regional food purchase intention (PI). The existing body of literature indicates that flavour, well-being, cost, empathic value, and social status are key influencers shaping FV, SV, and EMV regarding friendly, healthy regional food (Truong et al., 2021). Moreover, it is acknowledged that food neophobia operates as an essential moderating variable, influencing tourists' intentions to purchase regional food (Hussain et al., 2023).Meanwhile, drawing from the insights gathered from the literature review and the formulated hypotheses, a comprehensive conceptual framework is developed to steer the research.

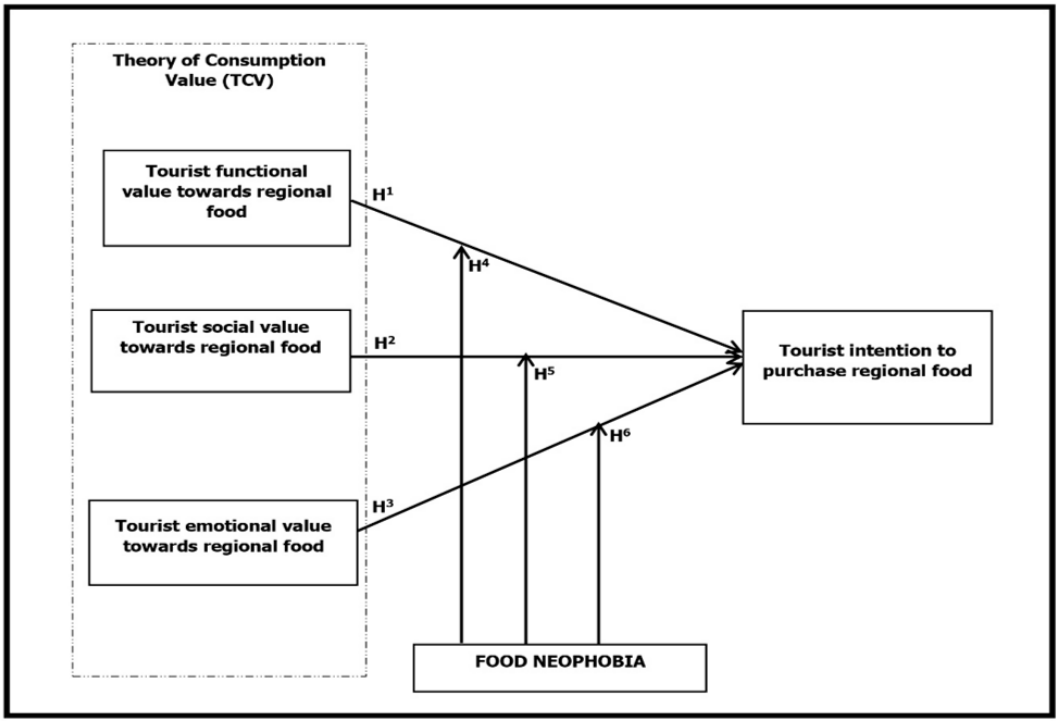

Figure 1 | Conceptual framework of the study
Source: Authors' work

3.2. Designing the Survey Tool

This study aimed to investigate six hypotheses by conducting a survey among tourists visiting Nainital. In pursuit of the research objectives, a survey comprising 21 items was employed, each evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. A careful alignment of all the constructs in the questionnaire with the existing literature is ensured. Eleven of these 21 statements were adapted from previous studies conducted by Kifaya and Rama (2023) and Wang et al. (2022), which were related to FV, SV, and EMV. Furthermore, ten statements derived from Pliner and Hobden (1992) were incorporated to gauge tourists' propensity to experiment with unfamiliar foods.

The Food Neophobia Scale (FNS) feedback was collected and assessed based on the degree

of agreement for each item. Subsequent to reversing the scoring for positive items, an FN score for each respondent ranged from 10 to 50. The mean FNS score in the study was 27.3 (with a standard deviation of 5.1). The mean was used as a cutoff point to classify respondents into high and low-food neophobia groups. Those scoring equal to or above the mean were categorised as having high food neophobia, while those scoring below were considered to have low food neophobia, following the approach used in previous research by (Schnettler, Höger, et al., 2017) and Schnettler, Grunert, et al. (2017).

Before conducting the primary survey, a preliminary survey was carried out with 120 participants from Nainital and its nearby regions to ensure the survey tool's reliability. This region was chosen due to its high tourist activity, attracting visitors from various geographical backgrounds. The instrument yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, represented by $\alpha = 0.904$, within the acceptable range (Hair et al., 2016) followed by an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to evaluate the questionnaire's construct validity.

3.3. Data Acquisition and Sampling

Data collection for this study involves the implementation of a survey approach. The study's target population encompassed tourists visiting the Nainital district, drawn to the region for various tourism activities, including sightseeing, cultural exploration, and recreational pursuits. More specifically, our sample was derived from tourists patronising local eateries and hotels offering regional food in the province. The survey was administered between January 10, 2023, and June 10, 2023. In total, 300 surveys were distributed, and 266 of them were considered valid and suitable for analysis. The sample size satisfied the minimal prerequisites for structural equation modelling (SEM), which is 200 participants (Wolf et al., 2013).

We opted for a purposive sampling technique to facilitate the selection of respondents. Due to Nainital's diverse topography, which includes hilly terrain, various tourist attractions, and numerous pilgrimage sites, the flow of tourists across the region varies and depends on their individual preferences. Hence, we utilised purposive sampling to secure a well-balanced and adequate number of participants. Purposive sampling is highly efficient in focusing on pertinent demographic groups as per the study requirement. This enables the investigator to readily look for a sample from the target population, effectively managing both time and expenses (Andrade, 2021). Subsequently, the gathered data from the questionnaires has been analysed employing SPSS 26 and AMOS 26. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was performed on the 266 legitimate feedbacks. Given that SEM is a robust analytical method to investigate and assess the relationships between measured and latent variables (Hair Jr et al., 2021).The decision to employ SEM as the research method was guided by its successful application in similar studies aimed at addressing analogous research inquiries (Lim & An, 2021; Vesci & Botti, 2019).

4. Data Evaluation and Interpretation

4.1. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Based on the profiles of the respondents, there was a nearly equal distribution between international and domestic tourists. Domestic tourists, hailing from various regions of India, accounted for a total of 59.96 percent, with the majority coming from the northern region (20.27 percent), followed by the east (16.39 percent), west (14.6 percent), and southern India (8.7 percent). International tourists constituted a somewhat smaller proportion at 40.04 percent. The gender distribu-

tion showed a slightly higher percentage of males (51.23%) than females (48.77%). A significant portion of tourists visiting the province was within the age bracket of 30 to 50 years, comprising 61.86 percent of the total. In terms of religious affiliation, the dominant faith was Hinduism, accounting for 35.87% of the respondents, followed by Sikhism (15.6%), Christianity (23.6%), and Islam (24.93%). Furthermore, the study revealed that many tourists visiting Uttarakhand had completed their Senior Secondary education.

4.2. Exploratory factor analysis

Before proceeding with exploratory factor analysis (EFA), it is essential to ensure that all vital assumptions are met. Table 1 confirms that all assumptions required for EFA have been satisfied.

Table 1 | Key Assumptions for EFA

Assumptions of EFA	**Conditions**	**Reference:**(Howard, 2016)	**Assumptions**
sample size is 266	*n>200*	(J. Wang, 2019)	Met
Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant	$p < 0.001$	(Field, 2013)	Met
KMO value is 0.920 measure of sampling adequacy	> 0.70	(Sofroniou & Hutcheson, 1999)	Met
Satisfactory communalities values	> 0.50	(Field, 2013)	Met
Total variance explained is 68.73%	> 50%	(Podsakoff & Organ, 1986)	
The variance for the first factor is 37.26%	< 50%	(Bandalos & Finney, 2018)	Met

Table 2 | Rotated component matrix

Constructs	**Items**	**Component**			
		1	2	3	4
Functional Value (FV)	The quality of regional food in Nainital is good. (FV1)	0.746			
	The regional food in Nainital is nutritious and good for health (FV2).	0.845			
	The prices of regional food in Nainital are affordable (FV3)	0.772			
Social Value (SV)	Purchasing and consuming regional food in Nainital helps me convey a positive image. (SV1)		0.745		
	Purchasing and consuming regional food in Nainital helps me feel accepted by others. (SV2)		0.827		
	Purchasing and consuming the regional food of Nainital makes me feel proud. (SV3)		0.708		
Emotional Value (EMV)	There is a feeling of individuality about consuming the local food of Nainital (EMV1)			0.704	
	Consuming the local food of Nainital brings satisfaction and enjoyment. (EMV2)			0.763	
	Trying the regional food of Nainital was a new and unique experience. (EMV3)			0.773	
Purchase Intention (PI)	I am intended to purchase the regional food from Nainital during this visit (PI1).				0.834
	I am planning to purchase the regional food from Nainital during this visit. (PI2)				0.847
	I will include the regional food of Nainital in my daily consumption during this visit (PI3).				0.817
	I want to include the regional food of Nainital in my meals during this visit (PI4)				0.842
	I am positive about purchasing regional food from Nainital. (PI5)				0.823
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.					
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.					

The EFA was conducted using Varimax rotation and Principal Component Analysis to reduce dimensions. It is noteworthy that all factor loadings in the rotated component matrix (RCM) exceed 0.7 (Hair Jnr et al., 2010). Consequently, the data has been condensed into four components, namely FV, SV, EMV, and BI, as depicted in Table 2.

4.3. Confirmatory factor analysis

Before proceeding with path analysis, it is essential to confirm the convergent and discriminant validity of the conceptual model using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Construct validity is evaluated using a set of fit indices (Hox, 2021). The results of various fit indices are as follows: chi-square/df = 1.530, GFI = 0.945, RMR = 0.044, AGFI = 0.920, NFI = 0.942, CFI = 0.979, and RMSEA = 0.044.

4.3.1. Convergent Validity Assessment (CVA)

To ascertain the reliability of the constructs, each component must exhibit a Composite Reliability (CR) exceeding 0.7, in accordance with the recommendations of Hair et al. (2016). Moreover, to meet the specified criteria for demonstrating convergent validity, the computed Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should exceed 0.50, and the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) should be lower than the AVE, as outlined by Segar (1997). As shown in Table 3, all these criteria are met, affirming the presence of convergent validity in the proposed model.

Table 3 | Convergent Validity Assessment

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading (Above 0.5)	Composite reliability (Above 0.7)	AVE (Above 0.5)	MSV (Less than AVE)
FV	FV1	0.748	0.817	0.599	0.593
	FV2	0.849			
	FV3	0.718			
SV	SV1	0.715	0.787	0.554	0.399
	SV2	0.829			
	SV3	0.680			
EMV	EMV1	0.684	0.754	0.506	0.499
	EMV2	0.707			
	EMV3	0.741			
PI	PI1	0.784	0.886	0.609	0.599
	PI2	0.826			
	PI3	0.757			
	PI4	0.796			
	PI5	0.736			

4.3.2. Discriminant Validity Assessment (DVA)

Discriminant validity, a crucial aspect of a research model, pertains to how each construct within the model distinguishes itself from the others. According to Ab Hamid et al. (2017), the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratio assesses the discriminant validity (DV) level. The results presented in Table 4 indicate that all the discriminant values are below the established HTMT threshold of 0.85, as suggested by Kline (2015). This analysis confirms the presence of discriminant validity among all the constructs, signifying their distinctiveness.

Table 4 | Evaluation of Discriminant Validity with HTMT Metric

	PI	FV	SV	EMV
PI				
FV	0.784			
SV	0.657	0.642		
EMV	0.728	0.697	0.583	

5. Hypothesis Testing

Following the validation of convergent and discriminant validity, AMOS 26 was utilised for the path analyses, and the outcomes of the research hypotheses can be found in Table 5. The particulars in the table encompass parameters such as standard error (SE), composite reliability (CR), and corresponding P values, offering a comprehensive basis for further assessments.

Table 5 | Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CR**	**P**	**Supported/Not Supported**
H1: FV positively influences Nainital regional food PI.	0.323	0.103	3.888	***	Supported (p < 0.01)
H2: SV positively influences Nainital regional food PI	0.545	0.115	5.914	***	Supported (p < 0.01)
H3: EMV positively influences Nainital regional food PI.	0.228	0.093	2.869	.014	Supported (p < 0.05)
Moderating Analysis					
Hypothesis 4: FN moderates the relationship between tourists' FV toward regional food and PI.					
Food neophobia - High	0.134	0.056	3	0.003	
Food neophobia - Low	0.458	0.029	14.676	***	
Critical Parameter Discrepancy Ratios (z-score)	4.103 (> 2.58)				Supported (p < 0.01)
H5: FN moderates the relationship between tourists' SV toward regional food and PI.					
Food neophobia - High	0.875	0.045	19.531	***	
Food neophobia - Low	0.746	0.032	25.185	***	
Critical Parameter Discrepancy Ratios (z-score)	1.649 (> 1.64)				Supported*
H5: FN moderates the relationship between tourists' EMV toward regional food and PI.					
Food neophobia - High	0.255	0.034	3.453	***	
Food neophobia - Low	0.188	0.024	2.833	0.005	
Critical Ratios for Differences between Parameters (z-score)	1.184 (< 1.64)				Not Supported*
* Here the Z score is compared with a critical value of the Z ratio at a 10 percent level which is equal to 1.64.					

The initial hypothesis aims to elucidate the influence of Functional Value (FV) on tourists' intentions to purchase regional food in the captivating destination of Nainital. The results meticulously detailed in Table 6 support each element of the first hypothesis. Importantly, FV, particularly in the context of regional food, exerts a substantial and positively significant effect on Purchase Intentions (PI) ($\beta = 0.323$, p = 0.000), unequivocally confirming H1.

The complexity lies in how various factors come together to produce this result. When tourists perceive regional food as offering distinctive and authentic flavours and a medium to gain knowledge, cost-effectiveness, and health benefits, it inevitably inclines them towards purchasing (Mohapatra & Biswas, 2017).

The second hypothesis delves into the influence of Social Value (SV) on tourists' intentions to purchase regional food. As delineated in Table 6, the results provide strong affirmation for each facet of the second hypothesis, revealing the prominent role that SV plays in this context ($\beta = 0.545$, p = 0.000), firmly confirming H2.These results can be comprehended by considering that tourists' food choices are influenced by their aspiration to reflect a specific image within their social circles, contributing to their purchase intentions (Kazama et al., 2018).It can be understood by the fact that when selecting regional goods and services, it transcends the product itself; it involves the social validation these choices carry.

The third hypothesis aimed to explore the impact of Emotional Value (EMV) on tourists' intentions to purchase regional food in Nainital. As depicted in Table 6, all elements of the third hypothesis are affirmed, demonstrating a positive effect ($\beta = 0.228$, p = 0.014) on tourists' purchase intentions for regional food. This suggests that when tourists perceive an emotional value associated with regional food, their intentions to buy it increase.

The next hypothesis (H4) explores the moderating influence of food neophobia (FN) on the relationship between a tourist's FV regarding regional food and their purchase intention. Surprisingly, low FN ($\beta = 0.458$, p = 0.000) exerts a more substantial impact on PI in comparison to high FN ($\beta = 0.134$, p = 0.003), as indicated by the Z score of 4.103, which surpasses the threshold of 2.58. This suggests that low food neophobia positively impacts a tourist's FV when they are open to trying novel foods.

Conversely, the fifth hypothesis (H5) explores the impact of high FN ($\beta = 0.875$, p = 0.000) versus low FN ($\beta = 0.746$, p = 0.000) in the context of their influence on SV and PI. Here, the Z score of 0.649, while not significant at the 5% level, shows significance at the 10% level. This suggests that high food neophobia has a somewhat more substantial effect on SV than low food neophobia, although the overall impact is not substantial.

Lastly, in hypothesis six (H6), food neophobia is tested as a moderator. Examining the relationship between EMV and PI toward regional food revealed unexpected results. Surprisingly, EMV and PI were not significantly influenced by FN, as indicated by a Z score of 1.184, which is less than the threshold of 1.64. This indicates that a tourist's purchase intentions regarding local food are not significantly affected by their level of food neophobia when emotional connections to regional food primarily drive their decisions.

6. Discussion

This study investigates tourists' purchase intentions for regional food, focusing on the influence of the components of TCV. The study centres on FV, SV, and EMV to better comprehend their influence on tourists' PI for regional food items. Our findings align with recent literature (D'Souza, 2022; Köse & Kırcova, 2021; Pawan et al., 2020), which adds to a more comprehensive insight into the significance of FV in driving tourists' food choices. It underscores the importance of factors such as knowledge, cost-effectiveness, and health benefits in their decision-making process. This research provides valuable insights into how tourists perceive regional food, enabling marketers to formulate more effective policies and strategies.

To enhance tourists' interest in purchasing regional food, marketers should underscore its nutritional and therapeutic benefits, particularly in urban settings. Moreover, the positive effects of regional food consumption on society and the environment can further bolster tourists' perception of the functional value associated with regional food (Gupta et al., 2023). Another critical aspect is the impact of social value on regional food choices, which reflects tourists' desire to align themselves with specific images within their social circles or personal decisions. Tourists are naturally inclined to explore regional food due to the potential for establishing social connections, sharing experiences, and amplifying their intentions (Rawat & Dani, 2022).

These findings corroborate the earlier research conducted by Vabø & Hansen (2016), which similarly revealed a significant influence on the association between SV and tourists' willingness to purchase regional food products. The strong association perceived between SV and regional food purchase intentions (regional food PI) underscores the need for marketers to emphasise the social dimensions of regional food. This entails highlighting its cultural significance and community

involvement. Marketers should focus on showcasing how these foods facilitate social connections and interactions. Additionally, promoting dining experiences at featured restaurants offering regional food can enhance tourists' social image and prestige, making it an appealing choice for them (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019; Hernandez-Rojas et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in light of the current trend in social media, it is evident that digital marketing exerts a notable influence on tourism as travellers increasingly turn to online platforms for pre-trip research. The prevalent encouragement for individuals to share their personal stories and experiences plays a pivotal role in shaping how regional food is perceived. Therefore, marketers specialising in regional food should explore these possibilities, recognising that it extends beyond flavours. It encompasses the social ambience surrounding regional food, significantly moulding tourists' purchase intentions.

This dynamic is supported by the observed positive relationship between Emotional Value (EMV) and Purchase Intentions (PI) concerning regional food. It suggests that when tourists associate emotional attributes with purchasing regional food, it enhances their likelihood of purchasing. This finding is consistent with a previous study by Chakraborty et al. (2022), which also discovered a significant link between EMV and the desire to purchase ethnic foods. The research outcomes also indicate that FN serves as an essential moderator, influencing the connection between FV and PI for regional food. Notably, this neophobic tendency is predominantly evident among tourists with low FN traits, as illustrated in Table 5. To elaborate, the interaction between these two constructs becomes pronounced when tourists exhibit lower FN traits. These findings align with prior research, including the studies conducted by Duize (2020) and Payini et al. (2020). These studies suggest that tourists with lower FN traits are more inclined to explore and sample new foods. Consequently, the purchase intentions of such individuals are more robust, particularly when they hold an optimistic view of the regional food available in Nainital.

The examination in this study also explored whether FN moderated the association between SV and PI. The results suggest that FN indeed strengthens the connection between SV and PI. Table 5 provides evidence that this connection becomes more conspicuous as tourists exhibit higher levels of FN.

The study's results suggest that tourists with higher levels of FN are more likely to buy regional food. When they are motivated by social considerations, particularly regarding their social circles, one plausible interpretation for this conduct is that tourists with elevated FN characteristics tend to be hesitant when it comes to unfamiliar sample foods. However, the concept of unfamiliarity varies based on the notion of SV. Tourists who explore the local food of Uttarakhand intending to assert their presence among their social groups may be influenced by perceived societal pressure. This results in higher purchase intent among tourists with high FN levels compared to tourists with low FN levels, who exhibit a greater willingness to experiment with new culinary experiences, rendering the opinions of others less influential. This finding aligns with previous research conducted by Muhammad et al. (2016).

However, no observed moderating effect between EMV and PI can be attributed to the fact that tourists, other than those in Nainital and nearby regions, primarily focus on recreational tourism rather than food. Additionally, the positive emotions associated with regional food, such as joy, excitement, or nostalgia, may override any reservations related to food neophobia. Importantly, although many tourists may not be well-acquainted with Nainital food, they are typically familiar with Nainital and its local culinary offerings. Many of them have had prior positive experiences with regional foods, leading to emotional attachments. These emotional connections

can be a more influential factor in shaping purchase intentions. Hence, their uneasiness or hesitancy regarding regional food has a limited effect on their inclination to partake. On occasion, individuals might decline such offerings even when presented with alternatives. This observation aligns with results from research conducted by scholars like Ashidin et al. (2016), Furukawa et al. (2019) and Joshi et al. (2021).

Additionally, it is worth noting that specific individuals may possess heightened psychological resilience, enabling them to effectively manage their food neophobia, mainly when the emotional appeal of regional food is compelling. These findings align with a study by Hashemi et al. (2021), where the emotional significance of the food can supersede neophobic tendencies, leading these individuals to embrace and enjoy regional food.

7. Conclusion

This research delves into tourists' preferences for regional food, focusing on FV, SV, EMV, and the moderating influence of food neophobia. The study underscores the pivotal role of FV, with knowledge, cost-effectiveness, and health benefits significantly shaping tourists' choices in regional food. SV highlights tourists' inclination for regional food, driven by social connections and shared experiences. The study aligns with prior research, revealing a solid connection between SV and the intent to buy local food. Digital marketing and social media significantly influence the perception of regional food. Tourists associating emotional attributes with regional food display higher purchase intentions, emphasizing the importance of crafting emotionally appealing culinary experiences.

Regarding food neophobia, the research found that tourists with low FN traits exhibit a more pronounced relationship between FV and PI. These individuals are optimistic about regional food offerings. The study also reveals that tourists with higher FN levels are more inclined to purchase regional food when motivated by social considerations. However, the analysis did not reveal any substantial moderating influence on the connection between EMV and PI, as some tourists prioritise recreational tourism over food. Their emotional connections to regional food override any reservations related to food neophobia.

In conclusion, this research offers valuable insights for marketers to tailor their strategies to tourist motivations and enhance culinary experiences. The interplay of FV, SV, EMV, and food neophobia illuminates the complexity of tourist behaviour, enabling more effective strategies and policies in the tourism and culinary sectors.

8. Practical and Theoretical Implications

This research carries several practical and theoretical implications for understanding tourists' purchasing intentions regarding regional food. In practical terms, it underscores the significance of marketing strategies highlighting regional food's nutritional and therapeutic benefits, particularly in urban areas. Emphasising the social value of regional food and promoting it to connect with culture and community can enhance its appeal to tourists. Leveraging digital marketing and social media to share stories and create a robust online presence becomes crucial in shaping perceptions of regional food. Crafting emotionally appealing culinary experiences can boost purchase intentions, capitalising on the emotional bonds formed with the food. For theoretical implications, the study deepens our understanding of how different components of TCV influence tourist decision-making, shedding light on the moderation effect of FN, particularly in the context of regional food. The geographical variation in consumer behaviour and the role of emotional resilience in food neophobia pro-

vide intriguing insights, and the study's interdisciplinary approach bridges psychology, marketing, and tourism, encouraging further collaboration to unravel the complexities of consumer choices in this context.

9. Limitations and Future Scope

The limitations of this study open avenues for future research in the domain of tourists' culinary preferences and the impact of regional food. While the regional specificity of the study, focusing on Nainital, allowed for in-depth insights, future research should consider broader geographical contexts to enhance the generalisability of findings. Cross-cultural comparisons can be valuable in understanding how different cultural backgrounds influence tourists' perceptions and intentions regarding regional food. Additionally, future studies should delve into more comprehensive measurements of food neophobia to capture the nuances of this construct. To conclude, a prospective avenue for research involves longitudinal studies, which can track changes in tourists' intentions over time as they become more acquainted with regional food. Comparative analyses between various regions or countries can offer richer insights into the factors at play.

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