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Is Gastronomy A Relevant Factor for Sustainable Tourism? An Empirical Analysis of Spain Country Brand

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Abstract: Tourism has become a fundamental industry for the economic growth of many countries. Due to this, there is growing competitiveness among the different destinations to attract as many tourists as possible. As a result, disciplines such as marketing have developed tools to differentiate some destinations from others and concepts such as place branding and country brand have emerged. One of the key factors forming the country brand is gastronomy, as food tourism is one way to reduce the growing problem of sustainability in tourism, as it impacts different aspects of the country's environment. However, there is a great lack of scientific works that relate both variables. In this paper, we propose to establish that, in the case of Spain, tourists' perception of Spanish gastronomy is a key element of its country brand. To do that, this study relies on the use of Partial Least Squares Structural Equations Modeling (PLS-SEM) using a 496 cases data set.

Keywords: country brand; gastronomy; tourism; Spain

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the main economic activities in the world. In the case of Spain, tourism has become an important source of income and country development. According to data from the World Tourism Organization, 81.8 million tourists visited Spain in 2017, thus becoming the country receiving the second-most international tourists [1]. In addition, the tourism sector accounted for 11.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017, which in terms of value was 62 billion euros, accounting for 12.8% of total economic activities [2].

Due to the capital importance of the tourism sector in the world economy, the governments in charge of tourism promotion began to apply marketing strategies in the early 1980s. Thus Burgess [3], Ashworth, and Voogd [4] carried out the first investigations focusing on the image that a place had to project and from a strategic perspective. Kotler et al. [5] continued and expanded this area of knowledge in the following decade. However, it was not until 2002 that the term “place branding” was coined [6] producing a sudden increase in the academic literature. For example, Kotler et al. [5] indicate that one of the objectives of the territory brand is the attraction of tourists to the destination and Van Gelder [7] reaffirms this idea.

However, one of the problems that arise for the proper management of the country brand is its polyhedral nature, since these can be associated with a huge number of dimensions. Analyzing the previous studies of the image of Spain made by the Real Instituto Elcano [8], this country is strongly associated with soft factors such as sports or gastronomy. Specifically, Symons [9] claimed that

gastronomy is a key element in the management of tourism, finding in the scientific literature a growing number of studies on food tourism. Despite this, there are only a few articles that relate gastronomy and place branding [10–12]. These authors have demonstrated how gastronomy is indicated as one of the main attributes of place branding of the territory and, therefore, is part of the attributes of a territory brand. Among other reasons, this is due to the fact that gastronomy is involved in different areas [13] such as agriculture, food industry, the retail sector, and hospitality. Despite this, many scholars agree that place branding and food tourism studies still lack a proven scientific methodology [14–16].

However, Swarbrooke [17], in his book “Sustainable Tourism Management”, pointed out that marketers must be mindful to develop a sustainable tourism model to reduce the possible negative impact over local communities. In this line, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has focused part of its research on sustainable tourism—boosting the International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO) which is monitoring the economic, environmental, and social impact of tourism at the destination level [18]. Among others, food tourism has been identified as a main way to empower local communities thanks to the value-added activities involved [19,20]. Nevertheless, there must be a linkage between what it is sustainable and what tourists desire when visiting a destination. Because of this, we wonder if gastronomy is a key factor forming the Spain brand, and so could be an attribute to lead a successful and sustainable marketing strategy for the Spanish government.

Having said that, the main objective of this research is to prove in an empirical way the relationship between gastronomy and the Spain brand. In the case of obtaining positive and conclusive results, this model would be used to know if this relationship can occur in other countries with a good gastronomic positioning such as France, Italy, Peru, Thailand, or Japan, based on the world travel awards 2018 that every year choose the world’s leading culinary destinations [21].

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Firstly, it should be emphasized that the success of a region in the reception of tourists may depend on macro-environmental factors such as politics, terrorism, diseases, natural disasters, or weather conditions [22]. However, some attributes have a more important role than others in the final choice of a touristic destination [23]. Moreover, Morgan et al. [24] ensured that the battle for customers in the tourism industry would not be won thanks to price competition, but by focusing on the hearts and minds of tourists, that is, in the emotional links and in the experience, as studied more recently by Bukharov and Berezka [25]. According to Sheth et al. [26] consumers, through their choice of a product or service—including tourism—make a clear statement of their lifestyle, which also brings an emotional link. Therefore, the country brand is an important element when choosing a destination as demonstrated by different academics [27–29].

Among the first research on marketing applied to the management of regions, we can highlight those of Burgess [3] and Ashworth and Voogd [4], that focused on the image that a place had to project and the sale of that image. Later, Kotler et al. [5] made a series of proposals on managing an effective image of the territories. This gave rise to the concept of place branding [30], which has aroused great interest among researchers and professionals. Some authors consider that it is a field that goes beyond generalist brand management [31]. For the correct development of the country brand, a systematic and long-term marketing strategy must be developed [32]. This strategy must aim to nurture and develop the natural and potential attributes of an area or region. Finally, Moilanen and Rainisto [33] listed clear and direct benefits derived from place branding.

The perceived image of a tourist destination by potential travelers is a significant factor in terms of choice, satisfaction, and purchase intention [34]. The same has been widely studied by authors such as Fakeye and Crompton [35] and more recently by Lee et al. [36] and Chen and Tsai [37]. The latter proved empirically, through a study carried out in Taiwan, that the image of an destination exerts a great influence on the behavior of tourists when choosing that tourist destination. This means that branding managers for a tourist destination have to take care of the image projected of their territory, trying to meet the needs of potential travelers. For the development of a strong image of a

territory through destination branding, it is necessary to identify those attributes that generate positive experiences for tourists. Once identified, these have to be key elements of communication and the positioning of the image of the place in order to attract new visitors and provide the destination with differentiating elements from the competition [38]. Experience shows that, in most cases, the absolute control of the image is beyond the reach of those responsible [39]. The bibliography studied shows how the management of the country brand is complex since it affects a large number of elements that define that country [5,40,41].

Related to the above, several authors have highlighted the importance of the perception that gastronomy has about the attributes of a country brand. Among them, we can highlight research on the attitude of tourists to local cuisine such as those carried out by Ricolfe et al. [42], Hjalager and Corigliano [43], Quan and Wang [44], or Nummedal and Hall [45]. Regarding gastronomy branding, as a part of destination branding, few articles address the subject. Some authors who have addressed this issue have empirically demonstrated that gastronomy is indicated as one of the main attributes of the place branding [10–12]. Others have pointed out that gastronomy has become one of the key elements for the improvement, sustainability, and consolidation of tourist destinations [46]. Therefore, it has become clear that gastronomy is inherent in tourism and essential both in its production and consumption [9].

In the case of Spain, it has some of the world's leading gastronomy, highlighting other tourist attributes and providing significant value to the country brand. In a recent study conducted by Pérez-Priego et al. [47], they have revealed that culture and local gastronomic heritage are currently a differentiating factor of tourist destinations due to the growing culinary interest for people visiting Spain. This may be due to the high perception of the quality of products and services related to Spanish cuisine that give it an image of exclusivity [48]. In line with the above, since 2011 TurEspaña (State Agency dedicated to the promotion of Spain as a tourist destination abroad) has implemented gastronomy as one of the main values of the tourism brand in Spain within its foreign promotion plan [49]. In its marketing plan one of its main objectives is to increase the power of the tourism brand in Spain thanks to gastronomy, as well as the promotion of gastronomic tourism for which the Royal Academy of Gastronomy has been added to the project [50].

This is because, although tourism is an important activity for Spain, this industry is related to sustainability problems having a direct impact on the physical environment, economic viability, and social justice and equity [17]. In this line, Moscardó and Pearce [51] showed how tourism development could affect to the disempowerment of destination communities. Both perspectives are linked with the UNWTO's sustainable tourism definition: "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" [18]. This may be why many places in Spain such as Madrid, Cataluña, or Islas Baleares have started to regulate and tax the entrance of new tourists to make this model more sustainable. Looking for solutions to this problem some studies have found the gastronomy, as an inherent part of the tourism, is a good solution to this sustainability problem. If the place has a strong linkage between tourism and food production, this can build added value to the place, stimulate the entrepreneurial activities among the locals, and boost food exports [19]. Also, when sustainable gastronomic tourism is well planned and executed it can preserve the quality of life of the locals [20].

Therefore, our main objective is to explore if the perception of attributes of Spanish gastronomy (ASG) by tourists becomes a key element for the development of Spain Brand (SB). We also aim to find out if gastronomy it is designated as one of the main attributes of the place branding of the territory as pointed out by other authors [10–12,52], in the case of Spain, which has some of the world's leading gastronomy, which contributes a remarkable value [48]. All this is specified in the following hypotheses that can be observed in Figure 1.

Hypothesis (H1). *There is a positive relationship between the perception of the attributes of Spanish gastronomy (ASG) and the perception of the Spain brand (SB).*

Hypothesis (H2). There is a positive relationship between the perception of the attributes of Spanish gastronomy (ASG) and the evaluation of Spanish gastronomy (ESG).

Hypothesis (H3). There is a positive relationship between the evaluation of Spanish gastronomy (ESG) and the perception of the Spain brand (SB).

Hypothesis (H4). The evaluation of Spanish gastronomy (ESG) mediates the link between the perception of the attributes of Spanish gastronomy (ASG) and the perception of the Spain brand (SB) (indirect effect).

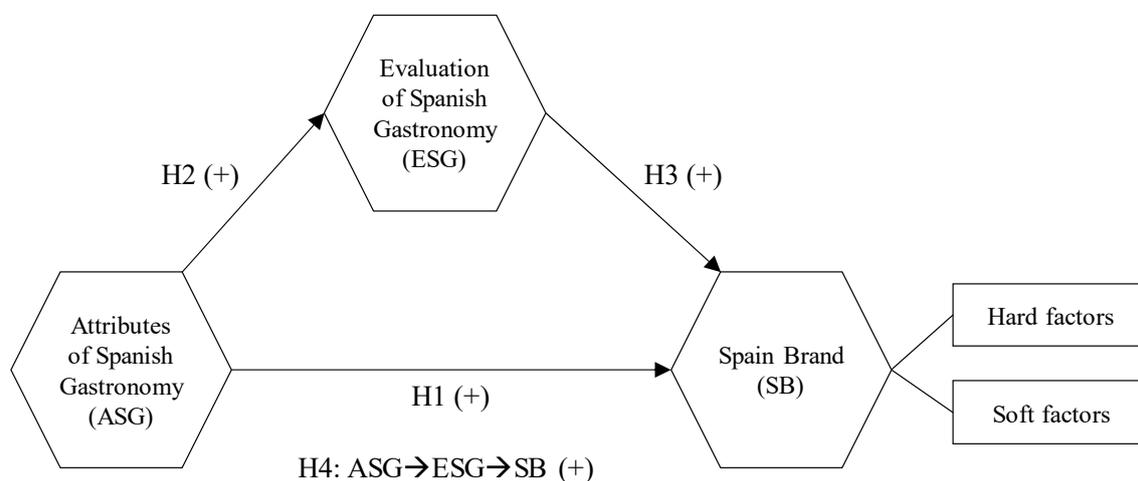


Figure 1. Research model and hypotheses. ASG: attributes of Spanish gastronomy; SB: Spain Brand; ESG: evaluation of Spanish gastronomy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample, Data Collection, and Measures

The methodology for this investigation was based on the realization of an online survey with the purpose of knowing the opinion of foreign citizens in relation to its gastronomy and its image as a tourist destination. In the first place, the profile of the respondent was configured. These must be non-Spaniards, over twenty years of age, and who had visited Spain. The age limitation was determined based on the reflection that people under twenty years could distort the results because they are not usually decision makers, that is to say, it is their parents who decide where to spend their vacations and where they eat. Due to the objectives of this research work, Spanish citizens were not considered as an objective public who know the vision that foreign tourists have about Spanish gastronomy. Once elected, a profile proceeded to the preparation of the questionnaire. To reach the final questionnaire six previous drafts were drawn up. By pre-test, we were detecting possible errors of interpretation, including measure response being mandatory or filtering, which could cause deviations understood and errors in the final analysis.

The sample was 496 individuals that would be considered as a large sample according to Kline [53]. However, to confirm the adequacy of the sample size, we relied on the G*power test, computed through the use of the G*power 3.1 tool [54]. Concretely, we conducted an a priori analysis, by virtue of which the necessary sample size is calculated as a function of researcher-specified values for the required significance level (α), the desired statistical power ($1-\beta$), and the to-be detected population effect size [54]. This test reveals that a minimum sample size of 74 is needed to obtain a power of 0.95 being alpha 0.05 and 2 the number of predictors (see Figure 2). Consequently, the final sample ($n = 496$) meets the initial sample size requirements [55].

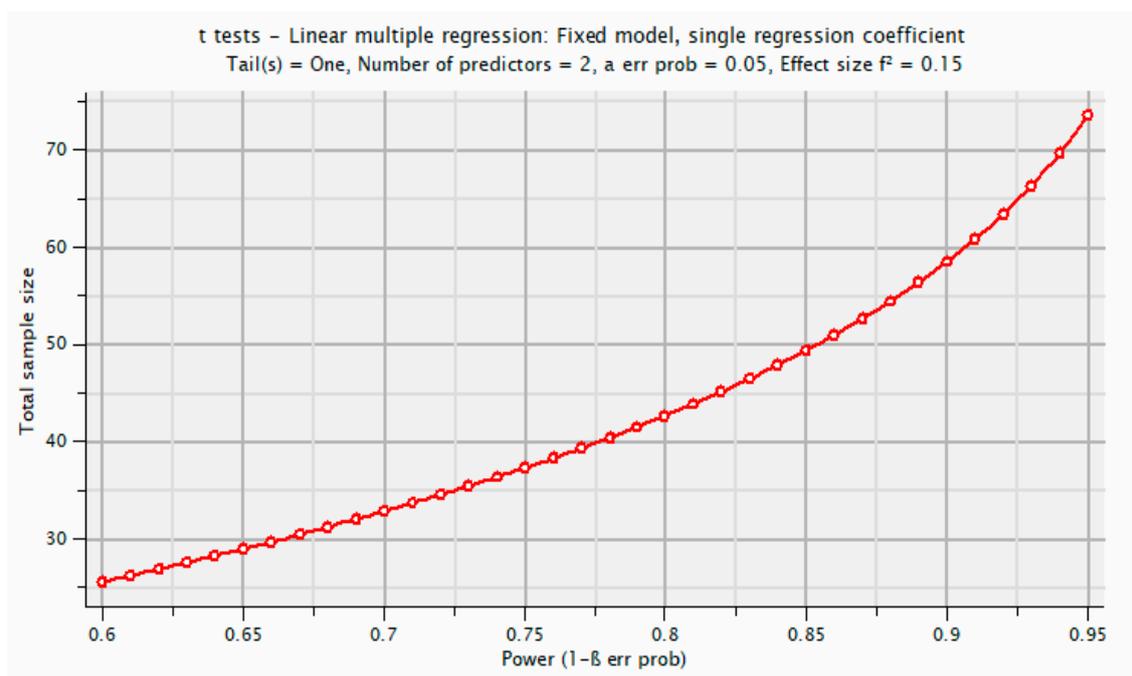


Figure 2. A priori power analysis plot.

The variables Attributes of the Spanish Gastronomy and Spain Brand have been modelled as composite constructs on behalf of the theoretical background shown in Table 1, and all the items of the survey were measured through a seven-point Likert scale. Such variables can be regarded as design constructs or artifacts that are made up of more elementary components, (i.e., dimensions or indicators). Thereby, composites are modelled as linear combinations of their own indicators or dimensions [56]. As can be observed in Table 2, ASG was measured by asking the interviewees to evaluate the following attributes of Spanish gastronomy: tasty, varied, traditional, original, sophisticated, healthy, international, exclusive, and quality. This construct provides a measure of the positive or negative perception that might have those interviewed in relation to the Spanish cuisine. However, the construct ESG was added to get a direct measurement of this perception, which was measured by the question: “After your visit, how would you assess Spanish gastronomy?” (1 = extremely poor, 7 = excellent). Finally, SB construct is a second order construct meaning that it is shaped by two first order constructs. These are hard (technology, innovation, and business) and soft (culture, partying, leisure, good weather, and Food/drink) factors that make up the image of Spain in the minds of tourists.

Table 1. Modeling of constructs.

Constructs	Authors
Attributes of Spanish Gastronomy (ASG): First order construct (Mode A).	Muñoz and Rodríguez [48]; Ricolfe et al. [42]; Kivela et al. [57]; Hjalager and Corigliano [43]; Cohen and Avieli [58]; Nummedal and Hall [45]; Mak et al. [16]; Hall and Mitchell [59].
Evaluation of Spanish Gastronomy (ESG): Single-item variable.	Hall and Mitchell [59]; Nuñez-Florencio [60]; Tarrés [61]; Schlüter [62]; Ehrmann et al. [63]; Surlemont and Johnson [64].
Spain Brand (SB): second order construct (Mode B) shaped by two dimensions (Hard and Soft factors).	Boyne and Hall [52]; Kastenholz et al. [10]; Gyimothy et al. [11]; Joppe et al. [12]; Muñoz and Rodríguez [48]; Chon [65]; Assael [66]; Papadopoulos and Heslop [40]; Goodall [41]; Fakeye and Crompton [35]; Kotler et al. [5]; Beerli and Martín [67]; Echtner and Ritchie [68]; Chen and Tsai [37]; Baloglu and McClear [69]; Bigné et al. [70].

Table 2. Individual item reliability, construct reliability and convergent validity.

Construct/Indicators	Outer Loadings	Weights	VIF	rho_A	CR	AVE
Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy				0.888	0.902	0.509
P1_1: Tasty	0.737	0.179	2.030			
P1_2: Varied	0.770	0.176	1.968			
P1_3: Traditional	0.590	0.116	1.496			
P1_4: Original	0.765	0.155	2.059			
P1_5: Sophisticated	0.779	0.169	2.248			
P1_6: Healthy	0.665	0.148	1.595			
P1_7: International	0.657	0.127	1.687			
P1_8: Exclusive	0.647	0.133	1.603			
P1_9: Quality	0.781	0.187	2.031			
Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy				N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
P2: Evaluation	1.000	1.000	1.000			
Soft factors				N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
P3_1: Culture	0.734	0.393	1.264			
P3_2: Partying	0.421	0.139	1.157			
P3_3: Leisure	0.567	0.229	1.287			
P3_6: Good weather	0.374	0.113	1.120			
P3_7: Food/drink	0.855	0.562	1.329			
Hard factors				N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
P3_4: Technology	0.918	0.387	3.496			
P3_5: Innovation	0.908	0.402	3.320			
P3_8: Business	0.775	0.361	1.439			

Note: VIF: Variance Inflation Factor; rho_A: Jöreskog's rho; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; N.A.: Non-Applicable.

3.2. Data Analysis

Empirical data analysis in the fields of management, marketing, psychology, information systems, and other related social sciences disciplines have been lately aiming to provide wiser and more accurate interpretations and understandings of the intricate interrelationships inherent to the so-called 'black box' of a broad range of organizational and behavioral features [71]. Partial Least Squares Structural Equations Modelling (PLS-SEM) is a tool of utmost interest and applicability when attempting to analyze complex interrelationships involving a wide diversity of latent variables—constructs—and manifest variables—indicators—, be such relationships either direct, indirect, or mediated and moderated in nature [71,72].

To empirically test the research model and hypotheses posited, this study relies on the use of Partial Least Squares Structural Equations Modelling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based structural equation modelling technique [55]. This decision is due to the fact that two of the constructs shaping our research model are composites [73]. Both theoretical and empirical studies have endorsed the use of PLS when a composite measurement model is supported [74]. Another reason for using PLS-SEM is that this research is primarily focused on identifying key constructs in order to predict the dependent construct—Spain Brand—and it uses latent variable scores in the subsequent development of Spain Brand as a second order construct applying the two-stage approach [75–77].

The two dimensions—Hard factors and Soft factors—shaping the multidimensional construct Spain Brand have been modelled as composites and estimated in Mode B (regression weights, the standard in OLS regression analysis, which comprise not only the correlation between each item and the latent variable but also the correlations between items), while Mode A (correlation weights resulting from bivariate correlations between each item and the latent variable) was chosen for measuring the Attributes of the Spanish Gastronomy construct. Moreover, SmartPLS 3.2.7 software was used [78].

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model: Individual Item Reliability, Construct Reliability, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity, Potential Multicollinearity, and Weights Assessment

The evaluation of the measurement model shows satisfactory results. First, with regard to the Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy construct, it has been modeled as a composite construct in Mode A. In this case, the evaluation of the measurement model entails the assessment of individual item reliability, construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The indicators meet the requirement of individual item reliability because the outer loadings are, generally, greater than 0.707 [79] (Table 2) and only a few of the outer loadings are slightly under this threshold. Nevertheless, the decision is to retain them to support the content validity of the scale. Only the item P1_10 was removed, following the advice for item trimming provided by Hair et al. [77], since its outer loading (0.432) was too low. Second, this construct satisfies the requisite of construct reliability, given that its Jöreskog's rho and composite reliability are greater than 0.7 [80] (Table 2). Third, this construct reaches convergent validity since its average variance extracted (AVE) is over the 0.5 critical level [81] (Table 2). Finally, Table 3 discloses that all the constructs attain discriminant validity following the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion [82], which indicates that values should be under the threshold of 0.85 [53]. As for the soft factors and hard factors constructs, they have been modeled as composite constructs in Mode B. Therefore, these composites must be assessed in terms of potential multicollinearity between items and weights assessment [55]. According to Petter et al. [83] a variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic over 3.3 indicates the existence of high multicollinearity between items. However, Ringle et al. [78] indicate that multicollinearity should be a concern if VIF levels surpass the critical level of 5. In our case (Table 2), the maximum VIF value for indicators came to 3.496, slightly over the 3.3 threshold and well below the threshold proposed by Ringle et al. [78]. Hence, we may conclude that multicollinearity is not a concern. Subsequently, the magnitude and significance of the weights should be examined (Table 2). Weights provide information concerning how each item contributes to the respective composite [84], allowing hence ranking the indicators according to their contribution.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Construct	Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)			Evaluation of the Spanish Gastronomy
	Attributes of the Spanish Gastronomy	Hard	Soft	
Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy				
Hard	0.414			
Soft	0.726	0.461		
Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy	0.760	0.282	0.577	

4.2. Structural Model

In line with Hair et al. [85] endorsement, this paper applies a bootstrapping (5000 resamples) technique to generate the standard errors, t-statistics, p-values and 95% bias corrected confidence intervals (BCCI) that enable the evaluation of the statistical significance for the considered relationships (both direct and indirect) hypothesized within the research model. Table 4 contains the main parameters that are obtained for the structural model under assessment in this study. The coefficient of determination (R^2) is assumed as the main criterion for measuring explained variance, which is shown in the endogenous constructs. The results comprised in Table 4 reveal that the structural model entails acceptable predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs, given that the R^2 coefficients are $R^2 = 0.451$ for the construct Spain brand and $R^2 = 0.529$ for the construct Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy (Table 4). In addition, all the direct and indirect relationships that underlie the four

research hypotheses under assessment are shown to be positive and significant. Thus, we find empirical evidence to sustain the four hypotheses posited in this research. This implies that the Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy are positively linked to Spain Brand and to the Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy (H1 and H2). Besides there is a positive and significant relationship Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy and Spain Brand (H3). Finally, this study also finds support for the mediation hypothesis that links the Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy with Spain Brand via the Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy (H4).

Table 4. Structural model results and predictive performance summary.

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	p-Value	95% BCCI
H1: Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy → Spain Brand	0.481(Sig.)	7.863	0.000	[0.354; 0.596]
H2: Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy → Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy	0.727(Sig.)	28.508	0.000	[0.672; 0.773]
H3: Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy → Spain Brand	0.235(Sig.)	3.495	0.000	[0.105; 0.369]
H4: [Indirect effect] Attributes of the Spanish gastronomy → Spain Brand	0.171(Sig.)	3.375	0.001	[0.075; 0.275]
Coefficient of determination: R ² Spain Brand = 0.451; R ² Evaluation of the Spanish gastronomy = 0.529				
Construct prediction summary				
	Q ²			
Spain Brand	0.336			
Dimension prediction summary				
	Q ²			
Soft	0.409			
Hard	0.156			

Note: 95% BCCI: 95% bias corrected confidence intervals.

4.3. Predictive Ability of the Model

The second purpose of our research is prediction. Shmueli and Koppius [86] define a model's predictive performance as its ability to generate precise predictions of new observations, being them either temporal or cross-sectional in nature. In this line, Shmueli [87] argues that explanation and prediction shape two distinct purposes that could be joined in a research study. Such position is also shared by Dolce et al. [88], who conclude that "The predictions of path models should be sensitive to the theory. In particular, the theoretical model represented by the structural equations and prediction should not be separated". Thus, this paper examines the predictive ability (out-of-sample prediction) of the proposed research model through the use of cross-validation with holdout samples [89] focusing on the key endogenous construct (Spain brand). Concretely, this paper relies on the use of the PLS predict algorithm [90] available in the SmartPLS software version 3.2.7. [78].

To assess whether the research model entails predictive ability it is necessary to check the Q² value. Positive Q² values imply that the prediction error of PLS results are smaller than the prediction error of merely using the mean values. For this purpose, the following prediction error statistics are considered: root mean squared error (RMSE), mean absolute error (MAE), and mean absolute percentage error (MAPE). Thus, attaining positive Q² values involves that the proposed research model offers a proper predictive ability. The research model posited in this study satisfies this criterion both at the construct (i.e., Spain brand), and at the dimension (soft and hard factors) levels (Table 4).

5. Discussions and Conclusions

As has been said before, gastronomy seems to be one of the main assets of the Spanish tourism brand due to its direct contribution to the economy and to the enormous potential it entails. However, few studies address the relationship between gastronomy and country brand. Thus, this paper sheds light upon this research gap, since it presents a research model that (i) hypothesizes a positive link

between the attributes of Spanish gastronomy (ASG) and Spain brand (SB), and (ii) subsequently analyses the existence of an indirect (mediated) effect of ASG on SB via the evaluation of Spanish Gastronomy (ESG) in the context of a sustainable way to promote the Spain brand. To test the research model and hypotheses, this paper relies on the use of partial least squares (PLS) path-modelling, a variance-based structural equation modelling technique of broad recognition, application, and robustness in the field of social sciences.

As the PLS analysis reveals, this paper shows in an empirical, scientific, and academic manner that these relationships are positive and statistically significant. That is why both scholars and practitioners (i.e., policy-makers) must begin to pay attention to the real importance that gastronomy has on the image of the country. As it might be observed, in light of the empirical basis presented in this paper, Spain currently enjoys a great global reputation in the field of gastronomy, which has been built throughout the last twenty years. Having been capable of reaching this relevant milestone—being recognized internationally for gastronomy—and having empirically verified the positive and significant impact exerted by Spanish gastronomy upon the Spanish country brand, it must serve to focus and emphasize part of our tourist communication policies on the gastronomic field. We presume that, in the case of Spain, the promotion of its gastronomy will not lead to anything but the development and improvement of the Spanish brand in a sustainable way.

This paper entails remarkable implications both for theory and practice. The theoretical implications are clear. This study is pioneering both from a conceptual and empirical point of view, since it posits an original conceptual model that assesses scarcely explored relationships between constructs, and subsequently analyses them empirically through the use of PLS. It also confirms what other studies pointed out—that gastronomy is a key factor forming a country's brand—in the case of Spain [47], as in other cases [42–45]. Considering the high capability of country brand to attract tourists [32] and following the advice of UNTWO to develop sustainable tourism marketing strategies, the main practical implication that derives from this study is that Spain must reinforce its positioning as a gastronomic brand in order to attract more food tourism is one of the best options to solve the sustainability problem [46] related to tourism [19,20]. Moreover, there are several countries like Peru, Thailand, or Japan that can follow the same way thanks to the strength of the image of culinary destinations [21]. Therefore, we urge Spanish policy-makers to publicize Spanish cuisine globally to maintain and improve the image of food tourism destination.

Regarding limitations, it is important to note that our results are valid for the case of Spain only. This makes us doubt what is the relative importance of gastronomy in the formation of the country brand over other tourist destinations. Therefore, as a future line of research, we intend to test this model for the cases of the aforementioned countries, as well as others whose gastronomy is not so well known to set the relative position of each destination. If gastronomy could be broadly established as a key factor in the formation of the country brand, this could be an affective global strategy to promote sustainable tourism.

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