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Perceived authenticity in ethnic and cultural restaurants: a systematic review and meta-analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to address fragmented evidence on perceived authenticity in restaurant contexts by developing an integrated understanding of its key antecedents and customer outcomes in ethnic and cultural dining settings.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review identified 100 studies, with 50 meeting the inclusion criteria for meta-analytic synthesis. Effect sizes were synthesized using random-effects models, and moderator analyses were performed to examine the roles of culture, age and gender.

Findings – Perceived authenticity is strongly shaped by tangible cues, particularly brand image and food quality. In turn, authenticity exerts robust positive effects on customer satisfaction, revisit intention and word of mouth. Moderator analyses further show that individualism strengthens the authenticity–positive emotion relationship, that older consumers place greater emphasis on authenticity in forming memorable dining experiences and that female customers are more sensitive to interpersonal cues.

Practical implications – The findings provide guidance for restaurant managers on developing and communicating authentic dining experiences in ways that support favorable customer responses. They also highlight the value of considering cultural and demographic differences when designing and delivering authenticity-related experiences.

Originality/value – This study clarifies how key antecedents differentially shape perceived authenticity and how authenticity influences customer outcomes. It also identifies boundary conditions across cultural and demographic contexts.

Keywords Perceived authenticity, Ethnic restaurants, Cultural restaurants, Customer satisfaction, Meta-analysis, Systematic review

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Perceived authenticity has emerged as a salient concept across multiple disciplines, evolving from philosophical and sociological foundations into a prominent construct within contemporary consumer behavior research (Le *et al.*, 2019). Within restaurant contexts, perceived authenticity has been identified as a critical factor influencing restaurant selection, dining experiences and subsequent consumer responses (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Wang and Mattila, 2013). Recent industry surveys indicate growing demand for authentic ethnic and cultural dining experiences. A global Ipsos survey commissioned by Hilton found that 86% of

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travelers were interested in experiencing local cuisines reflecting the culture and heritage of destinations, with 49% identifying restaurants and culinary experiences as a leading travel priority (Hilton, 2023). Similarly, Technomic (2018) reported that 44% of consumers preferred completely authentic ethnic food, while 36% were interested in exploring regional variations of ethnic cuisines. Together, these findings underscore the growing importance of authenticity in consumers' choices of ethnic and cultural dining experiences.

The concept of authenticity originated in sociological scholarship as a response to concerns surrounding modernity, globalization and the commodification of culture. MacCannell's (1973) seminal notion of staged authenticity describes how ostensibly genuine cultural experiences may be deliberately performed to meet consumer expectations. Extending this perspective to consumption contexts, Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that increasingly commoditized markets have heightened consumers' demand for distinctive and authentic experiences. In line with this argument, authenticity has been shown to enhance a range of consumer outcomes, including satisfaction, revisit intention, brand loyalty, willingness to pay a premium and word-of-mouth (Liu and Mattila, 2015; Zhang and Hanks, 2018).

The relevance of perceived authenticity is particularly pronounced in ethnic and cultural restaurant settings (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Ethnic restaurants represent the cuisine and cultural characteristics of a particular ethnic group, often, but not necessarily, outside that group's place of origin (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Tsai and Lu, 2012). Cultural restaurants more broadly preserve or communicate local, regional, traditional or heritage-based culinary cultures through regional cuisines, traditional cooking practices and inherited dining customs (Le *et al.*, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2022). Unlike heritage attractions, museums or historic sites, where authenticity often centers on perceptions of existing cultural resources and their presentation (Bryce *et al.*, 2015; Kolar and Žabkar, 2010), restaurants provide experiences that customers actively consume throughout the dining process (Le *et al.*, 2019; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Accordingly, restaurant authenticity is experienced through multiple cues extending beyond food to branding and service, décor and atmospherics and customer-related factors (Le *et al.*, 2019; Wang and Mattila, 2013).

Because perceived authenticity is jointly shaped by multiple external and internal cues, empirical findings have not always been consistent across studies. For example, prior knowledge has been shown to exert positive effects on perceived authenticity in some studies but not in others (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2016), while the influence of ethnic décor ranges from very strong to relatively modest (Kim and Lee, 2022; Muñoz and Wood, 2009). Meta-analysis can address such inconsistencies by providing more precise estimates of relationships and their heterogeneity, while examining whether between-study characteristics systematically account for this variation (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004). Such heterogeneity may reflect cultural and demographic differences: authenticity is socially and culturally constructed and may therefore be interpreted differently across cultural contexts (Jang *et al.*, 2012), while age and gender have been associated with differences in consumer preferences, evaluations and decision-making in hospitality and tourism settings (Kim and Jang, 2016; Namkung and Jang, 2007). Examining these moderators can therefore help identify when and under which conditions relationships between perceived authenticity and its antecedents and outcomes become stronger or weaker.

Beyond these inconsistent findings, the literature also remains fragmented. A structured synthesis of publication trends, regional emphases and methodological approaches is still lacking (Xiao and Watson, 2019). Existing studies tend to focus on isolated antecedents, either external cues such as food quality, décor and employee behavior (Antón *et al.*, 2019; Jang *et al.*, 2012) or internal factors such as consumers' responses, motivations and identities

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(Kim *et al.*, 2020; Meng and Choi, 2017). Similarly, prior research often examines single outcomes, such as satisfaction or revisit intention, rather than considering a coherent set of attitudinal and behavioral consequences associated with perceptions of authenticity (Hwang and Hyun, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2016). This fragmentation leaves important theoretical questions unresolved, including whether thing- and self-related antecedents differ in their influence, which specific factors within these domains are most consequential, whether authenticity exerts stronger effects on some consumer outcomes than others and under what cultural and demographic conditions these relationships become stronger or weaker.

Although several reviews have examined authenticity more broadly, they are largely qualitative and rarely focus specifically on restaurant settings (Le *et al.*, 2019). The present study combines a systematic literature review with a meta-analysis. The systematic literature review maps the development of the field through publication trends, geographical coverage, methodological characteristics and previously examined antecedents and outcomes. The meta-analysis synthesizes the effect sizes and heterogeneity of relationships involving perceived authenticity and examines potential moderators. Together, these complementary approaches clarify the relative roles of different sources of authenticity, identify the conditions under which their effects vary, provide a more integrated account of how perceived authenticity is formed and translated into consumer outcomes and reveal key theoretical questions for future research. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

Q1. What are the key antecedents that influence customers' perceptions of authenticity in ethnic and cultural restaurant contexts?

Q2. What are the primary attitudinal and behavioral outcomes resulting from customers' perceptions of authenticity in ethnic and cultural restaurant experiences?

Q3. What are the magnitudes (effect sizes) and variability (heterogeneity) of the relationships between perceived authenticity and its antecedents and outcomes, based on existing empirical studies?

Q4. What moderating roles do culture, age and gender play in shaping the relationships between antecedents and perceived authenticity, as well as between perceived authenticity and its outcomes?

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualizations of authenticity

Authenticity is a central yet complex construct in the hospitality and tourism literature. Its multidimensional nature has led scholars to conceptualize it in different ways, particularly in ethnic and cultural restaurant settings (Kovács *et al.*, 2014; Le *et al.*, 2019). Three perspectives have been particularly influential in explaining perceived authenticity in dining experiences: existential authenticity, servicescape-based authenticity and ethnic authenticity.

Wang's (1999) concept of existential authenticity focused on the subjective sense of authenticity experienced by individuals through their activities and experiences. Rather than being determined solely by whether an encountered object is genuine, existential authenticity concerns whether an experience enables individuals to feel more authentic and connected to their sense of self. This perspective therefore highlights the personal and experiential meanings of authenticity. While existential authenticity has also been applied in dining contexts, Wang and Mattila (2013) approached authenticity from a distinct angle, examining how consumers form authenticity judgments before actual consumption. Their servicescape

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perspective conceptualizes authenticity assessment as an inferential process in which consumers use the physical setting, the service providers and other customers as informational cues to determine whether an ethnic restaurant is true to its claimed type or cultural category. This perspective therefore emphasizes how physical and social elements of the restaurant environment jointly shape consumers' perceptions of authenticity. Jang *et al.* (2012), by contrast, focused more specifically on the culturally representative content of ethnic authenticity. They conceptualized ethnic authenticity through the authenticity of food and atmospherics, examining whether concrete dining attributes reflected the distinctive traditions and characteristics of the represented culture. In Korean restaurants, for example, food authenticity was reflected in presentation, taste, side dishes and self-cooking practices.

These perspectives are conceptually distinct but complementary. Existential authenticity explains the personal and self-related experience of authenticity. The servicescape perspective explains how consumers use physical and social cues to form authenticity judgments, whereas ethnic authenticity identifies the culturally specific attributes being evaluated in those judgments. Together, they show that perceived authenticity in dining experiences can emerge from consumers' internal experiences, interpretations of the restaurant environment and evaluations of its cultural representativeness.

While each of the above three perspectives captures a meaningful dimension of authenticity, they were developed within different research traditions and at different levels of specificity. Building on these developments, Le *et al.* (2019) reviewed authenticity research in dining experiences and proposed that the existing literature could be broadly organized into two overarching dimensions: authenticity of the thing and authenticity of the self. This two-dimensional framework offers a more parsimonious structure for integrating these perspectives. Within this framework, studies focusing on external restaurant attributes and cultural representations are generally associated with authenticity of the thing, whereas research on existential authenticity is aligned with authenticity of the self. Following this conceptualization, the present study adopts this distinction as the overarching framework for organizing the antecedents of perceived authenticity.

2.2 Antecedents of perceived authenticity

2.2.1 Authenticity of the thing. Authenticity of the thing refers to the external and tangible attributes that customers observe and evaluate within the restaurant environment (Le *et al.*, 2019). Building on Wang's (1999) constructivist perspective, Le *et al.* (2019) argue that these external restaurant cues do not inherently constitute authenticity; rather, consumers interpret them as evidence of whether a restaurant genuinely represents its claimed cultural identity. Accordingly, food quality, restaurant décor, service quality and branding-related cues provide different but complementary signals from which customers construct authenticity judgments (Kovács *et al.*, 2014; Wang and Mattila, 2013).

2.2.1.1 Food quality and authenticity. Food quality represents a core antecedent of perceived authenticity because it is one of the key external cues through which customers evaluate whether a restaurant genuinely represents its claimed cultural identity (Le *et al.*, 2019). Authentic food is typically associated with culturally congruent ingredients, adherence to traditional recipes and regional origin (Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Tsai and Lu, 2012). These food-related cues communicate the restaurant's commitment to preserving traditional culinary practices and therefore serve as tangible evidence from which customers construct authenticity judgments (Le *et al.*, 2019). Consumers interpret these cues through both their sensory experiences and their cognitive knowledge of traditional cuisine (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Tsai and Lu, 2012). When the food is perceived to faithfully reflect the

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represented cultural heritage, it enhances the credibility of the dining experience and strengthens perceived authenticity (Kim and Jang, 2016; Lu *et al.*, 2015).

2.2.1.2 Restaurant décor and cultural elements. Restaurant décor and cultural elements represent another important external cue through which customers evaluate the authenticity of ethnic and cultural restaurants. These elements include visual aesthetics, interior design, décor, culturally themed tableware, lighting, music and other atmospheric cues that reflect a specific cultural identity (Liu and Mattila, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Together, these tangible environmental cues provide visual and sensory information through which customers construct authenticity judgments. Previous research suggests that culturally appropriate décor and environmental features create an immersive cultural atmosphere, reinforcing customers' perceptions of cultural integrity and emotional engagement (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Jang *et al.*, 2012; Wang and Mattila, 2013). Consequently, customers often rely on these environmental cues when forming their initial authenticity perceptions, even before evaluating other aspects of the dining experience (Kovács *et al.*, 2014).

2.2.1.3 Service quality and authenticity. Following Le *et al.* (2019), customers construct authenticity judgments not only from the restaurant's physical environment but also through interactions with employees during the dining experience. In ethnic and cultural restaurant settings, authentic service involves employees demonstrating appropriate cultural etiquette, language proficiency and cultural knowledge relevant to the restaurant's theme (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Youn and Kim, 2017). Through interpersonal exchanges, cultural dialogues and the genuine representation of cultural practices, employees shape customers' evaluations of whether the dining experience authentically reflects the represented culture (Robinson and Clifford, 2012). Previous research has shown that culturally congruent employee behaviors strengthen authenticity perceptions by creating credible cultural interactions (Kim and Jang, 2016; Lu *et al.*, 2015).

2.2.1.4 Branding-related antecedents. Brand-related factors, including brand image and brand awareness, are important antecedents of perceived authenticity in ethnic and cultural restaurant settings (Lu *et al.*, 2015). A strong and culturally appropriate brand image communicates the restaurant's cultural values and identity, providing customers with symbolic cues from which authenticity judgments are formed (Le *et al.*, 2019; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Because authenticity cannot be directly verified before the dining experience, customers often rely on brand image to anticipate whether the restaurant will provide an authentic ethnic or cultural experience, even before directly engaging with the food or service (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Liu and Mattila, 2015). Similarly, greater brand awareness increases customers' familiarity with and confidence in the restaurant's authenticity claims, thereby reducing uncertainty and reinforcing perceived authenticity (Lu *et al.*, 2015).

2.2.2 Authenticity of the self. Authenticity of the self emphasizes consumers' internal psychological processes through which authenticity is personally experienced and interpreted, including subjective experiences, emotions, motivations and personal characteristics (Le *et al.*, 2019; Wang, 1999). Unlike the authenticity of the thing, which focuses on external restaurant cues, authenticity of the Self highlights how consumers assign personal meaning to those cues based on their individual psychology. Within this dimension, antecedents can be conceptually distinguished into three categories. Affective states reflect consumers' emotional responses during the dining experience, motivational drives explain why consumers seek authentic experiences and individual characteristics represent relatively stable personal attributes that shape how authenticity cues are interpreted and evaluated.

2.2.2.1 Affective states (emotions and feelings). Affective states reflect consumers' emotional responses during the dining experience and constitute an important aspect of

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authenticity of the self (Le *et al.*, 2019; Wang, 1999). Within Le *et al.*'s (2019) authenticity-of-the-self perspective, authenticity arises not only from cultural assessment but also from whether the experience evokes feelings that consumers perceive as genuine and personally meaningful. Positive emotions, nostalgia and experiential intensification can therefore strengthen perceived authenticity by deepening consumers' emotional engagement with the restaurant's cultural environment (Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Wang, 1999). For instance, nostalgia connects the dining experience with personally significant memories, enabling consumers to experience authenticity through continuity with their own past rather than solely through the objective accuracy of the restaurant's cultural presentation (Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Mkono, 2013).

2.2.2.2 Motivational drives. Motivational drives reflect the underlying reasons why consumers seek authentic dining experiences and therefore influence how authenticity is evaluated and appreciated (Le *et al.*, 2019; Wang, 1999). Consumers whose primary motivation is to pursue authenticity actively seek culturally genuine experiences as a means of personal enrichment and identity expression (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Similarly, individuals motivated by the need for uniqueness are more likely to value restaurants that offer distinctive cultural traditions, authentic culinary practices and experiences that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere (Liu and Mattila, 2015). In addition, the need to belong encourages consumers to value dining experiences that foster a sense of cultural connection and community affiliation, thereby enhancing perceptions of authenticity (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Napoli *et al.*, 2014).

2.2.2.3 Individual characteristics. Individual characteristics represent relatively stable personal attributes that shape how consumers interpret and evaluate authenticity cues during the dining experience. Consumers differ in their ability to engage with and interpret cultural experiences, resulting in different authenticity evaluations even when exposed to the same restaurant environment. For example, consumers with greater adaptability are better able to engage with unfamiliar cultural settings, enabling a deeper appreciation of authentic dining experiences (Mkono, 2013). Likewise, lifestyle congruence shapes how consumers interpret authenticity cues, as restaurant experiences that fit naturally with consumers' lifestyles are more readily perceived as genuine and personally relevant (Kim and Jang, 2016; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). Prior cultural knowledge also shapes authenticity evaluations by providing consumers with reference points for judging cultural authenticity. However, existing studies have reported mixed findings, suggesting that greater knowledge may either enhance authenticity perceptions through better cultural understanding or increase critical evaluations of authenticity claims (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2016).

2.3 Outcomes of perceived authenticity

Examining the outcomes of perceived authenticity is crucial for understanding its broader significance in the hospitality industry. Attitudinal outcomes reflect customers' internal evaluations, perceptions and emotional responses arising from authentic dining experiences. These outcomes can be understood through customer experience theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), which posits that organizations create value by staging memorable and emotionally engaging experiences rather than simply delivering products or services. Within ethnic restaurant settings, perceived authenticity enhances the experiential quality of the dining experience by creating culturally meaningful and immersive encounters. Consequently, authenticity shapes customers' overall responses to the dining experience.

Consistent with this perspective, previous research has shown that perceived authenticity enhances customers' experiential value, positive emotion, memorability and overall satisfaction. Authentic dining experiences are perceived as more valuable because they

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provide culturally meaningful encounters that are difficult to replicate in routine dining settings (Kim and Jang, 2016; Tsai and Lu, 2012). They also evoke positive emotion by creating more engaging and personally meaningful experiences, enabling customers to feel more connected to the cuisine and culture represented by the restaurant (Kim *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, authentic experiences are more distinctive and emotionally resonant than routine dining encounters, making them easier to remember and contributing to memorable dining experiences (Kim and Jang, 2016). When these authentic experiences meet or exceed customers' expectations, they also result in higher levels of overall satisfaction (Kim and Jang, 2016; Nunkoo *et al.*, 2025).

Behavioral outcomes extend beyond customers' attitudinal evaluations to encompass their future behavioral intentions and actions toward restaurant brands. Customer-based brand equity theory (Keller, 1993) provides a useful theoretical lens for explaining these behavioral responses. The theory proposes that favorable brand knowledge, including positive brand associations and trust, strengthens customer-based brand equity, which subsequently encourages favorable consumer behaviors. Within ethnic restaurant settings, authentic dining experiences provide credible signals of cultural genuineness, quality and uniqueness, enabling consumers to develop stronger trust in and more favorable associations with the restaurant brand. As perceived authenticity reinforces these positive brand perceptions, customers become more willing to establish and maintain long-term relationships with the restaurant.

Consistent with this perspective, previous research has shown that perceived authenticity positively influences purchase intentions, revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth communication. For example, consumers who perceive restaurants as authentic are more willing to purchase and pay premium prices because authenticity enhances perceptions of quality, uniqueness and value (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Tsai and Lu, 2012). Authentic dining experiences also strengthen customer loyalty and revisit intentions by fulfilling consumers' cultural and emotional expectations and reinforcing their relationship with the restaurant brand (Hwang and Hyun, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2016). Furthermore, authentic experiences are more distinctive, culturally meaningful and emotionally engaging than routine dining encounters, making them more worthy of sharing with others. As a result, customers are more likely to recommend authentic restaurants and communicate their positive experiences, thereby strengthening brand reputation and attracting new customers (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Liu and Mattila, 2015).

2.4 Meta-analysis

A meta-analytic synthesis is valuable for integrating authenticity-related findings across existing studies. Conflicting empirical results across studies examining similar constructs necessitate quantitative aggregation to estimate effect sizes and variability (Borenstein, 2009; Jang *et al.*, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2016). Such inconsistency also limits theoretical understanding of the relative importance of thing- and self-related antecedents, the relative influence of specific antecedents within each category and the strength of authenticity's relationships with different consumer outcomes.

2.5 Moderators

An examination of moderators is essential for understanding how perceptions of authenticity vary across consumer segments. Drawing on Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions theory, cultural values are expected to shape how consumers interpret authenticity in restaurant settings. Consumers from collectivistic cultures tend to value shared traditions, cultural continuity and social harmony, whereas those from individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on personal values, self-expression and unique experiences. Because perceived

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authenticity is based on consumers' interpretations and experiences, the meaning and importance attributed to authenticity are likely to be shaped by consumers' cultural values and beliefs (Jang *et al.*, 2012). For instance, when authenticity is interpreted as a personally meaningful experience, it is more likely to evoke more favorable emotional responses than when it is evaluated primarily in terms of shared cultural or social meanings. Accordingly, culture is expected to serve as an important boundary condition.

Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that age is associated with changes in individuals' motivational priorities through shifts in perceived future time horizons (Carstensen, 1992; Löckenhoff and Carstensen, 2004). According to the theory, as people age and perceive their future time as increasingly limited, they become less motivated by knowledge acquisition, novelty and exploration and instead place greater emphasis on emotionally meaningful experiences and emotional well-being. Applied to the present context, these motivational shifts may influence how consumers evaluate authenticity-related cues. For instance, younger consumers may respond more strongly to novel and immersive restaurant décor and culturally distinctive experiences, whereas older consumers may place greater value on authenticity reflected in familiarity and nostalgia (Kim and Jang, 2016; Liu and Mattila, 2015). Consequently, while younger consumers may perceive authenticity through cues associated with novelty and exploration, older consumers may be more likely to derive emotional meaning and memorable experiences from authenticity rooted in familiarity and tradition (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). These age-related differences suggest that perceived authenticity may be constructed and interpreted differently across age groups.

Gender role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that gender differences in consumer evaluations arise from socially constructed gender roles, which shape individuals' emotional responses, social behaviors and evaluative processes in consumption contexts. According to this theory, women are generally socialized into communal roles that emphasize interpersonal relationships, emotional understanding and social connectedness, whereas men are more often socialized into agentic roles that value independence, task accomplishment and functional performance. These gender role expectations influence the types of information consumers attend to and the criteria they use when evaluating marketplace experiences, including authenticity in dining contexts (Namkung and Jang, 2007; Robinson and Clifford, 2012). Consequently, female consumers may place relatively greater emphasis on emotional, relational and symbolic authenticity cues, whereas male consumers may place relatively greater emphasis on tangible and objective authenticity cues. Accordingly, gender is expected to moderate relationships involving perceived authenticity.

3. Methodology

3.1 Literature search

Consistent with previous review works in leading hospitality and tourism journals (e.g. Lin *et al.*, 2022; Zhu *et al.*, 2023), a comprehensive literature search was undertaken using Google Scholar and EBSCOhost (hospitality and tourism complete). Using both databases helped ensure broad coverage of the relevant literature. EBSCOhost (hospitality and tourism complete) was used primarily to capture studies published in hospitality and tourism journals, whereas Google Scholar was used to identify relevant studies published in disciplines beyond hospitality and tourism. This is important because research on perceived authenticity has also been published in journals relating to marketing, service management, food studies and sustainability. Google Scholar has been recognized as one of the largest and most comprehensive scholarly search tools (Gusenbauer, 2022). The selection of these databases is also supported by previous hospitality and tourism reviews, which have identified EBSCOhost (hospitality and tourism complete) and Google Scholar as among the most frequently used databases (Pahlevan-Sharif *et al.*, 2019).

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The literature search covered studies published through December 2025. In line with the search strategy adopted by Le *et al.* (2019), it combined terms relating to authenticity with restaurant-related terms. The search terms were as follows:

- Terms for authenticity: authentic*; and
- Terms for restaurants: restaurant* OR eatery* OR food establishment* OR food* OR cuisine* OR dining* OR foodservice* OR gastronomy* OR food experience*.

To further enhance the comprehensiveness of the search, backward reference searching and forward citation tracking were conducted on the included studies to identify any additional relevant articles.

3.2 Inclusion criteria

The present review used a two-stage screening process. In the first stage, studies were required to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- to be written in English and published in peer-reviewed academic journals;
- to have been conducted explicitly within restaurant settings; and
- to have examined perceived authenticity in restaurant settings representing ethnic or cultural culinary traditions, including ethnic restaurants, regional restaurants, traditional restaurants, heritage-based restaurants and time-honored restaurants.

In the second stage, more stringent criteria were applied to identify studies eligible for meta-analysis. In addition to the above requirements, studies were required to:

- employ empirical quantitative methods; and
- report statistical relationships relevant to authenticity, such as correlation coefficients or equivalent statistics that could be converted into Pearson's correlation coefficients (r), including standardized regression coefficients, t-values or F-values.

3.3 Paper selection

The literature selection process followed the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility (Page *et al.*, 2021). The initial keyword search across Google Scholar and EBSCOhost yielded 1,350 relevant articles. After removing duplicates and screening titles for relevance based on the inclusion criteria, 437 articles remained for further evaluation.

During abstract screening, the 437 articles were assessed for explicit relevance to cultural authenticity in restaurant contexts, resulting in the exclusion of 223 articles. The remaining 214 underwent full-text screening, during which a further 114 articles were excluded due to insufficient focus on restaurant settings. This process yielded 100 articles eligible for the systematic review (see Supplementary Appendix 1). A subsequent screening step assessed eligibility for the psychometric meta-analysis based on the availability of sufficient statistical information for effect-size computation. Fifty articles did not meet this additional requirement, resulting in 50 articles being included in the quantitative meta-analysis.

3.4 Coding and data extraction

A structured coding manual was developed to extract key information from each selected study. To ensure the accuracy of the coding process, the initial coding was completed by the first author and subsequently checked by the corresponding author, who verified all extracted

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relationships across all samples. The initial agreement rate during the verification process was 90% (235 of 261 relationships). For the remaining 26 discrepancies, both researchers referred back to the original articles to verify the extracted information, discuss any inconsistencies and reach agreement before the final data set was established.

The coding captured bibliographic information (authors, year and journal), methodological characteristics (research design and data collection methods), sample characteristics (sample size and demographics), theoretical frameworks, key constructs and operational definitions, measurement instruments and reported statistical outcomes (e.g. correlation coefficients). Qualitative studies were also coded to extract thematic insights, core arguments and conclusions related to cultural authenticity in restaurant contexts.

Regarding effect-size extraction, Pearson's correlation (r) was used as the primary effect-size metric. When studies reported standardized regression coefficients, these were converted to correlation coefficients using the procedure recommended by Peterson and Brown (2005). For studies reporting t- and F-values, conversion followed the method of Hullett and Levine (2003).

3.5 Meta-analysis

This study used Hunter and Schmidt's (2004) meta-analysis approach, which corrects for sampling and measurement errors to improve the accuracy of effect-size estimates. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) served as the primary metric for synthesizing effect sizes, ensuring consistency and comparability across the included studies. The effect sizes were then adjusted for sampling errors, with correlations weighted by their sample sizes to calculate robust weighted mean correlations. They were subsequently corrected for measurement error using the reported Cronbach's alpha reliability scores. Consistent with practices in existing tourism meta-analyses (e.g. Lim *et al.*, 2024), for studies that did not report Cronbach's alpha coefficients, substitute reliability values were estimated using the frequency-weighted mean reliability derived from the available reliability coefficients for the same construct, following the artifact distribution approach recommended by Hunter and Schmidt (2004). This procedure assumes that the available reliability estimates provide an empirical distribution that can be used to estimate missing reliability information. In total, ten studies required this correction. Finally, the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated to assess the precision of effect size estimates and further evaluate the significance of the synthesized relationships. Considering the potential influence of second-order sampling error on artifact estimates (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004), a minimum criterion of three independent studies ($k \geq 3$) was adopted, in line with previous hospitality and tourism psychometric meta-analyses (e.g. Lim *et al.*, 2024; Zhu *et al.*, 2023).

The homogeneity of effect sizes across studies was assessed using Cochran's Q test, the standard deviation (SDρ) of true-score correlations (ρ) and 80% credibility intervals (80% CR), consistent with established meta-analytic practices (Zhu *et al.*, 2022). Significant heterogeneity suggests the presence of potential moderating variables influencing the observed variability. Subgroup analyses using Z-tests were first conducted to explore potential sources of heterogeneity. The moderating role of culture was examined by classifying studies into Eastern and Western groups, contrasting contexts such as China and India with those such as the USA and the UK. A more fine-grained regional classification was not adopted as it would have resulted in substantially smaller subgroup sizes. The mean effect size was calculated separately for each subgroup and compared using Z-tests to determine whether differences between groups were statistically significant (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004). However, this broad geographical classification may not fully capture cultural variation across individual countries. Therefore, following previous hospitality and

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tourism meta-analyses (Lim and Ok, 2021; Zhu *et al.*, 2023), culture was further examined using meta-regression, with Hofstede's (1984) individualism score treated as a continuous cultural indicator. This two-step approach allowed culture to be assessed at both a broad geographical level and through a continuous national cultural dimension.

Meta-regression was conducted to examine continuous moderators. Cultural context was operationalized using Hofstede's (1984) individualism score. Although Hofstede's framework comprises six cultural dimensions, only individualism–collectivism was included as the cultural moderator in this study. Perceived authenticity reflects not only objective authenticity cues but also how consumers assign meaning to those cues. As individualism–collectivism reflects the extent to which authenticity cues are evaluated against personal values versus shared social norms, it was considered the most appropriate cultural dimension for the present analysis. This approach is also consistent with prior cross-cultural and marketing meta-analyses, which have similarly focused on individualism–collectivism because it is the most established and empirically robust cultural dimension in the literature (Akarsu *et al.*, 2024). Finally, selecting the cultural dimension that is theoretically most proximal to perceived authenticity allows for a more parsimonious moderator analysis while avoiding conceptual redundancy across Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Age was coded as the mean age of participants reported in each study. When mean age was not reported, it was estimated using the midpoint of each reported age range weighted by the corresponding frequencies, following previous meta-analytic studies (e.g. Lim *et al.*, 2024). Gender was represented by the proportion of male participants. These continuous moderators were then entered into the meta-regression model to examine their effects on the observed effect sizes.

4. Results

4.1 Sample characteristics

Figure 1 displays the cumulative number of published studies over time. From 2001 to 2010, only a small number of studies were published. However, publication activity increased steadily thereafter, with particularly rapid growth from 2019 to 2025. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the included studies.

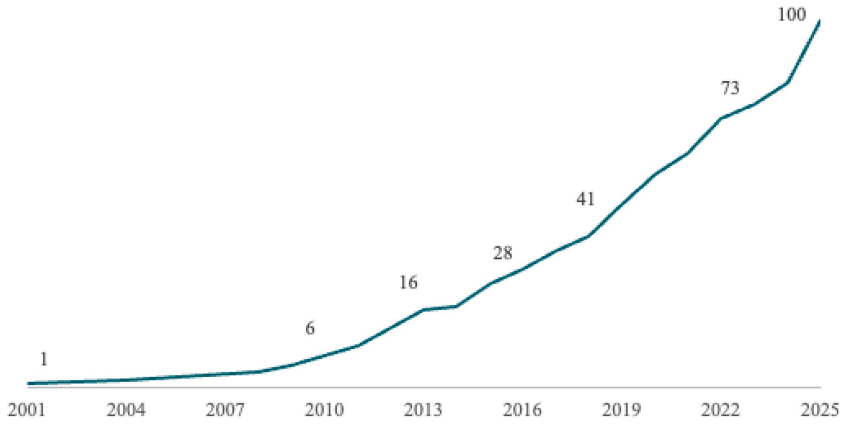


Figure 1. Cumulative number of articles by year

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Table 1. Sample description

Aspects	No. of studies	Percentages of studies (%)
Journal		
Hospitality and tourism	67	67
Nonhospitality and tourism	33	33
Top three published journals		
International Journal of Hospitality Management	18	18
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	11	11
Sustainability	5	5
Frequently examined regions (26 different regions)		
USA	27	27
China	20	20
Australia	6	6
UK	6	6
India	4	4
Frequently used measurement scales		
Robinson and Clifford (2012)	4	4
Jang *et al.* (2012)	4	4
Kim *et al.* (2020)	3	3
Wang and Mattila (2013)	3	3
Frequently used theories		
Authenticity theory	17	17
Constructivist authenticity theory	6	6
SOR theory	6	6
Research design		
Quantitative (cross-sectional)	43	43
Quantitative (experiment)	21	21
Qualitative (case study)	15	15
Qualitative (interview)	7	7
Mixed-methods	8	8
Conceptual paper	3	3
Review	3	3

Source(s): Authors' own work

Overall, the literature was concentrated in hospitality and tourism journals, with the USA and China accounting for the largest geographical shares. Quantitative approaches predominated, particularly cross-sectional research, although experimental and qualitative designs were also represented. Several recurring authenticity measures were identified, particularly those developed by Robinson and Clifford (2012), Jang *et al.* (2012), Kim *et al.* (2020) and Wang and Mattila (2013). Detailed publication, geographical, theoretical, measurement and methodological characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Figure 2 presents a grouped overview of the antecedents and outcomes examined across the included studies. Variables are categorized according to the study's conceptual framework, distinguishing among authenticity of the thing, authenticity of the self, attitudinal outcomes and behavioral outcomes. Variables shown in bold meet the minimum threshold ($k \geq 3$) required for inclusion in the psychometric meta-analysis.

Figure 3 illustrates publication trends across Eastern and Western regions by publication year. Publication activity was limited in both regions during the early 2000s but increased

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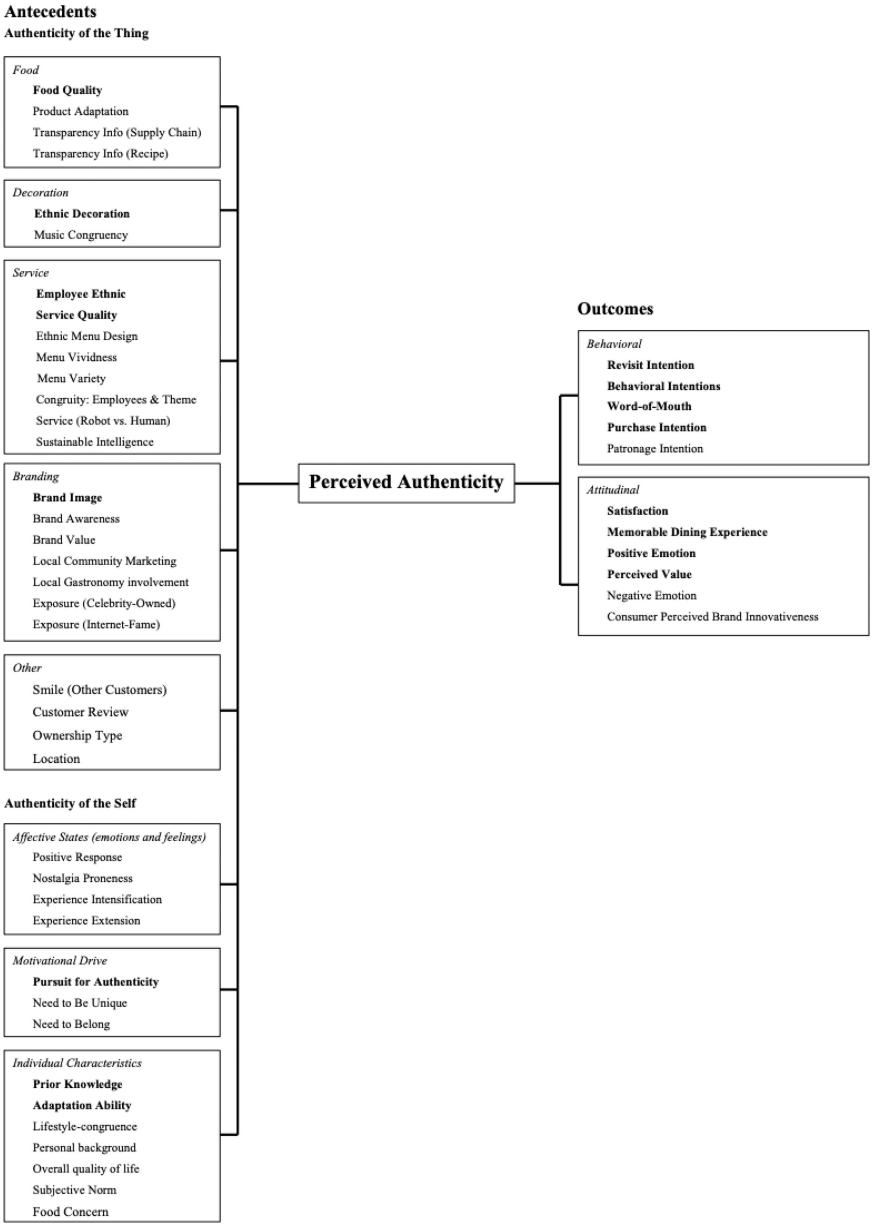


Figure 2. Grouped structure of antecedents and outcomes of perceived authenticity

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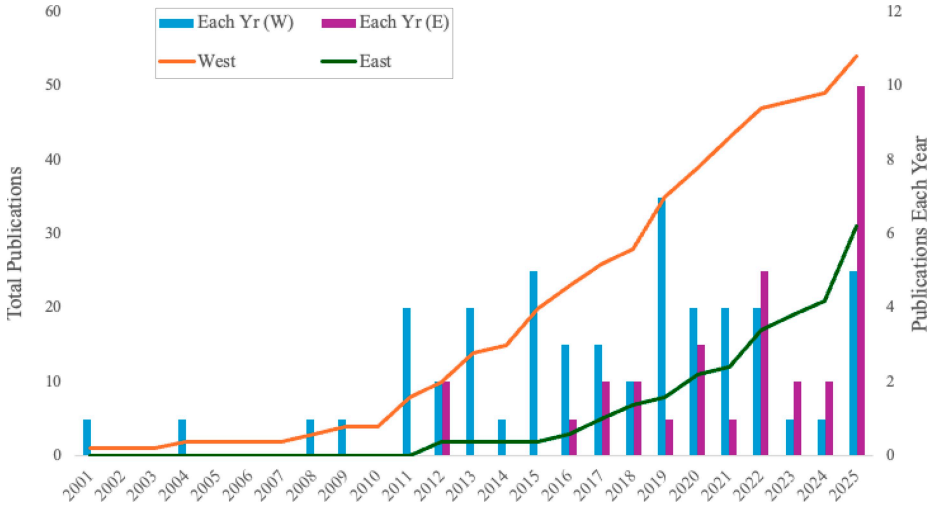


Figure 3. Annual and cumulative publication trends by region (East vs West), 2001–2025
Source: Authors' own work

steadily after 2010, particularly within Western contexts. Overall, studies conducted in Western regions accounted for the larger share of publications.

Figure 4 compares methodological approaches across Eastern and Western studies. Quantitative cross-sectional designs were the most common in both regions. Experimental designs were more frequently used in Western contexts, while qualitative methods, including case studies and interviews, were also more prevalent in Western research.

4.2 Psychometric meta-analysis

4.2.1 Antecedents of perceived authenticity. 4.2.1.1 Authenticity of the thing. Antecedents categorized under authenticity of the thing encompassed observable and contextual elements of the restaurant environment, including branding, décor, food and service-related features (see Table 2). These were generally associated with moderate-to-strong effects on perceived authenticity. Brand image emerged as the most influential factor in this category, showing a corrected effect size of $\rho = 0.66$ (95% CI: [0.61, 0.71]) with significant Q-statistics ($p < 0.001$).

Ethnic decoration, as a visual cue of cultural authenticity, showed a strong association ($\rho = 0.56$, 95% CI: [0.53, 0.59]). Food quality had a robust effect on culinary authenticity ($\rho = 0.62$, 95% CI [0.59, 0.65]). Service-related cues yielded more moderate effects (Service quality; $\rho = 0.54$, 95% CI [0.52, 0.58]), while employee ethnicity, the perceived match between staff and the restaurant's cultural theme, had a weaker effect ($\rho = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.40]).

4.2.1.2 Authenticity of the self. Antecedents associated with authenticity of the self reflect consumers' internal dispositions, capabilities and motivations that shape their personal engagement with authenticity. These include psychological characteristics such as adaptability, knowledge and the desire to seek authentic experiences. Adaptability was found to have a moderately strong effect on perceived authenticity ($\rho = 0.45$, 95% CI: [0.40, 0.49]).

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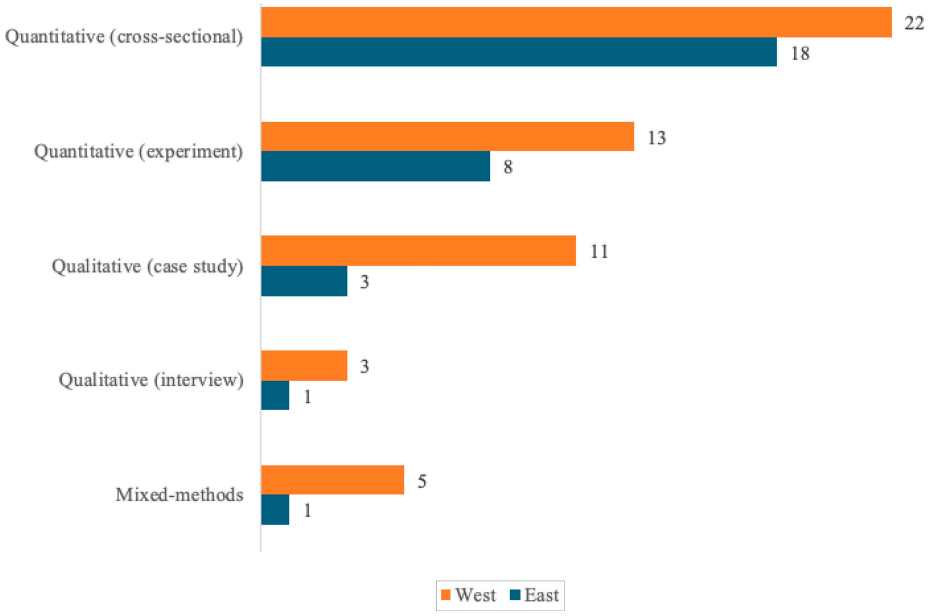


Figure 4. Comparative use of research methodologies in Western and Eastern studies
Source: Authors' own work

By contrast, prior knowledge showed a near-zero and nonsignificant effect ($\rho = 0.06$, 95% CI: [–0.01, 0.13]), derived from five studies ($n = 1{,}301$) and exhibited significant heterogeneity ($Q = 149$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding motivational traits, pursuit for authenticity demonstrated a moderately strong relationship with perceived authenticity ($\rho = 0.40$, 95% CI: [0.34, 0.46]).

4.2.2 Outcomes for perceived authenticity. For attitudinal outcomes, positive emotion, representing customers' emotional responses to authentic dining experiences, exhibited the strongest association with perceived authenticity ($\rho = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.64, 0.69]). Memorable dining experiences also showed a strong relationship ($\rho = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.56, 0.63]).

Perceived value was examined in five studies and yielded a corrected effect size of $\rho = 0.55$ (95% CI [0.52, 0.59]). Satisfaction showed a moderate to strong effect ($\rho = 0.54$, 95% CI: [0.51, 0.55]). The credibility interval was broad (0.24–0.83) and the Q-statistic was high ($Q = 506$, $p < 0.001$).

The behavioral consequences of perceived authenticity were robust. Purchase intention showed a corrected effect size of $\rho = 0.58$ (95% CI [0.55, 0.62]). Behavioral intentions, a construct often encompassing loyalty and repurchase behavior, were examined across eight studies, yielding $\rho = 0.56$ (95% CI [0.54, 0.60]). Word-of-mouth (WOM) showed a similarly strong corrected correlation ($\rho = 0.59$), based on five studies. Revisit intention demonstrated a relatively weaker effect among behavioral outcomes ($\rho = 0.49$, 95% CI [0.47, 0.51]).

4.3 Moderation analysis

4.3.1 Culture. 4.3.1.1 Subgroup analysis (Z-test). Subgroup analysis comparing Eastern and Western cultural contexts revealed some variation in effect sizes across regions

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Table 2. Meta-analysis results

Factors	K	N	r	ρ	SD ρ	95% CI	80% CR	Q
Antecedents								
Authenticity of the thing								
Branding								
• Brand image	3	1,076	0.55	0.66	0.18	[0.61, 0.71]	[0.43, 0.89]	53***
Decoration								
• Ethnic decoration	9	3,448	0.50	0.56	0.20	[0.53, 0.59]	[0.31, 0.81]	196***
Food								
• Food quality	7	2,678	0.56	0.62	0.14	[0.59, 0.65]	[0.45, 0.80]	93***
Service								
• Employee ethnicity	7	2,603	0.32	0.36	0.17	[0.32, 0.40]	[0.15, 0.56]	73***
• Service quality	9	3,209	0.48	0.54	0.22	[0.52, 0.58]	[0.27, 0.83]	215***
Authenticity of the self								
Individual characteristics								
• Adaptability	3	1,238	0.44	0.45	0.04	[0.40, 0.49]	[0.44, 0.45]	2
• Prior knowledge	5	1,301	0.05	0.06	0.43	[−0.01, 0.13]	[−0.48, 0.59]	149***
Motivational drives								
• Pursuit for authenticity	3	728	0.40	0.40	0.12	[0.34, 0.46]	[0.26, 0.54]	16***
Outcomes								
Attitudinal								
Perceived value	5	2,425	0.49	0.55	0.05	[0.52, 0.59]	[0.52, 0.59]	7
Memorable dining experience	9	2,968	0.53	0.59	0.19	[0.56, 0.63]	[0.37, 0.83]	155***
Positive emotion	7	2,821	0.59	0.67	0.07	[0.64, 0.69]	[0.59, 0.74]	24***
Satisfaction	16	6,913	0.48	0.54	0.23	[0.51, 0.55]	[0.24, 0.83]	506***
Behavioral								
Behavioral intentions	8	3,162	0.51	0.56	0.15	[0.54, 0.60]	[0.38, 0.76]	112***
Purchase intention	6	2,383	0.51	0.58	0.22	[0.55, 0.62]	[0.30, 0.87]	172***
Revisit intention	18	7,696	0.44	0.49	0.23	[0.47, 0.51]	[0.20, 0.78]	494***
WOM	5	1,967	0.51	0.59	0.22	[0.55, 0.63]	[0.31, 0.86]	133***

Note(s): *K = number of studies, n = cumulative sample size, r = mean correlation, ρ = average corrected correlation, $SD\rho$ = standard deviation of ρ, CI = confidence interval, CR = credibility interval, Q = Q-statistic, ***$p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

(see Table 3). For attitudinal outcomes, the effect of perceived authenticity on positive emotion was stronger in Western ($\rho = 0.70$) than in Eastern contexts ($\rho = 0.64$) and the subgroup difference was statistically significant ($Z = -1.96$, $p < 0.05$). Further meta-regression using Hofstede's individualism index as a continuous moderator confirmed this significant cultural moderation effect. The relationship between perceived authenticity and positive emotion increased with higher individualism scores ($\beta = 0.702$, $p = 0.033$).

4.3.2 Age. Meta-regression analysis was conducted using participants' mean age to assess its potential moderating influence on the relationships between antecedents and perceived authenticity, as well as between perceived authenticity and its outcomes (see Table 4). Among the outcomes, a statistically significant effect was found for memorable dining experience ($\beta = 0.712$, $p = 0.010$), indicating that the authenticity–memorable dining experience relationship was stronger in studies with older samples.

4.3.3 Gender. As shown in Table 5, the relationship between employee ethnicity and perceived authenticity was significantly moderated by gender ($\beta = -0.724$, $p = 0.022$), indicating that the relationship between employee ethnicity and perceived authenticity was stronger in studies with a higher proportion of female participants.

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Table 3. Subgroup analysis: national cultures (Eastern vs Western) as a moderator

Relationships	K	N	r	ρ	SD ρ	95% CI	80% CR	Z
Antecedents								
Decoration								
Ethnic decoration								0.69
• Eastern	6	2,176	0.52	0.59	0.19	[0.56, 0.63]	[0.34, 0.84]	
• Western	3	1,272	0.46	0.51	0.24	[0.46, 0.56]	[0.20, 0.82]	
Food								
Food quality								1.22
• Eastern	4	1,541	0.58	0.65	0.17	[0.61, 0.69]	[0.43, 0.88]	
• Western	3	1,137	0.52	0.58	0.09	[0.53, 0.63]	[0.47, 0.68]	
Service								
Employee ethnicity								−0.88
• Eastern	4	1,654	0.29	0.32	0.21	[0.27, 0.36]	[0.05, 0.57]	
• Western	3	949	0.37	0.40	0.09	[0.34, 0.46]	[0.30, 0.50]	
Outcomes								
Attitudinal								
Memorable dining experience								−0.52
• Eastern	3	776	0.44	0.51	0.27	[0.44, 0.57]	[0.17, 0.85]	
• Western	6	2,192	0.56	0.63	0.15	[0.59, 0.66]	[0.43, 0.82]	
Positive emotion								−1.96*
• Eastern	4	1,545	0.57	0.64	0.03	[0.60, 0.68]	[0.64, 0.64]	
• Western	3	1,276	0.62	0.70	0.10	[0.66, 0.74]	[0.58, 0.82]	
Satisfaction								0.15
• Eastern	6	2,396	0.47	0.52	0.22	[0.48, 0.55]	[0.24, 0.80]	
• Western	10	4,517	0.48	0.54	0.25	[0.51, 0.56]	[0.23, 0.86]	
Behavioral								
Purchase intention								1.31
• Eastern	3	1,465	0.56	0.62	0.16	[0.59, 0.67]	[0.42, 0.83]	
• Western	3	918	0.44	0.52	0.33	[0.46, 0.58]	[0.09, 0.95]	
Revisit intention								0.06
• Eastern	10	4,158	0.47	0.52	0.23	[0.49, 0.55]	[0.23, 0.82]	
• Western	8	3,538	0.39	0.44	0.23	[0.41, 0.47]	[0.14, 0.73]	

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$
Source(s): Authors' own work

5. Discussion

Addressing the four research questions, this study provides the first comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis of perceived authenticity in ethnic and cultural restaurant settings by systematically reviewing 100 qualitative and quantitative studies and quantitatively synthesizing evidence from 50 studies. In response to *RQ1* and *RQ2*, this study provides the first comprehensive synthesis of both the antecedents and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of perceived authenticity in restaurant contexts while documenting the theoretical foundations, measurement approaches, research designs and publication trends of this research stream. In response to *RQ3*, Hunter and Schmidt's (2004) psychometric meta-analysis corrects for sampling error and measurement unreliability, providing more accurate effect size estimates. Addressing *RQ4*, the moderator analyses further identify culture, age and gender as important boundary conditions shaping the strength of authenticity relationships. Collectively, these findings provide a robust empirical foundation for understanding perceived authenticity in restaurant settings. Building on these overarching

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Table 4. Meta-regression for age

Relations	K	N	B	SE	β	p-value
Antecedents						
Authenticity of the thing						
Branding						
• Brand image → authenticity	3	1,076	0.011	0.049	0.217	0.824
Decoration						
• Ethnic decoration → authenticity	9	3,448	0.011	0.009	0.411	0.235
Food						
• Food quality → Authenticity	6	2,432	−0.013	0.014	−0.445	0.337
Service						
• Employee ethnicity → Authenticity	7	2,603	0.009	0.009	0.421	0.295
• Service quality → Authenticity	8	2,963	−0.017	0.012	−0.504	0.137
Authenticity of the self						
Individual characteristics						
• Adaptability → Authenticity	3	1,238	−0.008	0.015	−0.460	0.605
• Prior knowledge → Authenticity	5	1,301	0.004	0.018	0.150	0.804
Motivational drives						
• Pursuit for authenticity → Authenticity	3	728	0.024	0.021	0.752	0.255
Outcomes						
Attitudinal						
Authenticity → Perceived value	3	1,451	0.007	0.007	0.774	0.284
Authenticity → Memorable dining experience	8	2,722	0.028	0.011	0.712	0.010*
Authenticity → Positive emotion	6	2,521	0.004	0.005	0.372	0.435
Authenticity → Satisfaction	11	4,808	0.019	0.021	0.279	0.360
Behavioral						
Authenticity → Behavioral intentions	6	2,502	−0.002	0.003	−0.280	0.561
Authenticity → Purchase intention	5	1,937	−0.014	0.015	−0.451	0.364
Authenticity → Revisit intention	14	6,043	−0.010	0.012	−0.221	0.412
Authenticity → WOM	4	1,368	−0.026	0.082	−0.201	0.750

Note(s): K = number of studies; n = cumulative sample size; B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; *$p < 0.05$
Source(s): Authors' own work

findings, the following sections discuss the key theoretical implications, future research directions and practical implications arising from the present review.

5.1 Theoretical implications

Building on Le *et al.*'s (2019) distinction between authenticity of the thing and authenticity of the Self, the meta-analysis clarifies the relative empirical roles of these two domains in restaurant settings. The strongest antecedents were concentrated within authenticity of the Thing, whereas self-related antecedents generally showed weaker effects. Restaurant authenticity is embedded in a multisensory dining experience, in which consumers evaluate the combined configuration of food, physical surroundings and social servicescape cues (Chua *et al.*, 2025). These observable elements provide immediate evidence of whether the restaurant coherently represents its claimed cultural identity. By comparison, although self-related characteristics, such as authenticity-seeking and adaptability, may also influence perceived authenticity, they appear to play an additional role in shaping how consumers appreciate authenticity cues presented by the restaurant (Antón *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the present findings empirically refine Le *et al.*'s (2019) framework by indicating that

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Table 5. Meta-regression for gender

Relationships	K	N	B	SE	β	*p*-value
Antecedents						
Authenticity of the thing						
Branding						
• Brand image → Authenticity	3	1,076	−0.027	0.053	−0.450	0.614
Decoration						
• Ethnic decoration → Authenticity	9	3,448	−0.010	0.011	−0.334	0.356
Food						
• Food quality → Authenticity	7	2,678	−0.006	0.016	−0.176	0.689
Service						
• Employee ethnicity → Authenticity	7	2,603	−0.017	0.008	−0.724	0.022*
• Service quality → Authenticity	9	3,209	−0.010	0.011	−0.340	0.324
Authenticity of the self						
Individual characteristics						
• Adaptability → Authenticity	3	1,238	−0.007	0.021	−0.329	0.727
• Prior knowledge → Authenticity	5	1,301	−0.018	0.016	−0.536	0.256
Motivation drives						
• Pursuit for authenticity → Authenticity	3	728	0.038	0.052	0.588	0.468
Outcomes						
Attitudinal						
Authenticity → Perceived value	4	1,826	−0.009	0.006	−0.736	0.121
Authenticity → Memorable dining experience	9	2,968	0.024	0.016	0.458	0.145
Authenticity → Positive emotion	7	2,821	−0.003	0.006	−0.252	0.552
Authenticity → Satisfaction	15	6,314	−0.010	0.014	−0.180	0.488
Behavioral						
Authenticity → Behavioral intentions	7	2,802	−0.001	0.003	−0.156	0.724
Authenticity → Purchase intention	6	2,383	−0.007	0.015	−0.215	0.639
Authenticity → Revisit intention	16	6,737	0.009	0.009	0.268	0.288
Authenticity → WOM	4	1,368	−0.019	0.033	−0.383	0.555

Note(s): *K* = number of studies; *n* = cumulative sample size; *B* = unstandardized coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; *$p < 0.05$
Source(s): Authors' own work

authenticity of the Thing provides a more proximal experiential basis for authenticity judgments, while authenticity of the self may have a more distal and context-dependent role. However, future research could examine whether the stronger role of authenticity of the thing enables carefully staged cultural cues to create convincing authenticity perceptions and whether authenticity of the self can still sustain an authentic experience when certain cues are absent or culturally inaccurate.

A second theoretical insight arises from the variation among antecedents within authenticity of the thing. Overall, the observed pattern is broadly consistent with constructivist authenticity theory, suggesting that consumers rely on culturally meaningful cues to construct authenticity (Wang, 1999). In particular, the robust associations of food quality, brand image and ethnic décor indicate that authenticity judgments are strongly grounded in attributes that embody or represent a restaurant's cultural identity. Such cues need not always be prominent features of the dining experience; even subtle cultural signals, such as the typography and layout of restaurant signage, can shape authenticity judgments (Song *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, the relative strength of these relationships provides additional theoretical insights. Food quality appears to exert a stronger influence than décor

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and service because it constitutes the core object of consumption through which culinary traditions are directly experienced (Kim *et al.*, 2017), whereas décor and service provide supporting contextual cues for interpreting that experience. This pattern can be explained using cue utilization theory (Olson and Jacoby, 1972), which suggests that consumers assign greater weight to cues perceived to be more diagnostic when evaluating intangible attributes (Wen *et al.*, 2020). However, the influence of these attributes may not solely reflect their cultural meanings. Expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) suggests that consumers evaluate experiences against prior expectations, implying that food quality, brand image and décor may shape perceived authenticity not only as authenticity-specific cues but also as primary evaluative cues. Future research can compare the psychological mechanisms through which different restaurant attributes influence perceived authenticity, clarifying whether they operate primarily through authenticity-specific pathways, broader evaluative pathways or both.

A third theoretical insight concerns the contingent role of antecedents within authenticity of the self. Their comparatively weaker bivariate associations do not necessarily indicate lower theoretical importance. Rather, these psychological characteristics are more likely to shape how consumers interpret and respond to authenticity cues provided by the restaurant, suggesting that their effects are often indirect or context-dependent rather than direct. The near-zero association between prior knowledge and perceived authenticity is particularly revealing. Schema theory (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987) suggests that prior knowledge provides cognitive structures that facilitate the recognition and interpretation of culturally congruent food, décor and service cues (Liu *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, assimilation–contrast theory (Sherif and Hovland, 1961) proposes that knowledgeable consumers apply clearer and more demanding standards, making adapted, commercialized or culturally inconsistent cues more likely to reduce authenticity perceptions (Song *et al.*, 2019). Prior knowledge may therefore operate as a positive moderator when restaurant cues conform to consumers' cultural schemas, but as a negative moderator when those cues appear adapted, commercialized or inconsistent with prior expectations. These opposing contingent effects may offset one another, resulting in a negligible overall relationship, while leaving prior knowledge theoretically important. Future research could model prior knowledge and other self-related characteristics as moderators of specific external authenticity cues and identify the conditions under which they amplify or attenuate perceived authenticity.

Moreover, previous review studies have primarily focused on identifying the antecedents of perceived authenticity, with less attention to its outcomes or to whether authenticity exerts stronger influences on some consumer outcomes than others (Le *et al.*, 2019). By quantitatively synthesizing authenticity outcomes within a single analytical framework, the present study demonstrates that perceived authenticity shows the strongest associations with positive emotion, followed by memorable dining experiences, behavioral intentions and satisfaction. This pattern extends customer experience theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) by suggesting that authenticity primarily creates value as an experiential stimulus. Consistent with research showing that restaurant experiential cues shape customers' emotions and subsequent evaluations (Im and Seo, 2024), authentic experiences may first evoke emotional responses by fulfilling consumers' needs for cultural connection, meaning and self-congruence before becoming reflected in satisfaction and behavioral outcomes (Kim *et al.*, 2017). Future research could compare authenticity with other restaurant attributes, such as novelty, luxury or convenience, to determine whether authenticity exerts a stronger influence on specific consumer outcomes than these alternative sources of customer value.

The moderator analyses further extend authenticity theory by exploiting a key advantage of meta-analysis: the ability to test whether between-study characteristics systematically

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explain variation in effect sizes. Culture, age and gender are often treated as background characteristics or statistical controls, yet the present findings show that they can alter both the formation of perceived authenticity and its consequences. Cultural individualism strengthens the relationship between perceived authenticity and positive emotion, extending the application of Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions framework to authenticity research by showing that individualism-collectivism shapes the extent to which perceived authenticity is translated into positive emotional responses. In individualistic contexts, authenticity more readily affirms personal values and self-expression; in collectivistic contexts, its emotional significance may be filtered through shared traditions and social appropriateness.

The age moderation indicates that the authenticity-memorability relationship tends to be stronger in studies with older samples. This pattern is broadly consistent with socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992), which links age composition to differences in the relative importance of emotionally meaningful versus novelty-oriented experiences. Accordingly, samples characterized by a higher mean age may show a stronger association between authenticity and memorability because authentic dining experiences often carry emotional and cultural meaning, whereas this association may be less pronounced in samples with a lower mean age, where novelty and exploration may represent more salient sources of memorability (Löckenhoff and Carstensen, 2004; Seyfi *et al.*, 2024). Gender, however, moderates the relationship between employee ethnicity and perceived authenticity, with a stronger association observed in studies with a higher proportion of female participants. This finding is in line with gender role theory, suggesting that differences in sample gender composition may be associated with the importance attached to interpersonal authenticity cues (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015). Employee ethnicity therefore appears to function as a more influential interpersonal authenticity cue in samples with greater female representation. Future research can therefore use cultural and demographic variables as theoretically specified moderators, testing whether they influence the construction of authenticity, its downstream effects or both, rather than routinely including them only as controls.

5.2 Directions for future empirical research

The present review indicates sustained growth in restaurant authenticity research but also reveals a notable methodological imbalance: studies conducted in Eastern contexts have relied more heavily on quantitative cross-sectional designs, whereas Western research has used a broader range of methodologies. Greater methodological diversity may be particularly valuable for unpacking the authenticity paradox, whereby culturally adapted or staged experiences can still be perceived as authentic (MacCannell, 1973). Qualitative research could first explore how consumers distinguish acceptable adaptation from a loss of authenticity, particularly which cultural elements they regard as essential, and why. These insights could then inform experiments that systematically vary the degree of adaptation, for example, comparing culturally faithful, locally adapted and deliberately staged experiences, to identify when adaptation begins to undermine perceived authenticity. Such a sequential approach would help reveal not only whether adaptation matters, but where consumers draw the boundary of authenticity and what drives that boundary. Recent evidence showing that consumers can respond favorably to deliberately recreated cultural experiences further demonstrates the relevance of this question (Gardiner *et al.*, 2022).

The widespread reliance on cross-sectional designs leaves an important temporal question unresolved:

Q1. When does perceived authenticity actually begin to form?

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This question is increasingly relevant as consumers encounter cultural and experiential information online before visiting a restaurant, and recent research shows that authenticity perceptions can already be shaped within digital environments (Dong *et al.*, 2023). Future research could therefore trace authenticity perceptions from online pre-exposure through the actual dining experience and subsequent visits, examining how these perceptions evolve and eventually stabilize over time. Longitudinal designs would be particularly useful for revealing this developmental trajectory and determining whether perceived authenticity represents a relatively stable judgment established early in the consumer experience or continues to be reconstructed as consumers accumulate direct experience. Experimental studies could further manipulate consumers' pre-consumption information before exposing them to the same dining experience to examine whether digital exposure changes how subsequent authenticity cues are interpreted, and, more fundamentally, the standards against which authenticity is judged (Zhang and Chen, 2024).

Several theoretically relevant relationships were unable to be meta-analyzed because the available evidence remains sparse ($k < 3$); these include music congruency and patronage intention, highlighting specific areas where further empirical evidence is still needed. More importantly, the near-zero average relationship between prior knowledge and perceived authenticity calls for reconsideration of how self-related characteristics are positioned within authenticity frameworks. Rather than assuming that prior knowledge, cultural familiarity, food neophobia or adaptability directly determine authenticity perceptions, future research could examine whether these characteristics change how consumers interpret external authenticity cues. Food neophobia provides an interesting example because unfamiliarity may create a tension in authenticity evaluations. Culturally unfamiliar food cues can strengthen perceived authenticity, yet the same unfamiliarity may also evoke negative responses among consumers who are reluctant to try unfamiliar foods (Kim *et al.*, 2017). A highly traditional dish may therefore provide a strong authenticity signal without being equally appealing to all consumers. This possibility opens a broader avenue for examining whether self-related characteristics complement their direct effects by shaping when and for whom external authenticity cues translate into perceived authenticity.

Another question is whether authenticity represents simply another favorable restaurant attribute, or a qualitatively different source of customer value. Service quality, luxury and novelty indicate whether an experience is well delivered, prestigious or new, whereas authenticity may give the experience cultural and symbolic meaning beyond these conventional evaluations (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). This distinction is relevant because authenticity has been closely associated with the creation of memorable experiences in ethnic restaurant settings (Kim and Jang, 2016). The meta-analysis findings show that perceived authenticity was most strongly associated with positive emotion, followed by memorable dining experiences and that comparatively weaker associations were observed for satisfaction and behavioral outcomes. Future research could therefore test whether authenticity can create strong emotional or memorable experiences even when other restaurant attributes are less favorable, and whether superior service or luxury can compensate when authenticity is weak. Such comparisons would help establish whether authenticity is substitutable with other sources of customer value or contributes something qualitatively different to the dining experience.

Another direction is to examine whether the apparent dominance of authenticity of the Thing reflects its theoretical importance or, in part, how authenticity has typically been measured. Existing measures operationalize authenticity with somewhat different emphases, ranging from the perceived cultural authenticity of food and atmosphere to broader judgments of the authenticity of the restaurant experience (Jang *et al.*, 2012; Kim *et al.*,

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2020; Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Wang and Mattila, 2013). Nevertheless, these measures predominantly capture authenticity in relation to the thing, rather than the self. This measurement emphasis may partly contribute to the stronger associations observed for thing-related antecedents in the meta-analysis. Future research could develop and apply measures that give greater attention to authenticity of the self and examine whether the relative importance of thing and self remains when both dimensions are more equally represented. This would also help clarify a more fundamental question:

Q2. does objective authenticity matter for consumer responses beyond what consumers themselves perceive as authentic?

5.3 Practical implications

The findings offer clear guidance for restaurant managers seeking to build authenticity as a strategic marketing resource. Food quality and brand image emerge as the most influential antecedents within the authenticity of the thing, indicating that operators should prioritize culturally accurate flavors, ingredient integrity and authentic preparation methods, while communicating these credibly through menus and brand touchpoints (Ryu and Han, 2010). Restaurants should develop coherent brand narratives conveying cultural heritage and provenance, as brand storytelling can strengthen authenticity perceptions and deepen emotional engagement. Restaurants can further strengthen these narratives by working with local chefs, food producers and cultural representatives to bring culinary traditions into the dining experience, making their cultural stories more tangible and credible (Rashidin *et al.*, 2026).

Décor also showed a strong association with perceived authenticity. Restaurants could make culturally distinctive preparation practices part of the visible dining environment, turning activities such as traditional cooking or craftsmanship into a "living" servicescape. Authentic objects, reclaimed materials or well-preserved imperfections from traditional dining settings can similarly create a stronger sense of provenance than newly manufactured ethnic decoration. Restaurants could also make the origins of culturally important ingredients visible within the servicescape (Home *et al.*, 2020), connecting the physical setting with where and how the food is produced. Together, these practices can make authenticity more tangible.

Self-related characteristics showed weaker direct relationships with perceived authenticity, but may still shape how consumers engage with authenticity offerings (Ebster and Guist, 2005). As these characteristics are difficult to observe, restaurants can allow customers to reveal their preferences through self-selection. For example, alongside regular dining, customers could opt for chef's-table or curated tasting experiences that provide deeper cultural immersion, while booking or ordering systems could offer "first-time explorer" and more culturally focused options depending on customers' familiarity and interest. Restaurants could also retain customers' previously selected experiences or preferences for future visits. Such practices accommodate differences in cultural familiarity and authenticity-seeking without psychological profiling, while helping customers engage with authenticity in ways that enhance their own perceptions of authenticity.

Perceived authenticity exhibited robust relationships with positive emotion, memorable dining experiences, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. These findings suggest that managers should view authenticity not simply as a favorable customer evaluation, but as a resource for creating emotionally engaging and memorable experiences. Restaurants can make cultural experiences more participatory, for example, by inviting customers to observe or take part in selected traditional food preparation, cultural rituals or other hands-on

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activities (Antón *et al.*, 2019). Digital tools, such as short videos, augmented reality or metaverse experiences, can further bring cultural stories and traditions to life where direct participation is less feasible, while also stimulating consumers' mental imagery and enriching their experience (Chang *et al.*, 2025). By making authenticity something customers actively experience and remember, restaurants can strengthen its emotional and experiential value, while potentially contributing to more distal behavioral outcomes, such as revisit intentions and positive word of mouth.

The moderation findings further highlight the value of market-sensitive authenticity strategies. In individualistic contexts, restaurants may emphasize personal meaning, uniqueness and customizable experiences, whereas in collectivistic contexts, managers may promote shared dining rituals, communal formats and group-oriented cultural narratives (Hofstede, 1984; Liu and Mattila, 2015). Given the age-related moderation pattern, operators should design experiences that enhance emotional meaning and memorability for older diners, recognizing that authenticity may carry greater experiential weight for this segment (Carstensen, 1992). Finally, the moderation analysis showed that gender influenced the relationship between employee ethnicity and perceived authenticity, with this relationship being stronger in studies with a higher proportion of female participants. This finding highlights the potential relevance of interpersonal interactions in communicating cultural authenticity (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015). Restaurants can strengthen this aspect of the experience through staff training, for example, by equipping employees with the cultural knowledge needed to explain the origins of dishes, traditional preparation and dining practices or the meaning of unfamiliar ingredients. As hospitality becomes increasingly technology-enabled, preserving such culturally meaningful human touchpoints may help maintain the relational value of authentic experiences (Xing and Zhang, 2026). Such interactions can make cultural authenticity more visible and meaningful to customers without requiring managers to identify or target customers by gender.

5.4 Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First, the evidence base is concentrated in a small number of regions, particularly the USA and China, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Second, the predominance of cross-sectional designs constrains causal inference and restricts insight into the temporal dynamics of authenticity perceptions (Maxwell and Cole, 2007).

Third, several potentially important variables could not be meta-analyzed due to insufficient empirical observations, such as music congruence and patronage intention, underscoring the need for targeted primary research. Some relationships were based on relatively small numbers of primary studies (e.g. $k = 3$), which may increase susceptibility to second-order sampling error (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004), particularly in the moderator analyses. The limited number of studies may reduce the statistical power of these analyses and limit the extent to which firm conclusions can be drawn. Accordingly, these findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Several relationships also exhibited broad credibility intervals and substantial heterogeneity. The pooled effect sizes therefore represent average relationships across study contexts and may not apply consistently across all settings (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004). Some of this heterogeneity may also reflect variation in how perceived authenticity was conceptualized and operationalized across primary studies. Although the psychometric meta-analysis corrected for measurement unreliability, differences in operationalization may represent an additional source of variation that warrants further investigation.

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While moderator analyses were conducted to examine potential sources of heterogeneity, the observed heterogeneity was not fully explained for every relationship. In addition, age and gender were examined as study-level moderators based on mean age and sample gender composition and these aggregate-level findings should not be interpreted as direct evidence of corresponding differences at the individual level (Geissbühler *et al.*, 2021). Future meta-analyses should therefore examine additional moderators and reassess these relationships as more primary evidence becomes available, while primary studies are needed to directly test whether the observed age- and gender-related patterns also hold. Finally, our meta-analysis relied primarily on bivariate relationships; future studies could employ meta-analytic structural equation modeling to test more complex causal structures among multiple constructs.

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