

**Using authenticity cues to increase repurchase intention in restaurants:
Should the focus be on ability or morality?**

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Abstract

Extant studies on restaurant experiences have prioritised the examination of perceived authenticity often at the expense of other authenticity types, such as moral and existential authenticities. Using signalling theory, this study evaluates a model of authenticity cues to predict consumer repurchase intention. A survey of 424 consumers at time-honoured restaurants in China demonstrated that moral authenticity contributed more to consumers' perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity than business ability-related authenticities (food, environment, and staff authenticities). Food and moral authenticities had a direct effect on repurchase intention. Theoretical and practical implications are offered.

Keywords: authenticity; perceived authenticity; moral authenticity; existential authenticity; repurchase intention

1. Introduction

Competitive advantage for restaurant businesses depends on whether an authentic dining experience can be created (Kim, 2021; Le et al., 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Restaurants can convey a sense of authenticity through both tangible (e.g., food) and intangible (e.g., service and atmosphere) cues to build consumer loyalty (Chen et al., 2020; Lehman et al., 2019). Thus, restaurant studies have endeavoured to explore different dimensions and types of authenticity as well as the antecedents and behavioural consequences of authenticity evaluations (Chen et al., 2020; De Vries & Go, 2017; DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). However, several knowledge gaps remain in this literature.

First, previous hospitality studies have overwhelmingly adopted a constructivist approach (see Table 1) in understanding authenticity (De Vries & Go, 2017; DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Liu et al., 2018), leading to a focus on consumers' evaluating perceived authenticity of hospitality and service objects (Le et al., 2019, 2021a). As such, other forms of authenticity prevalent in tourism and other fields, such as existential authenticity (Kesgin et al., 2021; Taheri et al., 2020), have remained largely unexplored in hospitality studies (Le et al., 2019, 2021a). Beyond consumers' perceived authenticity, alignment between consumers' self-values in the pursuit of the desired self (i.e., intrapersonal existential authenticity) and the restaurant experience (Le et al., 2021b) can be also critical for restaurant success. Thus, incorporating existential authenticity, particularly the intrapersonal authenticity dimension, in consumers' evaluations of restaurants can advance the theorisation of authenticity and its relationships with other types of authenticity.

Second, a dichotomy has attracted attention in the management and marketing literature that consumer behaviour can be understood from the perspectives of business ability and morality (Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013). This implies that consumers can make choice trade-offs between businesses that focus on maximising business ability (e.g., growth) versus those that are true to their moral values (Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013). This dichotomy can also be applied to understand consumer choices and patronage of restaurants. Thus, from an ability perspective, restaurant authenticity can be understood from how consumers perceive the authenticity of the food, environment, and staff (Chen et al., 2020; Kim & Baker, 2017). From a morality perspective, authenticity can be related to how the restaurant communicates and demonstrates its moral values to consumers (Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, 2021; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), indicative of the business moral authenticity (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Lehman et al., 2019; Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013). From both perspectives, consumers are evaluating tangible and intangible cues that convey impressions of authenticity associated with their restaurant experience. However, this dichotomy of ability versus morality-related authenticity has been ignored in tourism and hospitality studies (Zhang et al., 2021). Particularly, there is a lack of research on moral authenticity in the restaurant context. The importance of moral values and standards embedded in the service experience provided by restaurants and consumer perceptions in response to intangible cues have not been fully studied (Le et al., 2021a).

Lastly, despite previous studies suggesting that perceived authenticity has a positive influence on existential authenticity (Yi et al., 2018) and repurchase intention (Chen et al., 2020), these relationships have not been evaluated in time-honoured restaurants. Time-honoured restaurants differ from other generic ethnic or themed restaurants owing to the fact that they represent old restaurant brands and have widely earned reputations and recognition

(Song et al., 2021). They offer unique foods based on traditional cooking skills passed down through many generations and adhere to national and/or regional cultural values that are showcased through food and service. In China, some time-honoured restaurants have reflected both national and local dietary cultures simultaneously (e.g., Dong Laishun representing Chinese Islamic cuisine broadly; Quanjude signifying both Beijing cuisine and Chinese food culture in the meantime), whilst others have an emphasis more on a typical regional cuisine (e.g., Ermei Restaurant reputable for its Sichuan foods). In such restaurants, centuries-old traditions around culinary skills contribute to the authenticity of the food and environment but how these might affect consumer perceptions of other authenticity types have yet to be determined.

In this study, we apply signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001), which suggests that different types of product signals/cues can be used by consumers to evaluate an object, given the assumption of information asymmetry. Although the theory is widely applied in consumer studies in understanding how consumers interpret signals related to reputation and advertising (Connelly et al., 2011), brand equity (Erdem & Swait, 2001) and brand heritage (Song & Kim, 2022), few have investigated perceptions of authenticity cues (tangible and intangible) by consumers (Song & Kim, 2022). Le et al. (2019) further noticed in their systematic review that, up to the year 2019, signalling theory had not been adopted as a theoretical underpinning for restaurant authenticity studies. After the year 2019, Kim and Song (2020) applied signalling theory to study the effect of authenticity cues on consumers' perceived credibility. Yang et al. (2022) adopted this theory to explore food authenticity and its relationship with other concepts. These recent studies ascertained the appropriateness of applying signalling theory to authenticity studies. However, the theoretical potential of using signalling theory to explore restaurant authenticity has not been fully realised. In time-honoured restaurants, many consumers arguably do not have sufficient experience to be fully exposed to all the authenticity cues that are embedded in the restaurant's offer. In this way, there is always information asymmetry between time-honoured restaurants as signallers and consumers as information recipients. In such restaurants, many consumers are first-time diners seeking food and experiential novelty (Wang, 2019). They evaluate the restaurant's authenticity through limited transactional cues related to its food, environment, and staff service. Each visit may expose the consumer to new authenticity cues or reinforce existing ones. On the other hand, many consumers hardly have adequate knowledge of the business morality of a time-honoured restaurant. However, through their cumulative interactions with the service provider, cues from credible third-party certifications, and socially responsible behaviours for restaurants in their community, consumers can form a moral sense about an organisation (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). Eventually, consumers should be able to recall a variety of tangible and intangible authenticity cues in their long memories, although these cues are comparatively limited and might have been sporadically collected. The consumers will make authenticity judgements based on only those cues retained. Therefore, signalling theory provides the basis to understand which authenticity cues are more visible, accessible, and unperishable to consumers in time-honoured restaurants and whether moral authenticity is an important cue driving consumer behaviour. Overall, this study applies signalling theory to explore the effects of different authenticity cues on consumers' repurchase intention in time-honoured restaurants. Specifically, the objectives of this study are three-fold:

- 1) To examine how authenticity cues related to food, environment, and staff (i.e., business ability) affect consumers' perceived restaurant authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity;

- 2) To explore the effects of restaurants' moral authenticity cue on consumers' perceived restaurant authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity; and
- 3) To ascertain how consumers' perceived restaurant authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity contribute to repurchase intention.

2. Literature review

2.1 Authenticity types and signalling theory

Authenticity refers to something/someone being 'real,' 'genuine,' or 'true' (Lehman et al., 2019). Three research streams on authenticity exist, namely, the objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist perspectives (Le et al., 2019; Wang, 1999), leading to three authenticity types being evaluated: objective, constructive, and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity is assessed using scientific methods to examine the facts (Le et al., 2019, 2021a), and thus, studies have sought to identify object traits and attributes with a focus on 'material' things. It shares similarities with Grayson and Martinec's (2004) indexical authenticity in describing whether an object is a fake or a copy. It is also similar to the historical authenticity of Newman and Smith (2016). Constructive authenticity refers to one's perceptions and interpretations of the facts rather than the facts themselves (Le et al., 2019, 2021a). It is driven by consumer individuals' personal history, belief systems and social-cultural backgrounds (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). Thus, it is usually coined as 'perceived authenticity' at the consumer level in empirical studies. It is related to the sense of 'authenticity reproduction' embedded in the concept of iconic authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Carroll and Wheaton (2009) used 'type authenticity' to depict similar meanings. Existential authenticity focuses on the authenticity of the self rather than the object (Le et al., 2019, 2021a). Thus, it concerns the existential meanings and experiential outcomes that individuals perceive through participation in relevant activities (Le et al., 2020). Amongst the three authenticity types, perceived (constructive) and existential authenticities are conceptualised at the individual level. Objective authenticity (Wang, 1999) was found to be conceptually and empirically indistinguishable from perceived authenticity from a social psychology stance (Le et al., 2021a). More specifically, when making authenticity judgements, consumers have to interpret the objects and entities through their eyes, which signifies the use of a perceived authenticity lens (Kovács et al., 2014). Meanwhile, consumers may be insensitive to any objective authenticity certificates as communicated by the organisation (Chi & Jackson, 2011), or the organisation may not be able to convey evidence that proves objective authenticity in all circumstances. These leave uncertainty about the conceptual generalisability of objective authenticity (Le et al., 2021a). Therefore, although limited research claimed to have successfully consolidated all the above perspectives (Al-Kilani & Hedhli, 2021), differences in consumers' evaluations of objects' facts, products and experiences on the basis of their personal backgrounds and consumption experiences affect their overall evaluations of authenticities, which mainly reflect object-based perceived authenticity and consumers' existential authenticity.

With a steady stream of studies (e.g., Le et al., 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) examining restaurant authenticities and the provision of conceptual frameworks that should guide future research in this area, it is clear that restaurant authenticity evaluations should incorporate a broader range of authenticity types. Other than the reiteration of the traditional types of perceived authenticity (i.e., 'categorical/type authenticity' representing part of the

‘authenticity of the other’) and existential authenticity (i.e., ‘authenticity of the self’), Le et al. (2021a, 2022) emphasised two other major types of authenticity, ‘deviated authenticity’ and ‘moral authenticity.’ The former refers to the deviation from the existing belief or cognition in that something unusual, offbeat, and exotic is noticed. Whilst this may be relevant to other types of restaurants, given that time-honoured restaurants have long-lasting operations and generational inheritance in terms of cooking traditions (Song et al., 2021), the occurrence of deviated authenticity in such restaurants would be limited. The latter refers to the business values which are critical in authenticity assessments.

Moral authenticity is closely related to the ‘authenticity of the producer/service provider’, in Le et al.’s (2021a, 2022) conceptual frameworks. In its original form, moral authenticity refers to an individual’s ‘true self’ and whether he or she acts in accordance with his or her values (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It was originally derived from social psychology research (Gino et al., 2015; Lehman et al., 2019). In organisations, moral authenticity was defined as ‘provid[ing] the consumer with a feeling that this brand will help achieve self-authentication through connecting with personal moral values’ (Beverland et al., 2008, p.8). According to Carroll and Wheaton (2009) and Lehman et al. (2019), in order to achieve moral authenticity, operational decisions of organisations should embody the business values and philosophies, and convey their sincere choices and strategies in a moral and ethical sense. Moral authenticity in this context also implies a focus on sustainability, including social and environmental, as opposed to just economic, with consideration given to benefits for all stakeholders rather than shareholders alone (Lehman et al., 2019). Le et al. (2019) suggested that research attention should be given to how restaurant organisations convey their values and organisational identity. Nonetheless, this type of moral authenticity in terms of achieving the organisation’s passion, goals, and moral values has not received sufficient attention in the hospitality literature (Hwang et al, 2022).

Table 1 reviews recent literature (2015 to present) on the topic of restaurant authenticity with the aim of identifying themes and trends in the hospitality authenticity literature. It includes both conceptual and empirical studies, which assist us to summarise the adopted theoretical underpinnings of previous studies. Table 1 shows that the research contexts of these studies largely spanned across various types of restaurants, such as indigenous restaurants (Chao et al., 2021), traditional restaurants (Kim et al., 2020), authentic restaurants (Kim & Song, 2020), ethnic restaurants (Lu et al., 2015; Song et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2020; Youn & Kim, 2017), theme restaurants (Meng & Choi, 2018), and time-honoured restaurants (Kim, 2021). It is obvious that ethnic restaurants have been studied the most, however, time-honoured restaurants (Kim, 2021) have received comparatively limited attention. Also, Table 1 shows that the literature has attached importance mainly to the understanding of consumers’ perceived authenticity given the focus on hospitality consumption objects. Previous empirical hospitality studies have failed to provide sufficient attention to existential authenticity until recent years. For example, Akarsu et al. (2020) took the existentialist perspective to define the perceived authenticity in Airbnb as consumers’ perceived enjoyment and genuine experiences. Mody and Hanks (2020) even merged consumers’ perceived authenticity and existential authenticity overall. Unfortunately, their conceptualisation has not been supported with more evidence so far. Moreover, Table 1 shows a lack of hospitality studies that empirically evaluate moral authenticity. Hwang et al.’s (2022) study is one of the few recent research that focused on moral authenticity as a surrogate of brand authenticity in the hospitality literature. They found such authenticity could result in brand satisfaction, preference, and loyalty. Le et al. (2022) stated explicitly

that the authenticity of producer/service provider, which incorporates moral authenticity, was at the infancy stage of research in restaurant studies.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Despite growing recognition of different types of authenticity in the hospitality literature, understanding of consumers' existential authenticity and its conceptual difference from perceived authenticity was not always emphasised. Also, the antecedents and consequences of both types of authenticity remain sparsely researched. As Table 1 shows, first, very limited studies (e.g., DiPietro & Levitt, 2019) have attempted to explore specific authenticity cues concerning food, service environment and staff as the antecedents of consumers' perceived restaurant authenticity and existential authenticity. In our study, we tend to examine these authenticity cues from the business ability perspective and moral authenticity from the business morality perspective (Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013), which have witnessed a vacuum in hospitality literature. Second, although consumer behavioural intentions, such as repurchase intention, have been well supported in hospitality authenticity literature (e.g., DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Meng & Choi, 2018), none of them have looked at the joint influence of perceived and existential authenticities on repurchase intention. Besides, the interrelationship between these two types of authenticity has received limited attention in the hospitality field. Therefore, the current study fills a research gap (Kesgin et al., 2021; Le et al., 2019, 2021a) by incorporating both perceived and existential authenticities and their specific authenticity antecedents to understand repurchase intention.

Finally, Table 1 shows different theoretical lenses that have been applied in recent hospitality authenticity studies to understand the relationships between authenticity types and other constructs of interest. Whilst the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model has become a popular theoretical lens to understand antecedents and consequences of consumer authenticity evaluations, signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001) remains sparsely used. Signalling theory emphasises the information asymmetry that exists between signallers and recipients (Erevelles et al., 2001). Consumers normally have less information to evaluate product/brand quality than signallers (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Connelly et al., 2011). To address this inequality in information availability, businesses can send a variety of product/brand signals to consumers, helping them to appraise various intangible and tangible product/brand attributes (Erdem & Swait, 2001). In time-honoured restaurants, authenticity cues related to food, environment, and staff can be used to convey a sense of authenticity about the product/brand in attracting and retaining consumers (Kim & Song, 2020; Song & Kim, 2022). In this study, we propose moral authenticity as another authenticity cue for restaurant consumers to evaluate. Consumers, as recipients, often rely on these signals to evaluate the quality and authenticity of experiences in time-honoured restaurants (Chen et al., 2020; Song & Kim, 2022). Thus, signalling theory provides the basis for understanding consumer perceptions of different authenticity types in restaurants (Kim & Song, 2020; Song & Kim, 2022) and the subsequent behaviours that result from authenticity evaluations.

2.2 Antecedents of perceived restaurant authenticity

Restaurant studies have primarily examined perceived authenticity as an outcome of consumers' evaluations of authenticity cues (Song & Kim, 2022). From signalling theory, restaurants as signallers can design authenticity cues to facilitate consumer evaluation of the experience (Song & Kim, 2022), such as restaurant constructive authenticity (De Vries & Go,

2017; DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Liu et al., 2018). Perceived restaurant authenticity refers to ‘the degree to which the food and dining environment are perceived as genuine to its type and reflect the culture of ethnic origin’ (Liu et al., 2018, p. 1037). In time-honoured restaurants, perceived authenticity can be derived from culinary traditions and dietary culture (Kim, 2021), which imply a focus on providing cues related to food, environment, and staff, as suggested by signalling theory (Song & Kim, 2022).

As a restaurant’s core offer, food is the tangible subject of authenticity evaluations based on quality characteristics, such as temperature, menu, ingredients, cuisine type, taste, and portions (Chen et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017). In traditional restaurants, food authenticity is sought after by consumers who undeniably patronise such restaurants on the basis of authentic food that reflects culture, and local and regional culinary traditions (Kim et al., 2020). A restaurant’s physical environment also contributes to its constructive authenticity (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). The authenticity of the physical environment can be defined as those tangible and intangible factors of a restaurant that provide cues about the restaurant experience and include interior and exterior design, background music, and colour scheme that inform the ambience, thus contributing to authenticity perceptions (Chen et al., 2020). In particular, the congruency and alignment of these different elements convey a restaurant theme that can have a positive effect on the authenticity perceptions of consumers (Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, staff interactions with consumers are vital to service quality assessments (Kim & Baker, 2017) and staff authenticity can be viewed as the extent to which employees serve food in an authentic way, demonstrate authentic restaurant culture, and provide an authentic dining experience (Kim & Baker, 2017). Thus, staff authenticity is critical in generating positive experiences for consumers and affects overall authenticity perceptions.

Collectively, no consensus exists on how food, physical environment, and staff authenticities affect overall restaurant (constructive) authenticity. For example, DiPietro and Levitt (2019) focusing on regional American-style restaurants, found that food and environmental (service-scape) authenticities were significant antecedents of overall restaurant authenticity. Kim and Baker (2017) studying Korean restaurants, emphasised that staff authenticity had a greater positive influence on overall restaurant authenticity than food authenticity. Indeed, the nature of time-honoured restaurants implies that food, environment, and staff are critical elements of the dining experience, and thus, can potentially affect consumers’ overall restaurant authenticity evaluations (Kim, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). However, these relationships remain untested. Thus, we propose:

H1: Food authenticity will positively affect perceived restaurant authenticity.

H2: Environment authenticity will positively affect perceived restaurant authenticity.

H3: Staff authenticity will positively affect perceived restaurant authenticity.

In social psychology, when an individual evaluates the behaviour of others, ability (i.e., ‘competence’ and ‘intelligence’) and morality (i.e., ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘kindness’) intersect to form others’ evaluated characters (Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013). A similar evaluation, albeit on different characteristics, occurs when consumers evaluate an organisation. Thus, the dichotomy of ability and morality provides a theoretical lens to

understand the importance ascribed by consumers to each of these facets in their overall judgement of an organisation (Schmeltz, 2012).

Furthermore, based on signalling theory, both ability and morality can be considered important quality signals that facilitate a consumer to evaluate their experiences (Song & Kim, 2022). For instance, authenticity cues related to food, environment, and staff in traditional restaurants can serve as proxies to evaluate business ability (Kim & Song, 2020). A restaurant has control over how it designs the service environment, whom it employs, and the food quality it delivers. By developing and managing authenticity related to these abilities, a restaurant can achieve a competitive advantage. However, these abilities do not necessarily communicate the restaurant's morality to consumers. Perceptions of moral authenticity (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009) as another type of authenticity cue have been largely ignored in tourism and hospitality studies.

Moral authenticity in business settings originated from Beverland et al.'s (2008) and Carroll and Wheaton's (2009) conceptualisations of authenticity. Carroll and Wheaton (2009) contended that many consumers not only attached importance to product appearance and quality, but what the organisation's goals and commitment represent, and the values and abstract meanings that consumers could derive from corresponding consumption. Today, many consumers are concerned about the sincerity of an organisation's decisions and products, and their long-term sustainability goals (O'Connor et al., 2017). Le et al. (2021a) further substantiated that consumers are normally in the pursuit of consistency between their 'internal states and the external expressions of an entity,' thereby judging the moral authenticity of a business. Accordingly, moral authenticity becomes a key criterion for consumers to evaluate business societal performance in relation to acceptable societal norms and values that are important to them. Thus, moral authenticity becomes a cue that consumers rely on in their overall evaluation of restaurant authenticity. This relationship is particularly evident in time-honoured restaurants considering that their identity is built on true-to-self values and norms related to maintaining and promoting traditional food over time (Kim, 2021). Thus, we propose:

H4: Restaurant moral authenticity will positively affect perceived authenticity.

2.3 Antecedents of existential authenticity

Different from perceived authenticity in constructivist stance, existential authenticity pertains to the existential meanings as perceived by individuals and their experiential states of being (Le et al., 2020). In fact, at large, the existential authenticity concept remains under-researched in hospitality studies (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2020). The concept of 'existential authenticity' contains intrapersonal authenticity dimension which reflects the perception of freedom, self-actualisation, and self-discovery, and interpersonal authenticity dimension that demonstrates involvement and enhancement of family ties and human relationships (Fu, 2019). In this study, referring to some other studies (e.g., Kim & Bonn, 2016), we adopted intrapersonal authenticity to represent existential authenticity because we would compare restaurant ability and morality, which were related more to the nature of intrapersonal authenticity. Through assessing intrapersonal (existential) authenticity, we could understand from patronising time-honoured restaurants whether consumers find true to themselves (Fu, 2019), being in touch with one's inner being (Brown, 2013), and asserting

one's own will (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Existential authenticity also emphasises consumers' emotions and sense of self (Rickly-Boyd, 2013).

Signalling theory has been extended from focusing on brand evaluation to considering the entire consumer experience in hospitality studies (Song & Kim, 2022). Consumers can evaluate existential authenticity on the basis of the authenticity signals received and decoded from the restaurant (Song & Kim, 2022). A deeper engagement in an activity can activate existential authenticity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Yi et al., 2018), with restaurant consumers often engaging and interacting with multiple elements, such as food, physical environment, and staff (Chen et al., 2020), which can be considered the norm in performative hospitality practices. Performativity in these experiences can trigger existential moments and personal experiences for consumers (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). For example, food may trigger emotional states and transformative subjective experiences. The effects of the restaurant environment and staff performance on consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity (i.e., being myself) have been noted in previous studies (e.g., Le et al., 2019). Thus, it can be argued that in time-honoured restaurants, consumers can evaluate different authenticity types (food, physical environment, and staff) that can contribute to the fulfilment of their authentic selves (Brown, 2013). Thus, we propose:

H5: Food authenticity will positively affect consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

H6: Environment authenticity will positively affect consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

H7: Staff authenticity will positively affect consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

The moral authenticity of businesses and its alignment with consumer values in the pursuit of authenticity is becoming increasingly important (Lehman et al., 2019). When consumers perceive a business to be 'true-to-self' in its moral values, they develop admiration and feel emotionally attached to it (Moulard et al., 2021). In fact, modern service-dominant businesses emphasise the elicitation of memorable experiences and the process of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Le et al. (2021b) elaborated on several potential outcomes as derived from authentic experiences. In line with their reasoning, consumers build up or reinforce their self-image or desired self-image through experiences interacting with service providers. Purchasing brands that display business moral values can also help consumers fulfil a sense of self-responsibility towards society (Hwang & Kim, 2018). This parallels a central tenet of the experience economy, which suggests that consumers aim for achievement and transformation through economic offerings (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Le et al. (2021b) further argued that restaurant businesses are expected to align their values with consumers through producing interactive experiences, temporarily or in a more prolonged way. Organisations should, therefore, maintain and enhance their moral authenticity through genuine and continuing marketing efforts (Le et al., 2019). Meanwhile, consumers' self-actualisation and value-laden experience elicitation constitute key components of existential authenticity (Canavan, 2018), driving their ethical or moral consumption and exploration (Davies & Gutsche, 2016). The self-realisation or protection of self-esteem through meeting the irreplaceable core values (e.g., moral and ethical values) of the organisation has been reflected in consumers' intrapersonal existential authenticity that

restaurant businesses should seek to deliver on a continuous basis (Le et al., 2021b). This is particularly of vital importance for the survival and competition of time-honoured restaurants that strive to protect and pass down their values in the long course of history (Song et al., 2021). Thus, we can argue that consumers are more likely to perceive intrapersonal (existential) authenticity when a restaurant displays high levels of moral authenticity. Thus, we propose:

H8: Restaurant moral authenticity will positively affect consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

The relationship between perceived authenticity and existential authenticity is well-established. In tourism, the authenticity of toured objects can determine the existential authenticity of tourists (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2020; Taheri et al., 2020; Yi et al., 2018). Researchers have shown that a collection of tourists' perceived authenticity related to tourist attractions can lead to existential authenticity (Yi et al., 2018). For example, tourists' existential meanings and fulfilment in being themselves (i.e., intrapersonal authenticity) can be achieved through the perceived authenticity of heritage sites (Carreira et al., 2021; Yi et al., 2018). Based on this evidence, we postulate that in time-honoured restaurants, perceived authenticity can positively affect consumers' perceptions of being themselves leading to self-fulfilment. The focus on maintaining a unique culinary tradition and service (Zhang et al., 2021) in such restaurants can trigger personal reflections amongst consumers. Thus, we propose:

H9: Perceived restaurant authenticity will positively contribute to consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

2.4 Antecedents of repurchase intention

Repurchase intention refers to the likelihood that consumers will continue to patronise products and services that they have previously experienced (Ebrahim et al., 2016). Repurchase intention is one of the strongest predictors of future behaviour (Kim & Ok, 2009), leading to several factors being identified as its antecedents. In previous studies, perceived restaurant authenticity can directly predict consumer dining intentions (Kim et al., 2020). More specifically, higher levels of restaurant authenticity contribute to higher propensities for future visits (Kim & Song, 2020), and this relationship also exists in time-honoured restaurants (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, we propose:

H10: Perceived restaurant authenticity will positively affect repurchase intention.

Research on the relationship between consumers' existential authenticity and repurchase intention is nascent. For example, Kim and Bonn (2016) found that consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity positively contributed to their intention to revisit and recommend a winery. Similarly, Tan and Huang (2020) revealed that enjoyment and immersion by a tourist in an experience can reflect self or create self-fulfilment (i.e., existential authenticity) that contributes to revisit intentions. Thus, consumers can experience the feeling of self-fulfilment by immersing themselves in the restaurant ambience and enjoyment of the traditional food offered by time-honoured restaurants. They can also achieve self-actualisation by connecting to the culinary culture of such restaurants leading to positive repurchase intentions. Hence, we propose:

H11: Consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity will positively affect repurchase intention.

Based on the above discussions, different authenticity cues are believed to positively affect consumers' repurchase intention indirectly through the evaluation of perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity. In line with signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001), consumers would receive and collect various authenticity cues or signals in different consumption circumstances for their overall authenticity judgment (i.e., perceived restaurant authenticity and intrapersonal existential authenticity), which leads to consumers' further behavioural responses. These indirect relationships have been partially evidenced in some studies (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2022; Youn & Kim, 2017). Despite theoretically sound, empirical evidence on these is still lacking, particularly when comparing the effects of a restaurant's ability and morality as authenticity cues, as proved in Table 1. In this study, we propose the following hypotheses with mediating effects of perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity:

H12: Food authenticity will affect consumers' repurchase intention indirectly through perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

H13: Environment authenticity will affect consumers' repurchase intention indirectly through perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

H14: Staff authenticity will affect consumers' repurchase intention indirectly through perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

H15: Restaurant moral authenticity will affect consumers' repurchase intention indirectly through perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity.

Other than indirect relationships, the direct relationships between authenticity cues and repurchase intention have been considered to also exist in previous studies. For example, food authenticity has proved to affect repurchase intention directly (Yan et al., 2015), irrespective of whether the entire restaurant experience is perceived as authentic, which implies that authentic food in time-honoured restaurants constitutes an important direct driver of repurchase behaviour. In the meantime, environment authenticity could be also a direct contributing determinant of repurchase intention (So et al., 2021). This is particularly true for those consumers in their pursuit of the authentic restaurant environment in time-honoured restaurants. The same logic also applies to consumers who favour the way that staff serve and perform in such restaurants (Kim & Baker, 2017). Lastly, business moral authenticity could also influence repurchase intention directly, in line with Moulard et al.'s (2021) suggestion that moral authenticity generates stronger confidence amongst consumers towards future patronage of brands that exhibit a commitment to business moral values. Therefore, we propose:

H16: Food authenticity will directly affect consumers' repurchase intention.

H17: Environment authenticity will directly affect consumers' repurchase intention.

H18: Staff authenticity will directly affect consumers' repurchase intention.

H19: Restaurant moral authenticity will directly affect consumers' repurchase intention.

2.5 Conceptual model

Based on the above evidence, the following conceptual model is proposed (**Figure 1**). In line with signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001), we hypothesise that authenticity cues/signals related to food, environment, and staff, which represent business ability in time-honoured restaurants, and the moral authenticity cue/signal, which represents business morality, will influence perceived authenticity of the restaurant and consumers' existential authenticity. Collectively, these factors will have a direct or indirect influence on repurchase intention.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

3. Methods

3.1 Time-honoured restaurants

The cultural and economic significance of time-honoured restaurants to the hospitality and tourism industry in China has led the Ministry of Commerce (2019) to champion these brands since 1991. The highly recognised time-honoured restaurant brands include Quanjude (roasted ducks), Dong Laishun (Chinese Islamic cuisines), Qing Feng (Chinese buns), and many others (China Ministry of Commerce, 2019). Time-honoured restaurants were selected as the research context for this study due to two major reasons. First, existing studies on time-honoured restaurants have explored the authenticity of these restaurants (e.g., Kim, 2021) with a focus on perceived authenticity only. Existing studies have not examined existential authenticity and moral authenticity (Le et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Old brands of time-honoured restaurants provide the appropriate context for understanding diverse types of authenticities at the consumer level. For example, such restaurants must communicate and manifest their moral values (i.e., moral authenticity) explicitly and constantly to remain relevant to their consumers of different generations. These old brands need generations of recognition, protection, and inheritance. Furthermore, through patronising such time-honoured restaurants, consumers are also expected to match self-values and achieve experiential aims (i.e., existential authenticity), which could further secure revisit in the future. These strategies are challenging but highly indispensable for time-honoured restaurants to survive and sustain their competitiveness. Second, the challenging business environment due to COVID-19 and the increasing competition in this segment of the Chinese restaurant market has meant that some brands are fast disappearing (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, an understanding of how different authenticity cues can contribute to repurchase intention is timely in the quest for the survival and growth of time-honoured restaurants.

3.2 Measures

All constructs were adapted from previous studies and measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The number of items to measure each construct and the corresponding literature sources are as follows: Food authenticity [three items adapted from Kim and Song (2020)], environment authenticity [three items adapted

from De Vries and Go (2017), and Jang et al. (2012)], staff authenticity [three items developed from De Vries and Go (2017) and Kim and Baker (2017)], moral authenticity [10 items adopted from Lehman et al. (2019)], perceived restaurant authenticity [four items adapted from Kim et al. (2020)], intrapersonal (existential) authenticity (five items adapted from Yi et al. (2018)], and repurchase intention [three items adapted from Kim et al. (2020)]. All measurement items were translated into Chinese using the forward- and backward-translation method (Brislin, 1970). When necessary, some survey items included the term ‘Chinese/local’ so that respondents could understand the type of restaurants that opinions were being sought on and respondents could evaluate restaurant authenticity based on their cultural understanding of such restaurants. Before the main study, a pilot test was conducted with 100 participants from Beijing to ascertain comprehension of the questionnaire and initial scale reliability assessment. The pre-test led to minor changes in the wording of questionnaire items and all Cronbach’s alpha were greater than 0.7.

3.3 Sampling and data collection

Beijing has the largest number of time-honoured restaurant brands in China and was chosen as the sampling location. The official list of time-honoured restaurant brands, available from the website of China's Ministry of Commerce (2019), was used as the sampling frame. The studied population was qualified local consumers who had experiences of consuming recognised time-honoured restaurants. A well-known online marketing research company with a reliable and valid database of 2.6 million consumers in China, wjx.cn, was used for data collection. The data collection was conducted between November and December 2020. The company used Beijing Internet Protocol (IP) addresses to filter potential participants from Beijing’s overall population. Using the search results, the company used a random sampling approach to send the online survey link to potential participants. Participants were screened on three questions: 1) ‘Are you 18 years old or above?’, 2) ‘Have you dined in a time-honoured restaurant in Beijing in the past six months?’, and 3) ‘Please specify the time-honoured restaurant’s name, based on question 2’. Using the answers to question 3, only respondents who mentioned restaurant brands that appeared on the official list of time-honoured restaurant brands (China Ministry of Commerce, 2019) were included in the final sample of 424 respondents. The valid response rate was 16.96% given 2,500 respondents approached in total. The sample size met the minimum requirement of 400 recommended by Stevens (1996) to bypass any misspecification error in structural equation modelling (SEM).

3.4 Data analysis

The two-step procedure (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) for covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) was employed for data analysis using IBM’s SPSS AMOS 26. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to check construct validity and reliability, followed by a structural model evaluation to test the hypothesised relationships in Figure 1. Before running CFA, we conducted Harman’s single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) to check for common method bias (CMB), with results indicating that the total variance explained by the first common factor was 36.123%, well below the threshold of 50%. Thus, CMB was not a pervasive issue. We also assessed univariate and multivariate normality, and the results revealed non-normality (Byrne, 2016). More specifically, CR values (for skew and kurtosis) for some univariate variables were either equal to or greater than 1.96, and the multivariate

kurtosis value was larger than 5. Thus, we adopted the bootstrapping method to fix the non-normality (Nevitt & Hancock, 2001).

4. Results

4.1 Participants' profile

As shown in **Table 2**, more males (57.5%) participated in the survey than females (42.5%). The majority of the participants (87.1%) had ages between 21 and 50. About a third of participants were professionals (31.6%) and earned a monthly income of RMB 7,000–9,999 (approximately USD 1,090–1,558) (38.0%). Given these characteristics, the sample is similar to previous studies on the restaurant market in China (Youn et al., 2021). Participants named 38 time-honoured restaurant brands in Beijing, with the three most popular brands being Quanjude (8.5%), Qing Feng (7.8%), and Dong Laishun (6.6%).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

4.2 Measurement model

The results of CFA validated the measurements, given the acceptable model fit (goodness-of-fit index: $\chi^2 = 577.990$, $df = 411$, $\chi^2/df = 1.406$, CFI = .975, TLI = .972, IFI = .975, RMSEA = .031). We also confirmed the validity (i.e., convergent and discriminant validity) and reliability (i.e., Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability) of all measurements. First, we assessed convergent validity based on factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Factor loadings of all items were higher than 0.6 (see **Table 3**), and the AVE results of all constructs were above 0.5, indicating acceptable convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Second, discriminant validity was achieved with the square root of each construct's AVE values being higher than the pairwise correlations of constructs (**Table 4**) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Third, construct reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients being above the 0.7 requirement, ranging from .804 to .910. Additionally, the composite reliabilities of all constructs were above 0.7, ranging from .811 to .909, which demonstrated adequate internal consistency.

[Insert Table 3 and Table 4 about here]

4.3 Structural model

The original structural model evaluation showed good fit (goodness-of-fit index: $\chi^2 = 609.770$, $df = 413$, $\chi^2/df = 1.476$, CFI = .971, TLI = .967, IFI = .971, RMSEA = .034), with most of the hypotheses (13 out of 19 hypotheses) supported by the data. The R^2 values demonstrate the explanatory power of the predictor variables for the endogenous constructs. Results showed that food, environment, staff, and moral authenticities explained 58.4% of the variance in perceived restaurant authenticity ($R^2 = .584$) and 52.7% in existential authenticity ($R^2 = .527$). All other constructs accounted for 37.9% of the variance in repurchase intentions ($R^2 = .379$). **Table 5** shows that food authenticity ($\beta = .041$, ns) did not influence perceived restaurant authenticity, and thus, H1 was rejected. However, environment authenticity ($\beta = .176$, $p < .01$), staff authenticity ($\beta = .240$, $p < .01$), and restaurant moral authenticity (β

=.506, $p < .01$) had significant direct effects on perceived restaurant authenticity (thus, H2, H3, and H4 were supported). Surprisingly, food authenticity ($\beta = -.028$, ns) and environment authenticity ($\beta = .037$, ns) failed to affect consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity. Thus, H5 and H6 were rejected. Staff authenticity ($\beta = .126$, $p < .05$) affected intrapersonal authenticity, so H7 was supported. Restaurant moral authenticity ($\beta = .390$, $p < .01$) affected consumers' intrapersonal (existential) authenticity (thereby supporting H8). The results demonstrated that moral authenticity exerted a higher level of effect on consumers' perceived restaurant authenticity and existential authenticity than any of the ability-related authenticity constructs. In addition, perceived authenticity had a significant influence on intrapersonal (existential) authenticity ($\beta = .315$, $p < .01$) and repurchase intention ($\beta = .220$, $p < .05$), thereby supporting H9 and H10. Intrapersonal (existential) authenticity also significantly affected repurchase intention ($\beta = .188$, $p < .05$) (thereby supporting H11).

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Concerning the direct relationships amongst authenticity cues (i.e., food, environment, and staff authenticities, moral authenticity) and repurchase intention, the results indicated that food authenticity had a direct effect on repurchase intention ($\beta = .145$, $p < .05$). Moral authenticity also appeared to contribute directly to repurchase intention ($\beta = .194$, $p < .05$). Therefore, both H16 and H19 were supported. However, environment authenticity ($\beta = .003$, ns) and staff authenticity ($\beta = .008$, ns) failed to show a direct effect on repurchase intention. Therefore, both H17 and H18 were rejected.

Finally, the indirect effects of authenticity cues on repurchase intention were also examined. Beside the insignificant indirect path of food authenticity \rightarrow perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity \rightarrow repurchase intention ($\beta = .006$, ns), other indirect paths were all significant, including environment authenticity \rightarrow perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity \rightarrow repurchase intention ($\beta = .056$, $p < .01$); staff authenticity \rightarrow perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity \rightarrow repurchase intention ($\beta = .091$, $p < .01$); and moral authenticity \rightarrow perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity \rightarrow repurchase intention ($\beta = .215$, $p < .01$). Accordingly, H12 was rejected, and H13, H14, and H15 were all supported.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

5. Discussions and implications

This study examined the effects of different authenticity types (food, environment, staff, moral, perceived and existential) on consumer repurchase intention in time-honoured restaurants. The results have theoretical and managerial implications.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, this study extended the application of signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001) in consumer authenticity studies to the hospitality context. Based on this theory, the results demonstrated that different tangible and intangible attributes act as signals for authenticity evaluation by consumers. Specifically, environment (H2) and staff authenticities (H3), as opposed to food authenticity (H1), had positive relationships with perceived restaurant

authenticity. Given the importance attributed to food authenticity in existing studies (Kim et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018), our results deviated from such findings (Chen et al., 2020; DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). On one hand, the results of H2 and H3 confirmed the importance that consumers attach to restaurant experiences that are built on traditions, whereby the atmosphere and service experience are intimately connected to an ethnic or special-themed restaurant (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019). On the other hand, in ethnic restaurants, tangible cues about food contribute to ascertaining food authenticity (Kim & Baker, 2017). However, we found the non-significant influence of food authenticity on restaurant authenticity, suggesting that consumers' choice to dine in time-honoured restaurants implies that food is unequivocally authentic, and thus, perceived restaurant authenticity is affected by other authenticity types (environment and staff). This is particularly true for experienced consumers (Song & Kim, 2022) who may possibly be inclined to attribute their perceived authenticities more to intangible attributes given the nature of service intangibility (Ding & Keh, 2017). The intangible atmospheric cues and involvement with service staff were found to contribute more in this regard. This finding may be also attributable to our research design that targeted to collect cumulative experiences of consuming time-honoured restaurants, thereby merely demonstrating an overall food authenticity judgement. The food authenticity was not assessed in a detailed manner given the details of food 'raw materials, specific production methods or processes, as well as modelling, smell, colour' were not easily memorisable and recalled.

Moreover, we contributed to the tourism and hospitality literature by applying the dichotomy of business ability versus morality (Mende-Siedlecki et al., 2013), which originated from the social psychology domain. Our results showcased that not all facets of business ability contribute to explaining perceived authenticity in restaurants. Moral authenticity, another intangible authenticity cue, had a greater effect on perceived authenticity (H4) than food, environment, or staff authenticities, implying that business morality is more important than business ability. This finding gives credence to moral authenticity as a facet of business morality (Le et al., 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) and also as a determinant of other authenticity types in dining experiences. It exemplifies the viewpoint of Carroll and Wheaton (2009) that in the food and dining industry, moral authenticity closely relates to the organisation's moral identity, which eventually translates into perceived authenticity on the consumer side. It also mirrors Le et al.'s (2021a, 2022) proposition that moral authenticity is a component of the authenticity of the producer/service provider, enhancing authenticity in dining experiences in a significant manner. Based on signalling theory (Erevelles et al., 2001), consumers in time-honoured restaurants use cues from the service provider maintaining traditional food culture and sustaining business excellence rather than those focused on business growth (Beverland et al., 2008) to evaluate perceived restaurant authenticity. This finding potentially reflects the shifting expectations of Chinese consumers on businesses doing the right thing for the community rather than focusing on profit maximisation only. Recent consumer reports on time-honoured restaurants in China suggested that perceived value-for-money is problematic given the strong profit-driven business philosophy (Zhang et al., 2021).

Business ability (i.e., food, environment, and staff) and morality (moral authenticity) related authenticity cues were also compared for their effects on intrapersonal (existential) authenticity. Our study is one of the first to incorporate existential authenticity in conceptualising hospitality authenticities. Before our study, its antecedents have been largely unknown in the hospitality context. The results of our study indicated that moral authenticity

was the only significant antecedent (H8) of intrapersonal (existential) authenticity, whilst all ability-related authenticity factors had non-significant effects (H5, H6, and H7). Thus, in time-honoured restaurants, consumers are looking for self-business moral value congruence (Moulard et al., 2021) and seeking self-actualisation (Davies & Gutsche, 2016) from their consumption experience. In other words, aligning the brand authenticity of such restaurants with the self-image and experience of the consumer proved to be remarkably important (Le et al., 2021b), despite its lack of attention and evidence in the hospitality literature. Time-honoured restaurants with their uniqueness of longevity (Kim, 2021) could be capable of facilitating their consumers' existential authenticity through capitalising on sustaining and promoting their moral authenticity. However, the logic that consumer engagement with 'material and non-material' things will automatically trigger existential authenticity, as suggested in the tourism literature (Yi et al., 2018), is not fully replicated in dining experiences given that restaurants often embody daily consumption practices rather than being an extraordinary experience that triggers existential authenticity. Nevertheless, this is the first study that establishes a positive relationship between perceived and existential authenticity (H9) in restaurants.

Finally, we enriched the knowledge by understanding how the different authenticity types and cues predicted consumer repurchase intention. Specifically, we found that perceived restaurant authenticity affects repurchase intention directly (H10) and indirectly through intrapersonal (existential) authenticity (H9 and H11). These interrelationships support previous studies from the tourism literature (Chen et al., 2020; Tan & Huang, 2020; Yi et al., 2018).

Moreover, we found that authenticity cues (i.e., food, environment, staff authenticities, and moral authenticity) could all influence consumer repurchase intention in an indirect manner (H12, H13, H14, H15). Although the indirect influences on repurchase intention as triggered by the food, environment, and staff authenticity cues have been proved to some extent in previous studies (DiPietro & Levitt, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2022; Youn & Kim, 2017), those as derived from moral authenticity failed to receive scholarly attention. And the indirect relationships were generated through the co-occurrence and interplay of two authenticity types as the mediating factors: perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity. The complex path structure enriched our understanding of the hospitality authenticity types. Perceived authenticity and intrapersonal (existential) authenticity could represent consumers' immediate cognitive and affective responses (Yi et al., 2018) as a result of being exposed to the various authenticity cues but before consumers' decision to repurchase the restaurants. Additionally, and more thought-provoking, moral authenticity was found to have greater indirect effects on repurchase intention than the other authenticity cues, thereby providing credence to the propositions of Lehman et al. (2019) and Moulard et al. (2021) that today's consumers are more inclined to favour their self-value congruence in business consumptions, particularly in the context of time-honoured restaurants which must have been widely recognised in generations. This could be further underpinned in this study due to the fact that moral authenticity could also directly result in consumer repurchase intention (H19). It is believed that consumers are likely to revisit a time-honoured restaurant when they 'love' and feel responsible to help maintain the business philosophy and protect traditional gastronomy cultures. In this study, food authenticity also appeared to be a direct cue to lead to repurchase intention (H16), corroborating its role as the core offer of a time-honoured restaurant (Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, environment and staff authenticities did not exert such a direct power (H17, H18), due to the fact that

consumers would treat them as cues to make an overall authenticity judgement first, prior to repurchase decisions. These interesting findings offered important insight to restaurateurs.

5.2 Managerial implications

Repurchase intention is a key driver of restaurant success amidst and after the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring restaurants to take cost-effective measures for consumer retention whilst also managing an ever-increasing consumer expectation and competitive marketplace (Zhang et al., 2021). Time-honoured restaurants must emphasise cues directly related to food (e.g., local, traditional, and dietary) to generate positive repurchase intention. However, these cues are not vital to consumer evaluations of restaurant authenticity. The authenticity of restaurant atmospherics and service staff are more critical for positive perceived authenticity evaluations by consumers. Time-honoured restaurants should consider discovering the different combinations of environmental components, such as interior decorations, background music and colour, to emphasise the time-honoured restaurant theme and the corresponding food culture, given their indirect influence on consumers' repurchase intention through restaurant authenticity. Additionally, the role of service staff authenticity is emphasised given its indirect influence on repurchase intention. Managing key touchpoints for staff interactions with consumers and themed restaurant atmospherics that reinforce an authentic ambience are cues that will impact authenticity evaluations positively. Time-honoured restaurants should recruit and train staff that can provide authentic service through being genuine, friendly, and culturally knowledgeable to enhance restaurant authenticity.

Given the importance of moral authenticity to consumers of time-honoured restaurants, they should strive to maintain the food culture and develop business values that align with consumer and community expectations. Their current focus on profits only (Zhang et al., 2021) can have detrimental effects on their long-term survival. Previous studies have found that having financial motives as the overarching focus of a business could attenuate or destroy organisational authenticity, leading to brand damage such as increasing consumer brand hate (Bryson & Atwal, 2019; Bryson et al., 2013; Hegner et al., 2017). Therefore, socially responsible activities such as sourcing products and ingredients from local suppliers, attention to culinary tradition, fair pricing and using certified products are effective ways of improving business morality that must also be communicated to consumers.

The results also suggested that elements of morality and perceived authenticity can trigger intrapersonal (existential) authenticity amongst consumers who then have positive repurchase intentions. Time-honoured restaurateurs should position their business using morality and target consumers sharing similar moral values or pursuing self-achievement to retain and improve their competitiveness. This is particularly true for today's time-honoured restaurants where many consumers care more about sustainability and moral authenticity than traditional types of authenticities. Thus, understanding consumers' moral values and incorporating relevant values into their business, marketing and publicity activities and feedback systems can attract and retain consumers with similar values who may seek their desired states of being during consumption. For example, service evaluation cards with moral authenticity and existential authenticity questions can be designed for consumers to reflect on how the restaurant can better align its moral values to consumers and society as a whole.

5.3 Conclusion, limitations and further study

In conclusion, different authenticity types affect repurchase intention in different ways, thus, advancing our understanding of authenticity in restaurants and hospitality at large. However, this study has some limitations. First, the sample results cannot be generalised to those located beyond Beijing. For example, whether the authentic experiences in a Peking Duck restaurant (e.g., Quanjude restaurant branch property in Beijing) and those in a Xinjiang noodle-based time-honoured restaurant have subtle differences awaits further investigation. Meanwhile, in this study, we collected multiple restaurants rather than a single restaurant from the sample, and thus could not understand the underlying differences amongst the restaurants themselves. Future studies can test the proposed model and focus on some particular time-honoured restaurants located in other cities and regions of China, and those located in other countries. Second, the concept of moral authenticity is still in its infancy and has attracted limited theorisation and measurement. Thus, future studies must be conducted to determine its theoretical structure. Meanwhile, it is worthy for future research to examine moral authenticity from the organisational perspective (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009), or the authenticity of the producer (Le et al., 2021a, 2022), in increasing repurchase intention in different types of restaurants. More empirical evidence underpinning this direct connection could provide clearer guidance to restaurateurs. Third, only one outcome of authenticity was prioritised in this study, that of consumer repurchase intention, and hence, future studies can include other outcomes (e.g., recommendation intentions online and offline). Fourth, limited elements for each type of ability-related authenticity were measured. Future studies can expand these to examine antecedents such as consumer emotions, satisfaction, and attachment to time-honoured restaurants.

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Figure 1: Conceptual model

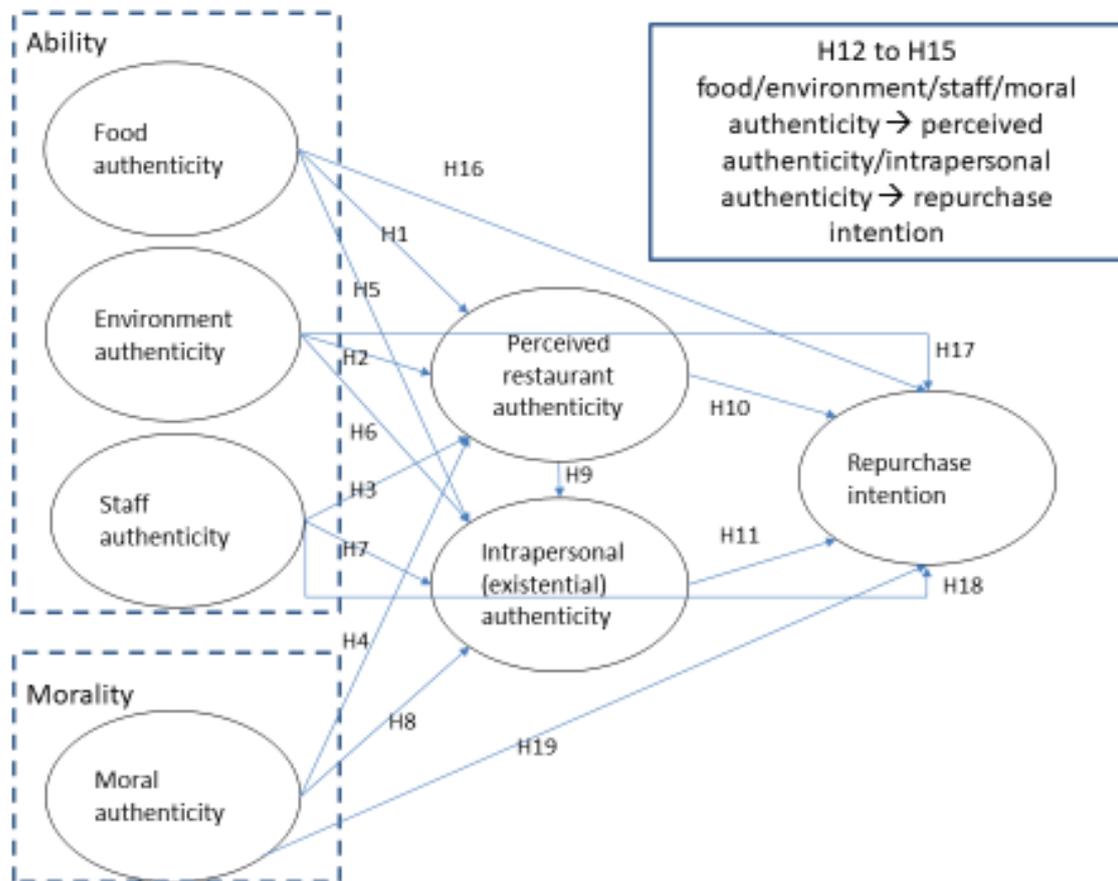


Figure 2: Final structural model

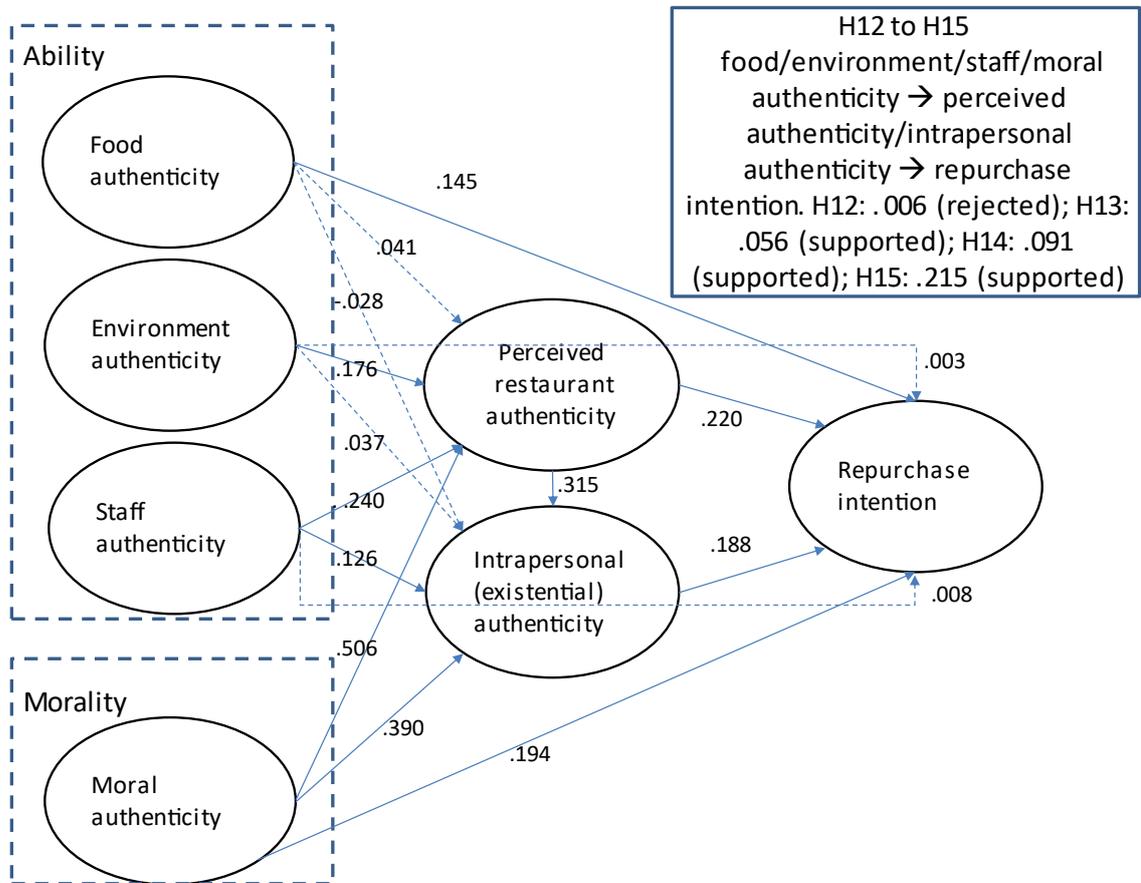


Table 1: Recent hospitality authenticity studies

Study	Hospitality context	Theoretical lens	Type(s) of authenticity	Antecedents of authenticity	Consequences of authenticity	Some major findings
Chen et al., 2022	Coffeehouse chain	Stimulus-organism-response model	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	Self enhancement, brand attachment, brand loyalty	Brand authenticity (continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism) was found to result in self-enhancement (achievement plus perceived power), which paved the way to generate brand attachment and loyalty.
Hwang et al., 2022	South Korean restaurants	N.A.	Moral authenticity	Utilitarian value, hedonic value	Brand satisfaction, brand preference, brand loyalty	Brand authenticity was found to influence brand satisfaction, preference, and loyalty. Brand authenticity had indirect effects on brand loyalty.
Kim & Lee, 2022	Ethnic restaurant	Stimulus-organism-response model	Perceived authenticity	Substantive servicescape, communicative servicescape, exoticism	Place attachment, experience intensification, experience extension	Servicescape affected exoticism and authenticity, which in turn influenced place attachment towards experience intensification and extension.
Le et al., 2022	Restaurant	Newly developed framework	Authenticity of the self (existential authenticity);	N.A.	N.A.	Authenticity of the self relates to existential authenticity; Authenticity of the producer covers 'reflection of values,

			Authenticity of the producer (including moral authenticity); Authenticity of the other (including perceived authenticity)			intentions, goals’, as well as ‘inherent qualities and characteristics’; Authenticity of the other comprises ‘conformity to existing knowledge of categories and types’, and ‘histories, events, valued places and persons’, which relate to object-based and constructive authenticities. Here, ‘deviations from existing knowledge’ appears as a new authenticity indicator.
Yang et al., 2022	Independent restaurant	Signalling theory	Perceived authenticity	Transparency information, exposure on business transparency	Purchase intention	Secret recipes could result in higher food authenticity, but secret regarding the food supply chain could not generate authenticity.
Chao et al., 2021	Indigenous restaurant	Stimulus-organism-response model	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	N.A.	Restaurant authenticity plays a moderating role between servicescape and experiential value, which contributes to consumer emotions and word-of-mouth, in both positive and negative ways.
Kim, 2021	Time-honoured restaurant	Mehrabian and Russell model	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	Positive emotions, revisit intention	Perceived authenticity (e.g., consistency, continuity, traditional, honesty,

						uniqueness, talent and scarcity) affects positive emotions leading to revisit intention.
Kim & Huang, 2021	Local food consumption	Newly developed framework	Perceived authenticity	Locavorism	Price, willingness to visit	Authenticity could positively generate pride, which finally results in consumers' behavioural intention.
Le et al., 2021a	Restaurant	Newly developed framework	Authenticity of the other; Authenticity of the producer (including moral authenticity); Authenticity of the self (existential authenticity)	N.A.	N.A.	Authenticity of the other consists of historical authenticity, categorical authenticity (i.e., constructive or perceived authenticity), and deviated authenticity. Authenticity of the producer and authenticity of the self relate to values authenticity, where existential and moral authenticity reflect.
Le et al., 2021b	Restaurant	Newly developed framework	Perceived authenticity; Existential authenticity; Objective Authenticity; Staged Authenticity	N.A.	N.A.	The new framework discussed authenticity types using interrelationships amongst consumers, providers, and experiences. Constructive authenticity does not require consumer-provider interactions whilst existential authenticity may have.

Lee & Chuang, 2021	Hotel	Stimulus-organism-response model	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	Satisfaction, quality of life, loyalty	Hotel authenticity mainly influences consumer satisfaction, whilst servicescape factors could influence both satisfaction and perceived quality of life, which result in loyalty.
Shafieizadeh et al., 2021	Food truck	Expectancy-disconfirmation theory, script theory	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	Quality perception, dining satisfaction, memorable experience, word-of-mouth	Authenticity perception and quality perception of food trucks lead to dining satisfaction, and dining experiences, which finally result in recommendation of the trucks.
Akarsu et al., 2020	Airbnb	Social exchange theory	Existential authenticity	Airbnb platform	Likability, behavioural intentions	Airbnb platform could influence perceived authenticity and experience, which relate to visitors' likability on Airbnb.
Kim et al., 2020	Traditional restaurant	Cognitive appraisal theory	Perceived authenticity	Authenticator, ownership type, history	Restaurant image, positive emotion, purchase intention	Perceived restaurant authenticity has a direct or indirect influence on purchase intention (through restaurant image and positive emotions).
Kim & Song, 2020	Authentic restaurant	Trust-transfer theory, signalling theory	Perceived authenticity	Credibility of authenticity claims, perceived competence	Purchase intention	Restaurant authenticity is attributable to the credibility of authenticity claims (i.e., authenticator, ownership type, history) and perceived restaurant competence. It

Mody & Hanks, 2020	Hotel/Airbnb	Newly developed framework	Perceived/ Existential authenticity	N.A.	Brand love, brand loyalty	could generate purchase intention. Authenticity connects to brand love and loyalty. Authenticity is understood at different levels.
Skinner et al., 2020	Restaurant	N.A.	Perceived authenticity	Local (food) components	Restaurant choice	Restaurant authenticity is judged by where locals eat and offering of local speciality dishes and wines.
Wen et al., 2020	Ethnic restaurant	Cue utilisation theory, consumer socialisation theory	Existential authenticity	Music enjoyment, music congruency	Satisfaction, behavioural intention	Whether the ethnic music is congruent with the restaurant theme can have an influence on perceived authenticity, which results in satisfaction and behavioural intention.
DiPietro & Levitt, 2019	American-style restaurant	N.A.	Perceived authenticity	Food and beverage, local community marketing, restaurant servicescape, food knowledge and experience	Satisfaction, return intentions	Restaurants' food and beverage, as well as local community marketing, have strong effects on perceived restaurant authenticity, leading to satisfaction and return intentions
Le et al., 2019	Restaurant	Newly developed framework	Authenticity of the other/the thing; Authenticity of the self; Authenticity of the organisation	N.A.	N.A.	This paper conducted a systematic literature review. It found little research explored authenticity of the organisation from the supplier perspective. It found that the majority of authenticity research

Song et al., 2019	Ethnic restaurant	Congruity theory	Perceived authenticity	Congruity between employees'/customers' ethnic background and restaurant theme	N.A.	concerning dining experiences adopted the unidimensional perspective to explore authenticity. Ethnic restaurant authenticity is influenced by consumers' knowledge of the cuisine, as well as social factors in the form of congruity amongst employees' ethnic background, restaurant theme, and other consumers' ethnic background.
Liu et al., 2018	Full-service Italian restaurant	Newly developed framework	Perceived authenticity	N.A.	Perceived quality, perceived value, behavioural intention	Restaurant consumers place more emphasis on restaurant authenticity when they are more interested in Italian food and culture.
Meng & Choi, 2018	Theme restaurant	Theory of planned behaviour	Existential authenticity	N.A.	Involvement, revisit intention	Other than consumer attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (i.e., elements of Theory of Planned Behaviour), consumers' perceived (i.e., existential) authenticity could also lead to restaurant revisit intention directly or indirectly through consumer involvement.

Youn & Kim, 2017	Ethnic restaurant	Newly developed framework	Perceived authenticity	Preparatory stage (ingredients), presentation stage (dish name, story about the dish's origins)	Purchase intention	Restaurant authenticity could lead to consumer satisfaction and purchase intention. It could originate from perceptions of both preparatory stages (e.g., ingredients) and presentation stages (e.g., dish name, story about the dish's origin).
Lu et al., 2015	Ethnic restaurant	Brand equity model	Perceived/existential authenticity	N.A.	Brand equity (brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty), brand choice intention	Consumers' authenticity could influence brand equity at the consumer level (e.g., brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty) and eventually, consumers' brand choice intention.
Concluding observation of research gaps	Limited attention to time-honoured restaurants	Limited studies used signalling theory to highlight the possible information asymmetry that exists between signallers and recipients	The majority of the studies focused on perceived authenticity from a unidimensional perspective, with insufficient attention given to existential authenticity	Limited studies clearly distinguished perceived and existential authenticities and treated them as authenticity assessment outcomes of a number of authenticity cues: food authenticity, environment authenticity, staff authenticity, and moral authenticity. Limited studies adopted perceived and existential authenticities simultaneously to predict the repurchase intention of hospitality consumers. None of the studies explored the inter-connectedness between perceived and existential authenticities.		

and moral
authenticity.

None of the studies found structural relationships amongst the different types of restaurant authenticity, such as perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, and moral authenticity.

Table 2. Sample profile (N=424)

Demographic background and brand name		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	244	57.5
	Female	180	42.5
Age	18 to 20	5	1.2
	21 to 30	155	36.6
	31-50	214	50.5
	51 or above	50	11.8
Education	High school or below	15	3.5
	College (such as sub-degree)	115	27.1
	Undergraduate	259	61.1
	Postgraduate	35	8.3
Occupation	Civil servant	26	6.1
	Entrepreneur	28	6.6
	Professional	134	31.6
	Private business owner	51	12.0
	White-collar employee	80	18.9
	Salesperson or service worker	44	10.4
	Freelancer	18	4.2
	Student	34	8.0
	Retired	1	.2
	Other	8	1.9
Personal monthly income	RMB 2999 and below	9	2.1
	RMB 3000-4999	6	1.4
	RMB 5000-6999	71	16.7
	RMB 7000-9999	161	38.0
	RMB 10000 and above	145	34.2
	No income	20	4.7
	Unstable income	12	2.8
Brands (Top 10 frequently mentioned brands)	Quanjude 全聚德	36	8.5
	Qingfeng 庆丰	33	7.8
	Donglaishun 东来顺	28	6.6
	Bianyifang 便宜坊烤鸭	19	4.5
	Emei Restaurant 峨嵋酒家	16	3.8
	Fengzeyuan 丰泽园饭店	14	3.3
	Dongxinshun Baodu Zhang 东兴顺爆肚张	13	3.1
	Taifenglou Restaurant 泰丰楼饭庄	13	3.1
	Beijing Restaurant 北京饭店	12	2.8
	Xi'an Restaurant 西安饭庄	12	2.8

Table 3: CFA results

Construct and items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Factor loadings	CR	AVE	α
Food authenticity						.836	.632	.828
Traditional food in this restaurant is authentic	5.484	1.040	-0.247	-0.251	.843			
Authentic Chinese food	5.476	1.087	-0.422	-0.169	.853			
Authentic local food	5.528	1.119	-0.570	0.126	.676			
Environment authenticity						.811	.590	.804
The exterior appearance is authentically Chinese/local	5.408	1.157	-0.409	-0.257	.725			
The interior design is authentically Chinese/local	5.434	1.124	-0.402	-0.254	.863			
The decorations are authentically Chinese/local	5.538	1.100	-0.466	-0.310	.707			
Staff authenticity						.813	.592	.812
Employees provide an authentic Chinese/local dining experience	5.387	1.128	-0.257	-0.676	.732			
Employees serve food with authentic Chinese/local way	5.377	1.115	-0.384	-0.378	.805			
Employees demonstrate authentic Chinese/local culture	5.337	1.141	-0.420	-0.278	.769			
Moral authenticity						.909	.500	.910
Cares more about its beliefs than it does about making money	5.137	1.052	-0.202	0.170	.732			
Puts its values over its profits	5.076	1.001	-0.010	-0.313	.697			
About a lot more than just making money	5.116	0.976	0.073	-0.291	.725			
Cares more about its values than profits	5.151	0.992	0.044	-0.413	.737			
True to an important set of values in all that it does	5.158	0.971	-0.118	-0.022	.749			
Sincere in attempting to do something important for the society/country	5.222	1.005	-0.006	-0.229	.713			

Motivated by its own set of values	5.259	0.962	-0.091	-0.179	.718			
Has a set of values that is central to its identity	5.219	0.921	-0.138	0.149	.657			
Focuses on important value choices that are clear to me	5.219	0.946	-0.097	0.125	.682			
Cares about doing what it feels is right	5.231	0.942	-0.118	-0.345	.656			
Perceived authenticity						.852	.591	.850
Consider this an authentic time-honoured restaurant	5.288	1.062	-0.083	-0.674	.714			
Would make me feel connected to the old days of China	5.175	1.030	0.010	-0.638	.797			
Experience and/or learn about the lifestyle of the old days	5.146	1.044	-0.007	-0.467	.814			
Would take me back in time	5.156	1.033	-0.212	-0.193	.745			
Intrapersonal (existential) authenticity						.892	.622	.891
My body was freed from the self-control or limitation of daily work/routine life and becomes more self and subjective in its own right	5.234	1.074	-0.510	0.545	.807			
Seek extraordinary experience to pursue self-realisation or get self-satisfaction	5.068	1.103	-0.284	0.425	.819			
Able to enjoy freedom	5.153	1.091	-0.307	0.181	.790			
Able to discover more about myself	5.099	1.104	-0.504	0.369	.732			
In touch with my feelings and emotions	5.278	1.106	-0.515	0.247	.794			
Repurchase intention						.839	.634	.838
I would like to dine in this restaurant again	5.234	1.126	-0.399	-0.233	.755			
I would choose to go to this restaurant over other time-honoured restaurants in the future	5.083	1.130	-0.291	-0.316	.811			
This restaurant would be my first choice compared to other time-honoured restaurants in the future	5.149	1.095	-0.363	-0.156	.822			

Note: N = 424 with 3,000 bootstraps.

Seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Table 4. Construct intercorrelations

	FD	EN	ST	MA	PA	IA	RI	Mean	SD
FD	.795 ^a							5.496	0.934
EN	.412	.768 ^a						5.460	0.956
ST	.363	.314	.769 ^a					5.367	0.962
MA	.356	.401	.334	.707 ^a				5.179	0.727
PA	.374	.428	.442	.619	.769 ^a			5.191	0.865
IA	.296	.345	.373	.599	.572	.789 ^a		5.167	0.915
RI	.337	.300	.285	.461	.468	.445	.797 ^a	5.155	0.971

Note: FD: Food authenticity, EN: Environment authenticity, ST: Staff authenticity, MA: Moral authenticity, PA: Perceived authenticity, IA: Intrapersonal (existential) authenticity, RI: Repurchase intention, ^a Square root of the average variance extracted

Table 5. Results of hypothesis test

Hypothesis	Standardised path coefficients	<i>p</i>
H1: FD → PA	.041	.538
H2: EN → PA	.176	.003**
H3: ST → PA	.240	.001**
H4: MA → PA	.506	.001**
H5: FD → IA	-.028	.621
H6: EN → IA	.037	.515
H7: ST → IA	.126	.022*
H8: MA → IA	.390	.001**
H9: PA → IA	.315	.000**
H10: PA → RI	.220	.019*
H11: IA → RI	.188	.022*
H16: FD → RI	.145	.041*
H17: EN → RI	.003	.971
H18: ST → RI	.008	.933
H19: MA → RI	.194	.029*
H12: food authenticity → perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity → repurchase intention	.006	.731
H13: environment authenticity → perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity → repurchase intention	.056	.008**
H14: staff authenticity → perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity → repurchase intention	.091	.000**
H15: moral authenticity → perceived authenticity/intrapersonal authenticity → repurchase intention	.215	.001**

Note: FD: Food authenticity, EN: Environment authenticity, ST: Staff authenticity, MA: Moral authenticity, PA: Perceived authenticity, IA: Intrapersonal (existential) authenticity, RI: Repurchase intention

** significant at .01 level

* significant at .05 level

Appendix. The major survey questions in Chinese

Food authenticity

这家餐馆供应正宗的传统食物

这家餐馆的食物具有浓郁的中国特色

这家餐馆的食物极富地方特色

Environment authenticity

这家餐馆的外观具有浓郁的中国或地方特色

这家餐馆的内部设计彰显正宗的中国文化或地方文化

这家餐馆的装潢具有浓郁的中国或地方特色

Staff authenticity

这家餐厅的员工提供正宗的中式用餐体验

这家餐厅的员工按传统中式方式出菜

这家餐厅的员工展现正宗中国文化或地方文化

Moral authenticity

这家餐厅似乎更关注自己的理念，而非赚钱

这家餐厅看重自身的价值高于利润

这家餐厅多向发展，而绝非仅限于赚钱

这家餐厅关心其价值胜于利润

这家餐厅在所有活动中都秉承一套重要的价值观

这家餐厅真诚地努力为社会/国家做贡献

这家餐厅按照自身的价值观行事

这家餐厅有与其自身身份匹配的一整套价值观

这家餐厅专注的重要价值选项显而易见

这家餐厅在乎做对的事情

Perceived authenticity

这是家正宗的老字号餐馆

这家餐馆让我和中国的过去联系在一起

我在这家老字号餐厅感受或了解以往时代的生活方式

这家餐馆让我回到过去

Intrapersonal (existential) authenticity

当我光顾这个老字号餐饮品牌时，我的身体摆脱了日常工作/日常生活的束缚，让我变得更加关注自我、主观的感受

当我光顾这个老字号餐饮品牌时，我试图寻求非凡的体验来实现自我或获得自我满足

在这家老字号餐厅用餐时，我能享受自由

在这家老字号餐厅消费时，我能够更多地了解自己

在这家老字号餐厅用餐时，我意识到、并关注自己的感受和情感

Repurchase intention

我会再次光顾这家餐厅用餐

将来我会选择这家餐厅而非其他老字号餐厅

和其他老字号餐厅比起来，这家餐厅是我的首选