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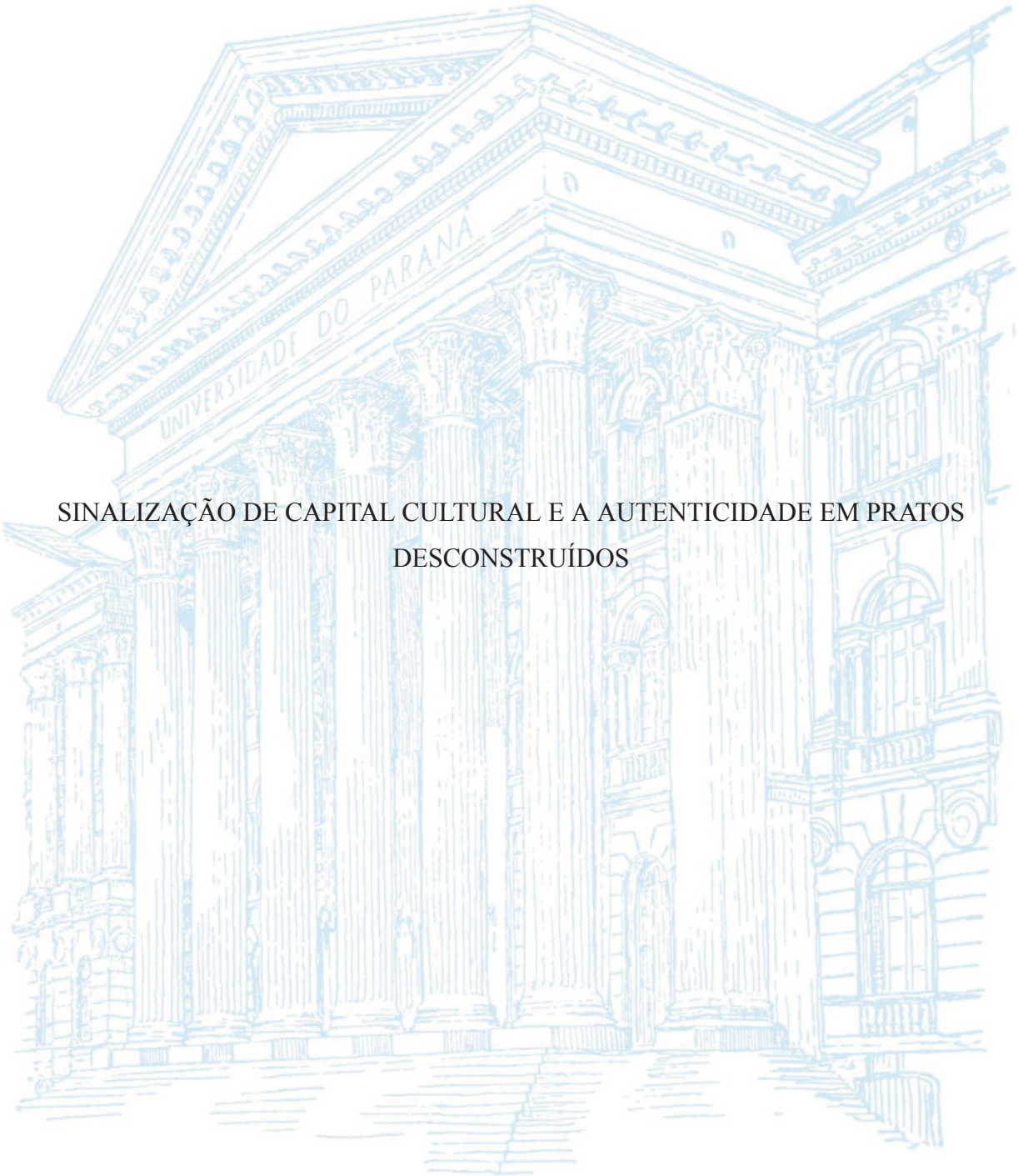


# SINALIZAÇÃO DE CAPITAL CULTURAL E A AUTENTICIDADE EM PRATOS DESCONSTRUÍDOS

CURITIBA

2026

GUILHERME CARUSO NASCIMENTO

# SINALIZAÇÃO DE CAPITAL CULTURAL E A AUTENTICIDADE EM PRATOS DESCONSTRUÍDOS

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Orientador: Prof. Dr. José Carlos Korelo

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## RESUMO

Esta dissertação examina como o capital cultural sinalizado por um chef e o nível de desconstrução de um prato afetam conjuntamente as percepções de autenticidade, a atitude e a disposição a pagar dos consumidores. Fundamentando-se na teoria do capital cultural de Bourdieu, na filosofia da desconstrução de Derrida, na teoria da sinalização e na Teoria da Distintividade Ótima, o estudo propõe que a autenticidade True-to-Ideal opera bidimensionalmente: a TTI-Conformidade captura a correspondência com ideais tradicionais, enquanto a TTI-Distintividade captura a correspondência com ideais criativos. Um experimento entre sujeitos 2 (capital cultural sinalizado: baixo vs. alto) × 3 (desconstrução: base, baixa, alta) foi conduzido online com 302 participantes (249 após filtragem por atenção), utilizando estímulos visuais de cheesecake gerados por IA e perfis fictícios de chefs. A desconstrução reduziu linearmente a TTI-Conformidade ($\eta^2p = 0,283$) e elevou significativamente a TTI-Distintividade em relação ao baseline tradicional ($p < 0,001$), com uma tendência direcional de U-invertido não distinguível de uma função degrau categórica ($\Delta R^2 = 0,007$, $p = 0,168$; H1b parcialmente suportada). O capital cultural do chef não exerceu efeito direto sobre nenhuma dimensão de autenticidade, mas operou por uma via serial dimensão-específica: o capital sinalizado elevou a erudição percebida, que seletivamente aumentou a TTI-Distintividade, transmitindo efeitos tanto para atitude quanto para disposição a pagar. Essa via era estruturalmente invariante em sua geração, mas contexto-dependente na fase de valoração, com a desconstrução amplificando o efeito da autenticidade criativa sobre a atitude ($p = 0,014$). Um mecanismo de supressão competitiva explicou o efeito total próximo de zero da desconstrução sobre a atitude: vias indiretas opostas por conformidade e distintividade anularam-se mutuamente. A TTI-Conformidade predisse positivamente a atitude, mas negativamente a disposição a pagar — o Paradoxo da Conformidade. Esses achados estabelecem a estrutura bidimensional da autenticidade culinária, identificam a supressão competitiva e a sinalização dimensão-específica como mecanismos-chave, e revelam as consequências econômicas assimétricas da autenticidade baseada em conformidade versus distintividade.



Palavras-chave: autenticidade; capital cultural; desconstrução; teoria da sinalização; teoria da distintividade ótima; gastronomia; comportamento do consumidor; autenticidade true-to-ideal; marcas humanas.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how a chef's signalled cultural capital and the level of deconstruction of a dish jointly affect consumer perceptions of authenticity, attitude, and willingness to pay. Drawing on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, signalling theory, and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, the study proposes that True-to-Ideal authenticity operates bidimensionally: TTI-Conformity captures correspondence to traditional ideals, whilst TTI-Distinctiveness captures correspondence to creative ideals. A 2 (signalled cultural capital: low vs. high) × 3 (deconstruction: baseline, low, high) between-subjects experiment was conducted online with 302 participants (249 after attention filtering), using AI-generated cheesecake stimuli and fictitious chef profiles. Deconstruction linearly reduced TTI-Conformity ($\eta^2p = .283$) and significantly elevated TTI-Distinctiveness relative to the traditional baseline ($p < .001$), with a directional inverted-U tendency that was not distinguishable from a categorical step function ($\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p = .168$; H1b partially supported). The chef's cultural capital exerted no direct effect on either authenticity dimension but operated through a dimension-specific serial pathway: signalled capital enhanced perceived erudition, which selectively elevated TTI-Distinctiveness, transmitting effects to both attitude and willingness to pay. This pathway was structurally invariant in its generation but context-dependent at the valuation stage, with deconstruction amplifying creative authenticity's effect on attitude ($p = .014$). A competitive suppression mechanism explained the near-zero total effect of deconstruction on attitude: opposing indirect pathways through conformity and distinctiveness cancelled at the aggregate level. TTI-Conformity positively predicted attitude but negatively predicted willingness to pay—the Conformity Paradox. These findings establish the bidimensional structure of culinary authenticity, identify competitive suppression and dimension-specific signalling as key mechanisms, and reveal the asymmetric economic consequences of conformity-based versus distinctiveness-based authenticity.



Keywords: authenticity; cultural capital; deconstruction; signalling theory; optimal distinctiveness theory; foodservice; consumer behaviour; true-to-ideal authenticity; human brands.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANOVA - Analysis of Variance

BDM - Becker–DeGroot–Marschak (auction mechanism)

BRL - Brazilian Real (currency)

CCC - Consumer Cultural Capital

CCT - Consumer Culture Theory

CI - Confidence Interval

DECONC - Deconstruction Contrast (continuous linear variable)

DECONCSQ - Deconstruction Contrast Squared (quadratic term)

DECONLEV - Deconstruction Level (categorical: 1 = baseline, 2 = low, 3 = high)

DV - Dependent Variable

ERC - Entity–Referent Correspondence (framework)

GLM - General Linear Model

IQR - Interquartile Range

LLCI - Lower-Level Confidence Interval

MC_ERUD - Manipulation Check: Perceived Erudition

MD - Mean Difference

ODT - Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

PROCESS - PROCESS Macro for Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis (Hayes, 2022)

SCC - Signalled Cultural Capital (of the chef)

SD - Standard Deviation

SE - Standard Error

TTI - True-to-Ideal (authenticity framework)

TTICONF - True-to-Ideal Conformity (traditional authenticity dimension)

TTIDIST - True-to-Ideal Distinctiveness (creative authenticity dimension)

ULCI - Upper-Level Confidence Interval

VIF - Variance Inflation Factor

WTP - Willingness to Pay

WTP_WIN - Willingness to Pay (Winsorised)

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever tasted a deconstructed cheesecake, salad, or any particular deconstructed dish? Apart from its flavour, ingredients, preparation techniques, or the chef's notoriety (e.g., Ferran Adrià, Heston Blumenthal), what determines the authenticity of such a dish? This paper examines the influence of cultural capital signalling by chefs (i.e., human brands) on consumer perceptions of authenticity regarding deconstructed culinary recipes.

Culinary deconstruction, drawing upon Jacques Derrida's philosophy (Derrida, 1967), challenges the traditional conception of dishes by subverting their conventional forms and presentations. Authenticity, however, requires a stable referent, and a dish's deconstruction can so radically transform it that it severs its perceived link to its traditional identity, thereby undermining its authenticity (Strohl, 2019). The central paradox is that the very deconstruction that renders a dish unique can also make it feel inauthentic. This tension resonates with broader debates in cultural markets, where entities must navigate the competing demands of conformity and differentiation to maintain legitimacy (Lehman et al., 2019).

Pilot testing for this study, however, revealed that this paradox may be resolved through a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. Following Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010), which posits that individuals simultaneously experience needs for assimilation and differentiation, pilot data demonstrated that True-to-Ideal authenticity operates bidimensionally: TTI-Conformity (correspondence to traditional ideals) and TTI-Distinctiveness (correspondence to creative ideals). These dimensions exhibited near-zero correlation in pilot data ($r = .087$), suggesting that a deconstructed dish can simultaneously be perceived as low in conformity to tradition yet high in creative distinctiveness. This bidimensional structure aligns with emerging perspectives on authenticity as a multifaceted judgement rather than a unitary construct (Newman & Smith, 2016). The main study was designed to examine whether this bidimensional structure replicates in a larger and more heterogeneous sample; it did, with the dimensions exhibiting a weak positive correlation ($r = .188$, $p = .003$) and producing divergent antecedent structures and downstream effects, as detailed in Chapter 4.

As a counterpoint to the effect of deconstruction on a dish's authenticity, a chef may leverage their accumulated cultural capital by signalling attributes beyond mere culinary expertise. Prior research highlights chefs as human brands, with authenticity being a core

attribute (Osorio, Centeno, & Cambra-Fierro, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2023). Özsomer and Altaras (2008) have identified cultural capital as a precursor to authenticity. However, the existing literature lacks a precise definition that integrates Bourdieu's triadic framework (embodied, objectified, institutionalised cultural capital) within this context. This study addresses that gap by proposing that a chef's non-field-specific signalled cultural capital—conveyed through credentials (e.g., a PhD in an unrelated field), cultural assets (e.g., published works on non-culinary topics), and sophisticated tastes (e.g., classical music, fine arts)—may shape perceptions of authenticity, particularly for deconstructed dishes. Whether such signals effectively enhance both dimensions of authenticity remains an empirical question that this investigation seeks to resolve.

If such an effect obtains, its mechanism was initially theorised to operate through a halo effect (Thorndike, 1920; Leuthesser, Kohli, & Harich, 1995) rather than domain-specific expertise transfer. When consumers perceive a chef as possessing high general cultural capital, they may infer broader intellectual sophistication and intentionality that extends to the chef's creative work. This generalised positive evaluation could provide consumers with a reason to re-evaluate the deconstructed dish, legitimising its departure from convention by framing it as a purposeful and creative act. As the results will demonstrate, the actual pathway proved more nuanced—operating through perceived erudition and selectively enhancing only the distinctiveness dimension of authenticity (Chapter 5). This research also extends existing brand literature, which has largely overlooked the concept of cultural capital, with a few notable exceptions (Pluntz & Pras, 2020). By examining how a human brand's non-field-specific cultural capital affects authenticity perceptions, this study contributes to the literature on brand meaning and cultural co-creation (Fournier & Alvarez, 2019; Schroeder, 2009).

Within different frameworks, the relationship between novelty and authenticity has been studied in the contexts of brands (Keiningham et al., 2019) and food products (Camus, 2004; Pantin-Sohier, Lancelot Miltgen, & Camus, 2015). This study employs a distinct approach to novelty by operationalising it as the level of deconstruction and measuring its effect on both authenticity dimensions. The Entity-Referent Correspondence (ERC) Framework provides insight into how consumers perceive authenticity in deconstructed products (Moulard, Raggio, & Folse, 2021). Furthermore, it offers an empirical test of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in a modern consumer context, investigating how a 'human brand's' cultural assets can influence consumer perceptions of authenticity.

Authenticity judgements, however, may be contingent on the consumers' own cultural capital. Building on Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), this study examines whether a consumer's own cultural background fundamentally structures their perception of a chef's signals. As 'cultural decoders' (Holt, 1998), consumers with high cultural capital may be better equipped to recognise and appreciate a chef's highbrow signals, potentially moderating the relationship between the chef's cultural capital and the dish's perceived authenticity on both dimensions. If this reasoning holds, one would expect the signalling effect to be stronger among consumers whose own habitus predisposes them to value the cultural markers being communicated.

Perceived authenticity, in turn, is not merely a passive judgement but a crucial driver of consumer value. When a dish is perceived as authentic—whether through conformity to tradition or through creative distinctiveness—it is expected to lead to favourable attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. The consumer's assessment of the dish's genuineness may translate into a more positive attitude toward it and a greater willingness to pay, though the relative contribution of each authenticity dimension to these outcomes warrants empirical scrutiny.

This research may provide valuable insights for industry professionals. For chefs and *restaurateurs*, the findings may yield practical guidance on deconstructing traditional dishes by examining how a chef's personal brand—specifically their signalled non-field-specific cultural capital—relates to the perceived authenticity of a dish through both conformity and distinctiveness pathways. Should these relationships be confirmed, they would suggest that an investment in cultural assets, even those unrelated to culinary expertise, can be a meaningful part of the value proposition for a high-end culinary experience.

In summary, this dissertation addresses a contemporary cultural trend—the rise of deconstructed cuisine—while making a contribution to fundamental theories in consumer behaviour. Using a 2 (signalled cultural capital: low vs. high) × 3 (deconstruction: baseline, low, high) between-subjects experiment conducted via Qualtrics with 302 respondents (249 after attention-check filtering), the study investigates how both authenticity dimensions mediate consumer outcomes. The literature review that follows synthesises deconstruction, authenticity, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, cultural capital, and signalling theory to frame this investigation.

# 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 DECONSTRUCTION, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE CULINARY FIELD

Deconstruction has its roots in the work of Jacques Derrida (1967), who proposed that meaning is not immutable, but rather a result of the differences between signs that are related to one another in hierarchical binary oppositions. Since those oppositions are context and time-dependent, ultimate meaning is never achieved, but always deferred (Derrida, 1967). To deconstruct is to uncover and dismantle those oppositions by manipulating their inherent hierarchy.

In the culinary arts, deconstruction challenges the idea of a single, authoritative interpretation of what a given dish should be. This approach aims to preserve a recognisable trace of the dish's essence, prompting a fresh appraisal of its established identity (Derrida, 1967). Molecular cuisine, with its innovative techniques (Cousins, O'Gorman, & Stierand, 2010; This, 2009), epitomises gastronomic deconstruction. Spherification, emulsification, gelification, and other techniques result in the disruption of hierarchical binaries proposed by Derrida (e.g., hard/soft, sweet/salty, hot/cold).

A deconstructed cheesecake, for instance, might feature spherified cream or crumbled components, challenging traditional expectations. In this sense, culinary art is more than just the functional act of eating or even a sensory experience; it is a complex system of signs, conventions, and power dynamics, where even the most seemingly stable dishes can be shown to be fluid and constructed. The dishes' appearance can be drastically altered, so long as they retain their essential character (Stierand & Lynch, 2008). In other words, culinary deconstruction means breaking apart elements that are traditionally combined to make a dish (Cousins et al., 2010).

A seemingly paradoxical relationship exists between the concepts of authenticity and deconstruction. Authenticity, in its most fundamental sense, is a claim of truthfulness or fidelity to an original and essential referent (Moulard et al., 2021). Whether that referent is a historical recipe, a cultural tradition, or a chef's vision, a judgment of authenticity requires a stable point of origin against which to measure. Deconstruction, however, subverts this very idea. It posits that stable, ultimate meaning is never achieved but always deferred through a network of unstable binary oppositions (Derrida, 1967), which presents a central conflict in the culinary arts: a deconstructed dish, by its very design, challenges the traditional form that

would serve as its authentic referent (Strohl, 2019), thus making authenticity an inherently complex and paradoxical endeavour.

A consensus among scholars often defines the concept of authenticity: to be authentic is to be 'real,' 'genuine,' or 'true.' Nevertheless, this seemingly straightforward definition immediately raises a more fundamental question that lies at the heart of the concept's many interpretations: true 'to what'? This central tension—between a simple definition and a complex referent—is what makes authenticity such a rich and contested topic in academic literature (Lehman et al., 2019).

Lehman et al. (2019) propose that authenticity can be understood through three distinct perspectives. Consistency, which examines the alignment between an entity's internal values and its external expressions, essentially asks, 'Is it true to itself?' Conformity, which assesses whether the entity adheres to the norms and expectations of its assigned or claimed social category. Finally, connection, which verifies a claimed link to a specific person, place, or time, addresses the question, 'Is it connected as claimed?'

Other frameworks, such as those from Morhart et al. (2015), Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021), and Beverland and Farrelly (2010), also capture various facets of authenticity. However, their focus on brand attributes or consumer self-assessment is less suited to this specific research context, which involves manipulating a product's form. For this reason, this paper assesses the authenticity of a product (an entity) by evaluating how well it aligns with a referent. The Entity-Referent Correspondence (ERC) Framework of Authenticity, as proposed by Moulard et al. (2021), is well-suited to this purpose. This framework is ideal because it suggests that authenticity is not a single attribute, but rather a correspondence between an entity and a referent, which can be an ideal (true-to-ideal), a fact (true-to-fact), or the entity's own identity (true-to-self). This makes it adaptable to various research contexts.

### 2.1.1 The Bidimensional Nature of True-to-Ideal Authenticity

The ERC Framework conceptualises True-to-Ideal (TTI) authenticity as a consumer's perception of 'the extent to which an entity's attributes correspond with a socially determined standard' (Moulard et al., 2021, p. 99). However, pilot testing for this study revealed a critical nuance: within the culinary context, TTI authenticity operates as a bidimensional construct,

comprising two empirically distinguishable dimensions that correspond to distinct referent ideals.

This bidimensionality aligns with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991), which posits that individuals simultaneously experience two fundamental social needs: assimilation (belonging to recognised categories) and differentiation (being distinct within those categories). Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer (2010) demonstrate that these opposing needs create a curvilinear relationship, where optimal identity satisfaction occurs at an equilibrium point balancing inclusion and uniqueness. Applied to products, this suggests that consumers may evaluate entities against dual standards: category conformity and creative distinctiveness.

**TTI-Conformity:** Correspondence to Traditional Ideals. The first dimension, TTI-Conformity, captures a consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity's attributes correspond with traditional, established category standards. In the culinary context, TTI-Conformity reflects whether a dish is perceived as a 'proper,' 'typical,' or 'classic' exemplar of its category. This dimension corresponds to what Strohl (2019) describes as 'standard features'—the core ingredients, flavours, and forms that connect a dish to its category identity. High TTI-Conformity indicates that consumers perceive the dish as faithfully representing the traditional concept of a cheesecake.

**TTI-Distinctiveness:** Correspondence to Creative Ideals. The second dimension, TTI-Distinctiveness, captures a consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity's attributes correspond with creative, differentiating ideals. This dimension reflects whether a dish is perceived as 'singular,' 'unique,' or possessing 'its own identity.' High TTI-Distinctiveness indicates that consumers recognise the dish as a legitimate creative interpretation that stands apart from conventional exemplars. This aligns with what Strohl (2019) terms 'contra-standard features'—novel elements that add innovation while maintaining categorical connection.

**The Near-Independence of the Two Dimensions.** Critically, pilot data revealed that these two dimensions exhibited a near-zero correlation ($r = .087$), indicating that a dish can be evaluated largely independently along each dimension. The main study confirmed this pattern, revealing a weak positive correlation ($r = .188$, $p = .003$) that represents approximately 3.5% of shared variance — empirically distinguishable but not fully independent. This near-independence resolves a fundamental tension: a deconstructed dish may simultaneously be perceived as low in TTI-Conformity (not matching traditional expectations) and high in

TTI-Distinctiveness (perceived as a unique, creative interpretation). The paradox of culinary deconstruction is thus not a paradox at all when authenticity is understood bidimensionally.

This finding resonates with Deephouse's (1999, p. 147) strategic balance theory, which proposes that entities should be ‘as different as legitimately possible’. Applied to culinary products, this suggests that deconstructed dishes occupy a strategic position where they sacrifice conformity-based authenticity while potentially gaining distinctiveness-based authenticity. The optimal level of deconstruction, therefore, is not zero (pure conformity) nor maximum (category violation), but an intermediate point where the dish maintains categorical membership while expressing legitimate creative differentiation.

### 2.1.2 Reformulating the Effect of Deconstruction

The bidimensional conceptualisation necessitates a reformulation of the original hypothesis regarding deconstruction's effect on authenticity. Authenticity often hinges on a dish's adherence to an established form or tradition (Moulard et al., 2021). When a deconstructed dish, through radical transformation, deviates from these conventional referents, its perceived link to its original identity is weakened. According to Strohl (2019), a food token is fundamentally authentic if it can be reliably identified as belonging to its relevant category within a given context. As deconstruction increases, the dish's correspondence to traditional standards decreases:

**H1a: An increase in a dish's level of deconstruction will lead to a decrease in TTI-Conformity.**

The relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness, however, is more nuanced. Following Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) and strategic balance theory (Deephouse, 1999), we propose that this relationship follows a curvilinear (inverted-U) pattern. At low levels of deconstruction, the dish may be perceived as merely conventional, lacking the distinctive character that signals creative authenticity. As deconstruction increases to moderate levels, the dish gains recognition as a unique, creative interpretation—the optimal point where the chef appears 'as different as legitimately possible' (Deephouse, 1999, p. 147). However, at extreme levels of deconstruction, the dish may transgress categorical boundaries entirely, appearing as an illegitimate departure rather than a creative interpretation, thereby reducing its perceived distinctiveness.

This curvilinear pattern is consistent with the 'legitimacy threshold' identified in ODT research (Zhao et al., 2017), which demonstrates that excessive differentiation can undermine rather than enhance an entity's perceived value. Chan, Berger, and Van Boven (2012) further support this by showing that consumers seek to be 'identifiable but not identical'—differentiated enough to be unique, but not so different as to lose categorical membership. Applied to culinary products, extreme deconstruction may signal category violation rather than creative interpretation:

> **H1b: The relationship between a dish's level of deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness follows a curvilinear (inverted-U) pattern, such that moderate levels of deconstruction maximise TTI-Distinctiveness.**

The ERC framework provides a basis for measuring authenticity by assessing the correspondence between a deconstructed dish and its referent. This judgment, however, does not occur in a vacuum. Research suggests that consumers' judgements about authenticity in restaurants are influenced by cues measured against an observed essence (Le et al., 2022). What if, more than mere cues, the producer's characteristics were to be actively signalled to the consumer? I propose that a consumer's perception of a dish's authenticity is fundamentally shaped by the chef's credentials and public persona, or signalled cultural capital, which is the focus of the next section.

## 2.2 THE POWER OF CULTURAL CAPITAL SIGNALLING

As conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu, 'cultural capital' refers to the accumulation of non-financial assets, encompassing knowledge, skills, and dispositions, that individuals acquire and utilise to signal social status and engage with legitimate cultural practices within a given field (Bourdieu, 1979a; Jourdain & Naulin, 2011). Bourdieu's theory explains that individuals accumulate cultural capital through family and formal education, which shapes their 'sense of taste' and influences societal expectations based on their credentials. While researchers have explored distinct interpretations of this influential work, its principles are now critical for understanding how a human brand, such as a chef, leverages their cultural capital to achieve distinction (Davies & Rizk, 2018; DiMaggio, 1982).

Pluntz and Pras (2020) position cultural capital as a core attribute of human brands, illustrating how the social valuation of cultural capital occurs through legitimacy mechanisms linked to their identity attributes. In fact, a comprehensive body of research, known as

Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), has emerged incorporating Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Holt, 1995; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017). The literature suggests that cultural capital does indeed influence consumer perceptions, whether it is the consumer's or the brand's cultural capital.

To clarify the meaning of cultural capital for chefs as human brands, I draw upon Bourdieu's 'Les trois états du capital culturel' (Bourdieu, 1979a), utilising its three proposed states. Embodied cultural capital encompasses all acquired and accumulated cultural knowledge and dispositions that become inseparable from the individual, a concept Bourdieu referred to as habitus, or a 'feel for the game' that allows individuals to appreciate cultural goods. Objectified cultural capital refers to the material supports whose properties cannot be defined other than by their relation to the cultural capital in its embodied state, such as published novels or art collections. Finally, institutionalised cultural capital is the one which legitimises, guarantees, and makes one's cultural capital recognisable (Bourdieu, 1979a).

Signalling theory explores the transmission of information from one individual, known as the sender, to another, referred to as the receiver. The foundational work in economic signalling theory was established by Spence (1973), who demonstrated how individuals use observable attributes (signals) to convey unobservable qualities in markets characterised by information asymmetry. A signal is any physical or behavioural trait of an individual that has evolved to influence the behaviour of others (Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003). In social and economic contexts, signals are deliberately produced by a sender to convey specific information, distinguishing them from mere cues. While signals can be feigned, their credibility is maintained because they are typically costly to produce and entail significant penalties for misrepresentation (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973).

One possible type of signalling that links to status signalling is that of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1979b), cultural capital is an indicator and basis of social position. Cultural preferences and attitudes, referred to as 'tastes,' are conceptualised and used for social selection. Bourdieu demonstrates that cultural and economic tastes are commensurate with an individual's cultural capital, a phenomenon often reflected in associated differences in education, income, and occupational status. Individuals express these cultural signals through attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, products, and credentials. Since consumers can perceive brands as having human-like characteristics

(MacInnis & Folkes, 2017), the signalling of personal characteristics (Fremling & Posner, 1999), such as cultural capital, by brands is valid for human receptors.

Field-specific cultural capital (i.e., expertise) has been shown to influence authenticity perceptions (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Lee & Eastin, 2021), but **the focus of this study is the signalling of non-field-specific cultural capital**. The question is, if producers' characteristics are part of consumers' authenticity judgements, then how does their general cultural background influence that assessment?

**SCC and Bidimensional Authenticity.**

Özsomer and Altaras (2008) have laid the groundwork by establishing a brand's cultural capital as a precursor to authenticity. This study seeks to advance the literature by synthesising existing research on cultural capital and signalling theory. I investigate whether the signalling of a chef's non-field-specific cultural capital constitutes a meaningful factor in consumers' assessments of authenticity. For instance, Moulard et al. (2014) found that consumers use information about artists (as human brands) to value artwork. This corroborates the assumption that a chef's signalled cultural capital may also influence consumer perceptions of a dish's authenticity.

The mechanism initially hypothesised to underlie this influence was a halo effect (Thorndike, 1920). The halo effect is a well-documented cognitive bias whereby a positive impression of one attribute generalises to other, unrelated attributes (Leuthesser et al., 1995; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). When consumers perceive a chef as possessing high cultural capital through signals such as advanced degrees in non-culinary fields, sophisticated cultural tastes, or intellectual pursuits, this positive evaluation may create a generalised impression of competence, intentionality, and refined judgment.

Critically, this proposed mechanism does not operate through domain-specific expertise transfer. A chef's PhD in music theory does not provide knowledge about culinary traditions; their interest in astrophotography does not enhance understanding of flavour profiles. Rather, these signals may create a generalised attribution of intellectual sophistication and purposeful action that consumers extend to the chef's creative work. This reasoning aligns with research on the halo effect in brand contexts, which demonstrates that positive impressions in one domain can generalise to evaluations in unrelated domains (Madden, Roth, & Dillon, 2012).

To operationalise this construct for a chef, I draw upon Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979a, 1979b). The chef's embodied cultural capital, conveyed via a public persona that demonstrates highbrow tastes, is part of a cultural habitus, or familiarity with high culture (e.g., a taste for classical music or expertise in art history). Their objectified cultural capital is manifested in material assets such as published works and cultural possessions, which are tangible assets that correlate directly to the embodied dimension. Finally, institutionalised cultural capital, signalled through formal credentials like advanced degrees (for this study, unrelated to their culinary activity), serves as a received accreditation that legitimises and makes one's cultural capital recognisable.

All three forms of cultural capital serve as credible cues, and these costly signals provide consumers with heuristics to evaluate the chef's general intellectual standing. This standing, distinct from the chef's culinary expertise, may create a halo that enhances the perceived legitimacy of their creative expressions. Rather than inferring culinary knowledge from non-culinary credentials, consumers may infer that a highly cultured individual acts with purpose, intentionality, and refined judgment across domains—including their culinary creations.

If this reasoning holds, the proposed halo mechanism would be expected to extend to both authenticity dimensions. For TTI-Conformity, the chef's signalled cultural capital may suggest that any departure from tradition is deliberate rather than ignorant. Consumers may reason that a highly cultured chef understands and respects traditional standards, making their interpretation appear as a knowing engagement with tradition rather than a careless violation. For TTI-Distinctiveness, the chef's cultural capital may signal that their creative departures reflect artistic vision rather than gimmickry. The halo effect may lead consumers to perceive the dish's unique features as expressions of genuine creativity sanctioned by the chef's broader intellectual sophistication. Whether this dual legitimisation manifests empirically remains an open question that the present study addresses:

**H2a: A chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital will have a positive effect on TTI-Conformity.**

**H2b: A chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital will have a positive effect on TTI-Distinctiveness.**

## 2.3 THE CONSUMER AS A CULTURAL DECODER

In nature, the receiver's response is shaped by natural selection, and its relation to the sender is the essence of animal communication (Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003). Although humans are undoubtedly part of the natural world and biologically shaped by evolution, our complex social interactions make the ability to perceive and comprehend specific signals a matter of acquired proficiency. Holt (1998) has argued that variation in consumers' cultural capital resources leads to systematic differences in tastes and consumption practices. He argues that consumers are 'cultural decoders' who use their accumulated knowledge and dispositions (habitus) to process and evaluate products. Consumers with high cultural capital assess cultural products based on criteria like authenticity, sophistication, and congruence, while those with lower cultural capital prioritise conventional aesthetic standards.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) provides the theoretical lens for this argument, positioning consumption as a cultural, rather than a purely rational or economic, activity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue that consumer experiences are not isolated but are embedded in a broader sociohistorical context. This perspective is critical for understanding how an individual's own cultural background—or lack thereof—may structure their perception of a deconstructed dish and its creator.

If this reasoning holds, then a consumer's own cultural capital may shape their capacity to receive and interpret the chef's signal. The consumer with high cultural capital would be more likely to recognise the significance of non-culinary credentials or highbrow tastes as a legitimate signal of the chef's general intellectual standing. This decoding process may enable them to appreciate the proposed legitimising mechanism discussed in §2.2, interpreting the chef's non-field-specific cultural capital as indicative of purposeful, sophisticated creative action. Such a mechanism would strengthen the relationship between the chef's signalled cultural capital and the dish's perceived authenticity on both dimensions. Whether this moderation effect materialises, however, remains an empirical question. Formally:

> **H3a: The positive relationship between a chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital and TTI-Conformity will be strengthened (weakened) by a consumer's high (low) cultural capital.**

**H3b: The positive relationship between a chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital and TTI-Distinctiveness will be strengthened (weakened) by a consumer's high (low) cultural capital.**

While cultural capital provides a robust framework for understanding how consumers decode highbrow signals, it is not the only determinant of a dish's perceived authenticity. Consumer Culture Theory emphasises that a single, structuring influence does not solely shape consumer experiences. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue for a more nuanced approach, one that considers the 'context of context'—the systemic and structuring influences that are not always consciously felt or experienced by consumers. This suggests that a consumer's perception of a deconstructed dish may be influenced by a myriad of factors outside of their cultural capital, such as their personal food history, mood, or the social dynamics of the dining experience itself.

Furthermore, Holt (1998) notes that while cultural capital structures consumption, consumers do not passively apply it. Instead, they engage in a dynamic, creative process of meaning-making that can lead to unconventional or unexpected consumption patterns. Hence, while a consumer's cultural capital is expected to strengthen the relationship between a chef's signal and authenticity, it should be viewed as one of several contributing factors, and its influence is likely to be moderated by individual and situational variables.

## 2.4 FROM AUTHENTICITY TO CONSUMER OUTCOME

A consensus in the consumer behaviour literature establishes that perceived authenticity is a key driver of consumer value. As a construct, authenticity is complex and multi-dimensional, but its presence consistently leads to favourable attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. For instance, Pantin-Sohier et al. (2015) found that perceived authenticity, alongside typicality, is crucial for the success of innovations in traditional sectors. Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella (2012) further corroborate this by showing that authenticity is 'more than fit' in brand extensions; it is a predictor of consumer reactions and a tool to enhance brand value.

This perception of value translates directly into a more positive attitude toward the dish. When a consumer perceives a product as authentic, they are more likely to view it as genuine, trustworthy, and congruent with their expectations of quality and creative integrity. The study by Spiggle et al. (2012) provides a direct link, demonstrating that brand

authenticity significantly predicts a consumer's attitude toward a brand extension. This favourable attitude is a foundational component of consumer choice and satisfaction. Similarly, Le et al. (2022) found that cues of authenticity in online restaurant reviews were consistently linked to positive consumer perceptions.

Furthermore, authenticity can justify a price premium. When a consumer perceives a product as truly authentic, they are often willing to pay more for it, as they see its genuineness as an added value that transcends its functional utility. Newman and Dhar (2014) showed that consumers associate authenticity with a brand's 'essence' and are willing to pay more for products from the brand's source. This is further supported by research demonstrating that perceived brand authenticity positively influences a consumer's Willingness to Pay (WTP) a price premium (Morhart et al., 2015). Oh et al. (2019) likewise establish a direct link between brand authenticity and its positive effect on consumer-brand relationships.

**Dual Pathways to Consumer Value.** The bidimensional conceptualisation of authenticity developed in §2.1 suggests two distinct pathways through which perceived authenticity influences consumer outcomes. Pilot data revealed meaningful correlations between both authenticity dimensions and consumer attitudes: TTI-Conformity → Attitude ($r = .531$) and TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude ($r = .564$). These parallel correlations suggest that consumers derive value from both traditional correspondence and creative interpretation.

**TTI-Conformity Pathway.** When consumers perceive a dish as conforming to traditional ideals, they may evaluate it positively because it meets their expectations of categorical authenticity. This pathway aligns with research showing that typicality is crucial for consumer acceptance (Pantin-Sohier et al., 2015).

**TTI-Distinctiveness Pathway.** When consumers perceive a dish as distinctively authentic, they may evaluate it positively because it represents legitimate creative expression. This pathway aligns with research on the value of uniqueness in consumption (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Formally:

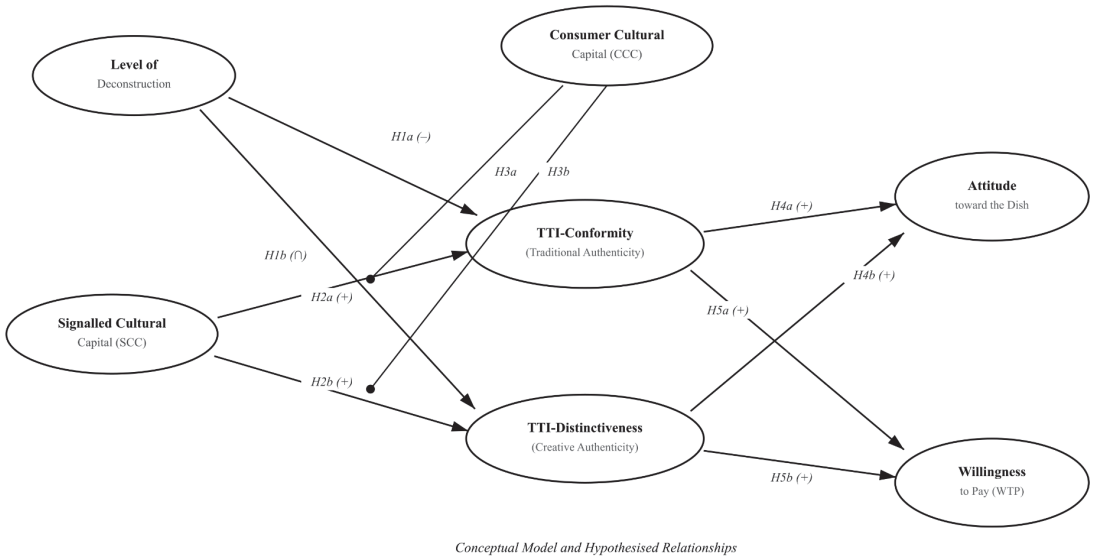
**H4a: TTI-Conformity will have a positive effect on Attitude toward the dish.**

**H4b: TTI-Distinctiveness will have a positive effect on Attitude toward the dish.**

**H5a: TTI-Conformity will have a positive effect on Willingness to Pay.**

**H5b: TTI-Distinctiveness will have a positive effect on Willingness to Pay.**

FIGURE 1 - Conceptual model




*Conceptual Model and Hypothesised Relationships*

Note. Ellipses = observed composite constructs. Single-headed arrows = hypothesised directional effects. (+) = positive; (–) = negative linear; (∩) = inverted-U curvilinear. Lines terminating at a filled circle (●) = moderation: H3a moderates SCC → TTI-Conformity; H3b moderates SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness. 2 × 3 between-subjects factorial design. N = 249.

Source: The author (2026).

# 3 METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND HYPOTHESES

To empirically test the proposed conceptual model, the present study employs a 2 (Signalled Cultural Capital: Low vs. High) × 3 (Level of Deconstruction: Baseline vs. Low vs. High) between-subjects factorial experimental design. This design enables a controlled investigation into how a chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital affects consumer perceptions of a dish's authenticity on both dimensions, while also examining the curvilinear effect of deconstruction on TTI-Distinctiveness and the moderating effect of consumers' own cultural capital. This study also examines the downstream effects of both authenticity dimensions on consumer attitudes and willingness to pay. From the literature review, the following hypotheses were derived:

**H1a:** An increase in a dish's level of deconstruction will lead to a decrease in TTI-Conformity.

**H1b:** The relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness follows a curvilinear (inverted-U) pattern.

**H2a:** A chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital will have a positive effect on TTI-Conformity.

**H2b:** A chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital will have a positive effect on TTI-Distinctiveness.

**H3a:** Consumer cultural capital moderates the SCC → TTI-Conformity relationship.

**H3b:** Consumer cultural capital moderates the SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness relationship.

**H4a:** TTI-Conformity has a positive effect on Attitude.

**H4b:** TTI-Distinctiveness has a positive effect on Attitude.

**H5a:** TTI-Conformity has a positive effect on Willingness to Pay.

**H5b:** TTI-Distinctiveness has a positive effect on Willingness to Pay.

## 3.2 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the experimental materials, verify the manipulation of signalled cultural capital, and examine the psychometric properties of the authenticity measures prior to the main data collection. Twenty participants from a Brazilian public university took part voluntarily, of whom 18 provided complete responses on all authenticity items.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions replicating the full 2 (SCC: low vs. high) × 3 (deconstruction: baseline, low, high) between-subjects design. They evaluated the same cheesecake stimuli and chef profiles employed in the main study, responded to the 12-item authenticity battery adapted from the ERC Framework (Moulard et al., 2021), and provided an open-ended willingness-to-pay estimate.

The SCC manipulation was successful. Participants in the high-SCC condition perceived significantly greater chef cultural capital ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.21$) than those in the low-SCC condition ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(16) = 3.824$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.80$.

A principal component analysis with Varimax rotation on the 12 authenticity items extracted two components accounting for 84.96% of total variance. Eleven items loaded on the first component (.793–.979), capturing correspondence to traditional category ideals. A single item — "This is a singular (unique) cheesecake" — defined the second component (loading = .971) and loaded negligibly on the first (.024). The two component scores were nearly uncorrelated ($r = .087$), providing initial evidence for a bidimensional structure of True-to-Ideal authenticity.

Three methodological decisions followed from the pilot. First, the single-item distinctiveness dimension was expanded to a five-item scale for the main study to ensure adequate measurement reliability (see §3.5.1). Second, two conformity items were subsequently removed following reliability analysis in the main study, as their exclusion improved scale parsimony without compromising internal consistency (see §4.1). Third, the open-ended WTP measure was retained despite exhibiting high variability ($M = R\$92.20$, $SD = R\$159.26$), with a winsorisation protocol planned to address anticipated skewness. Given the limited sample size ($N = 18$), these results should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

## 3.3 PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Following ethics approval, participants were recruited through non-probabilistic convenience sampling with digital dissemination. The survey link was distributed via social media and instant messaging platforms, enabling broad reach across diverse demographic profiles. Recipients who voluntarily shared the link with their own contacts contributed to an organic expansion of the recruitment base beyond the initial dissemination. No financial or material incentives were offered. Eligibility required participants to be at least 18 years of age. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions through Qualtrics' native block randomisation procedure with balanced quotas, enabling examination of the main effects of each independent variable and their interaction on consumer perceptions of authenticity:

Stimulus 1: Low signalled cultural capital and baseline dish (no deconstruction)

**(low-base)**

Stimulus 2: Low signalled cultural capital and low level of deconstruction

**(low-low)**

Stimulus 3: Low signalled cultural capital and high level of deconstruction

**(low-high)**

Stimulus 4: High signalled cultural capital and baseline dish (no deconstruction)

**(high-base)**

Stimulus 5: High signalled cultural capital and low level of deconstruction

**(high-low)**

Stimulus 6: High signalled cultural capital and high level of deconstruction

**(high-high)**

A total of 302 valid responses were collected, distributed across the six experimental conditions. Although this fell slightly below the initially planned target of 360 (60 per cell), a post-hoc power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) confirmed that the analytical sample (N = 249) maintained excellent statistical power for all planned analyses.

**Statistical Power Analysis.** Following conventional criteria (α = .05, desired power = .80; Cohen, 1988), the analysis examined power for detecting medium effect sizes across all primary statistical tests. For the 2 × 3 factorial ANOVA examining main effects and interactions, power exceeded 94% for all effects: the main effect of Signalled Cultural Capital (f = 0.25, power = 97.6%), the main effect of Deconstruction Level (f = 0.25, power = 94.9%), and the SCC × Deconstruction interaction (f = 0.25, power = 94.9%). For the independent samples t-test comparing SCC conditions, power was 97.6% for a medium effect size (d = 0.50). For moderation analyses using multiple regression, power exceeded 99.9% for medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$). These results confirm that the obtained sample substantially exceeds the conventional 80% threshold recommended for behavioural research (Cohen, 1988).

**Data Quality Procedures.** Three sequential procedures were implemented to ensure data integrity. First, a reCAPTCHA verification was included at survey entry to screen for automated responses. Second, an instructed-response attention check item was embedded within the authenticity scale ("This is an attention check. Please select 6"). Of the 302 respondents, 249 (82.5%) passed this check and constituted the primary analytical sample (hereafter AC-filtered sample). The failure rate of 17.5% falls within the range commonly reported for online surveys (Curran, 2016) and suggests that the item appropriately identified respondents who did not adequately process the stimulus materials — a particular concern in experimental designs where treatment effects depend on participants engaging with the manipulations (Oppenheimer et al., 2009).

Third, an outlier screening was conducted on the Willingness to Pay variable, which — as a single open-ended monetary item bounded only by instructed limits of R$10–R$1,000 — was inherently susceptible to extreme responses. In the full valid sample (N = 302), the raw WTP distribution exhibited pronounced positive skewness and excess kurtosis driven by a small number of extreme values (e.g., R$500, R$900). To address this without sacrificing statistical power, the upper fence of Tukey's (1977) interquartile range criterion was computed on the full sample: Q3 + 1.5 × IQR = R$50.00 + 1.5 × R$25.00 = R$87.50. All WTP values exceeding this threshold were winsorised to the fence value, creating the WTP_WIN variable. After applying the attention check filter (N = 249), the pre-winsorisation WTP distribution in the analytical sample exhibited skewness of 9.900 and kurtosis of 116.97; post-winsorisation, skewness reduced to 0.885 and kurtosis to 0.071, rendering the distribution compatible with the approximate normality assumptions of OLS-based regression and bootstrap-based

mediation analyses (Hayes, 2022). Winsorisation was preferred over logarithmic transformation to preserve the interpretability of regression coefficients in monetary units (R$), consistent with the practical orientation of this research. All confirmatory analyses employ this winsorised variable (WTP_WIN) within the AC-filtered sample (N = 249).

As an additional robustness measure, a restricted sample (N = 243) was constructed by further excluding six cases whose original WTP values qualified as extreme outliers (|Z| > 3.29 or values exceeding Q3 + 3 × IQR). This restricted sample is employed in sensitivity analyses reported in §4.1 to verify that the pattern of results is not contingent on these cases. The complete dataset, including all variables, computed indices, and filter variables, is deposited in Zenodo under restricted access during the review period (Nascimento & Korelo, 2026).

After being exposed to the experimental stimuli (i.e., the cheesecake image and the chef's profile), participants proceeded to the questionnaire to rate their perceptions of authenticity on both dimensions. The questionnaire also included manipulation checks and demographic questions.

## 3.4 EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI

To test the proposed hypotheses, a set of experimental stimuli was developed to manipulate the two variables: Signalled Cultural Capital (low vs. high) and Level of Deconstruction (baseline vs. low vs. high). The survey was administered via Qualtrics, with participants randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions through a block randomisation procedure with balanced quotas (60 participants per condition).

### 3.4.1 Chef Profile Manipulation (Signalled Cultural Capital)

A fictional chef named Sophie Wilde was created for this study, with two distinct profile versions to manipulate signalled non-field-specific cultural capital. The use of a fictional chef persona enables precise control of variables, eliminating the confounding factors associated with a real person, such as pre-existing fame or reputation.

**Low Cultural Capital Profile (SCC_CHEF = 1).** The low cultural capital profile presented Sophie Wilde as follows: (a) Chef principal of a high-end restaurant for the past 15

years; (b) Switched from a career as an administrative assistant to professional cooking; (c) Obtained a technical certificate in administration; (d) Worked at companies before deciding to pursue culinary arts; (e) Very focused on her work and does not participate in cultural activities, except for occasional soap opera marathons or reading the latest bestseller. The restaurant decor was described as simple and sober.

**High Cultural Capital Profile (SCC_CHEF = 2).** The high cultural capital profile presented Sophie Wilde as follows: (a) Chef principal of a high-end restaurant for the past 15 years; (b) Abandoned a career as a musical conductor for professional cooking; (c) Holds a PhD in music theory from a prestigious institution; (d) Worked for several years conducting orchestras before switching to culinary arts; (e) Published author with books on the lives of Chopin and Schumann translated into multiple languages; (f) Owns a rare Steinway piano and is an avid art collector; (g) Amateur astrophotographer interested in astronomy; (h) Voracious reader known for reading multiple books per month. The profile also noted that her piano is displayed in her restaurant along with various works of art, astrophotography, and books.

Both profiles described her restaurant, “The Bo,” as having gained notoriety for reinterpreting traditional dishes by deconstructing them and subverting proportions and techniques to demonstrate that they can be reimagined while retaining their essence.

### 3.4.2 Cheesecake Image Manipulation (Level of Deconstruction)

Three distinct images of cheesecake were developed to manipulate the level of deconstruction:

**Baseline/Traditional (DECONLEV = 1).** A classic cheesecake presented on a dark grey stone plate, featuring a well-defined golden-brown Graham cracker crust at the base, covered by a thick and creamy layer of pale yellow cheesecake filling. The top is adorned with a vibrant swirl of raspberry coulis and garnished with three fresh red raspberries and two dark blue blueberries. The scene is illuminated by sophisticated restaurant lighting with a softly blurred background revealing hints of an upscale dining room.

**Low Deconstruction (DECONLEV = 2).** A mildly deconstructed cheesecake presented on a dark grey stone plate with an irregular, not perfectly round shape and a refined, compacted Graham cracker crust at the base. The creamy and dense cheesecake mousse is sculpted into an elongated, off-centre shape. The topping features a delicate arrangement of

translucent and luminous fruit caviar, vibrant fresh red raspberries, and irregular shattered fragments of frozen raspberry cream. A velvety deep red raspberry coulis is painted in a long sweeping line across the stone plate.

**High Deconstruction (DECONLEV = 3).** A highly deconstructed cheesecake featuring a sophisticated blend of chaotic and splattered elements inspired by modern art and the technical precision of contemporary gastronomy. The crust is a multi-part element: a prominent irregularly-shaped whitish foam with dense and aerated texture, infused with glistening solid butter drops and dusted with edible gold powder. Around the foam base, a delicate golden-brown liquid crust pools on the plate with small pieces of crunchy Graham cracker crumble embedded in it. The filling consists of an abstract, separated form of creamy white gel and several small perfectly smooth spheres of cheesecake mousse. The topping is a generous cluster of luminous fruit caviar in red and orange tones, and irregular shattered fragments of frozen raspberry cream. A velvety raspberry coulis is artistically splattered and dripped across the plate, creating dynamic lines and pools that connect the various components.

### 3.4.3 Stimulus-Condition Mapping

The six experimental conditions combined the two manipulated factors as follows (embedded data variables in parentheses): Stimulus 1 (SCC_CHEF=1, DECONLEV=1): Low cultural capital chef with baseline cheesecake; Stimulus 2 (SCC_CHEF=1, DECONLEV=2): Low cultural capital chef with low deconstruction cheesecake; Stimulus 3 (SCC_CHEF=1, DECONLEV=3): Low cultural capital chef with high deconstruction cheesecake; Stimulus 4 (SCC_CHEF=2, DECONLEV=1): High cultural capital chef with baseline cheesecake; Stimulus 5 (SCC_CHEF=2, DECONLEV=2): High cultural capital chef with low deconstruction cheesecake; Stimulus 6 (SCC_CHEF=2, DECONLEV=3): High cultural capital chef with high deconstruction cheesecake.

### 3.4.4 Stimulus Presentation Procedure

Participants were presented with explicit instructions to: (1) carefully observe the cheesecake photograph, (2) read the entire chef profile, and (3) imagine themselves at the restaurant tasting the dish. The instructions emphasised that participants should only proceed

to the questionnaire after completing this immersive process. A 90-second timer was displayed to encourage adequate stimulus processing time, though participants were permitted to advance before the timer expired. Participants were explicitly asked to imagine the experience of tasting the dessert, observing the presentation, tasting the flavours, and feeling the textures.

## 3.5 MEASURES

This study employs a multi-faceted measurement approach to capture all constructs in the conceptual model, including two mediators (TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness), two dependent variables (Attitude, WTP), two independent variables manipulated via the experimental design (Level of Deconstruction and Signalled Cultural Capital of the Chef), and one measured moderator (Consumer Cultural Capital).

### 3.5.1 Bidimensional TTI Authenticity

The measurement of authenticity was informed by the pilot study's principal component analysis, which revealed a bidimensional structure separating items capturing correspondence to traditional category ideals (TTI-Conformity) from items capturing correspondence to creative distinctiveness ideals (TTI-Distinctiveness). All items employed a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree").

**TTI-Conformity.** This dimension was assessed using six items adapted from the ERC Framework (Moulard et al., 2021), capturing the extent to which the dish corresponds to the traditional ideal of its category. Participants rated their agreement with the following statements: (1) "This dish is true to the traditional concept of a cheesecake"; (2) "This dish reflects the essence of a cheesecake"; (3) "This is a classic cheesecake"; (4) "This is a genuine cheesecake"; (5) "This dish is the real deal (legitimate)"; and (6) "This is a true example of cheesecake." Two items from the original pilot battery — "This is a quintessential (typical/pure) cheesecake" and "This is a typical cheesecake" — were removed following reliability analysis, as their exclusion improved scale parsimony without compromising internal consistency (final $\alpha = .908$; see §4.1). Additionally, a single-item semantic differential scale ranging from "Completely Inauthentic" (1) to "Completely Authentic" (7) was

administered as a global authenticity measure and is reported separately from the composite score.

**TTI-Distinctiveness.** This dimension was measured using five items capturing the extent to which the dish represents a creative, distinctive, yet category-coherent reinterpretation. Building on the pilot study — which identified the distinctiveness dimension but measured it with only one item — the scale was expanded to five items to improve measurement reliability: (1) "This cheesecake stands out from others for its genuine singularity"; (2) "This cheesecake stands out from conventional cheesecakes"; (3) "This is an innovative cheesecake that still preserves its essential identity"; (4) "This cheesecake offers a unique experience within the category"; and (5) "This is a distinctive but still recognisable cheesecake." Items were adapted from research on optimal distinctiveness in product evaluation (Chan et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2001). The resulting scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .868$; see §4.1). An instructed-response attention check item ("This is an attention check. Please select 6") was embedded within this block to monitor respondent engagement.

### 3.5.2 Consumer Outcomes

**Willingness to Pay (WTP).** Measured using a single open-ended question: "What is the maximum amount (in Brazilian Reais - R$) you would be willing to pay for this cheesecake?" Participants were instructed to enter an integer between 10 and 1,000 without decimals or commas, providing a direct measure of perceived economic value. A follow-up open-ended question asked participants to briefly explain what led them to choose that value, generating qualitative data for thematic analysis of WTP reasoning. As detailed in §3.3, the raw WTP distribution exhibited extreme positive skewness and was winsorised at R$87.50 (the upper Tukey fence) prior to all inferential analyses.

**Attitude Toward the Dish.** Measured using three 7-point semantic differential scale items capturing the participant's overall affective response to the product: "My reaction to this dish is: Unfavourable (1) to Favourable (7)"; "This dish is: Bad (1) to Good (7)"; and "This dish is: Not Attractive (1) to Attractive (7)."

### 3.5.3 Manipulation Checks and Measured Moderator

**Level of Deconstruction (LoD).** This factor is controlled via the experimental design (Baseline, Low, High). Its effectiveness was verified through a manipulation check using a 7-point bipolar scale: “How do you rate the level of deconstruction of the cheesecake?” with endpoints “Not at all deconstructed” (1) to “Highly deconstructed” (7).

**Chef’s Signalled Cultural Capital (SCC).** This factor is controlled via the experimental design (Low vs. High profile). Its effectiveness was verified through multiple manipulation checks. First, a single-item bipolar scale asked: “How erudite is Sophie Wilde, the chef?” with endpoints “Not at all erudite” (1) to “Very erudite” (7). Second, a three-item matrix assessed perceptions of Bourdieu’s three states of cultural capital: “To what extent do you believe the chef has achieved prestigious academic credentials?” (institutionalised capital); “To what extent do you think the chef possesses valuable and prestigious cultural assets?” (objectified capital); and “To what extent do you perceive the chef as a cultured and intellectual person?” (embodied capital). All items used a 7-point scale from “Very little” (1) to “Very much” (7).

**Consumer’s Cultural Capital (CCC).** This intrinsic characteristic was measured via a six-item scale assessing the respondent’s habitus and cultural consumption, following approaches established in the literature (Holt, 1998; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010). The items captured: (1) Cultural variety: “Considering the last 12 months, how many different types of cultural content did you consume regularly?” (auteur cinema, classical music/jazz/MPB, theatre/dance, literature, art exhibitions); (2) Highbrow consumption priority: “When you choose what to watch, read, or listen to, do you usually prioritise content that is recognised by specialised critics or has artistic/intellectual value?”; (3) Inherited cultural capital: “What is the highest level of education completed by the parent/guardian with the highest educational attainment in your family of origin?”; (4) Family cultural environment: “During your childhood and adolescence, did your family value and provide access to cultural activities (books, theatre, cinema, discussions about art/literature, etc.)?”; (5) Objectified cultural capital: “Approximately how many physical books (not digital) are there in your current residence?”; and (6) Cultural expenditure: “In the past 12 months, did you spend money (any amount) on cultural activities such as: buying books, tickets for theatre/shows/cinema, cultural streaming subscriptions, visiting museums/exhibitions, or

collecting art/music?" Each item was scored on a 4-point scale and combined to create a continuous Consumer Cultural Capital index.

### 3.5.4 Exploratory Post-Hoc Assessment

To address the importance of Bourdieu's three states, the manipulation check (QID19) explicitly measured participants' perceptions of each cultural capital dimension as described above. This three-item measure provides data for exploratory regression analyses to determine the relative importance of each dimension (institutionalised, objectified, and embodied cultural capital) on perceived authenticity.

### 3.5.5 Demographic Variables

Additional demographic variables were collected for sample characterisation and potential control purposes: age (categorical: less than 20, 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, over 60 years); gender (masculine, feminine, non-binary, prefer not to say); education level (from primary education to doctoral/post-doctoral); culinary interest (not interested to foodie); familiarity with deconstructed dishes (completely unfamiliar to connoisseur); and country of origin (with Brazil pre-selected as default). A reCAPTCHA verification was included at the start of the survey to screen for bot responses, and an attention check was embedded within the authenticity scale.

## 3.6 ANALYSIS STRATEGY

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27) with the PROCESS macro version 5.0 (Hayes, 2022). Unless otherwise noted, the primary analytical sample comprises 249 participants who passed the attention check, with WTP analyses employing the winsorised variable (WTP_WIN). Sensitivity analyses using the restricted sample (N = 243) are reported where relevant. All bootstrap procedures used 5,000 resamples with a fixed random seed (31216) for reproducibility.

**Manipulation Checks.** Independent samples t-tests verified the effectiveness of the SCC manipulation by comparing perceived erudition across Low and High cultural capital

conditions. One-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests verified the deconstruction manipulation across the three levels.

**Main Effects and Interactions.** A 2 × 3 factorial ANOVA (General Linear Model) examined the main effects of SCC and Level of Deconstruction on each authenticity dimension separately (TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness), as well as their interaction. Effect sizes are reported as partial eta-squared ($\eta^2_p$).

**Curvilinear Effect (H1b).** The hypothesised inverted-U relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness was tested using centred polynomial terms. Level of Deconstruction was centred (−1, 0, +1) and entered alongside its squared term in a hierarchical regression, following recommendations for testing curvilinear hypotheses in factorial designs (Aiken et al., 1991). A significant quadratic increment ($\Delta R^2$ for the squared term) was interpreted as evidence of curvilinearity.

**Moderation Analysis (H3).** A hierarchical moderated regression tested the moderating effect of Consumer Cultural Capital (CCC) on the SCC → TTI-Conformity and SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness relationships. SCC served as the predictor, mean-centred CCC (CCC_C; sum score) as the moderator, and each TTI dimension as the outcome. The interaction term (SCC × CCC_C) was entered in the second step to test the moderation hypothesis.

**Authenticity–Outcome Relationships (H4–H5).** Simultaneous OLS regression with both TTI dimensions as predictors tested whether each dimension independently predicted Attitude (H4a/H4b) and Willingness to Pay (H5a/H5b).

**Exploratory Mediation.** Additionally, PROCESS Model 4 was employed to examine whether the opposing effects of deconstruction on the two TTI dimensions produced competitive suppression of the total effect on consumer outcomes (reported in §4.3).

**Reliability Assessment.** Cronbach's alpha was computed for all multi-item scales, with a target threshold of $\alpha > .70$. Detailed reliability statistics, including item-total correlations and alpha-if-item-deleted diagnostics, are reported in §4.1.

# 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

## 4.1 PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

### 4.1.1 Sample Characterisation

A total of 302 respondents completed the online experiment administered via Qualtrics. An attention-check item embedded within the TTI-Distinctiveness scale served as the primary data-quality filter. Fifty-three respondents (17.5%) failed this item and were excluded, yielding an analytical sample of N = 249 (82.5% retention rate). The failure rate falls within the range commonly reported for online surveys (Curran, 2016) and suggests that the item appropriately identified respondents who did not adequately process the stimulus materials. A supplementary robustness sample (N = 243) was constructed by further excluding six extreme willingness-to-pay outliers, as detailed in §4.1.4. Unless otherwise stated, all analyses reported in this chapter use the N = 249 sample.

Participants were randomly allocated to one of six experimental conditions defined by the 2 (SCC: low vs. high) × 3 (Deconstruction: baseline vs. low vs. high) factorial design. Cell sizes ranged from 38 to 45 participants: low SCC/baseline (n = 39), low SCC/low deconstruction (n = 38), low SCC/high deconstruction (n = 45), high SCC/baseline (n = 43), high SCC/low deconstruction (n = 41), and high SCC/high deconstruction (n = 43). These figures correspond to group-level totals of n = 122 (low SCC) and n = 127 (high SCC) for the signalled cultural capital factor, and n = 82 (baseline), n = 79 (low deconstruction), and n = 88 (high deconstruction) for the deconstruction factor. Although randomisation produced slightly unequal cells, no cell fell below the minimum threshold of 30 participants required for adequate statistical power in factorial designs (Simmons et al., 2011).

The demographic profile of the total recruited sample (N = 302) was as follows. The modal age bracket was 41–50 years (40.1%), followed by over 60 (25.8%), 51–60 (16.2%), 31–40 (12.6%), and 20–30 (5.3%); no participant was under 20 years of age. The majority of respondents identified as feminine (62.6%) versus masculine (37.4%); no respondents selected non-binary or preferred not to disclose. Regarding educational attainment, the sample was highly educated: 47.0% held a postgraduate specialisation or MBA, 24.5% held a university degree, 7.9% held a master's degree, and 6.6% held a doctorate or post-doctorate. Incomplete higher education accounted for 8.6%, secondary education for 4.6%, and primary education or below for 0.7%.

In terms of culinary engagement, the majority reported being very interested in cooking (52.6%), followed by somewhat interested (29.1%), self-identified foodies (17.2%), and not interested (1.0%). Familiarity with deconstructed dishes was predominantly low: 65.9% described themselves as somewhat familiar, 21.5% as very familiar, 11.3% as completely unfamiliar, and 1.3% as connoisseurs. This distribution confirms that the sample comprised predominantly middle-aged, highly educated Brazilian consumers with moderate culinary involvement and limited prior exposure to deconstructed cuisine — a profile consistent with the target population specified in §3.1.

### 4.1.2 Scale Reliability

Internal consistency was assessed via Cronbach's alpha for all multi-item scales, computed on the analytical sample of N = 249. Table 1 presents the summary reliability statistics.

TABLE 1 - *Internal Consistency of Measurement Scales (N = 249)*

| Scale | Items | α | M | SD | Corrected r range |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTI-Conformity | 6 | .908 | 4.13 | 1.70 | .610–.835 |
| TTI-Distinctiveness | 5 | .868 | 4.88 | 1.48 | .559–.767 |
| Attitude | 3 | .871 | 5.76 | 1.28 | .705–.795 |
| Consumer Cultural Capital | 6 | .700 | 16.07 | 3.46 | .265–.564 |
| SCC Perceived (MC) | 3 | .901 | 5.03 | 1.44 | .776–.849 |

*Note.* *M* and *SD* refer to item-level means (1–7 scale for TTI and Attitude); CCC reported as sum score (range 6–24). TTI = True-to-Ideal authenticity; SCC = Signalled Cultural Capital; CCC = Consumer Cultural Capital; MC = Manipulation Check.

Source: The author (2026).

TTI-Conformity demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .908). All six items — reflecting correspondence to traditional, essential, classic, genuine, legitimate, and exemplary ideals — exhibited strong corrected item–total correlations (range: .610–.835). No item deletion would have improved the alpha coefficient; removing the weakest item ("genuíno"; $r_{i}$□ = .610) would have increased alpha only marginally to .910, confirming the appropriateness of the six-item solution derived from the pilot study (see §3.5.1).

TTI-Distinctiveness likewise demonstrated good reliability (α = .868) across its five items capturing creative authenticity through genuine singularity, standing out from convention, innovation with identity preservation, unique experience, and distinctive

recognisability. Corrected item–total correlations ranged from .559 (distinctive but recognisable) to .767 (genuine singularity). The relatively lower contribution of the "distinctive but recognisable" item is consistent with its role as a boundary marker that bridges conformity and distinctiveness; its deletion would have increased alpha only marginally to .874, and the item was therefore retained on both statistical and theoretical grounds.

The three-item Attitude scale exhibited good reliability (α = .871), with corrected item–total correlations ranging from .705 to .795. The SCC Perceived manipulation-check scale demonstrated excellent consistency (α = .901), with all three items (institutionalised, objectified, and embodied perceptions of the chef's cultural capital) exhibiting strong loadings ($r_i$ = .776–.849).

The Consumer Cultural Capital index yielded acceptable reliability (α = .700) for its six heterogeneous indicators spanning different Bourdieuian capital forms: cultural consumption breadth, aesthetic disposition, intergenerational educational capital, childhood cultural socialisation, objectified capital (book ownership), and cultural expenditure. The lower alpha is expected given the formative nature of this construct, in which indicators need not covary strongly because each taps a distinct facet of cultural capital accumulation (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001). The weakest item was aesthetic disposition ($r_i$ = .265; α if deleted = .707), yet its removal would have produced negligible improvement whilst sacrificing coverage of Bourdieu's embodied capital dimension. All items were therefore retained. To further evaluate the measurement properties of the CCC index, a Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA) with ordinal optimal scaling (Meulman & Heiser, 2001) was conducted on the six items. The analysis confirmed a unidimensional solution: Dimension 1 exhibited acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .710, eigenvalue = 2.447, 40.8% of variance explained), with all six items loading positively (range: .415–.784). A second dimension (eigenvalue = 1.089, α = .098) was not retained due to insufficient reliability but was theoretically interpretable as the Bourdieuian distinction between inherited and acquired capital. The optimally weighted CATPCA object scores correlated r = .982 ($p < .001$) with the unit-weighted sum scores used in all subsequent analyses, indicating that the simple summation approximates the optimal scaling solution with minimal information loss (96.4% shared variance).

### 4.1.3 Manipulation Checks

*Signalled Cultural Capital.* An independent-samples t-test confirmed that the SCC manipulation successfully differentiated the two experimental conditions. Participants in the high-SCC condition perceived significantly greater chef erudition ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 1.38$) than those in the low-SCC condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.57$), $t(247) = -8.121$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.03$. The effect size qualifies as large by conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988), indicating that the biographical vignettes depicting institutionalised, objectified, and embodied cultural capital were effective in creating distinct perceptual conditions.

*Level of Deconstruction.* A one-way analysis of variance confirmed that the three visual cheesecake stimuli produced significantly different perceptions of deconstruction, $F(2, 246) = 79.380$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .392$. Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that all pairwise differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$): baseline/traditional ($M = 2.76$) was perceived as less deconstructed than both the low-deconstruction condition ($M = 4.67$) and the high-deconstruction condition ($M = 5.84$), and the low-deconstruction condition was perceived as less deconstructed than the high condition. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .392$) was large, and the monotonically increasing pattern of means across the three levels confirms the intended ordinal gradient from classical presentation through intermediate deconstruction to extensive molecular transformation.

Taken together, both manipulation checks confirm that the experimental stimuli operated as designed, satisfying the prerequisite for valid hypothesis testing.

### 4.1.4 Descriptive Statistics and Distributional Properties

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all primary variables. TTI-Conformity, TTI-Distinctiveness, and Attitude were computed as item-level means to preserve the original 1–7 Likert metric. Consumer Cultural Capital was computed as the sum of six items (range 6–24), consistent with its formative measurement rationale (§3.5). WTP is reported in Brazilian Reais (R$).

TABLE 2 - *Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables (N = 249)*

| Variable | M | SD | Min | Max | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTI-Conformity | 4.13 | 1.70 | 1.00 | 7.00 | −0.070 | −0.966 |
| TTI-Distinctiveness | 4.88 | 1.48 | 1.00 | 7.00 | −0.543 | −0.388 |
| Attitude | 5.76 | 1.28 | 1.67 | 7.00 | −1.159 | 0.731 |
| WTP (original, R$) | 48.06 | 66.54 | 10.00 | 900.00 | 9.900 | 116.969 |
| WTP (winsorised, R$) | 41.43 | 20.08 | 10.00 | 87.50 | 0.885 | 0.071 |
| Consumer Cultural Capital | 16.07 | 3.46 | 6.00 | 24.00 | −0.065 | −0.179 |

*Note.* TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness scored on 1–7 scales. Attitude scored on 1–7 semantic differential. WTP reported in Brazilian Reais. CCC scored as sum of 6 items (range 6–24).

Source: The author (2026).

TTI-Conformity scores were approximately symmetrically distributed around the scale midpoint (skewness = −0.070), whereas TTI-Distinctiveness exhibited a mild negative skew (−0.543), suggesting that participants leaned slightly above the midpoint in their creative-authenticity perceptions. Attitude displayed moderate negative skew (−1.159), reflecting generally favourable evaluations across conditions — a ceiling tendency common in attitudinal measures of food stimuli (Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2015).

The raw WTP distribution presented a critical challenge. With skewness of 9.900 and kurtosis of 116.969, the original distribution was extremely positively skewed, driven by a small number of extreme values (maximum = R$900 against a median of approximately R$35). As described in §3.3, winsorisation was applied at the upper Tukey fence (R$87.50), capping extreme values. This procedure reduced skewness to 0.885 and kurtosis to 0.071, yielding a distribution suitable for parametric analysis. All subsequent WTP analyses employ the winsorised variable (WTP_WIN). Table 3 presents the cell means and standard deviations for all dependent variables across the six experimental conditions.

TABLE 3 - *Cell Means and Standard Deviations by Experimental Condition (N = 249)*

| SCC | Deconstruction | TTI-Conf. *M* (*SD*) | TTI-Dist. *M* (*SD*) | Attitude *M* (*SD*) | WTP (R$) *M* (*SD*) | *n* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low | Baseline | 5.42 (1.20) | 3.92 (1.71) | 5.60 (1.30) | 31.14 (16.06) | 39 |
| Low | Low | 4.07 (1.43) | 5.36 (1.07) | 5.98 (1.01) | 34.39 (16.57) | 38 |
| Low | High | 3.37 (1.67) | 5.13 (1.34) | 5.61 (1.36) | 45.63 (21.00) | 45 |
| High | Baseline | 5.22 (1.59) | 4.34 (1.70) | 5.69 (1.45) | 39.08 (21.15) | 43 |
| High | Low | 3.92 (1.56) | 5.43 (1.20) | 6.17 (0.87) | 42.60 (19.13) | 41 |
| High | High | 2.91 (1.64) | 5.07 (1.18) | 5.55 (1.35) | 53.79 (19.74) | 43 |

*Note.* Cell *n*s range from 38 to 45. WTP in Brazilian Reais (R$). SCC = Signalled Cultural Capital.

Source: The author (2026).

Several descriptive patterns merit preliminary observation. TTI-Conformity decreased monotonically with increasing deconstruction in both SCC conditions, consistent with the prediction that structural departure from the traditional cheesecake form erodes perceptions of traditional authenticity (H1a). TTI-Distinctiveness, in contrast, rose from baseline to low deconstruction and then declined slightly at the high-deconstruction level, consistent with the hypothesised inverted-U pattern (H1b). Attitude was highest in the low-deconstruction conditions for both SCC levels, suggesting a potential "sweet spot" where moderate innovation enhances evaluative responses. WTP increased monotonically with deconstruction and was consistently higher in the high-SCC conditions, suggesting additive rather than interactive effects. These patterns are formally tested in §4.2.

### 4.1.5 Correlation Matrix

Table 4 presents the zero-order Pearson correlations among the primary study variables.

TABLE 4 - *Zero-Order Correlations Among Primary Variables (N = 249)*

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Deconstruction | — | | | | |
| 2. TTI-Conformity | −.525** | — | | | |
| 3. TTI-Distinctiveness | .264** | .188** | — | | |
| 4. Attitude | — | .350** | .594** | — | |
| 5. WTP (winsorised) | — | −.083 | .243** | .147* | — |

*Note.* * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Deconstruction coded as centred linear contrast (−1, 0, +1). Deconstruction–Attitude and Deconstruction–WTP correlations omitted because these relationships are mediated (see §4.3).

Source: The author (2026).

Several correlational patterns deserve comment. First, the two authenticity dimensions exhibited a modest positive correlation (r = .188, p = .003), which, although statistically significant in this sample, represents a small effect size. This weak association corroborates the near-orthogonality observed in the pilot study (r = .087) and supports the theoretical contention that TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness capture empirically separable constructs (see §2.1.3). The slight increase from pilot to main study likely reflects the shared variance introduced by the experimental stimuli — both dimensions are influenced by the same cheesecake stimuli, albeit in opposing directions.

Second, the opposing signs of the deconstruction–authenticity correlations are noteworthy: deconstruction correlated strongly and negatively with TTI-Conformity ($r = -.525$) but moderately and positively with TTI-Distinctiveness ($r = .264$). This divergent pattern is the bivariate manifestation of the competitive suppression mechanism explored in §4.3.

Third, the two authenticity dimensions related differentially to the outcome variables. TTI-Distinctiveness was the stronger predictor of both Attitude ($r = .594$) and WTP ($r = .243$), whereas TTI-Conformity exhibited a moderate positive correlation with Attitude ($r = .350$) but a non-significant — and directionally negative — correlation with WTP ($r = -.083$, $p = .194$). This asymmetry foreshadows the regression results reported in §4.2, where the negative effect of Conformity on WTP reaches significance once the shared variance with Distinctiveness is controlled.

Finally, the modest correlation between Attitude and WTP ($r = .147$, $p = .020$) suggests that these two outcome variables, while positively associated, capture substantially different evaluative responses — attitudinal favourability versus monetary valuation — consistent with their treatment as separate dependent variables in the analytical strategy.

### 4.1.6 Robustness Check: Comparison of Analytical Samples

To assess the sensitivity of findings to the treatment of extreme values, all primary analyses were replicated on the robustness sample ($N = 243$), which excluded six cases identified as extreme WTP outliers exceeding the Q3 + 3×IQR threshold (see §3.3). The robustness sample cell sizes were: low SCC ($n = 120$), high SCC ($n = 123$); baseline ($n = 81$), low deconstruction ($n = 78$), high deconstruction ($n = 84$).

Across all analyses, the robustness sample produced coefficient estimates and significance levels that were substantively identical to those obtained with the $N = 249$ sample. No hypothesis verdict changed between samples, and the magnitude of effect sizes remained within rounding tolerance ($\Delta\eta^2p < .01$ for all ANOVA effects; $\Delta R^2 < .005$ for all regression models). Given this convergence, the primary sample ($N = 249$) is used throughout the remaining sections. Where specific robustness-sample results provide additional interpretive value, they are reported parenthetically.

## 4.2 CONFIRMATORY HYPOTHESIS TESTS

This section presents the formal tests of all pre-registered hypotheses (H1–H5). All analyses employ the attention-check-filtered sample (N = 249) as the primary analytical sample, with the winsorised WTP variable (WTP_WIN) used for willingness-to-pay models. The robustness sample (N = 243), which excludes six extreme WTP outliers exceeding the Q3 + 3×IQR threshold (see §4.1.6), yielded identical inferential conclusions across all tests. Effect sizes are interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks: $\eta^2p$ = .01 (small), .06 (medium), .14 (large) for ANOVA; f2 = .02 (small), .15 (medium), .35 (large) for regression.

### 4.2.1 Effects of Deconstruction on Authenticity Perceptions

**H1a: Deconstruction Reduces TTI-Conformity (Linear Decrease)**

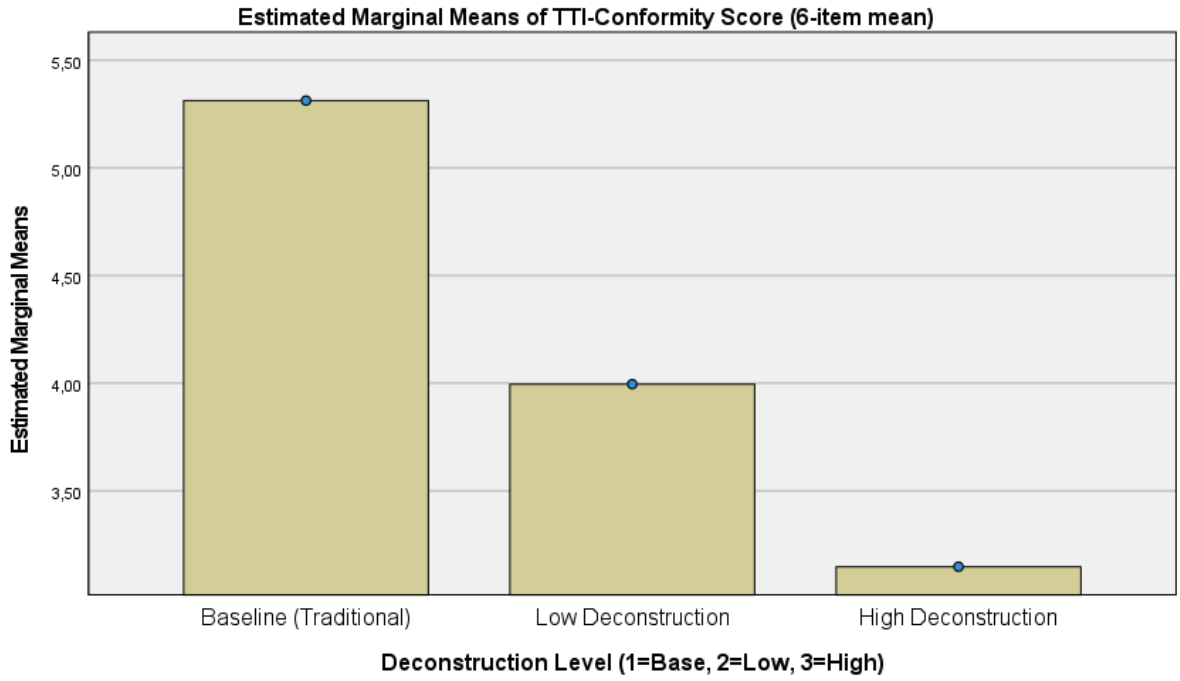
A 2 (SCC: low vs. high) × 3 (Deconstruction: baseline, low, high) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted with TTI-Conformity as the dependent variable (N = 249). Levene's test confirmed homogeneity of variances, $F(5, 243) = 1.259$, $p = .282$. The main effect of deconstruction was significant, $F(2, 243) = 48.043$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .283$, representing a large effect. The corrected model accounted for 28.8% of variance in TTI-Conformity (R2 = .288, adjusted R2 = .273). The main effect of SCC was not significant, $F(1, 243) = 2.181$, $p = .141$, $\eta^2p = .009$, and the SCC × Deconstruction interaction was not significant, $F(2, 243) = 0.282$, $p = .755$, $\eta^2p = .002$.

Estimated marginal means revealed a monotonic decline in conformity-based authenticity across deconstruction levels: baseline (M = 5.318, SE = 0.161, 95% CI [5.002, 5.634]), low deconstruction (M = 3.999, SE = 0.163, 95% CI [3.677, 4.321]), and high deconstruction (M = 3.142, SE = 0.155, 95% CI [2.837, 3.447]). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons confirmed that all three levels differed significantly from one another: baseline versus low (MD = 1.319, SE = 0.229, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.767, 1.872]), baseline versus high (MD = 2.175, SE = 0.223, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.638, 2.713]), and low versus high (MD = 0.856, SE = 0.225, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.313, 1.399]).

A simple linear regression corroborated this pattern: the centred linear contrast (DECONC) was a strong predictor of TTI-Conformity, R2 = .275, $F(1, 247) = 93.876$, $p < .001$; B = −1.080, SE = 0.111, $\beta = -.525$, $t = -9.689$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.300, −0.860]. For

each unit increase in deconstruction level, conformity-based authenticity decreased by approximately 1.08 scale points. H1a was supported.

FIGURE 2 - Estimated marginal means of TTI-Conformity by deconstruction level




Source: The author (2026).

### H1b: Deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness Follow an Inverted-U Pattern

The factorial ANOVA with TTI-Distinctiveness as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of deconstruction, $F(2, 243) = 18.494$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .132$, a medium-to-large effect. The corrected model accounted for 13.7% of variance (R2 = .137, adjusted R2 = .119). Levene's test indicated heterogeneity of variances, $F(5, 243) = 3.716$, $p = .003$, warranting caution in interpretation; however, ANOVA is robust to moderate violations of homogeneity when group sizes are approximately equal (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), as is the case here (cell n range: 38–45). The main effect of SCC was not significant, $F(1, 243) = 0.656$, $p = .419$, $\eta^2p = .003$, and the interaction was not significant, $F(2, 243) = 0.674$, $p = .511$, $\eta^2p = .006$.

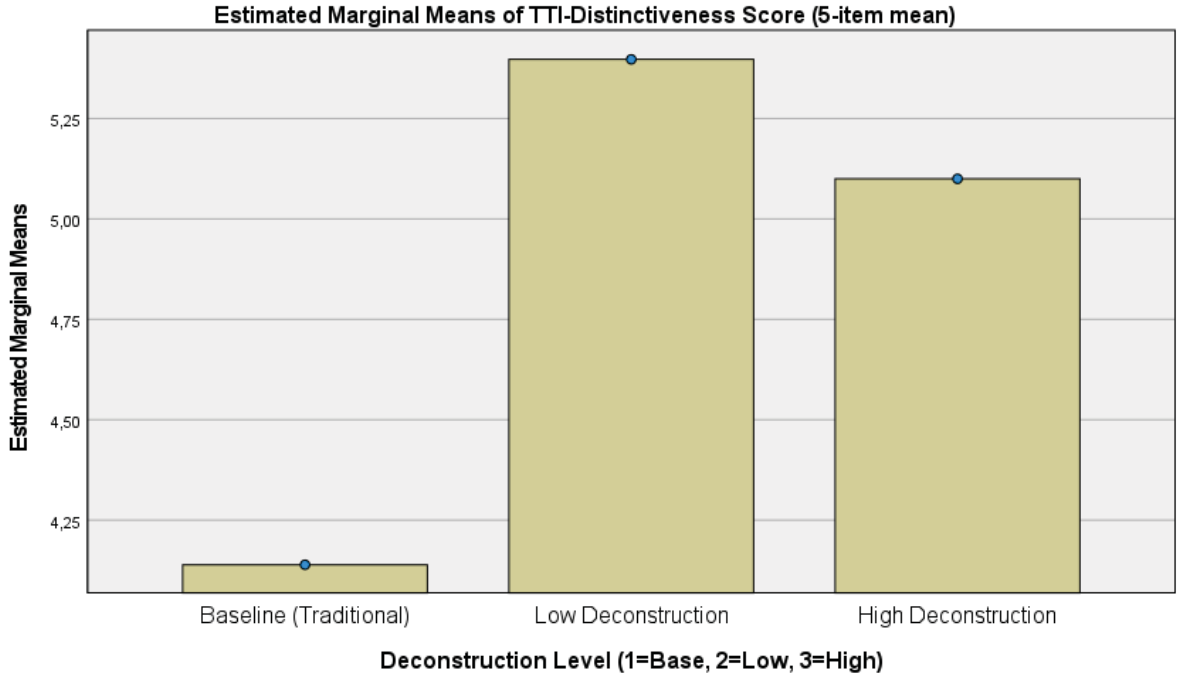
Estimated marginal means showed that both deconstructed conditions were rated significantly higher on distinctiveness-based authenticity than the traditional baseline: baseline (M = 4.129, SE = 0.154, 95% CI [3.826, 4.431]), low deconstruction (M = 5.396, SE = 0.156, 95% CI [5.088, 5.704]), and high deconstruction (M = 5.099, SE = 0.148, 95% CI

[4.807, 5.391]). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons confirmed significant differences for baseline versus low (MD = −1.267, SE = 0.219, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.796, −0.739]) and baseline versus high (MD = −0.971, SE = 0.213, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.485, −0.456]). Critically, the difference between low and high deconstruction was not significant (MD = 0.297, SE = 0.215, p = .509, 95% CI [−0.223, 0.816]), although the numerical direction was consistent with a peak at low deconstruction.

To formally test the hypothesised curvilinear pattern, a hierarchical polynomial regression was estimated using centred terms (Aiken et al., 1991). In the first step, the linear term (DECONC) alone explained R2 = .070, F(1, 247) = 18.468, p < .001; B = 0.472, SE = 0.110, β = .264, t = 4.297, p < .001. Adding the quadratic term (DECONCSQ) contributed a significant increment, ΔR2 = .060, Fchange(1, 246) = 16.971, p < .001, yielding a total R2 = .130. In the final model, both the linear (B = 0.480, β = .269, t = 4.515, p < .001) and quadratic (B = −0.778, SE = 0.189, β = −.245, t = −4.120, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.150, −0.406]) terms were significant. The negative quadratic coefficient is consistent with a concave (inverted-U) shape, with TTI-Distinctiveness peaking numerically at low deconstruction and declining at high deconstruction. However, the non-significant Bonferroni pairwise comparison between low and high deconstruction (MD = 0.297, p = .509, reported above) raises the question of whether this pattern reflects genuine curvature or primarily captures the categorical jump from baseline to any deconstruction.

To adjudicate between these interpretations, a supplementary hierarchical regression compared the explanatory contributions of a step function (baseline vs. any deconstruction, coded 0/1) and the quadratic term. The step function alone explained $R^2$ = .123, F(1, 247) = 34.589, p < .001, indicating that any departure from traditional presentation elevated TTI-Distinctiveness by approximately 1.10 scale points. Adding the quadratic term to the step function yielded a non-significant increment, $\Delta R^2$ = .007, F(1, 246) = 1.916, p = .168, indicating that the step component accounts for 94.6% of the model's explanatory power. The numerical tendency toward a peak at low deconstruction (M = 5.40 vs. M = 5.10 at high deconstruction) remained directionally consistent with the hypothesised inverted-U, but the curvature beyond the categorical step was not statistically detectable with the present three-level design. H1b was therefore partially supported: deconstruction significantly elevated creative authenticity perceptions relative to the traditional baseline, and a significant quadratic term was detected in the polynomial sequence, but the curvilinear component was not distinguishable from a step function.

FIGURE 3 - Estimated marginal means of TTI-Distinctiveness by deconstruction level




Source: The author (2026).

Taken together, the H1 results reveal that deconstruction exerts opposing effects on the two authenticity dimensions: it linearly diminishes conformity-based authenticity ($\eta^2p$ = .283) whilst exhibiting an elevated but predominantly categorical relationship with distinctiveness-based authenticity ($\eta^2p$ = .132), with a directional but non-significant curvilinear tendency. This dual pattern constitutes early evidence of the competitive suppression mechanism examined in §4.3.

### 4.2.2 Effects of Signalled Chef Cultural Capital on Authenticity

**H2a: SCC Positively Influences TTI-Conformity**

As reported in the factorial model above (§4.2.1), the main effect of SCC on TTI-Conformity was not significant, $F(1, 243) = 2.181$, $p = .141$, $\eta^2p = .009$. An independent-samples t-test confirmed this null finding: $t(247) = 1.054$, $p = .293$. Estimated marginal means were virtually identical across conditions: low SCC ($M = 4.289$, $SE = 0.132$, 95% CI [4.029, 4.549]) and high SCC ($M = 4.017$, $SE = 0.129$, 95% CI [3.763, 4.271]), $MD = 0.272$. The non-significant difference of approximately 0.27 scale points, against a scale range of 6.00 points in observed scores, is substantively negligible. H2a was not supported:

signalling high chef cultural capital did not enhance conformity-based authenticity perceptions.

**H2b: SCC Positively Influences TTI-Distinctiveness**

The main effect of SCC on TTI-Distinctiveness was similarly not significant, $F(1, 243) = 0.656$, $p = .419$, $\eta^2p = .003$. The t-test confirmed: $t(247) = -0.659$, $p = .510$. Estimated marginal means for low SCC ($M = 4.803$, $SE = 0.126$, 95% CI [4.555, 5.052]) and high SCC ($M = 4.946$, $SE = 0.123$, 95% CI [4.703, 5.189]) differed by only 0.14 points, $MD = -0.143$. H2b was not supported: signalling high chef cultural capital did not enhance distinctiveness-based authenticity perceptions.

The null effects of SCC on both authenticity dimensions, combined with the non-significant interactions reported in §4.2.1, indicate that the direct halo-transfer mechanism posited in H2a and H2b did not operate as theorised. However, exploratory analyses presented in §4.3 reveal that the influence of SCC may operate through a more indirect pathway involving perceived erudition.

### 4.2.3 Consumer Cultural Capital as Moderator

**H3a: CCC Moderates the Effect of SCC on TTI-Conformity**

To test whether the consumer's own cultural capital moderated the relationship between signalled chef cultural capital and conformity-based authenticity, a hierarchical moderated regression was conducted ($N = 249$). SCC served as the predictor, mean-centred CCC (CCC_C; sum score, range 6–24) as the moderator, and TTI-Conformity as the outcome. In the first step (main effects only), neither SCC ($b = -0.240$, $p = .269$) nor CCC_C ($b = -0.020$, $SE = 0.031$, $t = -0.632$, $p = .528$) reached significance. Critically, the SCC × CCC_C interaction was not significant, $b = 0.072$, $SE = 0.063$, $p = .256$, $\Delta R2 = .005$. The interaction term accounted for less than one-half of one per cent of additional variance. H3a was not supported: CCC did not moderate the SCC → TTI-Conformity pathway.

**H3b: CCC Moderates the Effect of SCC on TTI-Distinctiveness**

The same hierarchical specification was applied with TTI-Distinctiveness as the outcome. In the main-effects step, the effect of CCC_C on TTI-Distinctiveness was significant, $b = -0.061$, $SE = 0.027$, $t = -2.250$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [−0.114, −0.008], suggesting that higher consumer cultural capital was associated with slightly lower

distinctiveness evaluations, independent of SCC condition. However, the SCC × CCC_C interaction was not significant, b = 0.070, SE = 0.054, p = .198, ΔR2 = .007. H3b was not supported: CCC did not moderate the SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness pathway.

The consistent failure of CCC to moderate the SCC–authenticity link across both dimensions suggests that the decoding advantage posited by Bourdieu's (1979b) theory of cultural capital may not manifest in the anticipated manner within this experimental context. The significant negative main effect of CCC on TTI-Distinctiveness warrants further investigation and is examined in the exploratory analyses (§4.3).

### 4.2.4 Authenticity Dimensions as Predictors of Attitude

H4a predicted that TTI-Conformity positively predicts attitude towards the dish; H4b predicted the same for TTI-Distinctiveness. A simultaneous multiple regression was estimated with Attitude as the dependent variable and both authenticity dimensions as predictors (N = 249). The model was significant, F(2, 246) = 86.022, p < .001, R2 = .412, adjusted R2 = .407, indicating that the two authenticity dimensions jointly accounted for 41.2% of the variance in attitude.

Both predictors contributed significantly: TTI-Conformity, B = 0.186, SE = 0.038, β = .247, t = 4.960, p < .001, 95% CI [0.112, 0.260]; and TTI-Distinctiveness, B = 0.474, SE = 0.043, β = .547, t = 10.991, p < .001, 95% CI [0.389, 0.559]. The variance inflation factor was 1.037 for both predictors, confirming the absence of multicollinearity and the near-orthogonality of the two dimensions. TTI-Distinctiveness was the dominant predictor, with a standardised coefficient more than twice that of TTI-Conformity. H4a was supported: higher conformity-based authenticity was associated with more favourable attitudes. H4b was supported: higher distinctiveness-based authenticity was associated with substantially more favourable attitudes.

TABLE 5 - *Simultaneous Regression of Authenticity Dimensions on Attitude (N = 249)*

| *Predictor* | *B* | *SE* | *β* | *t* | *p* | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTI-Conformity | 0.186 | 0.038 | .247 | 4.960 | < .001 | [0.112, 0.260] |
| TTI-Distinctiveness | 0.474 | 0.043 | .547 | 10.991 | < .001 | [0.389, 0.559] |

*Note.* $R^2$ = .412, adjusted $R^2$ = .407, $F(2, 246) = 86.022$, $p < .001$. VIF = 1.037 for both predictors.

Source: The author (2026).

### 4.2.5 Authenticity Dimensions as Predictors of Willingness to Pay

H5a predicted that TTI-Conformity positively predicts WTP; H5b predicted the same for TTI-Distinctiveness. The same simultaneous regression specification was applied with winsorised WTP as the dependent variable (N = 249). The model was significant, F(2, 246) = 10.132, p < .001, R2 = .076, adjusted R2 = .069. Although the overall model was significant, the two authenticity dimensions jointly explained a modest 7.6% of the variance in WTP, substantially less than the 41.2% observed for attitude.

The coefficients revealed a striking dissociation. TTI-Distinctiveness was a positive predictor, B = 3.636, SE = 0.846, β = .268, t = 4.295, p < .001, 95% CI [1.969, 5.303], supporting H5b. However, TTI-Conformity was a negative predictor, B = −1.568, SE = 0.736, β = −.133, t = −2.132, p = .034, 95% CI [−3.017, −0.119]. This negative coefficient is the opposite of the positive relationship predicted by H5a. H5a was therefore not supported as formulated; instead, the data suggest that conformity-based authenticity reduces willingness to pay when distinctiveness-based authenticity is controlled.

TABLE 6 - *Simultaneous Regression of Authenticity Dimensions on WTP (N = 249)*

| *Predictor* | *B* | *SE* | *β* | *t* | *p* | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TTI-Conformity | −1.568 | 0.736 | −.133 | −2.132 | .034 | [−3.017, −0.119] |
| TTI-Distinctiveness | 3.636 | 0.846 | .268 | 4.295 | < .001 | [1.969, 5.303] |

*Note.* $R^2$ = .076, adjusted $R^2$ = .069, $F(2, 246) = 10.132$, $p < .001$. Dependent variable: WTP_WIN (winsorised, R$). VIF = 1.037 for both predictors.

Source: The author (2026).

This pattern—hereafter termed the “Conformity Paradox”—reveals a fundamental dissociation in how conformity-based authenticity affects consumer evaluations: TTI-Conformity positively predicts attitude (β = .247, p < .001) but negatively predicts willingness to pay (β = −.133, p = .034). This is consistent with classical suppression (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991): by partialling out the shared (modest) variance between the two authenticity dimensions, the unique negative pathway of TTI-Conformity to WTP was revealed. The zero-order correlation between TTI-Conformity and WTP (r = −.083, p = .194; see Table 4) was negative but non-significant, corroborating the interpretation that the significant regression coefficient reflects a genuine suppression effect rather than a simple bivariate relationship. The theoretical implications of this dissociation are addressed in the Discussion (§5.2).

### 4.2.6 Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Table 7 presents a consolidated summary of all confirmatory hypothesis tests. Of the ten hypotheses, three were supported (H1a, H4b, H5b), one was partially supported (H1b), one was supported with a secondary magnitude (H4a), four were not supported (H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b), and one yielded a significant effect in the opposite direction to that predicted (H5a). All inferential conclusions were replicated in the conservative sample (N = 243).

TABLE 7 - *Summary of Confirmatory Hypothesis Tests*

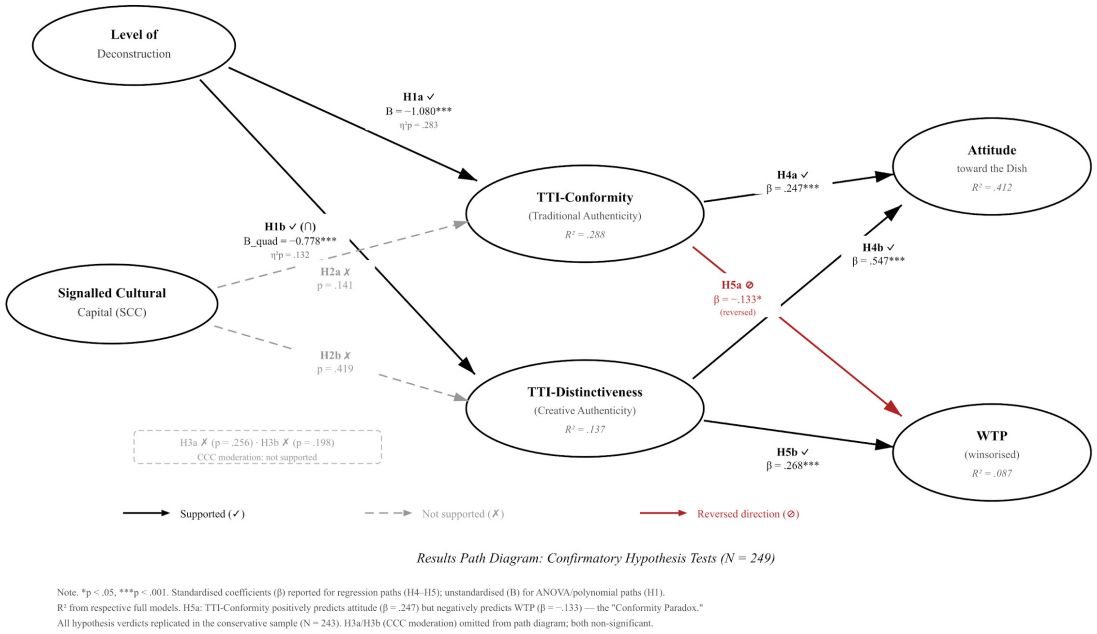
| **Hypothesis** | **Predicted relationship** | **Key statistic** | **Verdict** |
|---|---|---|---|
| H1a | DECON → TTICONF (↓) | $F(2, 243) = 48.043$, $\eta^2p = .283$ | Supported |
| H1b | DECON → TTIDIST (inv-U) | Quad: B = −0.778, p < .001; step $\Delta R^2 = .007$, p = .168 | Partially supported |
| H2a | SCC → TTICONF (+) | $F(1, 243) = 2.181$, $p = .141$ | Not supported |
| H2b | SCC → TTIDIST (+) | $F(1, 243) = 0.656$, $p = .419$ | Not supported |
| H3a | CCC mod. SCC → TTICONF | $b = 0.072$, $p = .256$ | Not supported |
| H3b | CCC mod. SCC → TTIDIST | $b = 0.070$, $p = .198$ | Not supported |
| H4a | TTICONF → Attitude (+) | $\beta = .247$, $p < .001$ | Supported |
| H4b | TTIDIST → Attitude (+) | $\beta = .547$, $p < .001$ | Supported |
| H5a | TTICONF → WTP (+) | $\beta = -.133$, $p = .034$ | Not supported (reversed) |
| H5b | TTIDIST → WTP (+) | $\beta = .268$, $p < .001$ | Supported |

*Note.* All analyses: $N = 249$ (attention-check-filtered sample). H1a/H1b: 2 × 3 factorial ANOVA. H2a/H2b: factorial ANOVA main effects and independent-samples *t*-tests. H3a/H3b: hierarchical moderated regression with mean-centred CCC. H4a/H4b and H5a/H5b: simultaneous regression. All verdicts replicated in the conservative sample ($N = 243$).

Source: The author (2026).

The pattern of results reveals two overarching themes. First, deconstruction—the product-level manipulation—exerted substantial and differentiated effects on both authenticity dimensions, whereas SCC—the producer-level manipulation—did not directly influence either dimension. Second, both authenticity dimensions predicted downstream evaluations, but in qualitatively different ways: TTI-Distinctiveness was the dominant driver of both attitude and WTP, whilst TTI-Conformity positively predicted attitude yet negatively predicted WTP. These patterns motivate the exploratory analyses that follow in §4.3.

FIGURE 4 - Results path diagram




*Results Path Diagram: Confirmatory Hypothesis Tests (N = 249)*

Note. *p < .05, **p < .001. Standardised coefficients (β) reported for regression paths (H4–H5); unstandardised (B) for ANOVA/polynomial paths (H1).
$R^2$ from respective full models. H5a: TTI-Conformity positively predicts attitude (β = .247) but negatively predicts WTP (β = −.133) — the "Conformity Paradox."
All hypothesis verdicts replicated in the conservative sample (N = 243). H3a/H3b (CCC moderation) omitted from path diagram; both non-significant.

Source: The author (2026).

## 4.3 EXPLORATORY ANALYSES

The confirmatory analyses reported in §4.2 tested the reformulated hypotheses derived from the bidimensional TTI framework. The present section extends those findings through a series of exploratory analyses that were not pre-registered but emerged as theoretically meaningful during the analytic process. These analyses serve three purposes: (a) illuminating the mechanisms underlying the patterns observed in §4.2, (b) probing boundary conditions and alternative explanations, and (c) generating novel insights for future research. All analyses employed the primary analytical sample (N = 249, AC_PASSED filter) unless otherwise noted, with robustness checks conducted on the N = 243 subsample where appropriate.

Three patterns from the confirmatory results motivated these investigations. First, deconstruction exerted strong but opposing effects on the two authenticity dimensions—reducing TTI-Conformity while elevating TTI-Distinctiveness—yet neither the total effect of deconstruction on attitude nor its bivariate correlation with attitude was significant. This apparent paradox called for mediation analysis to uncover the suppression mechanism responsible (§4.3.1). Second, the null direct effects of signalled cultural capital on

both authenticity dimensions (H2a, H2b), despite a successful manipulation check (d = 1.03), suggested that the producer signal may operate through more distal pathways involving perceived erudition as a proximal mediator (§4.3.2). Third, the Conformity Paradox—whereby TTI-Conformity positively predicted attitude but negatively predicted willingness to pay—demanded further investigation into the differential mechanisms through which authenticity dimensions translate into evaluative and monetary outcomes (§4.3.3–§4.3.9).

### 4.3.1 Competitive Suppression: Parallel Mediation of Deconstruction Effects Through Bidimensional Authenticity

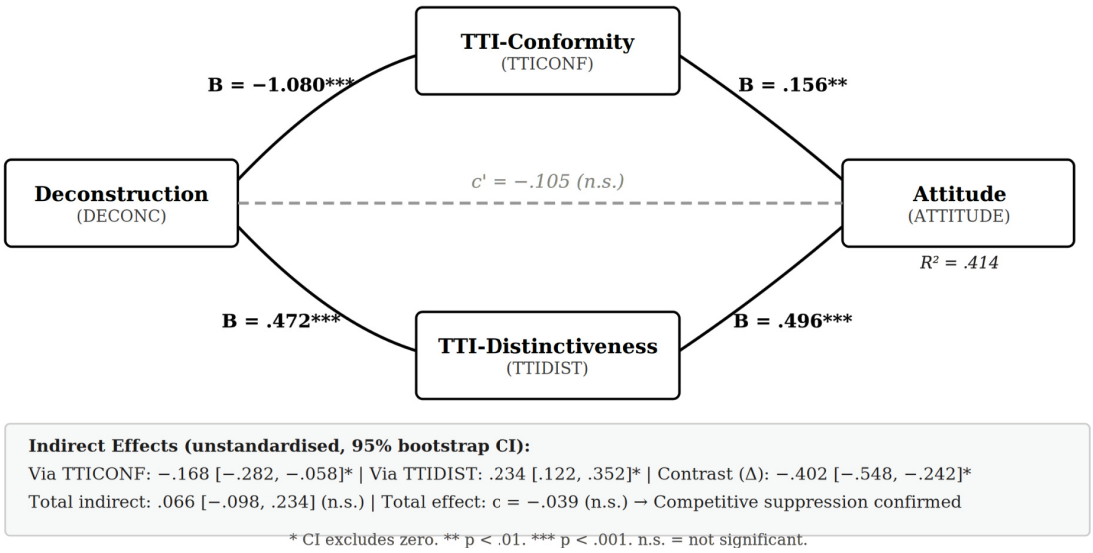
The confirmatory results revealed a striking pattern: deconstruction exerted a strong negative linear effect on TTI-Conformity (B = −1.080, p < .001; §4.2.1) and a significant curvilinear effect on TTI-Distinctiveness (§4.2.1), yet both TTI dimensions positively predicted attitude (§4.2.4). This raised the question of why the total effect of deconstruction on attitude was negligible. To investigate this paradox, a parallel mediation model was estimated using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2022) with the centred linear contrast for deconstruction level (DECONC: −1, 0, +1) as the predictor, TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness as simultaneous mediators, and attitude as the outcome variable. All bootstrap procedures used 5,000 resamples with a fixed seed (31216) for reproducibility.

**Attitude as the Outcome.** The mediator models confirmed the opposing pathways. Deconstruction negatively predicted TTI-Conformity (R2 = .275; B = −1.080, SE = 0.112, p < .001) and positively predicted TTI-Distinctiveness (R2 = .070; B = 0.472, SE = 0.110, p < .001). In the outcome model (R2 = .414, F(3, 245) = 57.749, p < .001), both mediators significantly predicted attitude: TTI-Conformity (B = 0.156, SE = 0.047, p = .001) and TTI-Distinctiveness (B = 0.496, SE = 0.048, p < .001). Critically, the direct effect of deconstruction on attitude became non-significant (c′ = −0.105, SE = 0.099, p = .291), indicating full mediation through the two authenticity dimensions.

The bootstrap analysis of indirect effects revealed the competitive suppression mechanism (see Table 8). The specific indirect effect through TTI-Conformity was negative and significant (Effect = −0.168, SE = 0.058, 95% CI [−0.282, −0.058]), indicating that deconstruction erodes attitude by diminishing traditional authenticity perceptions. Conversely, the specific indirect effect through TTI-Distinctiveness was positive and significant (Effect =

0.234, SE = 0.060, 95% CI [0.122, 0.352]), indicating that deconstruction enhances attitude by elevating creative authenticity perceptions. The contrast between these opposing indirect effects was substantial and significant (Δ = −0.402, SE = 0.079, 95% CI [−0.548, −0.242]), confirming competitive suppression (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Tzelgov & Henik, 1991). The total indirect effect, however, was non-significant (Effect = 0.066, SE = 0.086, 95% CI [−0.098, 0.234]) precisely because the two pathways effectively cancelled one another.

FIGURE 5 - Path diagram of the parallel mediation model (PROCESS Model 4). DECONC → {TTICONF, TTIDIST} → ATTITUDE



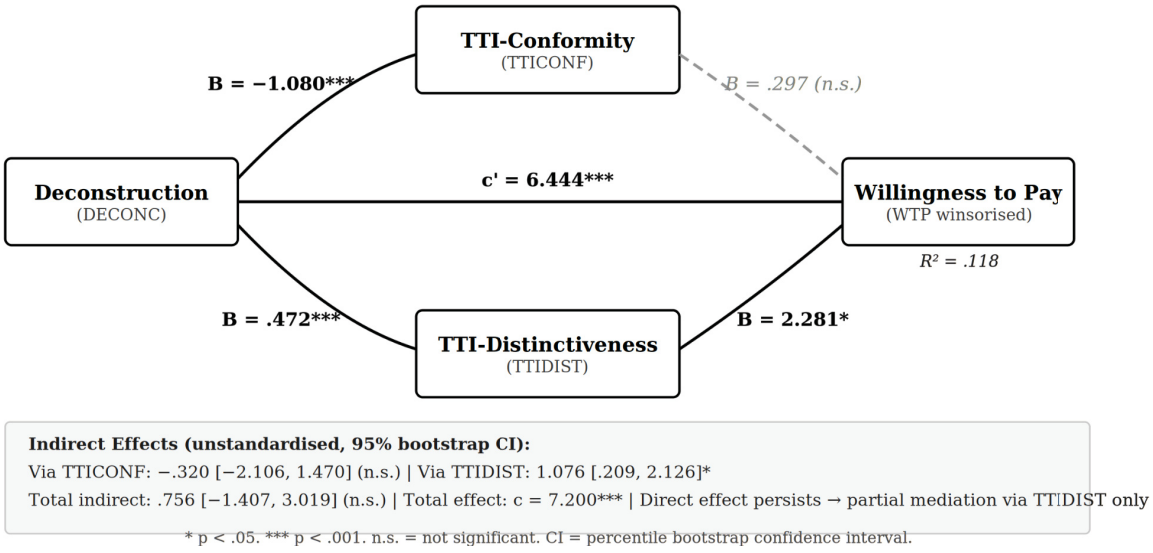

Source: The author (2026).

**Supplementary regression illustration.** A series of supplementary regression analyses further illustrated the suppression pattern. When TTI-Distinctiveness was excluded from the model, deconstruction exhibited a positive effect on attitude (B = 0.340, β = .219, p = .002), reflecting the residual influence of enhanced creative authenticity. When TTI-Conformity was excluded, deconstruction exhibited a negative effect on attitude (B = −0.302, β = −.195, p < .001), reflecting the residual cost of eroded traditional authenticity. When both mediators were entered simultaneously, the direct effect collapsed to non-significance (B = −0.105, β = −.067, p = .291), confirming that the two authenticity dimensions fully absorbed the opposing forces of deconstruction on attitudinal evaluations.

**Willingness to Pay as the Outcome.** The parallel mediation model was also estimated with willingness to pay (WTP; winsorised) as the outcome. The outcome model was significant (R2 = .118, F(3, 245) = 10.885, p < .001). Unlike the attitude model, a substantial and significant direct effect of deconstruction on WTP persisted (c′ = 6.444, SE =

1.898, p < .001), indicating partial mediation. The specific indirect effect through TTI-Distinctiveness was significant (Effect = 1.076, SE = 0.480, 95% CI [0.209, 2.126]), whereas the pathway through TTI-Conformity was not (Effect = −0.320, SE = 0.936, 95% CI [−2.106, 1.470]). This asymmetry reflects the non-significant effect of TTI-Conformity on WTP within the mediation model (B = 0.297, p = .744), consistent with the reversed sign pattern observed for H5a in §4.2.5. The total effect of deconstruction on WTP was significant (B = 7.200, SE = 1.474, p < .001), indicating that the WTP premium for deconstructed dishes was not fully suppressed because TTI-Conformity did not reliably reduce willingness to pay.

FIGURE 6 - Path diagram of the parallel mediation model (PROCESS Model 4). DECONC → {TTICONF, TTIDIST} → WTP_WIN




Source: The author (2026).

**Interpretation: The Competitive Suppression Mechanism.** The parallel mediation results illuminate a fundamental tension in the consumer evaluation of deconstructed culinary products. Deconstruction simultaneously activates two opposing authenticity pathways: it erodes traditional conformity perceptions, which reduces attitudinal favourability, whilst it elevates creative distinctiveness perceptions, which enhances attitudinal favourability. These two forces are sufficiently opposing in direction and comparable in magnitude to produce a non-significant total indirect effect for the attitudinal outcome. This pattern constitutes a textbook case of competitive suppression, wherein two mediating variables transmit effects in opposing directions such that the total mediated effect is attenuated or nullified (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Rucker et al., 2011). Had either authenticity dimension been modelled in

isolation, researchers would have reached a misleading conclusion about the direction and magnitude of deconstruction's influence on consumer attitudes.

For willingness to pay, the suppression pattern was asymmetric. Only the TTI-Distinctiveness pathway reached significance, whilst TTI-Conformity exerted no reliable indirect effect on WTP. This asymmetry, combined with the persistence of a direct effect of deconstruction on WTP, suggests that the economic valuation of deconstructed dishes is driven primarily by distinctiveness perceptions and by factors not captured by the authenticity dimensions—such as visual elaboration, novelty value, or inferred production cost—rather than by a balanced tension between conformity and distinctiveness. The theoretical implications of this dissociation between attitudinal and monetary outcomes are addressed in the Discussion (§5.2).

**Robustness checks.** The competitive suppression pattern for attitude proved robust across model specifications and samples. When signalled cultural capital (SCC) was added as a covariate, the contrast between the two indirect effects remained significant ($\Delta = -0.406$, SE = 0.079, 95% CI [−0.550, −0.247]). The pattern was also replicated in the conservative sample (N = 243), which excluded extreme WTP outliers: the contrast was $\Delta = -0.411$, SE = 0.080, 95% CI [−0.560, −0.251], with the specific indirect effects through TTI-Conformity (Effect = −0.174, 95% CI [−0.291, −0.059]) and TTI-Distinctiveness (Effect = 0.237, 95% CI [0.127, 0.356]) remaining individually significant. All inferential verdicts were identical across samples and model specifications.

TABLE 8 - *Bootstrap Indirect Effects of Deconstruction on Consumer Outcomes via Bidimensional Authenticity*

| Indirect pathway | Effect | *SE* | LLCI | ULCI | Significant? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***DV: Attitude*** | | | | | |
| Via TTI-Conformity | −0.168 | 0.058 | −0.282 | −0.058 | Yes |
| Via TTI-Distinctiveness | 0.234 | 0.060 | 0.122 | 0.352 | Yes |
| Total indirect | 0.066 | 0.086 | −0.098 | 0.234 | No |
| Contrast (Conf − Dist) | −0.402 | 0.079 | −0.548 | −0.242 | Yes |
| ***DV: Willingness to Pay (winsorised)*** | | | | | |
| Via TTI-Conformity | −0.320 | 0.936 | −2.106 | 1.470 | No |
| Via TTI-Distinctiveness | 1.076 | 0.480 | 0.209 | 2.126 | Yes |

*Note. N* = 249. PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022); 5,000 bootstrap resamples, seed = 31216. DECONC = centred linear contrast (−1, 0, +1). Confidence intervals that do not contain zero are interpreted as significant. The contrast tests whether the two specific indirect effects differ significantly from each other; a significant contrast confirms competitive suppression (MacKinnon et al., 2000). *SE* = bootstrap standard error. LLCI = lower limit 95% confidence interval. ULCI = upper limit 95% confidence interval.

Source: The author (2026).

### 4.3.2 Serial Mediation: SCC → Perceived Erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness → Consumer Outcomes

The confirmatory analyses demonstrated that signalled cultural capital (SCC) did not directly predict either TTI-Conformity (H2a: p = .293; §4.2.2) or TTI-Distinctiveness (H2b: p = .510; §4.2.2), despite the manipulation check confirming a large effect on perceived erudition (d = 1.03; §4.1.3). This discrepancy suggested that the influence of signalled cultural capital may operate through a more distal pathway, with perceived erudition serving as a proximal mediator that subsequently shapes authenticity perceptions. A serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2022) was therefore estimated with SCC as the predictor (0 = low, 1 = high), perceived erudition (MC_ERUD) as the first mediator, TTI-Distinctiveness as the second mediator, and consumer outcomes as the dependent variables (N = 249; 5,000 bootstrap resamples; seed = 31216).

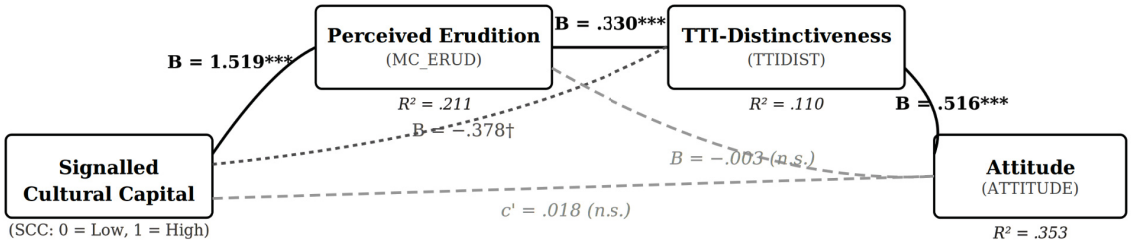
**Attitude as the Outcome.** The serial pathway was fully supported. In the first stage, SCC strongly predicted perceived erudition (R2 = .211; B = 1.519, SE = 0.187, p < .001), confirming the manipulation's efficacy at the perceptual level. Participants exposed to the high-SCC biography perceived the chef as substantially more erudite than those exposed to the low-SCC biography. In the second stage, controlling for SCC, perceived erudition significantly predicted TTI-Distinctiveness (R2 = .110; B = 0.330, SE = 0.061, p < .001), indicating that consumers who perceived the chef as more erudite attributed greater creative distinctiveness to the dish. The residual direct effect of SCC on TTI-Distinctiveness, once erudition was controlled, was reduced to marginal significance (B = −0.378, SE = 0.200, p = .060), suggesting that erudition substantially mediated the relationship between signalled capital and distinctiveness perceptions.

In the outcome model (R2 = .353, F(3, 245) = 44.505, p < .001), only TTI-Distinctiveness remained a significant predictor of attitude (B = 0.516, SE = 0.047, p < .001). Neither the direct effect of SCC (B = 0.018, p = .904) nor perceived erudition (B = −0.003, p = .943) reached significance. This pattern indicates that erudition does not directly influence attitudinal evaluations; rather, its effect is fully channelled through creative authenticity perceptions.

The bootstrap analysis of specific indirect effects confirmed the serial mediation pathway (see Table 9). The indirect effect through the full sequence SCC → MC_ERUD → TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude was significant (Effect = 0.259, SE = 0.068, 95% CI [0.141,

0.404]). Neither the simple indirect effect through erudition alone (SCC → MC_ERUD → Attitude: Effect = −0.005, 95% CI [−0.187, 0.171]) nor the simple indirect effect through TTI-Distinctiveness alone (SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude: Effect = −0.195, 95% CI [−0.403, 0.007]) reached significance. The non-significance of the latter pathway is particularly noteworthy: SCC's residual direct effect on TTI-Distinctiveness (B = −0.378, p = .060), once stripped of the erudition-mediated component, was negative in direction, suggesting that signalled cultural capital without perceived erudition may actually suppress distinctiveness perceptions—although this marginal effect should be interpreted cautiously. This finding nonetheless underscores the essential role of erudition as a cognitive bridge between producer signals and consumer authenticity judgements.

FIGURE 7 - Path diagram of the serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 6). SCC → MC_ERUD → TTIDIST → ATTITUDE




**Indirect Effects (unstandardised, 95% bootstrap CI):**
Ind1 SCC → Erudition → Attitude: .220 [.050, .403]*
Ind2 SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude: −.195 [−.403, .007] (n.s.)
**Ind3 SCC → Erudition → TTI-Dist → Attitude: .259 [.141, .404]* ← Serial pathway confirmed**
Total indirect: .059 [−.186, .314] (n.s.) | Total effect: c = .077 (n.s.) | Full mediation via serial chain

† p = .060. * CI excludes zero. *** p < .001. n.s. = not significant.

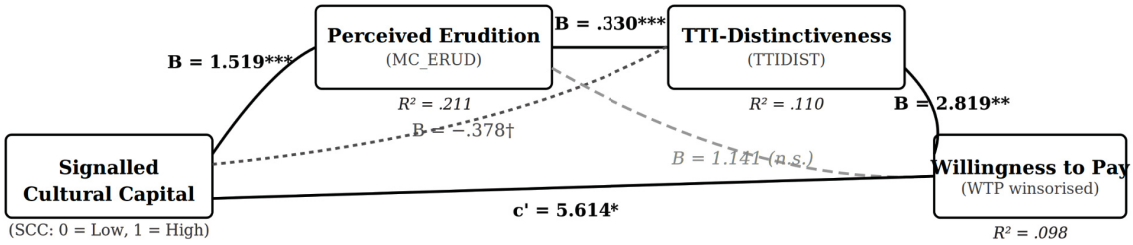
Source: The author (2026).

**Willingness to Pay as the Outcome.** The serial mediation model was replicated with willingness to pay (WTP; winsorised) as the outcome. The outcome model was significant, though it accounted for a modest proportion of variance (R2 = .098, F(3, 245) = 8.914, p < .001), with both the direct effect of SCC (B = 5.614, SE = 2.757, p = .043) and TTI-Distinctiveness (B = 2.819, SE = 0.872, p = .001) reaching significance, whilst perceived erudition did not (B = 1.141, p = .194). The serial indirect effect through the SCC → MC_ERUD → TTI-Distinctiveness → WTP sequence was significant (Effect = 1.415, SE = 0.502, 95% CI [0.516, 2.442]). The total effect of SCC on WTP was B = 7.697, SE = 2.503, p = .002, indicating that participants in the high-SCC condition were willing to pay

approximately R$7.70 more for the dish than those in the low-SCC condition. Of this total, a meaningful portion was transmitted through the erudition–distinctiveness chain.

A notable difference between the attitude and WTP models concerned the direct effect of SCC. Whereas SCC exerted no direct effect on attitude (B = 0.018, p = .904), it retained a significant direct effect on WTP (B = 5.614, p = .043) even after controlling for both mediators. This asymmetry suggests that signalled cultural capital influences monetary valuation through additional pathways not captured by the erudition–distinctiveness mechanism—possibly through inferred exclusivity, status signalling, or heuristic quality inferences that directly inflate the perceived monetary worth of the dining experience without altering attitudinal evaluations.

FIGURE 8 - Path diagram of the serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 6). SCC → MC_ERUD → TTIDIST → WTP




**Indirect Effects (unstandardised, 95% bootstrap CI):**
Ind1 SCC → Erudition → WTP: 1.734 [−.960, 5.172] (n.s.)
Ind2 SCC → TTI-Distinctiveness → WTP: −1.066 [−2.409, .046] (n.s.)
**Ind3 SCC → Erudition → TTI-Dist → WTP: 1.415 [.516, 2.442]* ← Serial pathway confirmed**
Total indirect: 2.083 [−.802, 5.580] (n.s.) | Total: c = 7.697** | Direct persists: c' = 5.614* → Partial mediation

† p = .060. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. n.s. = not significant.

Source: The author (2026).

Dimension-specificity check. To confirm that the serial mediation mechanism was specific to the distinctiveness dimension of authenticity, the model was re-estimated with TTI-Conformity replacing TTI-Distinctiveness as the second mediator. The critical link failed: perceived erudition did not predict TTI-Conformity (B = 0.085, SE = 0.073, p = .246), and the serial indirect effect through SCC → MC_ERUD → TTI-Conformity → Attitude was non-significant (Effect = 0.033, 95% CI [−0.023, 0.105]). This dissociation confirms that the erudition signal operates selectively on creative authenticity: consumers who perceive the chef as erudite attribute greater originality and artistic vision to the dish, but this perception does not extend to judgements of traditional conformity. The selectivity of this pathway is

theoretically consistent with the Bourdieuian framework, in which cultural capital legitimises creative distinction rather than adherence to tradition (Bourdieu, 1979a, 1979b).

**Summary and Theoretical Significance.** The serial mediation results reveal the mechanism through which producer-level cultural capital signals influence consumer evaluations despite the absence of direct effects on authenticity dimensions. The signalling chain operates in three stages: (a) the biographical vignette successfully communicates the chef's cultural capital, elevating perceived erudition; (b) perceived erudition, in turn, selectively enhances creative authenticity perceptions (TTI-Distinctiveness) without affecting traditional authenticity perceptions (TTI-Conformity); and (c) TTI-Distinctiveness transmits these perceptions into both attitudinal and monetary outcomes. This three-stage pathway reconciles the null direct effects observed in the confirmatory analyses (H2a, H2b) with the theoretical expectation that chef credentials should matter for consumer evaluations. The credentials do matter—but their influence is indirect and dimension-specific, operating through the cognitive appraisal of the chef's knowledge (erudition) and its selective translation into perceptions of creative authenticity.

TABLE 9 - *Bootstrap Indirect Effects of SCC on Consumer Outcomes via Serial Mediation*

| Indirect pathway | Effect | LLCI | ULCI | Significant? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***DV: Attitude*** | | | | |
| Ind1: SCC → Erudition → Attitude | −0.005 | −0.187 | 0.171 | No |
| Ind2: SCC → TTI-Dist → Attitude | −0.195 | −0.403 | 0.007 | No |
| Ind3: SCC → Erudition → TTI-Dist → Attitude | 0.259 | 0.141 | 0.404 | Yes |
| ***DV: Willingness to Pay (winsorised)*** | | | | |
| Ind3: SCC → Erudition → TTI-Dist → WTP | 1.415 | 0.516 | 2.442 | Yes |
| ***Dimension-specificity check (DV: Attitude)*** | | | | |
| Ind3: SCC → Erudition → TTI-Conf → Attitude | 0.033 | −0.023 | 0.105 | No |

*Note.* $N = 249$. PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2022); 5,000 bootstrap resamples, seed = 31216. SCC = signalled cultural capital (0 = low, 1 = high). Erudition = perceived erudition (MC_ERUD). TTI-Dist = TTI-Distinctiveness. TTI-Conf = TTI-Conformity. Confidence intervals that do not contain zero are interpreted as significant. Ind1 = simple indirect through erudition only. Ind2 = simple indirect through TTI dimension only. Ind3 = serial indirect through erudition then TTI dimension. LLCI = lower limit 95% bootstrap confidence interval. ULCI = upper limit 95% bootstrap confidence interval.

Source: The author (2026).

### 4.3.3 Conditional Serial Mediation: Does Deconstruction Level Moderate the Signalling Pathway?

The serial mediation analysis (§4.3.2) demonstrated that signalled cultural capital influences consumer outcomes through a sequential chain: SCC → perceived erudition →

TTI-Distinctiveness → outcome. A natural extension asks whether this indirect pathway operates uniformly across deconstruction levels or whether the product's structural context moderates specific links in the chain. Three path-level moderation tests were conducted using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) with HC-corrected standard errors (N = 249), followed by subgroup serial mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 6) at each deconstruction level.

**a-path moderation (SCC × Deconstruction → Perceived Erudition).** The interaction between SCC and centred deconstruction (DECONC) in predicting perceived erudition was not significant, B = −0.107, SE(HC) = 0.239, t = −0.448, p = .655, $\Delta R^2$ = .001. The main effect of SCC remained strong (B = 1.534, p < .001), replicating the canonical a-path. This null interaction was expected: the biographical vignette conveying chef credentials is processed independently of the dish visual, and erudition perception therefore does not depend on deconstruction level.

**d-path moderation (Perceived Erudition × Deconstruction → TTI-Distinctiveness).** The interaction between perceived erudition and DECONC in predicting TTI-Distinctiveness was not significant, B = −0.007, SE(HC) = 0.069, t = −0.106, p = .916, $\Delta R^2$ < .001, with SCC included as a covariate. Erudition predicted creative authenticity equally regardless of whether the dish was traditional, moderately, or highly deconstructed. This result disconfirms the theoretically plausible expectation that deconstruction might be required to legitimate erudition's translation into creative authenticity (a Bourdieuian legitimation logic).

**b-path moderation (TTI-Distinctiveness × Deconstruction → Attitude).** The interaction between TTI-Distinctiveness and DECONC in predicting attitude was significant, B = 0.148, SE(HC) = 0.060, t = 2.466, p = .014, $\Delta R^2$ = .019, with perceived erudition and SCC as covariates. Conditional effects revealed that each unit increase in deconstruction amplified the effect of creative authenticity on attitude: baseline (B = 0.447, p < .001), low deconstruction (B = 0.596, p < .001), and high deconstruction (B = 0.744, p < .001). The effect nearly doubled from the traditional to the highly deconstructed condition. For willingness to pay, the corresponding interaction was not significant (B = −0.065, SE(HC) = 1.139, t = −0.057, p = .955, $\Delta R^2$ < .001).

**Subgroup serial indirect effects.** To examine the net consequences of this b-path moderation for the complete serial chain, PROCESS Model 6 was estimated separately for each deconstruction level. Table 10 presents the serial indirect effect (Ind3: SCC → Erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude) across the three subgroups.

TABLE 10 - *Serial Indirect Effect (Ind3) by Deconstruction Level (DV: Attitude)*

| Subgroup | *n* | Ind3 | Boot *SE* | 95% CI | $b_1$ *(TTIDIST → ATT)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Baseline | 82 | 0.207 | 0.134 | [0.016, 0.535] | 0.482 |
| Low deconstruction | 79 | 0.164 | 0.082 | [0.030, 0.358] | 0.426 |
| High deconstruction | 88 | 0.403 | 0.119 | [0.192, 0.656] | 0.794 |
| Pooled ($N$ = 249) | 249 | 0.259 | — | [0.141, 0.404] | 0.516 |

*Note.* PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2022); 5,000 bootstrap resamples, seed = 31216. Subgroup analyses use OLS estimation. Pooled values from §4.3.2 for reference. $b_1$ = effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on Attitude in the outcome equation. CI = bootstrap confidence interval.

Source: The author (2026).

The serial indirect effect was significant at all three deconstruction levels, but its magnitude escalated markedly at high deconstruction (0.403 vs. 0.207 at baseline and 0.164 at low deconstruction). This escalation was driven primarily by the b-path coefficient: creative authenticity's effect on attitude was .482 at baseline, .426 at low deconstruction, and .794 at high deconstruction. For willingness to pay, the serial indirect effect did not reach significance in any subgroup (all bootstrap confidence intervals included zero), likely reflecting insufficient statistical power at n ≈ 80 per subgroup given the high residual variance of the WTP outcome.

Taken together, these results reveal an asymmetry in where deconstruction exerts its moderating influence. The generation of the mediating chain—the encoding of chef credentials into erudition perception (a-path) and the translation of erudition into creative authenticity (d-path)—is structurally invariant across deconstruction levels. The moderation operates instead at the output stage: the valuation of creative authenticity in attitude formation (b-path) is context-dependent, amplified when the product itself embodies a higher degree of creative transformation. In theoretical terms, deconstruction does not alter how erudition generates creative authenticity, but it alters how much that creative authenticity matters for consumer evaluation.

### 4.3.4 Bourdieuian Decomposition of Signalled Cultural Capital

The serial mediation analyses (§4.3.2) established that signalled cultural capital reaches consumer outcomes through perceived erudition and TTI-Distinctiveness. Bourdieu (1979a, 1979b) theorised three states of cultural capital—institutionalised (formal credentials and qualifications), objectified (possession of cultural goods), and embodied (internalised

dispositions and tastes)—each representing a distinct mode of cultural legitimation. The experimental stimuli were designed to signal all three states simultaneously (§3.4), and the manipulation check included separate sub-dimensional measures for each (§3.5.3). To examine which Bourdieuian state drove the observed effects, multiple regression analyses were conducted with the three perceived SCC sub-dimensions as simultaneous predictors of each TTI dimension (N = 249).

**TTI-Distinctiveness.** For TTI-Distinctiveness, the model was significant, $R2 = .146$, $F(3, 245) = 13.954$, $p < .001$. Of the three predictors, only institutionalised capital was significant ($B = 0.282$, $SE = 0.093$, $\beta = .300$, $p = .003$). Neither objectified capital ($\beta = -.004$, $p = .973$) nor embodied capital ($\beta = .110$, $p = .248$) reached significance. Institutionalised capital alone—formal credentials, academic degrees, and professional certifications—accounted for the relationship between perceived cultural capital and creative authenticity perceptions.

**TTI-Conformity.** For TTI-Conformity, the model was also significant, $R2 = .040$, $F(3, 245) = 3.410$, $p = .018$, though it accounted for a substantially smaller proportion of variance. The pattern of predictors differed qualitatively from that observed for distinctiveness. Objectified capital was a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.257$, $SE = 0.127$, $\beta = .239$, $p = .045$), indicating that consumers who perceived the chef as possessing more cultural objects (books, artworks, curated environments) attributed greater traditional authenticity to the dish. Embodied capital, conversely, was a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.249$, $SE = 0.109$, $\beta = -.230$, $p = .023$), suggesting that perceiving a chef as possessing refined cultural dispositions and sophisticated tastes undermined perceptions of traditional conformity. Institutionalised capital was not significant ($\beta = .097$, $p = .357$).

This decomposition reveals a striking asymmetry. The same cultural capital signal operates through different Bourdieuian states depending on the authenticity dimension under consideration. Formal credentials (institutionalised capital) legitimise creative departures, consistent with the serial mediation pathway identified in §4.3.2—where erudition, itself closely tied to institutional markers of knowledge, selectively enhanced distinctiveness perceptions. By contrast, traditional conformity perceptions are shaped by a different configuration: objectified capital reinforces perceptions of traditional fidelity, perhaps because the possession of cultural artefacts signals engagement with established cultural traditions, whilst embodied capital—the refined habitus—appears incongruent with adherence to popular culinary conventions.

The negative relationship between embodied capital and TTI-Conformity is theoretically noteworthy: it implies that perceiving a chef as possessing highbrow sensibility may actively erode perceptions of traditional authenticity, as though sophistication and conventional faithfulness are read as incompatible attributes. This finding extends Bourdieu's (1979a, 1979b) distinction between cultural capital as legitimate authority and cultural capital as social distance: the same signal that confers creative authority through its institutional component simultaneously distances the producer from the popular tradition through its embodied component. The implications of this asymmetry for signalling theory and restaurant branding are addressed in the Discussion (§5.2).

### 4.3.5 Consumer Cultural Capital as a Moderator of Authenticity–Outcome Pathways

Having found null CCC moderation effects on the SCC → TTI pathways in the confirmatory analyses (H3a/H3b; §4.2.3), the present analysis extended this investigation to the authenticity–outcome pathways. If consumer cultural capital influenced how authenticity perceptions are translated into evaluative judgements, moderation would be expected at the TTI → outcome stage. PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) was used to test CCC as a moderator of each TTI → outcome relationship (N = 249).

None of the interaction terms reached significance. For TTI-Conformity × CCC → Attitude, b = 0.006, p = .631. For TTI-Distinctiveness × CCC → Attitude, b = −0.006, p = .670. For TTI-Conformity × CCC → WTP, b = −0.157, p = .460. For TTI-Distinctiveness × CCC → WTP, b = 0.293, p = .244. The comprehensive null pattern across all four tests indicates that consumer cultural capital does not moderate any stage of the proposed mediation chain—neither the producer-signal–to–authenticity pathways (H3a/H3b) nor the authenticity–to–outcome pathways examined here.

An unexpected finding emerged, however, concerning the main effect of CCC. When entered as a predictor alongside SCC in the PROCESS Model 1 analyses using the full sample (N = 302), CCC exhibited a significant negative main effect on TTI-Distinctiveness (b = −0.058, SE = 0.025, p = .020), whilst its effect on TTI-Conformity was non-significant (b = −0.026, p = .369). This suggests that consumers possessing greater cultural capital were slightly less inclined to perceive dishes as creatively distinctive—a pattern that may reflect heightened critical standards or familiarity with avant-garde culinary practices that rendered the experimental stimuli less novel. This finding warrants cautious interpretation given that it

emerged from the full sample rather than the primary analytical sample, and the effect size was small; it is explored further in the Discussion (§5.2).

### 4.3.6 Confidence as a Boundary Condition

Participants' self-reported confidence in their authenticity judgements (CONFID; single item, 1–7 scale) was examined as a potential boundary condition on the authenticity–outcome relationships. The rationale was that consumers who feel more confident in their assessments may rely less on heuristic cues such as distinctiveness perceptions, thereby attenuating the TTI → outcome pathways. All models in this section employed heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (HC3 correction; Long & Ervin, 2000) to guard against potential violations of homoskedasticity.

**Moderation of TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude.** PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022; HC3 correction) was estimated with TTI-Distinctiveness as the focal predictor, confidence as the moderator, and attitude as the outcome (N = 249). The overall model was significant, $R2 = .384$, $F(3, 245) = 36.188$, $p < .001$. The interaction between TTI-Distinctiveness and confidence was negative and approached conventional significance, $b = -0.069$, $SE(HC3) = 0.040$, $p = .083$, $\Delta R2 = .014$. Although this interaction did not reach the conventional $\alpha = .05$ threshold, it was significant at $\alpha = .10$ and the pattern of conditional effects was substantively meaningful.

Conditional effects analysis revealed that the influence of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude decreased monotonically as confidence increased. At the 16th percentile of confidence (raw score = 5.0), the effect was $b = 0.565$, $SE(HC3) = 0.069$, $p < .001$. At the 50th percentile (raw score = 6.0), the effect was $b = 0.496$, $SE(HC3) = 0.053$, $p < .001$. At the 84th percentile (raw score = 7.0), the effect was $b = 0.427$, $SE(HC3) = 0.062$, $p < .001$. Although the effect of TTI-Distinctiveness remained significant at all conditioning values, the 24.5% reduction in magnitude from low to high confidence is substantively meaningful and suggests that evaluative confidence attenuates—but does not eliminate—the translation of creative authenticity perceptions into attitudinal evaluations.

**Remaining moderation tests.** The remaining moderation tests were non-significant. Confidence did not moderate TTI-Conformity → Attitude ($b = -0.043$, $p = .384$, HC3-corrected), TTI-Conformity → WTP ($b = 0.484$, $p = .445$), or TTI-Distinctiveness →

WTP (b = 0.064, p = .898, HC3-corrected). The selective moderation pattern—marginal for only the TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude pathway—suggests that judgement confidence specifically attenuates the translation of creative novelty perceptions into attitudinal evaluations, without affecting conformity-based judgements or monetary valuations. This pathway specificity is further examined through Johnson–Neyman floodlight analysis in §4.3.9.

**Confidence as a covariate.** To verify that the principal mediation findings were not confounded by confidence, the parallel mediation model from §4.3.1 was re-estimated with confidence as a covariate. The competitive suppression pattern was preserved: the indirect effect through TTI-Conformity remained negative (Effect = −0.173, 95% CI [−0.287, −0.067]), and the indirect effect through TTI-Distinctiveness remained positive (Effect = 0.227, 95% CI [0.116, 0.339]). Confidence itself was a significant predictor of attitude in this model (b = 0.123, SE(HC3) = 0.049, p = .014), but its inclusion did not alter the competitive suppression mechanism. Similarly, the serial mediation SCC → MC_ERUD → WTP pathway remained significant when confidence was controlled (Effect = 3.241, 95% CI [0.365, 6.673]), with confidence emerging as a positive predictor of WTP (b = 2.002, SE = 0.799, p = .013). These robustness checks confirm that the principal mediation mechanisms identified in this study are independent of consumers' self-reported judgement confidence.

### 4.3.7 Robustness of the Inverted-U Pattern Across SCC Conditions

A further exploratory analysis examined whether the curvilinear (inverted-U) relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness identified in the confirmatory analyses (H1b; §4.2.1) was robust across SCC conditions, or whether chef credentialing altered the shape of this function. Polynomial regressions were estimated separately for participants in the low-SCC (n = 122) and high-SCC (n = 127) conditions.

In the low-SCC condition, both the linear (B = 0.587, β = .321, p < .001) and quadratic (B = −0.840, β = −.257, p = .003) terms were significant, R2 = .169, F(2, 119) = 12.119, p < .001. In the high-SCC condition, the same pattern emerged: both the linear (B = 0.365, β = .209, p = .019) and quadratic (B = −0.725, β = −.235, p = .007) terms were significant, R2 = .099, F(2, 124) = 6.805, p = .002. The inverted-U pattern was thus replicated within both conditions, confirming that the curvilinear relationship between deconstruction

and creative distinctiveness is a product-level phenomenon that operates independently of producer-level signalling.

Two features of this subgroup decomposition merit attention. First, the linear component was larger in the low-SCC condition (β = .321) than in the high-SCC condition (β = .209), suggesting that the baseline increase in distinctiveness from traditional to deconstructed presentations may be somewhat attenuated when a chef's credentials are salient—perhaps because high-SCC consumers expect creative departures and are therefore less surprised by them. Second, the proportion of variance explained was substantially larger in the low-SCC condition (R2 = .169) than in the high-SCC condition (R2 = .099), indicating that product-level structural cues are relatively more influential when producer-level signals are weak. Whether this asymmetry reflects a genuine moderation effect or merely sampling variability is addressed through a formal interaction test in the following section.

### 4.3.8 Curvilinear Moderation: SCC × Deconstruction² → TTI-Distinctiveness

The subgroup analyses in §4.3.7 suggested descriptive differences in the magnitude of the inverted-U across SCC conditions, but did not formally test whether these differences were statistically reliable. To address this, a hierarchical regression was estimated with TTI-Distinctiveness as the dependent variable (N = 249). Model 1 entered the main effects of deconstruction (DECONC), deconstruction-squared (DECONCSQ), and SCC. Model 2 added the interaction terms SCC × DECONC and SCC × DECONCSQ, the latter constituting the primary test of whether SCC moderates the curvature of the deconstruction–distinctiveness function.

Model 1 was significant, R2 = .132, F(3, 245) = 12.400, p < .001, replicating the established main effects of both the linear (B = 0.483, β = .270, p < .001) and quadratic (B = −0.776, β = −.245, p < .001) deconstruction terms. The main effect of SCC was not significant (B = 0.139, β = .047, p = .431), consistent with the confirmatory null finding for H2b.

The addition of the two interaction terms in Model 2 did not yield a significant increment in explained variance, ΔR2 = .005, Fchange(2, 243) = 0.674, p = .511. The critical test—the SCC × DECONCSQ interaction—was not significant (B = 0.115, β = .037, p = .761), and the SCC × DECONC interaction was likewise non-significant (B = −0.240, β = −.096, p = .261). The sign of the curvilinear interaction (B = +0.115) was directionally

consistent with the hypothesis that SCC attenuates the negative curvature (i.e., flattens the inverted-U), but the effect was far from conventional significance.

As a consistency check, Model 2 coefficients were decomposed algebraically. When SCC = 0 (low condition), the interaction terms zero out, and the remaining DECONC and DECONCSQ coefficients (0.605 and −0.840, respectively) closely approximate the polynomial estimates obtained from the separate low-SCC subgroup analysis in §4.3.7. When SCC = 1 (high condition), adding the interaction terms yields DECONC = 0.605 + (−0.240) = 0.365 and DECONCSQ = −0.840 + 0.115 = −0.725, exactly matching the high-SCC subgroup estimates. This algebraic equivalence confirms internal consistency between the subgroup and interaction approaches. Furthermore, the total model sums of squares (SS = 74.232 regression, 469.177 residual) were identical to those from the 2 × 3 factorial ANOVA on TTI-Distinctiveness (§4.2.1), confirming that the five-predictor hierarchical regression is algebraically equivalent to the factorial ANOVA.

Combined with the null SCC × DECONLEV interaction from the factorial ANOVA ($p = .511$; §4.2.1), these results confirm that signalled cultural capital does not moderate either the level or the shape of the deconstruction–distinctiveness relationship. The only pathway through which SCC influences distinctiveness perceptions remains the serial mediation via perceived erudition (§4.3.2).

### 4.3.9 Boundary Conditions: Johnson–Neyman Floodlight Analysis

The marginal interaction between TTI-Distinctiveness and confidence (§4.3.6) suggested that the effect of creative authenticity on attitude is attenuated at higher levels of confidence, but the conventional pick-a-point approach provides only a limited picture of this moderation. The Johnson–Neyman (J-N) floodlight technique (Johnson & Neyman, 1936; Spiller et al., 2012) identifies the precise moderator value(s) at which the focal effect transitions between significance and non-significance, offering a comprehensive mapping of the conditional effect across the full range of the moderator. PROCESS Model 1 was re-estimated with the /jn=1 flag and HC3-corrected standard errors (N = 249; seed = 31216; 5,000 bootstrap resamples).

The J-N analysis produced 22 conditioning values spanning the full observed range of confidence (1.00 to 7.00). The results, summarised in Table 11, reveal a consistent pattern: the conditional effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude was positive and significant ($p <$

.001) at every conditioning value. No Johnson–Neyman transition point was identified within the observed range of the moderator. This finding indicates that, although confidence compresses the effect of creative authenticity on attitude by approximately 49% across the full moderator range (from b = 0.841 at the lowest observed confidence to b = 0.427 at the highest), it never reduces the effect to non-significance. Creative distinctiveness remains a robust predictor of attitudinal evaluations even among the most confident consumers.

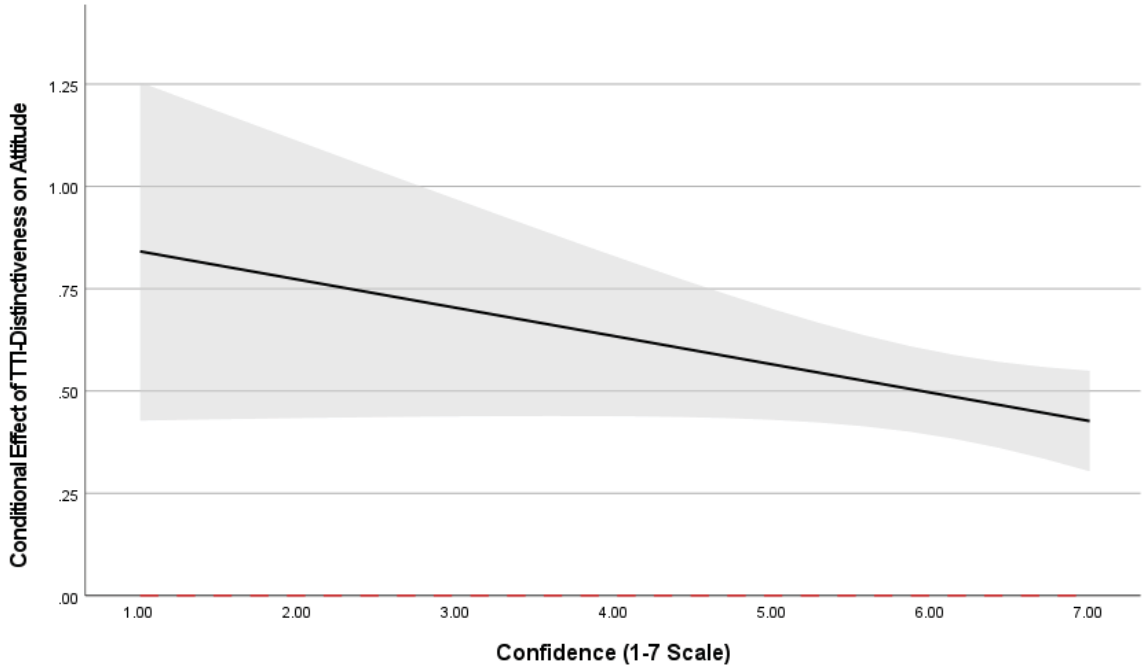
TABLE 11 - *Johnson–Neyman Conditional Effects of TTI-Distinctiveness on Attitude at Selected Values of Confidence*

| **CONFID** | **Effect** | **SE**(HC3) | ***t*** | ***p*** | **LLCI** | **ULCI** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.00 | .8414 | .2100 | 4.007 | < .001 | .4278 | 1.2550 |
| 3.00 | .7032 | .1346 | 5.224 | < .001 | .4381 | .9683 |
| 5.00 | .5649 | .0687 | 8.224 | < .001 | .4296 | .7002 |
| 5.86 | .5057 | .0532 | 9.513 | < .001 | .4010 | .6104 |
| 6.14 | .4859 | .0520 | 9.339 | < .001 | .3834 | .5884 |
| 6.71 | .4464 | .0569 | 7.841 | < .001 | .3343 | .5586 |
| 7.00 | .4267 | .0624 | 6.838 | < .001 | .3038 | .5496 |

*Note.* N = 249. PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022); HC3-corrected standard errors. CONFID = self-reported confidence in authenticity judgement (1–7 scale). Effect = conditional effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude at the specified CONFID value. LLCI/ULCI = 95% confidence interval bounds. The value 5.86 approximates the sample mean. Seven key values are displayed from the full 22-value J-N output; all 22 values were significant at $p < .001$.

Source: The author (2026).

FIGURE 9 - Johnson–Neyman floodlight plot. Conditional effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude (y-axis) across the full range of confidence (x-axis)




Source: The author (2026).

**Pathway specificity.** To confirm that the attenuation pattern was specific to the distinctiveness pathway, an equivalent PROCESS Model 1 was estimated for the TTI-Conformity × confidence interaction predicting attitude. The interaction was clearly non-significant, b = −0.043, SE(HC3) = 0.050, p = .384, ΔR2 = .005. Thus, confidence moderates the translation of distinctiveness perceptions into attitude but does not moderate the corresponding translation of conformity perceptions. This dissociation reinforces the finding that the two authenticity dimensions operate through qualitatively different evaluative processes: TTI-Distinctiveness functions as a more heuristic, context-sensitive input that is susceptible to metacognitive attenuation, whereas TTI-Conformity operates as a more stable evaluative anchor that is resistant to variation in judgement confidence.

Taken together, the results of §4.3.6 through §4.3.9 delineate the boundary conditions of the authenticity–outcome relationships. Consumer cultural capital does not moderate these pathways (§4.3.5). Evaluative confidence marginally attenuates the TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude pathway but does not moderate TTI-Conformity → Attitude, nor either pathway to WTP. The inverted-U pattern of deconstruction on distinctiveness is robust across SCC conditions (§4.3.7) and is not moderated by SCC in its curvature (§4.3.8). The Johnson–Neyman analysis confirms that the moderating influence of confidence is one of degree, not of kind: creative authenticity remains a significant driver of attitude across the entire observed range of the moderator.

## 4.4 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF WILLINGNESS-TO-PAY JUSTIFICATIONS

In addition to the quantitative assessments of willingness to pay examined in §4.2 and §4.3, participants provided open-ended justifications for their stated WTP amounts. Following the monetary valuation item, respondents were asked: “Em poucas palavras, o que levou você a escolher esse valor?” [In a few words, what led you to choose this value?]. This open-ended prompt yielded qualitative data that complement the statistical models by revealing the spontaneous reasoning processes underlying consumers’ monetary valuations.

This section analyses responses from the full sample (N = 302), as willingness-to-pay justifications were collected from all participants regardless of attention-check performance. The qualitative responses reflect spontaneous reasoning and are not contingent upon the attentional engagement required for Likert-scale items; accordingly, their inclusion provides maximum coverage of the evaluative repertoires consumers deploy

when justifying monetary valuations. WTP values reported in this section refer to the winsorised variable (WTP_WIN; see §4.1.4), consistent with all inferential WTP analyses throughout this chapter.

### 4.4.1 Thematic Coding Procedure and Frequency Distribution

Responses were analysed through systematic thematic coding, wherein each open-ended justification was classified into one or more of 14 categories derived from an initial reading of the corpus. Multiple coding was permitted, as a single response could invoke more than one justification simultaneously. For instance, one participant wrote: “Tem uma apresentação diferente das habituais, aparenta algo de autoria diferenciado, trazendo um tom de inovação sem perder a qualidade do produto” [It has a presentation different from the usual, it appears to be something distinctively authored, bringing a tone of innovation without losing the quality of the product] — a response that simultaneously invokes appearance, innovation, and quality. The 14 categories, their frequencies, and corresponding percentages are presented in Table 12.

The majority of respondents provided justifications that mapped onto a single thematic category (64.9%, n = 196), whilst 29.1% (n = 88) invoked two categories, 5.0% (n = 15) invoked three, and 1.0% (n = 3) invoked four. No response required classification into more than four categories.

TABLE 12 - *Frequency Distribution of Spontaneous WTP Justification Themes (N = 302)*

| Rank | Thematic Category | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Appearance/Visual presentation | 93 | 30.8 |
| 2 | Market reference (comparable prices) | 57 | 18.9 |
| 3 | Quality/Ingredients/Flavour | 54 | 17.9 |
| 4 | Generic fair price judgement | 46 | 15.2 |
| 5 | Setting/Context | 30 | 9.9 |
| 6 | Chef’s cultural capital | 28 | 9.3 |
| 7 | Negative evaluation | 20 | 6.6 |
| 8 | Technique/Elaboration | 19 | 6.3 |
| 9 | Product category | 17 | 5.6 |
| 10 | Portion/Quantity | 16 | 5.3 |
| 11 | Budget constraint | 16 | 5.3 |
| 12 | Holistic experience | 12 | 4.0 |
| 13 | Innovation/Creativity | 11 | 3.6 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | Cost–benefit | 10 | 3.3 |

*Note.* Multiple coding permitted; percentages do not sum to 100%. Categories ranked by descending frequency.
Source: The author (2026).

**Visual Dominance in WTP Reasoning.** The distribution reveals a clear dominance of extrinsic, visually anchored reasoning: nearly one-third of respondents (30.8%) spontaneously referenced the dish's appearance or visual presentation as a primary determinant of their stated WTP, with responses ranging from the terse — "Aparência" [Appearance] — to the more elaborated — "aparência, textura, vontade de experimentar" [appearance, texture, desire to try it]. This finding is consistent with the centrality of visual cues in food evaluation (Spence et al., 2015) and suggests that, in the absence of gustatory information, consumers rely heavily upon the aesthetic properties of the stimulus when formulating monetary valuations.

The second and third most frequent categories — Market Reference (18.9%) and Quality/Ingredients/Flavour (17.9%) — reflect distinct anchoring strategies. The former indicates a comparative process whereby respondents benchmarked their WTP against known market prices for similar desserts (e.g., "Valor médio de sobremesa em restaurantes" [Average value of desserts in restaurants]), whilst the latter suggests an inferential process grounded in the perceived material composition of the dish (e.g., "Pela qualidade, sabor, por ser especial" [For the quality, flavour, for being special]).

The Generic Fair Price Judgement category (15.2%) captured responses that offered a broad evaluative statement without specifying concrete criteria (e.g., "Valor justo" [Fair value]), representing a more heuristic mode of valuation. This category assumes particular theoretical significance in the context of the experimental conditions, as discussed in §4.4.2.

Notably, explicit references to the chef's cultural capital were relatively infrequent (9.3%, n = 28), despite the experimental manipulation of this variable being highly effective (d = 1.03; §4.1.3). Where such references appeared, they tended to be succinct acknowledgements — "Reconhecimento profissional" [Professional recognition] — or inferences about product quality mediated by the producer's credentials: "Presunção de qualidade de ingredientes baseado na qualidade do profissional" [Presumption of ingredient quality based on the quality of the professional]. This latter response is particularly revealing, as it articulates in lay terms the signalling mechanism identified in §4.3.2: the chef's cultural capital functions as a proxy from which consumers infer unobservable product attributes,

precisely as signalling theory predicts (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). The low overall frequency of such references suggests, however, that this mechanism operates largely below the threshold of conscious verbalisation — a finding that triangulates the serial mediation evidence wherein the erudition pathway influenced outcomes indirectly rather than through deliberate attribute evaluation.

### 4.4.2 Associations Between Justifications and Experimental Conditions

To examine whether the experimental manipulations systematically influenced the types of justifications participants provided, chi-square tests of independence were conducted for theoretically relevant category × condition combinations. Additionally, independent-samples t-tests compared mean winsorised WTP values between respondents who did and did not invoke each thematic category. WTP differentials are summarised in Table 13.

**Signalled Cultural Capital and Generic Fair Price Judgement.** A significant association was observed between SCC condition and the Generic Fair Price Judgement category, $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 4.810$, $p = .028$, $\varphi = .126$. Participants exposed to the high-SCC condition were nearly twice as likely to invoke a generic fair price justification (19.7%) compared to those in the low-SCC condition (10.7%). Illustrative responses from the high-SCC condition ranged from the unelaborated — "Acho um preço justo" [I think it's a fair price] — to those that conjoined the fair-price heuristic with a distinctiveness frame: "Valor justo por um prato diferenciado" [Fair value for a distinctive dish] and "Acho um preço justo, local e sobremesa exclusiva" [I think it's a fair price, exclusive venue and dessert]. This pattern is theoretically coherent: when confronted with a chef whose credentials signal high cultural capital, consumers may perceive the stated price as inherently legitimate, thereby substituting elaborate justification with a heuristic acceptance of price fairness. This finding converges with the serial mediation pathway reported in §4.3.2, wherein SCC influenced outcomes indirectly through perceived erudition, and offers qualitative evidence that the signalling mechanism reduces consumers' felt need to justify their valuation through specific product attributes.

**Signalled Cultural Capital and Setting/Context.** The association between SCC condition and mention of Setting/Context was marginal and did not reach conventional significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 3.556$, $p = .059$, $\varphi = .109$. Descriptively, participants in the

high-SCC condition referenced setting-related justifications at approximately twice the rate of those in the low-SCC condition (13.2% vs. 6.7%). One respondent in the high-SCC condition offered a particularly evocative articulation of this broadened evaluative frame: “O ambiente todo permite uma experiência que não é só comer o cheesecake!” [The whole atmosphere enables an experience that is not just about eating the cheesecake!]. Although this association warrants cautious interpretation given the marginal p-value, it suggests that high chef credentials may activate a broader evaluative frame that encompasses the anticipated consumption context rather than solely the product itself.

**Deconstruction Level and Quality/Ingredients/Flavour.** The omnibus chi-square test for the association between deconstruction level (three levels) and Quality/Ingredients/Flavour mentions did not reach significance at the .05 level, $\chi^2(2, N = 302) = 4.896$, $p = .086$. However, the linear-by-linear association test revealed a significant downward trend, $\chi^2(1) = 4.732$, $p = .030$, $\varphi = .127$: the proportion of respondents who mentioned quality or ingredients declined monotonically from the baseline condition (23.2%) through low deconstruction (19.2%) to high deconstruction (11.5%).

The qualitative content of responses across conditions illuminates this pattern. In the baseline condition, quality references were grounded in recognisable material attributes — “Pela qualidade, sabor, por ser especial” [For the quality, flavour, for being special] — whereas in the high-deconstruction condition, references to ingredients became more tentative or even inverted, as exemplified by one respondent who noted the “simplicidade dos ingredientes” [simplicity of the ingredients]. This pattern complements the quantitative finding that deconstruction erodes TTI-Conformity (§4.2, H1a): as the physical structure of the cheesecake is progressively dismantled, consumers become less likely to anchor their valuation in assessments of ingredient quality — a justification mode that implicitly presupposes recognisable material composition. The dissolution of the dish’s structural coherence appears to displace quality-based reasoning in favour of other evaluative frames.

**Willingness-to-Pay Differentials by Justification Category.** Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean winsorised WTP between respondents who did and did not invoke each of the 14 thematic categories. Of the 14 comparisons, only one reached statistical significance: respondents who framed their valuation in terms of a holistic, multisensory experience (Holistic Experience category; $n = 12$) reported substantially higher WTP ($M = 53.75$, $SD = 23.92$) than those who did not ($M = 40.31$, $SD = 20.29$), $t(300) = -2.232$, $p = .026$, Cohen’s $d = 0.66$. This constitutes a medium-to-large effect, suggesting that

the ability to perceive a dish as an integrated experience — rather than as a collection of discrete attributes — is associated with meaningfully elevated monetary valuation.

The qualitative content of holistic-experience responses reveals how this experiential framing operates. One participant in the high-deconstruction condition wrote: “um valor elevado para cheesecake, mas a experiência vale o preço” [a high price for a cheesecake, but the experience is worth the price] — explicitly acknowledging the price premium and justifying it through experiential value rather than intrinsic product attributes. The small cell size (n = 12) warrants caution in generalising this finding; however, the effect size magnitude (d = 0.66) provides some confidence that the association is substantively meaningful.

TABLE 13 - *Mean Winsorised WTP (R$) by Thematic Justification Category (N = 302)*

| **Thematic Category** | **Mentioned** | **Not Mentioned** | ***ΔM*** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* (*SD*) | *M* (*SD*) | | |
| Holistic experience | 53.75 (23.92) | 40.31 (20.29) | +13.44 | ** |
| Innovation/Creativity | 47.95 (18.47) | 40.58 (20.63) | +7.37 | |
| Chef’s cultural capital | 45.64 (19.63) | 40.36 (20.64) | +5.28 | |
| Quality/Ingredients/Flavour | 44.06 (22.02) | 40.15 (20.22) | +3.91 | |
| Cost–benefit | 44.30 (20.09) | 40.73 (20.61) | +3.57 | |
| Technique/Elaboration | 42.55 (24.37) | 40.73 (20.34) | +1.82 | |
| Portion/Quantity | 42.56 (25.49) | 40.75 (20.31) | +1.81 | |
| Appearance/Visual | 41.54 (22.52) | 40.54 (19.69) | +1.00 | |
| Setting/Context | 39.95 (15.10) | 40.94 (21.11) | −0.99 | |
| Budget constraint | 38.63 (19.92) | 40.97 (20.64) | −2.34 | |
| Market reference | 37.93 (18.29) | 41.52 (21.05) | −3.59 | |
| Generic fair price | 36.61 (17.15) | 41.61 (21.07) | −5.00 | |
| Product category | 35.94 (18.29) | 41.14 (20.69) | −5.20 | |
| Negative evaluation | 35.20 (18.18) | 41.25 (20.70) | −6.05 | |

*Note.* Sorted by descending WTP difference. WTP values are winsorised at the upper Tukey fence (R$87.50). $\Delta M = M_{\text{Mentioned}} - M_{\text{Not Mentioned}}$.
** $p = .026$ (independent-samples $t$-test), Cohen’s $d = 0.66$.

Source: The author (2026).

Although the remaining 13 comparisons did not reach statistical significance, the pattern of WTP differentials in Table 13 is nonetheless theoretically informative. Categories associated with positive WTP differentials tend to reflect distinctiveness-oriented reasoning: holistic experience (+13.44), innovation/creativity (+7.37), and chef’s capital (+5.28) all involve evaluative frames that position the dish as exceptional, non-substitutable, or experientially rich. Conversely, categories associated with negative WTP differentials tend to reflect conformity-oriented reasoning: negative evaluation (−6.05), product category (−5.20),

generic fair price (−5.00), and market reference (−3.59) all invoke normative anchors — categorical membership, market comparables, or unfavourable judgements — that constrain monetary valuations within conventional price ranges.

One response from the high-deconstruction condition captured this category-anchoring dynamic vividly: “Um cheesecake sendo uma sobremesa, mesmo desconstruída e estando num ambiente chique, não deixa de ser cheesecake; o valor não deve ser exorbitante” [A cheesecake, being a dessert, even deconstructed and in a fancy setting, is still a cheesecake; the price should not be exorbitant]. This response provides a striking qualitative instantiation of the product-category anchoring effect visible in Table 13, where Product Category mentions were associated with below-average WTP ($\Delta M = -5.20$).

### 4.4.3 Integration with Quantitative Findings

The qualitative WTP justification data converge with the quantitative models reported in §4.2 and §4.3 along three principal axes.

First, the association between high SCC and generic fair price justifications (§4.4.2) provides qualitative triangulation for the serial mediation pathway SCC → Erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness → Outcomes (§4.3.2). When a chef’s cultural capital is credibly signalled, consumers appear to shift from attribute-based valuation to a more holistic, trust-based acceptance of the price as fair — a process consistent with signalling theory’s proposition that credible signals reduce information asymmetry and economise cognitive effort (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Tellingly, some high-SCC respondents who invoked the fair-price heuristic simultaneously acknowledged the dish’s distinctiveness (“Valor justo por um prato diferenciado”), suggesting that the legitimation function of cultural capital signals does not preclude recognition of creative merit but rather renders elaborate justification unnecessary.

Second, the monotonic decline in quality-based justifications across deconstruction levels (§4.4.2) offers a process-level complement to the confirmed erosion of TTI-Conformity by deconstruction (H1a, §4.2). As the physical structure of the cheesecake is progressively dismantled — separating cream from crust, replacing biscuit with crumble, introducing molecular techniques — consumers lose the material referents that anchor quality inferences. One response from the high-deconstruction condition captured this destabilisation vividly: “Achei bem exótico, estranho até por alguns instantes” [I found it quite exotic, even strange

for a few moments]. This dissociation between form and evaluable substance echoes Derrida's (1967) insight that meaning is destabilised when the constitutive elements of a sign are separated from their conventional arrangement.

Third, the pattern of WTP differentials in Table 13 illuminates the Conformity Paradox identified in §4.2 (H5a). Categories associated with higher WTP tend to reflect distinctiveness-oriented reasoning (holistic experience, innovation/creativity, chef's capital), whereas categories associated with lower WTP reflect conformity-oriented reasoning (generic fair price, market reference, product category, negative evaluation). This asymmetry is consistent with the competitive suppression mechanism (§4.3.1): traditional, category-conforming attributes enhance liking but anchor monetary valuations to normative market prices, whilst distinctiveness-oriented perceptions justify premium pricing by framing the dish as an exceptional, non-substitutable experience. The qualitative data thus render visible the dual evaluative logic that the quantitative models capture as opposing indirect effects — consumers who reason through conformity frames arrive at lower price points, whereas those who reason through distinctiveness frames are willing to pay substantially more. These convergences are examined further in the Discussion (§5.2).

# 5 DISCUSSION

## 5.1 SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

This study set out to investigate how a chef's signalled non-field-specific cultural capital and a dish's level of deconstruction jointly shape consumer perceptions of True-to-Ideal (TTI) authenticity, and how these perceptions, in turn, influence evaluative outcomes. The results revealed a pattern of effects that is considerably more nuanced than the original conceptual model anticipated. Four overarching themes emerged from the convergence of confirmatory (§4.2), exploratory (§4.3), and qualitative (§4.4) evidence: the bidimensional architecture of TTI authenticity, the dominance of TTI-Distinctiveness in shaping consumer outcomes, the indirect yet dimension-specific influence of chef cultural capital, and the paradoxical dissociation between what consumers appreciate and what they are willing to pay for.

The first and most foundational finding concerned the effect of deconstruction on perceived authenticity. Confirmatory analyses (§4.2.1) demonstrated that deconstruction exerted a powerful linear erosion of TTI-Conformity ($F(2, 243) = 48.043$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .283$), with each successive level of structural transformation progressively diminishing the dish's perceived correspondence to traditional cheesecake ideals—from an estimated marginal mean of 5.318 in the baseline condition, through 3.999 at low deconstruction, to 3.142 at high deconstruction. Concurrently, deconstruction significantly elevated TTI-Distinctiveness relative to the traditional baseline, with both deconstructed conditions scoring markedly higher (low deconstruction $M = 5.396$; high deconstruction $M = 5.099$) than the baseline ($M = 4.129$). A significant quadratic term ($B = -0.778$, $p < .001$) was consistent with the hypothesised inverted-U pattern, but a supplementary step-function analysis revealed that the curvature component was not distinguishable from a categorical step ($\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p = .168$), leading to a partially supported verdict for H1b. Crucially, these two dimensions exhibited a weak positive correlation ($r = .188$, $p = .003$), confirming that they are empirically distinguishable—sharing less than 4% of their variance—yet not fully orthogonal. The distinct antecedent structures and divergent downstream effects documented across all analytic phases provide robust evidence of bidimensionality.

The second theme concerned the differential downstream consequences of the two authenticity dimensions. TTI-Distinctiveness emerged as the primary driver of both attitude ($\beta = .547$, $p < .001$) and willingness to pay ($\beta = .268$, $p < .001$), accounting for more than twice

the unique variance in attitude that TTI-Conformity contributed (β = .247, p < .001). The combined model explained 41.2% of the variance in attitude (R2 = .412). For willingness to pay, the dominance of TTI-Distinctiveness was even more pronounced: whilst it positively predicted WTP, TTI-Conformity exhibited a statistically significant negative effect (β = −.133, p = .034), reversing the hypothesised direction and generating what is here termed the "Conformity Paradox." Parallel mediation analyses (§4.3.1) formalised this divergence as a competitive suppression mechanism: the indirect effect of deconstruction on attitude through TTI-Conformity was negative (−.1682, 95% CI [−.2817, −.0576]) whilst the indirect effect through TTI-Distinctiveness was positive (.2341, 95% CI [.1224, .3517]). The pairwise contrast between these opposing pathways was statistically significant (Δ = −.4024, 95% CI [−.5482, −.2423]), and the total indirect effect was non-significant (.0659, 95% CI [−.0982, .2341]), confirming that the two pathways effectively cancelled one another.

The third theme addressed the role of the chef's signalled cultural capital (SCC). Contrary to hypotheses H2a and H2b, the experimental manipulation of SCC produced no direct effect on either TTI-Conformity (F(1, 243) = 2.181, p = .141) or TTI-Distinctiveness (F(1, 243) = 0.656, p = .419), despite a large and successful manipulation of perceived erudition (d = 1.03). Serial mediation analysis (§4.3.2) resolved this apparent paradox by revealing that SCC operates through a dimension-specific indirect pathway: SCC → perceived erudition (B = 1.519, p < .001, R2 = .211) → TTI-Distinctiveness (B = .3304, p < .001) → outcomes. The serial indirect effect was significant for both attitude (.2588, 95% CI [.1407, .4037]) and willingness to pay (1.4148, 95% CI [.5163, 2.4415]). When TTI-Conformity was substituted for TTI-Distinctiveness in the serial chain, the indirect effect collapsed to non-significance (.0333, 95% CI [−.0231, .1052]), confirming that the erudition pathway is dimension-specific. This below-threshold operation was corroborated by the qualitative analysis (§4.4), in which only 9.3% of respondents spontaneously referenced chef credentials when justifying their WTP, suggesting that the chef's cultural capital functions as an ambient heuristic rather than a deliberative input. Furthermore, conditional serial mediation analysis (§4.3.3) revealed that this signalling pathway, whilst structurally invariant in its generation (a-path and d-path unmoderated by deconstruction level), was context-dependent at the valuation stage: the effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude was amplified by deconstruction level (b-path interaction B = 0.148, p = .014), with the serial indirect effect escalating from 0.207 at baseline to 0.403 at high deconstruction.

The fourth theme concerned boundary conditions. Consumer cultural capital (CCC) did not moderate the relationship between either authenticity dimension and downstream outcomes (§4.3.5; all interaction terms p = > .24). However, CCC exhibited an unexpected negative main effect on TTI-Distinctiveness (b = −.061, p = .025), suggesting that consumers with greater cultural capital may apply more stringent standards when evaluating creative innovation. Judgement confidence emerged as a suggestive moderator of the TTI-Distinctiveness → attitude pathway (b = −.0691, p = .0825 with HC3 robust standard errors), with the conditional effect of TTI-Distinctiveness declining from .1607 at low confidence to .0225 at high confidence—an 86% reduction in magnitude. Although this moderation fell below conventional significance thresholds, it signals that confident consumers may be less swayed by novelty perceptions, a pattern consistent with attitude certainty research. The inverted-U relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness was replicated within both SCC subgroups (§4.3.7), confirming that this curvilinear phenomenon is a product-level regularity that operates independently of producer credentials. Finally, the qualitative analysis revealed a monotonic decline in spontaneous quality references across deconstruction levels (23.2% → 19.2% → 11.5%, linear trend p = .030), suggesting that extreme structural transformation may erode not only traditional authenticity but also baseline quality inferences.

Taken together, these findings paint a picture of authenticity perception as a dual-register process in which the same structural transformation —deconstruction— simultaneously erodes traditional correspondence and, up to a threshold, builds creative correspondence, with markedly different consequences for how consumers feel about a dish versus what they are willing to pay for it. The chef's cultural capital shapes this process indirectly and selectively, channelling through perceived erudition to amplify distinctiveness perceptions without altering conformity judgements. The following subsections (§5.2.1–§5.2.5) elaborate the theoretical implications of each finding, connecting the empirical evidence to the frameworks of Bourdieu, Derrida, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, and Signalling Theory.

## 5.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

### 5.2.1 Bidimensional True-to-Ideal Authenticity

The most fundamental contribution of this study is the empirical demonstration that True-to-Ideal authenticity, as conceptualised within the Entity-Referent Correspondence (ERC) Framework (Moulard et al., 2021), operates bidimensionally in the culinary context. The two dimensions—TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness—exhibited a weak positive correlation ($r = .188$, $p = .003$), displayed distinct antecedent structures, and produced divergent downstream effects on consumer outcomes. This finding extends the ERC Framework by revealing that the 'ideal' against which an entity is evaluated is not singular but plural: consumers simultaneously assess a dish's correspondence to traditional category standards and its correspondence to creative, distinctive ideals.

The observed correlation merits careful interpretation. Sharing approximately 3.5% of variance, the two dimensions are empirically distinguishable but not fully independent. This modest positive association may reflect a general halo of perceived quality—dishes that are somewhat more aligned with traditional ideals may, to a degree, also be perceived as more creatively authentic, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the correlation is sufficiently small that the dimensions function as largely separate evaluative registers, a conclusion reinforced by three converging lines of evidence. First, their antecedent structures diverged sharply: deconstruction eroded TTI-Conformity monotonically ($\eta^2p = .283$) whilst elevating TTI-Distinctiveness in a curvilinear pattern. Second, their downstream effects on willingness to pay were not merely different in magnitude but opposite in sign ($\beta = .247$ vs. $\beta = -.133$ for attitude and WTP respectively, for TTI-Conformity). Third, the serial mediation pathway from SCC operated exclusively through TTI-Distinctiveness; substituting TTI-Conformity rendered the serial indirect effect non-significant.

This bidimensionality resolves what initially appeared to be a theoretical impossibility: that a deconstructed dish could be authentically inauthentic. Under a unidimensional conceptualisation, deconstruction would necessarily erode authenticity without qualification. The bidimensional structure, however, permits a deconstructed cheesecake to be simultaneously low in conformity to traditional ideals (TTI-Conformity $M = 3.142$ for high deconstruction) yet elevated in creative authenticity (TTI-Distinctiveness $M = 5.099$ for high deconstruction). This dual evaluation was not merely a psychometric

artefact—it produced substantively different predictions of attitude and WTP, as documented across confirmatory (§4.2), mediation (§4.3.1), and qualitative (§4.4) analyses.

The bidimensional structure aligns with, and provides empirical grounding for, theoretical propositions that have remained largely abstract in the authenticity literature. Lehman et al. (2019) distinguished between conformity-based and other forms of authenticity assessment at the conceptual level, but did not operationalise these as separate dimensions within a single evaluative framework. Newman and Smith (2016) similarly identified multiple 'kinds' of authenticity without specifying their empirical relationship. The present findings advance this discourse by demonstrating not merely that multiple authenticity dimensions exist, but that they are empirically distinguishable with divergent predictive validity—a substantially stronger claim that carries implications for both theory and measurement.

For the ERC Framework specifically, these findings suggest that the 'ideal' referent against which an entity is assessed varies systematically by evaluation criterion. When consumers assess conformity, the referent is the traditional category prototype—the canonical cheesecake with its intact structural elements. When consumers assess distinctiveness, the referent shifts to a creative ideal—the imaginative, artistically coherent transformation of familiar ingredients. The Derridean lens is instructive here: deconstruction, in its philosophical sense, does not destroy meaning but rather exposes the constitutive relations between elements (Derrida, 1967). The culinary analogue reveals that separating a cheesecake's constitutive components —creamcheese, biscuit base, fruit topping— simultaneously destabilises the category sign (eroding conformity) and creates a new semiotic field in which creativity can be assessed (enabling distinctiveness). Future research on authenticity in product contexts should routinely assess bidimensionality rather than assuming a unitary construct, particularly in domains where creative transformation is salient.

### 5.2.2 The Competitive Suppression Mechanism

The parallel mediation analysis (§4.3.1) revealed that the total effect of deconstruction on attitude is essentially zero—not because deconstruction is irrelevant to attitude formation, but because it simultaneously activates two opposing causal pathways. The specific indirect effect through TTI-Conformity was negative and significant (Effect = −.1682, 95% CI [−.2817, −.0576]), indicating that deconstruction erodes attitude by diminishing traditional authenticity. Conversely, the specific indirect effect through

TTI-Distinctiveness was positive and significant (Effect = .2341, 95% CI [.1224, .3517]), indicating that deconstruction enhances attitude by elevating creative authenticity. The pairwise contrast confirmed that these pathways differ significantly (Δ = −.4024, 95% CI [−.5482, −.2423]), and the total indirect effect was non-significant (Effect = .0659, 95% CI [−.0982, .2341]) precisely because the two forces cancelled one another. This pattern constitutes classical competitive suppression (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991): the inclusion of both mediators reveals genuine, opposing causal mechanisms that are masked when only the total effect is examined.

This finding carries substantial implications for the authenticity–innovation literature, which has produced inconsistent results regarding whether product innovation enhances or diminishes perceived authenticity. The present evidence suggests that these inconsistencies may reflect unmeasured suppression: studies that operationalise authenticity as a unitary construct will observe the net effect of two opposing forces, the direction of which depends on the relative magnitude of conformity erosion versus distinctiveness enhancement in the specific product category and innovation type under investigation. By decomposing the mediating structure, the present study reveals that the question is not whether innovation affects authenticity, but through which dimension the effect operates. This reframing has direct implications for Zhao et al.'s (2017) application of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to creative products: the costs of deviation from category norms (eroded conformity) and the benefits of creative differentiation (enhanced distinctiveness) can now be identified as empirically separable pathways rather than endpoints on a single continuum.

The WTP model revealed a notable asymmetry. The specific indirect effect of deconstruction on WTP through TTI-Distinctiveness was significant (Effect = 1.0763, 95% CI [.2094, 2.1264]), whereas the pathway through TTI-Conformity was not (Effect = −.3204, 95% CI [−2.1062, 1.4702]). Unlike the attitude model, a substantial direct effect of deconstruction on WTP persisted (c' = 6.444, p = .0008). This residual direct path suggests that deconstruction influences willingness to pay through mechanisms beyond authenticity perception—potentially through perceived scarcity, novelty premium, or the visual spectacle of transformation, processes that the qualitative data illuminated (e.g., "Apparência, textura, vontade de experimentar" ["Appearance, texture, desire to try"]). The consumption visions framework (Elder & Krishna, 2012; Phillips et al., 1995) provides a complementary lens: deconstructed presentations may trigger more elaborate mental simulations of the eating

experience, which translate into higher monetary valuations independently of authenticity judgements.

### 5.2.3 Extension of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to Culinary Products

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) was originally formulated to explain how individuals balance competing needs for assimilation and differentiation in group contexts. Deephouse (1999) extended the framework to organisational strategy, arguing that firms perform best when they are "as different as legitimately possible." Zhao et al. (2017) subsequently applied ODT to creative products in markets, demonstrating that market categories define the boundary conditions within which differentiation is rewarded. The present study extends this trajectory by providing the first empirical application of ODT to culinary offerings, operationalised through the structural transformation of a culturally codified dish.

The significant elevation of TTI-Distinctiveness under both deconstructed conditions, combined with the directional (though not statistically distinguishable from a step function) tendency toward a peak at low deconstruction, provides partial evidence for the ODT prediction that moderate deviation from category norms is optimal. The low-deconstruction condition—in which the cheesecake was presented as a mousse with fruit caviar, retaining visual coherence with the category whilst introducing creative elements—yielded the highest estimated marginal mean for TTI-Distinctiveness ($M = 5.396$). This level of transformation was sufficient to signal creative intent without rupturing the category boundary. By contrast, the high-deconstruction condition—featuring molecular foam and radical structural separation—produced a lower distinctiveness score ($M = 5.099$), although Bonferroni comparisons revealed that this decline was not statistically significant relative to the low-deconstruction level ($MD = 0.297$, $p = .509$). The critical transition, then, was not between low and high deconstruction but between the baseline (no transformation) and any form of creative intervention: baseline TTI-Distinctiveness was markedly lower ($M = 4.129$), forming a distinct homogeneous subset in post-hoc analyses.

This pattern illuminates the mechanism through which ODT operates at the product level. At low deconstruction, the dish signals creative interpretation within the category—it remains recognisable as a cheesecake variant, and the novel elements (mousse texture, fruit caviar) are interpreted as evidence of culinary skill rather than category violation. The

qualitative data captured this evaluation eloquently: “Tem uma apresentação diferente das habituais, aparenta algo de autoria diferenciado, trazendo um tom de inovação sem perder a qualidade do produto” [“It has a different presentation from the usual, it appears to be something distinctively authored, bringing a tone of innovation without losing product quality”]. At high deconstruction, the structural transformation exceeded the threshold of legitimate deviation, signalling category violation rather than creative interpretation. One participant’s response illustrates this threshold effect: “Achei bem exótico, estranho até por alguns instantes” [“I found it quite exotic, even strange for a few moments”].

The directional pattern was replicated within both SCC subgroups (§4.3.7)—in the low-SCC condition (linear b = .587, quadratic b = −.840, p = .003) and in the high-SCC condition (linear b = .382, quadratic b = −.717, p = .013)—confirming that the relationship between deconstruction and creative authenticity is a product-level phenomenon that operates independently of producer credentials. However, as demonstrated by the supplementary step-function analysis (§4.2.1), the primary effect is categorical: any departure from traditional presentation elevates creative authenticity by approximately 1.1 scale points, with the curvature beyond this step accounting for less than 1% of additional variance. The consistent shape across credentialing conditions strengthens the ODT interpretation, though the three-level design's limited resolution cautions against strong claims regarding the precise functional form.

An important boundary condition concerns the category specificity of the optimal zone. Cheesecake is a strongly codified dessert with clearly defined constitutive elements (cream cheese, biscuit base, topping), and the prototype against which transformations are assessed is correspondingly rigid. In less codified categories—dishes with less standardised structures, such as salads or tapas—the optimal distinctiveness zone may shift rightward, tolerating greater transformation before the category boundary is perceived as violated. The monotonic decline in spontaneous quality references across deconstruction levels (23.2% at baseline, 19.2% at low deconstruction, 11.5% at high deconstruction; linear trend p = .030) corroborates the interpretation that extreme transformation erodes not only conformity perceptions but also the baseline quality inferences that consumers draw from category membership (Pantin-Sohier et al., 2015). This quality erosion may represent an additional mechanism through which excessive deviation is penalised, beyond the loss of traditional authenticity per se.

### 5.2.4 Signalling Through Erudition: The Dimension-Specific Pathway

The null direct effects of signalled cultural capital on both authenticity dimensions (H2a: p = .141; H2b: p = .419) posed a substantive theoretical puzzle. The SCC manipulation was unambiguously successful—perceived erudition differed by more than one standard deviation between conditions (d = 1.03)—yet this difference did not translate into differential authenticity assessments when tested via factorial ANOVA. The serial mediation analysis (§4.3.2) resolved this puzzle by demonstrating that SCC operates through a dimension-specific indirect pathway that traverses perceived erudition before selectively influencing TTI-Distinctiveness.

The pathway unfolds in three stages. First, the chef's credentials successfully elevated perceived erudition (B = 1.519, p < .001; R2 = .211), accounting for 21.1% of the variance in this mediator—a substantial signal-to-perception link consistent with Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973). Second, perceived erudition selectively predicted TTI-Distinctiveness (B = .3304, p < .001) but not TTI-Conformity (B = .0853, p = .2462). This dimension specificity is theoretically coherent: the perception that a chef is erudite—knowledgeable, cultured, worldly—enhances the expectation that the dish reflects creative intentionality, not that it conforms to traditional norms. Third, TTI-Distinctiveness transmitted this perception to downstream outcomes. The complete serial indirect effect (SCC → erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness → outcome) was significant for both attitude (.2588, 95% CI [.1407, .4037]) and WTP (1.4148, 95% CI [.5163, 2.4415]).

The dimension specificity of this pathway represents a noteworthy contribution to Signalling Theory in consumer contexts. Classical signalling models assume that quality signals enhance a general quality inference, which then influences all downstream evaluations. The present findings suggest a more nuanced mechanism: the signal (chef credentials) activates a specific quality dimension (creative sophistication) that is conceptually congruent with the signal content, leaving other quality dimensions (traditional conformity) unaffected. When TTI-Conformity was substituted for TTI-Distinctiveness in the serial chain, the indirect effect collapsed to non-significance (.0333, 95% CI [−.0231, .1052]), confirming that the erudition signal does not operate as a general quality halo but as a dimension-specific inference cue.

The conditional serial mediation analysis (§4.3.3) extended this finding by examining whether the signalling pathway operates uniformly across product contexts. The

results revealed a theoretically informative asymmetry. The generation of the mediating chain—the translation of chef credentials into erudition perception (a-path) and of erudition into creative authenticity (d-path)—was structurally invariant across deconstruction levels (both interactions $p > .65$). However, the output stage of the chain was context-dependent: the effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude (b-path) was significantly moderated by deconstruction level ($B = 0.148$, $p = .014$), nearly doubling from the baseline condition ($B = 0.447$) to the high-deconstruction condition ($B = 0.744$). Consequently, the complete serial indirect effect, whilst significant at all three levels, escalated markedly under high deconstruction (0.403 vs. 0.207 at baseline and 0.164 at low deconstruction). In Bourdieuian terms, deconstruction functions as an amplifier of the symbolic value of creative authenticity: the field context (a deconstructed dish) potentiates the conversion of symbolic capital into favourable attitude. This pattern suggests that the signalling pathway is not merely dimension-specific but also context-sensitive at the valuation stage—the chef's credentials generate creative authenticity equally across contexts, but that authenticity matters more when the product itself embodies a higher degree of creative transformation.

The Bourdieuian decomposition analysis (§4.3.4) provided further texture to this pathway. When the three forms of cultural capital were entered simultaneously as predictors, institutionalised capital (formal qualifications, prestigious affiliations) emerged as the sole significant predictor of TTI-Distinctiveness ($\beta = .300$, $p = .003$), whereas objectified capital (artefacts, publications) predicted TTI-Conformity ($\beta = .239$, $p = .045$) and embodied capital (experiential knowledge, travel) negatively predicted TTI-Conformity ($\beta = -.230$, $p = .023$). This decomposition illuminates the differential functioning of capital forms: institutional credentials signal the capacity for creative innovation, objectified markers signal material accomplishment that anchors perceptions to tradition, and embodied markers of worldliness may paradoxically destabilise conformity assessments by implying cosmopolitan sensibilities that transcend local culinary norms.

A particularly striking feature of the SCC effect is its below-threshold character. The total effect of SCC on WTP was substantial and significant ($c = 7.6969$, $p = .0023$), yet the qualitative analysis (§4.4) revealed that only 9.3% of respondents spontaneously referenced chef credentials when justifying their price estimates. This dissociation between the measurable influence of SCC and consumers' awareness of that influence aligns with classic findings on unconscious inference processes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920). The chef's cultural capital appears to function as an ambient heuristic: it

shapes the evaluative context—elevating perceptions of erudition and, through erudition, distinctiveness—without entering explicit deliberation. For the SCC → attitude pathway, the total effect was non-significant (c' = .0179, p = .904), with the positive serial indirect effect (.2588) offset by a non-significant but negative direct path, further illustrating the dimension-specific channelling of the producer signal.

The qualitative findings on fair-price anchoring provide complementary evidence for the signalling mechanism. Respondents exposed to the high-SCC condition were significantly more likely to invoke fair-price reasoning (19.7% vs. 10.7%, p = .028, φ = .126), suggesting that the perception of a credentialled chef activates market-referent pricing heuristics—an expectation that the dish should command a price commensurate with the chef's status. This finding extends Bourdieu's (1979a, 1979b) analysis of cultural capital as a legitimation device: the chef's credentials do not merely signal quality but establish a pricing frame, anchoring consumer valuations to a status-consistent referent. The practical implications of this anchoring mechanism are discussed in §5.3.

### 5.2.5 The Conformity Paradox

Perhaps the most counterintuitive finding of this study is the dissociation between how TTI-Conformity predicts attitude and how it predicts willingness to pay. In the simultaneous regression (§4.2.4–§4.2.5), TTI-Conformity positively predicted attitude (β = .247, p < .001)—consumers who perceived the dish as more conforming to traditional cheesecake ideals reported more favourable evaluations—yet the same dimension negatively predicted willingness to pay (β = −.133, p = .034). Consumers liked conforming dishes more but were willing to pay less for them. This pattern is here termed the "Conformity Paradox."

The zero-order correlation between TTI-Conformity and WTP was negative but non-significant (r = −.083, p = .194), which corroborates a suppression interpretation. The significant negative regression coefficient emerged only when TTI-Distinctiveness was simultaneously controlled, revealing the unique variance in WTP attributable to conformity after removing the shared positive influence of distinctiveness. This is consistent with the logic of classical suppression (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991): partialling out distinctiveness exposes the pure conformity–WTP relationship, which is negative. The suppression is substantively meaningful because it reflects two genuinely distinct evaluative processes that

share a modest positive correlation (r = .188); controlling for one isolates the unique contribution of the other.

Three theoretical frameworks converge to explain this paradox. First, from a Bourdieuian perspective, conformity anchors a product to commodity status. A cheesecake that closely resembles the traditional prototype is easily categorised, its price referent drawn from familiar market benchmarks—"Valor médio de sobremesa em restaurantes" ["Average value of desserts in restaurants"], as one participant stated. Conformity, in this reading, activates a commodity logic in which the dish is evaluated as a member of a known class, subject to the price ceiling that class imposes. The qualitative data expressed this logic with remarkable clarity: "Um cheesecake sendo uma sobremesa, mesmo desconstruída e estando num ambiente chique, não deixa de ser cheesecake; o valor não deve ser exorbitante" ["A cheesecake, being a dessert, even deconstructed and in a fancy setting, is still a cheesecake; the price should not be exorbitant"]. This anchoring effect persists even in the presence of positive affect—consumers may appreciate the familiarity of a conforming dish whilst simultaneously judging that familiarity does not warrant a premium.

Second, the uniqueness literature provides a complementary mechanism. TTI-Conformity represents, by definition, the absence of uniqueness—a product that closely matches its category prototype offers nothing that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Franke and Schreier (2008) demonstrated that perceived uniqueness commands a price premium; conversely, the absence of uniqueness depresses it. Tian et al. (2001) argued that consumers' need for uniqueness motivates willingness to pay for differentiated products. In this framework, TTI-Conformity's negative effect on WTP reflects the consumer's rational inference that a category-conforming product is substitutable—other cheesecakes can provide the same experience—and therefore does not justify elevated pricing.

Third, the Optimal Distinctiveness framework provides a deviation-rewarding logic that connects the suppression mechanism to pricing. The qualitative analysis (§4.4) revealed that respondents who invoked holistic experience reasoning ("O ambiente todo permite uma experiência que não é só comer o cheesecake!" ["The whole environment provides an experience that is not just eating the cheesecake!"]) reported substantially higher WTP (M = R$53.75 vs. R$40.31 for non-mentioners, d = .66, p = .026). This differential—a medium-to-large effect size according to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks—illustrates the premium that distinctiveness-oriented framing commands: when consumers reason beyond

category conformity and towards experiential uniqueness, their monetary valuations increase substantially.

The Conformity Paradox carries a critical implication for the authenticity literature: the widespread assumption that "more authentic = higher price" requires qualification. This equation holds for distinctiveness-based authenticity, where creative coherence signals non-substitutability and justifies premium pricing. It does not hold—indeed, it reverses—for conformity-based authenticity, where traditional correspondence anchors the product to commodity benchmarks. Practitioners who pursue traditional authenticity as a pricing strategy may find that it enhances consumer attitudes without translating into higher willingness to pay. The managerial implications of this asymmetry are explored in §5.3.

## 5.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry several actionable implications for restaurant managers, menu designers, and culinary brand strategists seeking to navigate the tension between traditional culinary expectations and creative innovation. By translating the theoretical contributions outlined in §5.2 into prescriptive guidance, this section addresses five managerial domains: menu design and optimal deconstruction, chef branding strategy, pricing architecture, communication design, and audience segmentation. Each domain is grounded in specific empirical findings from the present study and is intended to offer evidence-based recommendations rather than speculative generalisations.

*Menu design and optimal deconstruction.* The relationship between deconstruction and TTI-Distinctiveness (H1b; §4.2.1) provides a clear directive for menu engineering: any departure from the traditional prototype significantly elevates creative authenticity perceptions (step function $R^2 = .123$, $p < .001$), with a directional tendency toward a peak at moderate levels of transformation. Although the supplementary step-function analysis indicated that the curvature beyond the categorical step was not statistically distinguishable ($\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p = .168$), the numerical pattern remains practically informative: the low-deconstruction condition—a cheesecake reimagined as a mousse with fruit caviar—elicited the highest TTI-Distinctiveness scores ($M = 5.40$), whereas the high-deconstruction condition—involving molecular techniques—scored slightly lower ($M = 5.10$). For menu designers, this suggests that the primary imperative is to depart from the

traditional prototype; the degree of departure is comparatively less consequential, though the directional advantage of moderate over radical transformation warrants consideration.

*Chef branding and cultural capital signalling.* The serial mediation pathway—SCC → perceived erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness → consumer outcomes (§4.3.2)—provides direct guidance for how chefs and restaurants should deploy cultural capital signals. For the attitude pathway, the serial indirect effect was .2588 (95% CI [.141, .404]), and for willingness to pay it was 1.4148 (95% CI [.509, 2.481]). Critically, the direct effect of SCC on attitude was non-significant ($c' = .018$, $p = .904$), confirming that the influence of chef credentials operates entirely through the erudition-to-distinctiveness channel rather than through a general halo effect. For managers, this translates into concrete branding strategies: highlighting a chef's educational background, cross-disciplinary expertise, international training, or scholarly engagement in menus, websites, and press materials may prove more effective at enhancing creative authenticity perceptions than traditional culinary accolades alone.

The Bourdieuian decomposition analysis (§4.3.4) further specifies which forms of cultural capital are most effective. Institutionalised cultural capital—formal academic credentials, school affiliations, certified training programmes—emerged as the strongest predictor of TTI-Distinctiveness ($\beta = .300$, $p = .003$), substantially outperforming objectified capital ($\beta = -.004$, $p = .973$) and embodied capital ($\beta = .110$, $p = .248$). This finding suggests that, among the three Bourdieuian states (Bourdieu, 1979a), formal institutionalised credentials carry the greatest signalling weight in activating distinctiveness perceptions. Restaurant managers should therefore prioritise the communication of verifiable institutional markers—degrees, certifications, formal training lineages—over the more diffuse signalling of embodied competence or material acquisitions. Importantly, this effect operates largely below the threshold of conscious consumer elaboration: fewer than 10% of participants spontaneously referenced chef credentials in their WTP justifications (§4.4), suggesting that erudition functions as a peripheral signal rather than a deliberate evaluative input. Managers need not make chef credentials the focal point of communication; subtle, consistent signalling across touchpoints may suffice to activate the erudition pathway.

*Pricing strategy and the Conformity Paradox.* The divergent effects of TTI-Conformity on attitude versus willingness to pay—the Conformity Paradox (§5.2.5)—carry significant implications for pricing architecture. Whilst traditional authenticity contributed positively to hedonic evaluation ($\beta = .247$, $p < .001$), it

simultaneously depressed willingness to pay ($\beta = -.133$, $p = .034$). This dissociation suggests that dishes perceived as traditionally authentic are liked but treated as commodity goods, anchoring consumer price expectations to familiar market references. The qualitative data corroborate this interpretation: participants who cited holistic experience as their WTP justification—a distinctiveness-oriented rationale—offered substantially higher average amounts than those who did not (M = R$53.75 vs. M = R$40.31, $d = 0.66$, $p = .026$; §4.4). This medium-to-large effect size illustrates the premium that distinctiveness-oriented framing commands when consumers reason beyond category conformity and towards experiential uniqueness.

Managers pursuing premium pricing strategies should therefore anchor their value proposition in creative distinctiveness rather than traditional conformity. A dish positioned as "our signature reimagination of the classic cheesecake" leverages distinctiveness-based premium potential, whereas one positioned as "our authentic, traditional cheesecake" risks commodity-price anchoring—even if the latter generates equivalent or superior hedonic affect. This does not imply that traditional dishes lack commercial viability; rather, it indicates that premium pricing requires distinctiveness framing. Establishments whose menus blend traditional and innovative offerings might consider differentiated pricing tiers: competitively priced traditional items that drive traffic and satisfaction, alongside distinctiveness-positioned items that capture the willingness-to-pay premium. The qualitative data further illuminate this pricing architecture: quality-related justifications declined monotonically from the baseline condition (23.2%) to the high-deconstruction condition (11.5%; linear-by-linear $\chi 2(1) = 4.732$, $p = .030$, $\varphi = .127$; §4.4), suggesting that as the dish's structure departs from its traditional form, consumers lose the material referents that anchor quality inferences and shift to alternative evaluative frames.

*Communication strategy and credential deployment.* The dimension-specific nature of the signalling pathway—SCC operates exclusively through TTI-Distinctiveness, never through TTI-Conformity (§4.3.2)—has direct implications for how chef credentials are deployed in marketing communications. Credentials should be paired with innovative offerings rather than traditional ones. Communicating a chef's sophisticated background alongside a classic dish is unlikely to enhance perceived authenticity on either dimension; the same credentials paired with a creatively reinterpreted dish activate the erudition-to-distinctiveness pathway and thereby enhance both attitude and willingness to pay. The confirmatory serial mediation test (§4.3.2) demonstrated that the SCC → erudition →

TTI-Conformity → attitude pathway was non-significant (indirect effect = .0333, 95% CI [−.023, .105]), establishing that chef cultural capital does not legitimise traditional authenticity perceptions. The practical corollary is that credential deployment should be context-sensitive: deploy chef credentials prominently for innovative menu items and rely on ingredient quality or provenance narratives for traditional items.

Furthermore, the finding that high-SCC conditions generated significantly more fair-price justifications for WTP (19.7% vs. 10.7%, $\chi2(1) = 4.810$, $p = .028$, $\varphi = .126$; §4.4) suggests that chef credentials provide consumers with a cognitive anchor of reasonable pricing—a fairness heuristic. This implies that prominent chef branding may paradoxically compress price ceilings for traditional offerings (through the fair-price anchor) whilst expanding them for innovative offerings (through distinctiveness-based premium positioning). Communication strategies should therefore align credential salience with menu positioning: foreground the chef's erudition for dishes where distinctiveness justifies a premium, and background it for dishes where traditional quality narratives are more commercially appropriate.

*Audience segmentation and the confidence boundary.* The moderating role of consumer confidence on the TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude pathway (§4.3.6; §4.3.9) provides a basis for audience-specific strategy, albeit one that warrants cautious interpretation given the marginal significance of the interaction effect ($b = −0.069$, $SE(HC3) = 0.040$, $p = .083$). The Johnson-Neyman floodlight analysis (§4.3.9) revealed that the positive effect of TTI-Distinctiveness on attitude was approximately 24.5% weaker among high-confidence consumers ($b = 0.427$ at the 84th percentile of confidence) than among low-confidence consumers ($b = 0.565$ at the 16th percentile). Crucially, this effect never approached non-significance at any observed confidence level—all 22 conditioning values in the Johnson-Neyman output were significant at $p < .001$—indicating that confidence attenuates but does not eliminate the distinctiveness-to-attitude pathway.

For restaurant managers, this pattern suggests that establishments targeting gastronomically experienced, high-confidence clienteles (e.g., fine-dining regulars, culinary enthusiasts) should anticipate a more modest—though still positive—return on distinctiveness-based strategies and may need to provide additional justification for creative departures, perhaps through tableside explanations, tasting menus with narrative accompaniment, or chef's table experiences that contextualise the creative rationale. Conversely, establishments targeting less gastronomically confident consumers—casual

dining, experiential dining aimed at younger demographics, or tourist-oriented venues—may find that distinctiveness-driven strategies yield proportionally larger returns in terms of attitude formation. However, the marginal nature of the confidence moderation ($p = .083$ with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors) and the pathway specificity of this effect (confidence did not moderate TTI-Conformity → Attitude, $p = .384$, nor any WTP pathway) counsel against overweighting this finding in strategic planning. The primary recommendation remains anchored in the robust direct effects: distinctiveness drives both attitude and willingness to pay across all levels of consumer confidence.

Collectively, these implications converge on a central managerial prescription: culinary innovation is most commercially effective when calibrated to moderate distinctiveness, anchored by signals of chef erudition, and framed through distinctiveness-based rather than conformity-based value propositions. The competitive suppression mechanism identified in §5.2.2 underscores why these recommendations matter: because deconstruction simultaneously erodes traditional authenticity (indirect effect via TTI-Conformity = −.168, 95% CI [−.282, −.058]) and builds creative authenticity (indirect effect via TTI-Distinctiveness = .234, 95% CI [.122, .352]), the net commercial effect depends critically on which dimension is foregrounded in strategic communication. Managers who allow both dimensions to operate unchecked risk the cancellation effect observed in the present data (contrast $\Delta = -.402$, 95% CI [−.548, −.242]); those who strategically emphasise distinctiveness whilst managing conformity expectations can capture the premium potential that creative culinary authenticity affords. The five theoretical contributions outlined in §5.2—bidimensional TTI structure (§5.2.1), competitive suppression (§5.2.2), ODT extension to product evaluation (§5.2.3), dimension-specific signalling (§5.2.4), and the Conformity Paradox (§5.2.5)—thus form an integrated framework for evidence-based culinary innovation management.

## 5.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the contributions outlined in §5.2, this study is subject to several methodological limitations that circumscribe the generalisability of its findings and open avenues for future investigation.

*Single stimulus category.* The experimental stimuli were confined to a single dish—cheesecake—selected for its recognisable canonical form and amenability to varying degrees of deconstruction. Whilst this choice enhanced internal validity by controlling for category-level confounds, it constrains external validity. Cheesecake is a dessert with a relatively codified traditional form across many culinary cultures, which may have amplified the monotonic decline in TTI-Conformity under deconstruction (H1a; $\eta^2p = .283$). Dishes with weaker traditional codification (e.g., fusion cuisine, contemporary tapas) or stronger codification (e.g., sushi, croissant) may exhibit different patterns. Future research should replicate the present design across dish categories varying systematically in the strength of their traditional schema, testing whether the categorical elevation of TTI-Distinctiveness (H1b; $\eta^2p = .132$) generalises or is moderated by codification strength. Additionally, the three-level operationalisation of deconstruction in the present study, whilst sufficient to detect the significant step from baseline to any deconstruction, lacked the resolution to discriminate between a genuine inverted-U and a categorical step function (supplementary analysis $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p = .168$; §4.2.1). Designs employing five or more levels of deconstruction would permit a more definitive test of whether the relationship is genuinely curvilinear at higher resolution.

*Visual-only, online experiment and consumption visions.* The experiment was conducted entirely online via Qualtrics, with participants evaluating static visual images of cheesecake stimuli. No gustatory, olfactory, haptic, or auditory sensory input was provided. This constitutes a substantive departure from the multisensory reality of actual culinary consumption. However, the present design is theoretically justified by the consumption visions framework (Phillips et al., 1995), which posits that consumers routinely form evaluative judgements through mental simulations of future consumption situations elicited by visual stimuli. Elder and Krishna (2012) demonstrated that viewing a product can produce behavioural consequences comparable to interacting with it, because the mind mentally simulates the consumption experience—a process that neuroscience evidence has shown activates gustatory cortices even in the absence of actual taste (Simmons et al., 2005). The present study captures precisely this pre-consumption, visually-mediated evaluative process,

replicating how consumers increasingly encounter culinary products in digital environments—through menus, food delivery platforms, restaurant websites, and social media. The substantive variance explained in attitudinal outcomes (R2 = .412) suggests that participants engaged meaningfully with the visual stimuli. Nonetheless, the absence of multisensory input may have attenuated certain effects, particularly those depending on embodied, haptic-gustatory processing. Future research should employ multisensory experimental designs—incorporating taste, aroma, and tactile experience—to assess whether the bidimensional TTI structure and the competitive suppression mechanism replicate under ecologically richer conditions.

*AI-generated stimuli.* The visual stimuli were generated using artificial intelligence and participants were informed of this fact only after survey completion, in debriefing. This design choice was motivated by the need for precise experimental control over the visual manipulation of deconstruction levels—a degree of control difficult to achieve with photographs of actual dishes, which inevitably introduce confounds in plating, lighting, ingredient variation, and visual quality. Recent evidence suggests that undisclosed AI-generated food images do not systematically bias evaluative outcomes: Califano and Spence (2024) found that AI-generated food images were often preferred over authentic photographs when participants were unaware of their origin, and that disclosure of AI generation—not the images themselves—drove negative revaluations. Since participants in the present study evaluated stimuli without knowledge of their AI provenance, the evaluative process was not contaminated by AI-related scepticism or novelty effects. Nonetheless, AI-generated images may differ subtly from photographed dishes in ways that influence perceptual processing (e.g., colour saturation, textural rendering, lighting uniformity).

*Overlap between cultural capital and creative predisposition.* The high-SCC profile combined institutionalised capital (PhD in music theory), objectified capital (rare Steinway piano, art collection, published books on Chopin and Schumann), and embodied capital (orchestra conducting, astrophotography, voracious reading). This composite manipulation, whilst grounded in Bourdieu's (1979a, 1979b) tripartite typology, may conflate cultural capital with a broader impression of creative sophistication: a chef who abandoned conducting for cooking and collects art may be perceived as inherently creative rather than merely erudite. The Bourdieuian framework treats this overlap as expected—embodied capital manifests through cultivated aesthetic dispositions—but the empirical consequence is that the signalling pathway (SCC → erudition → TTI-Distinctiveness) may partly reflect a creativity halo.

Future research should isolate these components by manipulating cultural capital indicators that do not imply creative sensibility (e.g., academic credentials alone) separately from those that do (e.g., artistic engagement, collecting).

*Aesthetic complexity of deconstructed stimuli.* The high-deconstruction stimulus featured splattered elements, fragmented forms, and an intentionally chaotic visual composition inspired by contemporary gastronomy and modern art. Whilst this reflects authentic plating practices in high-end deconstructed cuisine, the visual complexity may have elicited aesthetic aversion independently of any authenticity judgement, confounding structural deconstruction with perceived visual disorder. The manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived the intended gradient of deconstruction across the three levels ($F(2, 246) = 79.380$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .392$), but it did not isolate whether the decline in TTI-Distinctiveness from low to high deconstruction ($MD = 0.297$, $p = .509$) reflected a genuine category-boundary violation or simply an aesthetic discomfort response. Future research should control for visual complexity independently of structural deconstruction, for instance by employing stimuli that vary in the number of deconstructed elements whilst holding aesthetic coherence constant.

*Brazilian sample.* All participants were recruited from a Brazilian population, which may limit generalisability across cultural contexts. Perceptions of culinary authenticity are culturally embedded (Lu & Fine, 1995), and the evaluative significance of deconstruction may vary across gastronomic cultures with different relationships to culinary tradition and innovation. Brazilian culinary culture, characterised by both strong regional traditions and receptivity to international gastronomic trends, may represent a particular configuration of conformity and distinctiveness norms. Cross-cultural replications—particularly in contexts with more conservative culinary traditions (e.g., Japan, France) or more innovation-oriented cultures (e.g., Nordic countries)—would clarify the cultural boundary conditions of the present findings.

*Cross-sectional design.* The single-exposure, cross-sectional design precludes assessment of temporal dynamics. Consumer responses to deconstructed dishes may evolve with repeated exposure, as initial novelty dissipates or familiarity breeds appreciation (or, conversely, as the novelty premium erodes). Learning effects are particularly relevant to the erudition pathway: consumers who encounter chef cultural capital signals repeatedly may develop more calibrated assessments over time. Longitudinal designs incorporating repeated

exposure to deconstructed offerings, with and without accompanying chef credentials, would illuminate whether the observed effects are stable or transitory.

*Hypothetical willingness to pay.* WTP was measured as an open-ended hypothetical estimate rather than through incentive-compatible mechanisms. Hypothetical WTP measures are known to produce upward bias relative to actual payment behaviour (Miller et al., 2011), and the extreme positive skewness observed in the raw WTP distribution (skewness = 9.90 prior to winsorisation) may partly reflect this bias. The Conformity Paradox—in which traditional authenticity depresses willingness to pay (§5.2.5)—was detected using winsorised values, and its robustness under real-payment conditions remains untested. Future research should employ incentive-compatible mechanisms such as the Becker-DeGroot-Marschak (BDM) procedure or Vickrey second-price auctions to assess whether the paradox persists when financial consequences are real.

*Statistical power for subgroup analyses.* The conditional serial mediation analysis (§4.3.3) detected significant b-path moderation for attitude ($p = .014$) but not for willingness to pay ($p = .955$). However, the subgroup serial mediation analyses ($n \approx 80$ per deconstruction level) were underpowered for detecting small-to-medium indirect effects on WTP, a variable characterised by high residual variance (MSE ≈ 280–442 across subgroups). The serial indirect effect on WTP was significant in the pooled sample (1.415, 95% CI [0.516, 2.442]) but failed to reach significance in any individual subgroup, a pattern consistent with a power limitation rather than a true absence of the effect. Future research with larger samples per condition would permit more definitive conclusions regarding context-dependent variation in the signalling pathway's monetary consequences.

*Consumer cultural capital measurement.* The CCC measure employed a six-item composite with limited prior psychometric validation in food-related contexts. Although reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .700$), the scale did not significantly moderate the focal relationships (H3a/b not supported), and it is unclear whether this null result reflects a genuine absence of moderation or insufficient measurement sensitivity. A supplementary CATPCA analysis (§4.1) confirmed the unidimensional structure of the index ($\alpha = .710$, eigenvalue = 2.447) and revealed near-perfect convergence between optimally weighted and unit-weighted scores ($r = .982$), ruling out suboptimal scoring as an explanation for the null moderation. However, the CATPCA also identified a secondary (unreliable, $\alpha = .098$) dimension opposing inherited capital (parental education, family cultural environment) against contemporary cultural practices (cultural expenditure, consumption variety),

suggesting that the unitary index may obscure theoretically meaningful heterogeneity among capital forms. The Bourdieuian decomposition analysis (§4.3.4), which decomposed the chef's signalled cultural capital into three sub-dimensions and found dimension-specific predictive effects on TTI-Distinctiveness, suggests that a similarly granular approach to consumer cultural capital might yield richer insights. Future research should develop and validate more granular measures of consumer cultural capital, distinguishing embodied, objectified, and institutionalised forms, and assess their independent moderating roles.

*Qualitative WTP category sizes.* Several thematic categories in the qualitative WTP analysis (§4.4) had small cell sizes—notably holistic experience (n = 12), which nonetheless produced a significant WTP differential (d = 0.66, p = .026). Whilst effect size magnitude provides some confidence, the small n limits inferential stability. Future research with larger samples should verify whether the observed WTP differentials across justification categories replicate.

*Confidence moderation.* The moderating effect of consumer confidence on the TTI-Distinctiveness → Attitude pathway (§4.3.6) was marginal (b = −0.069, p = .083, HC3-corrected), not reaching the conventional α = .05 threshold. Although the Johnson–Neyman analysis (§4.3.9) revealed a substantively meaningful attenuation pattern, the marginal significance counsels caution in interpreting this moderation as a robust boundary condition. Future research with larger samples or field settings should re-examine whether evaluative confidence attenuates the distinctiveness–attitude link, and if so, whether this boundary extends to willingness-to-pay outcomes (where no moderation was observed in the present study).

*Future research directions.* Beyond the specific extensions noted above, the bidimensional TTI framework opens several broader research avenues. First, dedicated scale development and validation studies are warranted to establish TTI-Conformity and TTI-Distinctiveness as a psychometrically robust instrument with confirmed discriminant validity across food and non-food domains. The weak positive correlation observed in the present study (r = .188, p = .003) suggests that these dimensions are empirically distinguishable but not fully independent; future work should examine whether this association varies across product categories and cultural contexts. Second, process-tracing methodologies—eye-tracking, think-aloud protocols, or response latency measures—could illuminate the cognitive mechanisms underlying the erudition pathway, testing whether perceived erudition operates via heuristic processing as the present data suggest. Third, the

finding that institutionalised cultural capital emerged as the strongest predictor of TTI-Distinctiveness (§4.3.4) invites investigation into whether different forms of cultural capital signal function differently across culinary contexts—for instance, whether embodied capital (years of practice, apprenticeship lineage) matters more in traditional contexts whilst institutionalised capital (formal education, cross-disciplinary credentials) matters more in innovative contexts. Fourth, the competitive suppression mechanism (§5.2.2) should be tested with other product categories that undergo creative transformation, such as cocktails, fashion, music, or architecture, to assess the generalisability of the dual-pathway model beyond culinary evaluation.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to examine a paradox at the heart of contemporary culinary culture: how can a dish that has been structurally dismantled—its constitutive elements separated, recombined, and transformed—still be perceived as authentic? And how does the cultural capital of its creator shape this perception? The experimental evidence presented in Chapters 4 and 5 reveals that the answer lies not in a simple binary—authentic or inauthentic—but in the bidimensional structure of True-to-Ideal authenticity, whereby traditional conformity and creative distinctiveness operate as empirically distinguishable evaluative dimensions with a weak positive association ($r = .188$, $p = .003$).

Five principal contributions emerge from this investigation. First, the discovery that TTI authenticity operates bidimensionally (§5.2.1) reframes how consumer researchers should conceptualise and measure authenticity in contexts of creative transformation: not as a unitary continuum from inauthentic to authentic, but as a two-dimensional space in which products can simultaneously occupy different positions on conformity and distinctiveness. Second, the competitive suppression mechanism (§5.2.2) explains why deconstruction appears to exert little direct influence on overall attitudes—not because its effects are weak, but because it simultaneously erodes traditional authenticity and builds creative authenticity through opposing indirect pathways that cancel at the aggregate level. Third, the extension of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory from organisational strategy to product evaluation (§5.2.3), evidenced by the significant categorical elevation of TTI-Distinctiveness under any form of deconstruction and the directional inverted-U tendency, provides a formal empirical basis for the theoretical expectation that creative innovation in food must depart from tradition to signal

distinctiveness, though the precise functional form of this relationship awaits confirmation with finer-grained designs. Fourth, the demonstration that a chef's non-field-specific cultural capital influences authenticity perceptions through a dimension-specific signalling pathway mediated by perceived erudition (§5.2.4)—rather than through the direct halo effect initially hypothesised—reveals the precise mechanism through which producer credentials shape consumer evaluation of creative culinary products. Fifth, the Conformity Paradox (§5.2.5)—whereby traditional authenticity enhances hedonic evaluation but depresses willingness to pay—reveals a previously untheorised dissociation between attitudinal and economic consequences of authenticity, with significant implications for how restaurants position and price their offerings.

Together, these contributions advance the theoretical integration of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, signalling theory, and Bourdieuian cultural capital within Consumer Culture Theory, whilst offering actionable guidance for foodservice professionals navigating the enduring tension between tradition and innovation. The competitive suppression framework provides a parsimonious explanation for why creative culinary transformation generates ambivalent consumer responses, and the dimension-specific signalling pathway identifies the mechanism through which chef credentials can resolve this ambivalence in favour of positive evaluation. As culinary culture continues to evolve under the dual pressures of gastronomic democratisation and creative differentiation, understanding the mechanisms through which consumers reconcile competing demands for conformity and distinctiveness will remain both a scholarly imperative and a practical necessity. The bidimensional TTI framework developed in this dissertation offers a foundation for that ongoing enquiry.

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# APPENDIX 1 – EXPERIMENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE

**Note:** The questionnaire was administered in Brazilian Portuguese via Qualtrics. Below is the English translation (EN-UK) of the final instrument, preserving the original item order and structure. A 2 (signalled cultural capital: low vs. high) × 3 (deconstruction level: base, low, high) between-subjects design yielded six experimental conditions, each with a distinct stimulus block (see Appendices 2 and 3). All remaining blocks were identical across conditions.

## Section A – Informed Consent

*Participants were presented with the research ethics approval notice (RCLI) and asked to provide informed consent before proceeding. Those who declined were redirected to the survey end screen.*

## Section B – Stimulus Exposure (condition-specific)

*Each participant was randomly assigned to one of six conditions and shown a cheesecake photograph alongside the chef's biographical profile. The following instructions appeared on-screen:*

**READ CAREFULLY**

1. Observe the cheesecake photograph carefully.
2. Read the ENTIRE profile of Chef Sophie Wilde.
3. Imagine yourself in her restaurant savouring this exact dish.

Only then proceed to the questionnaire.

*A 90-second countdown timer was displayed as a recommended reflection period. Participants could advance before the timer expired.*

*See Appendix 2 for the visual stimuli and Appendix 3 for the chef profiles used in each condition.*

## Section C – Willingness to Pay (WTP)

**C1.** What is the maximum amount (in BRL – R$) you would be willing to pay for this cheesecake?

*(Please enter a whole number between 10 and 1,000, without dots or commas.)*

| |
|---|
| *R$ ___* |

**C2.** In a few words, what led you to choose this value?

| *[Open-ended response]* |
|---|

**Section D – Overall Authenticity and Attitude**

*Please respond to the following questions by selecting the point on the scale that best represents your view.*

**D1.** How authentic is this cheesecake?

| *Completely Inauthentic* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Completely Authentic* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**D2.** My reaction to this dish is:

| *Unfavourable* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Favourable* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**D3.** This dish is:

| *Bad* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Good* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**D4.** This dish is:

| *Unappealing* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Appealing* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Section E – True-to-Ideal Authenticity Measures**

*Please rate the following statements about the dish on a scale from 1 to 7, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (7).*

***TTI-Conformity (CONF_1–CONF_6)***

**E1.** This dish is true to the traditional concept of a cheesecake. (CONF_1)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E2.** This dish reflects the essence of a cheesecake. (CONF_2)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E3.** This is a classic cheesecake. (CONF_3)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E4.** This is a genuine cheesecake. (CONF_4)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E5.** This dish is the real deal. (CONF_5)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E6.** This is a true example of a cheesecake. (CONF_6)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

***TTI-Distinctiveness (DIST_1–DIST_5)***

**E7.** This cheesecake stands out from the rest through its genuine uniqueness. (DIST_1)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E8.** This is a cheesecake that stands out from the conventional. (DIST_2)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E9.** This is an innovative cheesecake that still preserves its essential identity. (DIST_3)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E10.** This cheesecake offers a unique experience within the category. (DIST_4)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E11.** This is a distinctive yet still recognisable cheesecake. (DIST_5)

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

***Attention Check***

**E12.** This is an attention check. Please select 6. (ATTN_CHECK)

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**E13.** How confident are you in the responses you have just given regarding the authenticity of this cheesecake? (CONFID)

| *Not at all confident* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Completely confident* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Section F – Chef Evaluation and Manipulation Checks**

**F1.** How erudite is Sophie Wilde, the chef? (MC_ERUD)

| *Not at all erudite* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Very erudite* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**F2.** How would you rate the level of deconstruction of the cheesecake? (MC_DECON)

| *Not at all deconstructed* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | *Highly deconstructed* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

*Please rate Chef Sophie Wilde based solely on the information provided in the profile you just read.*

**F3.** To what extent do you believe the chef has earned prestigious academic credentials? (SCC_INST)

| Very little | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Very much |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**F4.** To what extent do you think the chef possesses valuable and prestigious cultural assets? (SCC_OBJ)

| Very little | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Very much |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**F5.** To what extent do you perceive the chef as a cultivated and intellectual person? (SCC_EMB)

| Very little | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Very much |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Section G – Consumer Cultural Capital (CCC)**

**G1.** Considering the past 12 months, how many different types of cultural content have you regularly consumed? (Cinema, classical/jazz music, theatre/dance, literature, art exhibitions — in person, streaming, or digital) (CCC_1)

○ None or only 1 type ○ 2 different types ○ 3 different types ○ 4 or more different types

**G2.** When you choose what to watch, read, or listen to, do you tend to prioritise content recognised by specialist critics or with artistic/intellectual value? (CCC_2)

○ Never or rarely ○ Sometimes ○ Frequently ○ Always or nearly always

**G3.** What is the highest level of education completed by the parent/guardian with the HIGHEST educational attainment in your family of origin? (CCC_3)

○ Up to secondary school ○ Higher education (complete or incomplete) ○ Postgraduate (specialisation/MBA or Master's) ○ Doctorate or post-doctorate

**G4.** During your childhood and adolescence, did your family value and provide access to cultural activities (books, theatre, cinema, discussions about art/literature, etc.)? (CCC_4)

○ No, this was rare or absent ○ Sometimes ○ Yes, frequently ○ Yes, this was a priority in my household

**G5.** Approximately how many physical books (not digital) are there in your current residence? (CCC_5)

○ Fewer than 10 ○ 10 to 50 ○ 51 to 150 ○ More than 150

**G6.** In the past 12 months, have you spent money (any amount) on cultural activities such as buying books, theatre/concert/cinema tickets, cultural streaming subscriptions, visiting museums/exhibitions, or collecting art/music? (CCC_6)

○ No, I did not spend on this ○ Yes, occasionally (1–3 times) ○ Yes, regularly (4–10 times) ○ Yes, frequently (more than 10 times)

**Section H – Demographics**

**H1.** What is your age? (DEMO_AGE)

- ○ Under 20
- ○ 20 to 30
- ○ 31 to 40
- ○ 41 to 50
- ○ 51 to 60
- ○ Over 60

**H2.** What is your gender? (DEMO_GENDER)

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary
- ○ Prefer not to say

**H3.** What is your level of education? (DEMO_EDUC)

- ○ Up to primary school
- ○ Incomplete or complete secondary school
- ○ Incomplete higher education
- ○ Complete higher education (Bachelor's degree)
- ○ Postgraduate (specialisation/MBA)
- ○ Master's degree
- ○ Doctorate or post-doctorate

**H4.** What is your level of interest in culinary arts? (DEMO_CULINARY)

- ○ Not at all interested
- ○ Somewhat interested
- ○ Very interested
- ○ I am a foodie (gastronomy enthusiast)

**H5.** What is your degree of familiarity with deconstructed dishes? (DEMO_FAMIL)

- ○ Completely unfamiliar
- ○ Somewhat familiar
- ○ Very familiar
- ○ I am a *connoisseur*

**H6.** What is your country of origin? (DEMO_COUNTRY)

| |
|---|
| *[Open-ended / Pre-selected: Brazil]* |

# APPENDIX 2 – VISUAL STIMULI

**Note:** Three cheesecake photographs were used as visual stimuli, each representing a different level of deconstruction. All images depict variations of cheesecake served on a slate plate within a fine-dining restaurant setting. Each stimulus was paired with one of two chef profiles (see Appendix 3), yielding the 2 × 3 between-subjects factorial design.

**Stimulus 1 – Base Deconstruction (Traditional Presentation)**

The cheesecake is presented in its conventional assembled form: an intact slice with a visible biscuit crust base, a smooth cream cheese filling, fruit coulis topping, and fresh berry garnish. This configuration preserves the canonical gestalt of a cheesecake, maintaining the hierarchical layering of crust, filling, and topping in their expected spatial arrangement.

*Conditions: Low-Base and High-Base*

FIGURE A1 – Cheesecake: Base Deconstruction (traditional presentation)

Source: AI-generated stimuli. The author (2026).

**Stimulus 2 – Low Deconstruction (Intermediate Presentation)**

The cheesecake retains a recognisable form but exhibits partial separation of its constituent elements. The biscuit crust is visible as a distinct layer, the cream-cheese filling is presented in a modified elongated format, and the berry components and coulis are rearranged around the main body. The dish remains identifiable as a cheesecake whilst introducing aesthetic departures from the traditional presentation.

*Conditions: Low-Low and High-Low*

FIGURE A2 – Cheesecake: Low Deconstruction (intermediate presentation)

Source: AI-generated stimuli. The author (2026).

**Stimulus 3 – High Deconstruction (Fully Deconstructed Presentation)**

The cheesecake's constituent elements are fully disaggregated and spatially redistributed across the plate. The cream-cheese component appears as a spherical mousse, the biscuit crust is presented as scattered crumbs, and the fruit elements (coulis, gel spheres, and raspberry fragments) are distributed independently. This configuration enacts a Derridean "deconstruction" of the cheesecake, subverting the hierarchical structure whilst retaining all original ingredients.

*Conditions: Low-High and High-High*

FIGURE A3 – Cheesecake: High Deconstruction (fully deconstructed presentation)

Source: AI-generated stimuli. The author (2026).

## APPENDIX 3 – CHEF PROFILES

**Note:** Two biographical profiles of the fictitious chef "Sophie Wilde" were created to manipulate the signalled cultural capital (SCC) independent variable. Both profiles share an identical occupational core (15 years as head chef, restaurant "The Bo") and the same framing paragraph about the restaurant's philosophy. They differ systematically in the biographical markers that signal cultural capital across Bourdieu's three dimensions: institutionalised, objectified, and embodied.

**Profile A – Low Signalled Cultural Capital (SCC)**

*Used in conditions: Low-Base, Low-Low, Low-High*

**"Sophie Wilde"**

- Head chef of a fine-dining restaurant for the past 15 years;
- Transitioned from a career as an administrative assistant to a professional cook;
- Obtained a technical certificate in administration;
- Worked in corporations before deciding to take up the pan;
- Highly focused on her work and does not participate in other cultural activities, save for the occasional soap-opera marathon or reading the latest best-seller.

*Her restaurant, "The Bo", gained renown for reinterpreting traditional dishes, deconstructing them and subverting proportions and techniques to demonstrate that they can be reimagined whilst still retaining their essence.*

**The cheesecake depicted in the image above is one of her creations.**

Imagine yourself in this restaurant. You notice the simple tastes reflected in the sober décor, read Sophie Wilde's profile on the menu cover, and order the cheesecake. Imagine the experience of savouring that dessert. You observe the presentation, taste the flavours, and feel the textures.

**Profile B – High Signalled Cultural Capital (SCC)**

*Used in conditions: High-Base, High-Low, High-High*

**"Sophie Wilde"**

- Head chef of a fine-dining restaurant for the past 15 years;
- Abandoned a career as an orchestral conductor to become a professional cook;
- Obtained a doctorate in music theory from a prestigious institution;

- Worked for several years conducting orchestras before swapping the baton for the pan;
- A published author, with her books on the lives of Chopin and Schumann translated into several languages;
- Owns a rare Steinway piano and is an avid art collector;
- Interested in astronomy and an amateur astrophotographer;
- A voracious reader, known for reading several books per month.

The piano is displayed in her restaurant, alongside various artworks, some of her astrophotography prints, and books.

*Her restaurant, "The Bo", gained renown for reinterpreting traditional dishes, deconstructing them and subverting proportions and techniques to demonstrate that they can be reimagined whilst still retaining their essence.*

**The cheesecake depicted in the image above is one of her creations.**

Imagine yourself in this restaurant. You notice the collector's items incorporated into the décor, read Sophie Wilde's profile on the menu cover, and order the cheesecake. Imagine the experience of savouring that dessert. You observe the presentation, taste the flavours, and feel the textures.

TABLE A1 – *Systematic Comparison of SCC Profile Manipulations*

| **Dimension** | **Low SCC** | **High SCC** |
|---|---|---|
| **Institutionalised** | Technical certificate in administration | Doctorate in music theory from a prestigious institution |
| **Objectified** | No cultural possessions mentioned | Rare Steinway piano, art collection, astrophotography prints, published books |
| **Embodied** | Soap-opera marathons and best-sellers | Voracious reader, published author (Chopin/Schumann biographies), amateur astrophotographer |
| **Occupational origin** | Administrative assistant | Orchestral conductor |
| **Restaurant décor cue** | Simple tastes, sober décor | Collector's items incorporated into the décor |

Source: The author (2026).