



The structural equation model of behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to identify the underlying dimensions of Thailand food destination image and to investigate the causal relationships among food destination image, memorable gastronomy experience and behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand. A quantitative approach was applied to determine the behavioural intentions model by collecting 400 online questionnaires from international tourists. The findings suggest that two underline food destination images are food identity image and food reputation image. The result of the SEM analysis revealed a good fit with the empirical data ($\chi^2/df = 1.226$, $P = .067$, $AGFI = .948$, $CFI = 0.995$, $RMSEA = 0.027$). Furthermore, food identity image and food reputation image had a positive effect on a memorable gastronomy experience with effect coefficients of 0.69, 0.23, respectively. Memorable gastronomy experience was significant in predicting behavioural intentions with effect coefficients of 0.85. From the study, marketing communication campaigns should be focused on the reasonable price of food, street market and uniqueness of Thai food through a variety of communication platforms.

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Introduction

Food represents the history of a locality, culture, stories and symbols of various countries and places. Local and regional food can enhance the value of a destination and has become an interest for tourists, in which it plays a key role in differentiating the destination

considerably (Brokaj, 2014; Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). Food and drink have been an essential component of the overall tourist experience, including a significant part of tourism spending for both independent and organized trips (Jones & Jenkins, 2002). Food is now used as a means of developing new niche markets, supporting regional identities, developing qualified and sustainable tourism. Undoubtedly, the relationship between food and tourism is significant. It is not only a fundamental need for tourist's consumption but also a unique feature in destination branding. The gastronomy

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tourism concept has become a more recognized area of tourism research in the last decade, particularly the use of food as a mechanism in developing and promoting both established and emerging tourist destinations, which has been proposed and investigated in the more recent literature (Richards, 2015). The study of gastronomic destinations against the global competition has emphasized the topics of marketing, branding and food destination image. (e.g. AbKarim, 2006; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019). Such studies established gastronomy tourism as a driving force for the uniqueness and competitiveness for destinations in the worldwide market.

Thailand, as one of the world's popular tourist destinations, was ranked first in the Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index (GDCI) 2019. Above and beyond historical and natural attractions in the eyes of international tourists, Thai food, such as Pad Thai, Tom-Yum, and Massaman curry, has become increasingly recognized and more widely known internationally. The uniqueness of Thai food and its variety makes it popular for foreign tourists. Over the years, the cultural capital related to food has been gradually highlighted by focusing on the opportunities to connect food and tourism as a means of destination differentiation. However, the study of food destination image in Thailand is scarce when compared to another scope of the study, especially consumer behaviours. To enhance understanding in utilizing food as a destination image benefits the designing of future destination marketing strategies and achieves a greater competition. Without information from international tourists' perspective, it will be difficult to understand how international tourists perceived the food destination image and their experiences toward gastronomy tourism. Consequently, the objectives of this study were 1) to identify the underlying dimensions of Thailand food destination image, and 2) to investigate the causal relationships among food destination image, memorable gastronomy experience and behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand. The international tourists' perspective is vital in terms of enriching the tourist experience, increasing the awareness of a destination, and attracting first-time repeat visitors (Boyne, William, & Hall, 2002). In terms of the practical contribution of this study, the model of behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand will be useful information for developing

national gastronomy tourism plan and policy and will benefit tourism practitioners in developing the quality of gastronomic experience.

Literature Review

Gastronomy Tourism and the Use of Thai Food in Gastronomy Tourism

In the past, food was often perceived as a necessity rather than an attraction. This perception has been changed over the last two decades as food has become an important link between people, place, culture, identity and tourism. As referred to by Chi, AbKarim, and Gursoy (2010), terms such food tourism, culinary tourism, and gastronomy tourism have been used to describe tourism activities that relate to food. These various terms are often used interchangeably to describe a process in which food plays a significant role in determining travel decision making and shaping travel behaviour (Hall, Mitchell, & Sharples, 2003). In 2019, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined gastronomy tourism as a type of tourism activity which is characterized by the visitor's experience derived from food and related products and activities in his/her travelling. Along with authentic, traditional, and/or innovative culinary experiences, gastronomy tourism may also involve other related activities such as visiting the local producers, participating in food festivals, and attending cooking classes. Having considered a different definition of gastronomy tourism, the above mentioned by UNWTO definition is applied to this study.

Thai food is a part of the culture and has unrivalled flavours. Its unique attributes represent three main values: nutritional, cultural, and medical value. The use of fresh ingredients, variety of herbs and spices, skilful cooking methods, and presentation techniques are key contributions to its uniqueness. As a result, Thai cuisine can be considered as an art and an important part of the country's cultural heritage passed down through generations. Not only do the pearls of wisdom of Thai food play a key role, but also the variety of Thai food and diverse categories of restaurants with different styles, layouts, and locations benefit gastronomy tourism. Promoting Thai locality in food tourism, and developing Bangkok into a fine dining regional hub were mentioned

as the second National Tourism Development Plan (2017-2021).

Concept of Destination Image

At the destination level, it is essential to define the characteristics of tangible and intangible products and services to draw a distinction from other competitors. The concept of destination image was introduced to understand travel behaviour and to design effective marketing strategies in tourism (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Consisting of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist derived from a destination (Crompton, 1979), the significant role of the destination image is to influence the process of choosing, the subsequent evaluation of the trip, and tourists' forthcoming intentions to visit. Food is an element of culture and a recognizable component of the destination image. Hence food is used in various destination marketing strategies, as a means of product differentiation. Recently, the concept of food destination image has been extended from destination image to the outlined tourists' perceptions toward food-related tourism. Food destination image has recently obtained considerable attention in tourism studies and has been conceptualised as a multidimensional construct (e.g. AbKarim, 2006; Chi et al., 2010; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Stalmirska, 2017; Toudert, & Bringas-Rábago, 2019).

The Relationship among Destination Image, Memorable Experience and Behavioural Intentions

Food is one of the key elements related to tourists' experience and it significantly influences tourists' subsequent behaviours (Chi, Chua, Othman, & AbKarim, 2013). Empirical studies revealed that the destination image significantly has an impact on tourist satisfaction (memorable experience) and behavioural intentions (Lee, 2009; Chi et al., 2010; Chi et al., 2013). However, the linkage between these variables in the Thai food context has not yet been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, this research study aimed to investigate the influencing role of food in destination image on gastronomy experience (H1) and the influencing role of gastronomy experience on behavioural intentions in Thai tourism context (H2). In this study, food in destination image was represented by food identity and food

reputation. Food identity refers to the role of food in representing cultural identity that can only be found in that location (Richards, 2002) while food reputation can be defined as the whole set of beliefs (representations, attitudes, direct and indirect knowledge, etc.) that individuals hold about food (De Dominicis et al., 2020). Both food reputation and food identity have a significant role in influencing tourists' gastronomic experience or satisfaction (Bonaiuto et al., 2012; Richards, 2002).

Gastronomic experiences can add value to tourism by providing the connection between local culture, landscape, and food. Additionally, creating the 'atmosphere' is essential to a tourist's memorable holiday experience (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Dining experiences enhance specific and memorable visitor experiences to the travellers and may lead them to share their experiences in social network sites. When tourists enjoy having an authentic and unique experience, it may provoke their desire to share it with others and to generate the content through electronic word of mouth channels (Anton, Camarero, Laguna, & Buhalis, 2019). Several studies have exposed the relation between memorable gastronomy experience and behavioural intentions such as by Cohen and Avieli (2004), and Toudert, and Bringas-Rábago (2019). Therefore, we proposed that:

H1: The perception of food destination image has a positive impact on the perception of a memorable gastronomy experience (Food identity image - H1a, and Food reputation image – H1b).

H2: The perception of a memorable gastronomy experience has a positive effect on tourists' behavioural intention.

Methodology

A quantitative approach was applied to determine the structural equation model (SEM) of behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand. The data were collected from international tourists who had been in Thailand in the last 3 years and had experienced at least 3 Thai food dishes as per screening questions. The survey questionnaire consisted of four major sections. The first section of the questionnaire measured Thailand food image with 23 attributes being developed based on previous studies (AbKarim, 2006; Lertputtarak, 2012), and the questionnaire was modified

to suit the context of this study. The following part of the questionnaire focused on memorable gastronomy experience with five attributes that were selected for the study of Anton et al. (2019). The third section aimed at “behavioural intentions” to measure tourists’ loyalty intentions regarding the intention to repeat and word of mouth with 4 attributes from the previous study by Anton, et al (2019). In these three sections, a 5-point scale with measurements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was applied to evaluate each respondent’s opinion. In the last section, the respondents were asked to provide information regarding their demographic profiles and behaviours. Hence, the data were collected from September–October 2020 via online-based questionnaire due to the coronavirus epidemic situation. Cronbach’s Alpha was employed to assess the reliability of a set of scale. 485 completed online self-administered questionnaires were submitted online with 400 usable questionnaires or about 82.5% of the targeted sample size. This size was considered adequate according to the sample size requirements for SEM analysis based on a widely accepted rule of thumb at 10 cases per indicator variable (Nunnally, 1967). Besides, Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010) suggested that an appropriate sample size ranging from 100 to 400 could provide a sound basis for a model’s estimation. The causal relationships among food destination image, memorable gastronomy experience and behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand were analyzed by multivariate statistical software, consisting of 3 main stages; (1) the dimensions of food destination image exploratory analysis, (2) the measurement model was tested with confirmatory factor analysis, and (3) the conceptual model was tested by SEM which examined the model of international tourists’ behavioural intentions toward gastronomy tourism.

Results

About 50.8 percent of respondents were female of whom 52 percent were aged between 20–30 years old. About 24.8 percent of respondents were from China, followed by the United State of America (17.8%) and Italy (5.3%). The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents were at college level (52.3%), and holiday-pleasure was quoted as the main purpose of a trip

to Thailand (58.3%). The social media and travel review websites (Facebook, Twitter, Tripadvisor, etc.) were the source of information/knowledge about Thai food, followed by the information on the internet, and Thai restaurants in their country of residence respectively. In terms of challenges in gastronomy tourism, the three issues that were frequently mentioned were; (1) Language barriers including language issues with staff, language & clarity of menus, etc., (2) Service quality issue in terms of professionalism, friendliness, promptness, etc., and (3) Substandard food quality (taste, freshness, aroma, presentation). Interestingly, the diversity of culinary establishments and menu offerings were the least challenges for international tourists.

The multivariate analysis was conducted with three phases including underline dimensions of Thailand food destination image, the validity of the measurement model and structural equation modelling testing. Firstly, the analysis of the basic assumptions in structural equation modelling was applied with the test of correlation, multicollinearity, linearity, and normality. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity indicated sampling adequacy of data and its suitability in running an EFA with the value of 0.955 and the significance level (.000). A principal component analysis using varimax rotation was undertaken to determine the underlying dimensions of Thailand food image among 19 items (4 items were removed due to low correlation coefficient). Items with loadings lower than 0.7 were eliminated. Two factors with an eigenvalue above 1.0 were extracted with 8 items being retained and explained about 59.93 percent of the total variance. The two factors were labelled based on items grouped under them as Food Identity (FI) and Food Reputation (FR). They were utilized for the latent construct of destination image in the subsequent SEM analysis.

Secondly, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then performed to assess patterns of interrelationships among various constructs by evaluating the goodness of fit analysis, convergent and discriminant validity. The results showed that the four measurement models had a very good fit with the empirical data. Moreover, the convergent and discriminant validity of four constructs were established with the construct reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE). Table 1 illustrates each AVE was between .50 to .70, which surpassed the threshold value of .50. Additionally, CR value range from

.82 to .96 was higher than the criterion at .70 (Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct with other constructs. All the squared correlations among three constructs were below the AVE value of each construct. We can conclude that these measurement models were reliable and valid, thus can be assembled into SEM analysis.

Lastly, the full structural equation model indicated that there was no goodness of fit with the empirical: $\chi^2/df = 3.306$, $p = .000$, AGFI = .859, CFI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.076. The model modification was applied based on modification indices (MI) derived from the relationship of each construct. The goodness of fit analysis showed that the re-specified model had a very good fit with the empirical data. This was confirmed by

the following values obtained from the statistical tests: $\chi^2/df = 1.226$, $p = .067$, AGFI = .948, CFI = 0.995, RMSEA = 0.027. Figure 1 reveals that 74 percent of the variance in perceived memorable gastronomy experience can be explained by food destination image; food identity and food reputation. Additionally, 73 percent of the variance in behavioural intentions can be explained by food identity, food reputation and memorable gastronomy experience. On the basis of the path coefficients, it indicated that food identity and food reputation were positive predictors of memorable gastronomy experience with effect coefficients of 0.69, 0.23, respectively, thus supporting H1a and H1b. Memorable gastronomy experience was significant in predicting behavioural intentions with effect coefficients of 0.85, thus H2 was also supported.

Table 1 Convergent validity

(n = 400)				
Constructs and indicators	Standardized Loading	α	AVE	CR
Food identity (FI)		.89	.57	.93
Img1: Unique cultural experience	.733			
Img2: Delicious food	.760			
Img3: Exotic food and cooking methods	.769			
Img4: Opportunity to visit street market	.747			
Img5: Unique street food vendors	.673			
Img6: Reasonable price for dining out	.823			
Food reputation (FR)		.72	.57	.82
Img17: Much literature on food	.785			
Img18: The most popular cuisines	.714			
Memorable gastronomy experience (EXP)		.91	.70	.96
Sat1: Remember positive things about Thai food	.782			
Sat2: This is a memorable food experience	.833			
Sat3: Thai food was stimulating	.833			
Sat4: Thai food was exciting	.908			
Sat5: Thai food was interesting	.827			
Behavioural intentions (INT)		.77	.50	.85
Int1: Recommend to friends and family	.805			
Int2: Post comments on social network	.440			
Int3: Visit again due to its gastronomy	.654			
Int4: I will eat Thai food again	.830			

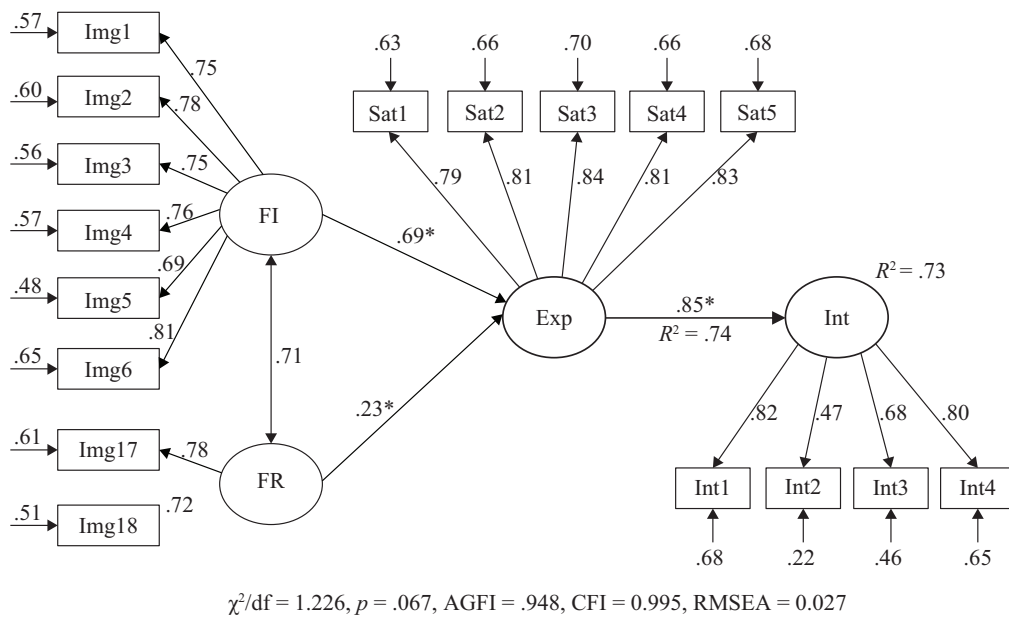


Figure 1 Structural model of international tourists' behavioural intentions

Note: standardized coefficients are reported; —> statistically significant,

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

On the basis of the structural equation model analysis, it revealed that the model was a good fit with the empirical data. The food destination image and memorable gastronomy experience positively affected behavioral intention of the international tourists. Consequently, conclusions, discussion and recommendation can be drawn from the findings.

Thailand's food destination image consisted of two dimensions including food identity and food reputation. Improving these two dimensions can significantly enhance tourists' gastronomy experience and subsequent behavioral intentions. To improve Thai food identity, according to the top three factor loading values, the national tourism organization and other organizations responsible for tourism promotion should put emphasis on the reasonable price of the foods for dining out, the opportunity to a visit street market when dining out, and the uniqueness and pleasant taste of Thai food in their marketing communication campaigns. To improve the food reputation, more literature on Thai food should be provided and accessible through a variety of communication platforms. Moreover, while the information on a wide

selection of Thai food needs to be communicated, the focus should be on the popular cuisines to strengthen the perceived food image of the destination. Results of the study were in accordance with those studies conducted by AbKarim (2006), Chi et al. (2010), Lertputtarak (2012), and Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019) who found that food tasting image has a consistent significant positive influence on both food preference and food consumption for both Chinese and Australian tourists who visited Phuket. Moreover, Thai food offers a unique cultural experience to tourists in accordance with Richards (2012), who mentioned food is often a gateway to local culture and can bring tourists and locals together in a shared cultural experience. When people eat local food in a local area, they have an authentic and original experience. As a result, authenticity depends on the environment, time, local setting, the process of cooking, and local people who prepare the food (Wang, 1999).

A study by Othman, Salehuddin, Hashim, and Ibrahim (2009) outlined the increasing popularity of Thai food due to its unique flavor and diversity of taste. Besides, Sunanta (2005) revealed the internationalization of Thai food and that Thai restaurants in global cities are increasingly popular globally. Results of the food destination image could benefit the destination manager

and local businesses in promoting food culture as unique selling propositions of the country/destination. Potentially, a tourism destination can maximize its benefits especially for the local economy by providing locally produced foodstuffs for tourists' consumption (Boyne et al., 2002). As long as gastronomy can be connected to specific countries or regions, it surely becomes a powerful tourism marketing tool (Richards, 2002). Theoretically, this study has identified food as a dimension of destination image and it can be utilized as a guideline for successful destination marketing. Besides, food represents national identity and reputation. The finding also indicated that memorable gastronomy experience fully mediated the relationship between food destination image and behavioural intentions. The result of this study was aligned with the studies by Chang, Kivela, and Mak (2011), Chi and Qu (2008), Chi et al. (2010), and Freire and Gertner (2021). For further study, the researcher needs to retain a deeper understanding of each attribute of food destination image and should include the additional factors to the antecedences and consequences because it affects memorable gastronomy experience in the model. The study of tourists' different nationality and their perception on food destination image would benefit creating proper marketing, and it would positively affect the international audience's perception toward gastronomy tourism in Thailand.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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