

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE IMAGE OF FOOD AND FOOD SATISFACTION OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF TOURIST GROUPS

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## ABSTRACT

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Thailand enjoys growing tourism revenues from the increasing number of tourists year by year. Food tourism is a core component of the tourism experience in Thailand; it contributes to the growth of its sustainable tourism and highlights the country's unique identity and local culture. Food tourism and local food attributes are vital in attracting tourists to visit a particular destination and engage in food-related activities. This type of tourism has been regarded as a form of promoted tourism that has received much attention from tourists due to its stimulating effect on their satisfaction. As a tourism strategy, food tourism has become increasingly significant for many countries in attracting tourists to revisit and in increasing revenues for the economy. Although Thailand actively promotes food tourism, with European tourists being the highest spenders in its tourist market, several issues need to be clarified. This study examines the effect of food image on the food satisfaction of tourists and compares the impact of food image in Thailand on two groups of tourists, namely, European and non-European tourists, by performing structural equation modelling and multiple group analysis. Results indicated that food image significantly influences tourists' food satisfaction, with tourist groups playing a moderating role. The European tourist group shows a higher level of satisfaction toward food image than the non-European group. This study's results can provide managerial implications that can aid in the development of a food tourism strategy for Thailand. Practical suggestions are proposed to sustain and improve food tourism in Thailand to suit a diverse tourist group and help stakeholders in developing and supporting food image factors that contribute to food tourism.

**Keywords:** Food image; food satisfaction; local food; European and non-European; moderating role

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Food tourism shows a strong potential in improving destination management, supporting culture and contributing to the agriculture and food manufacturing sectors (World Tourism Organization, 2017). This type of tourism has been regarded as a form of promoted tourism that has received much attention from tourists due to its stimulating effect on their behaviour. Food tourism also generates direct and indirect benefits for the local communities and economies of overseas destinations (Mak et al., 2012). Boyne et al. (2003) reported that 40% of tourist expenditures are for food. Food tourism is a core component of tourism experience in Thailand that not only contributes to the growth of its sustainable tourism but also highlights the unique identity and culture of its local societies (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; DASTA, 2018). According to the World Food Tourism Situation Report, food tourism generates a combined revenue of 150 billion USD globally. In 2015, food tourism in Thailand generated 1.4 billion USD in revenues (with 86 million USD coming from foreign tourists), which accounted for 20% of its total tourism revenue (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2018).

Thailand accumulates an increasing amount of tourism revenues from European tourists as the number of these visitors continues to increase every year. In 2018 and 2019, Thailand has accommodated 6,719,000 and 6,760,000 European tourists, respectively. Despite being only the second-largest tourist market in East Asia, Thailand boasts the highest average travel expenditures per capita and longest length of stay of European tourists in the entire region (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2019). These tourists, particularly those from the United Kingdom, spend the highest amount on accommodation, followed by food and beverages (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2017).

Experiencing food and beverages is a popular activity amongst tourists in Thailand (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2018). This finding underscores the relationship between tourism and food consumption. Accordingly, food tourism, along with cultural and natural tourism, has become an important strategy for attracting tourists (DASTA, 2018). In the 5<sup>th</sup> UNWTO World Forum, the World Tourism Organization proposed several guidelines for the development of gastronomy, including its planning and management, shaping of trends, measuring and understanding the journey of 'gastronomy tourists' and evaluating the image and positioning of a gastronomy tourism destination. One highlight of this forum is the WTO's recommendation to develop market intelligence that is specific to gastronomy tourism by quantifying, determining and characterising gastronomy tourists and by analysing the dynamics of a destination (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

Although Thailand is well-known as a food hub and despite the issuance of government policies on the promotion of the food tourism in the country, the economic contributions of food tourism remain limited. Specifically, food tourism revenues in Thailand are smaller than those of other countries that focus on gastronomy tourism (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2018). The sustainable benefits of food tourism for local communities are also limited, thereby negatively affecting the value and experience creation for tourists (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2017). The image of local food is presented as food produced and consumed in a particular destination, which can enhance tourists' travel experience by defining the food's cultural identity. Even though Thailand has a rich local cuisine (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2018), some tourists have limited knowledge. That is, they only know general Thai cuisine. As a result, Thailand only focuses on its 'iconic' dishes when catering to tourists (Cohen and Avieli, 2004), thereby limiting the food choices available to visitors. Moreover, food tourism in Thailand does not adequately represent the country's diverse local culture. Several studies on local food in Thailand have also highlighted concerns related to food sanitation and hygiene in the country (Sirigunna, 2015; Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn, 2017; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee, 2013), which may discourage tourists from consuming local food (Cohen and Avieli, 2004) and consequently reduce their confidence and satisfaction with food in a local destination.

Several studies on food image have reported different results from various groups of tourists. These studies have categorised tourists according to their involvement (Levitt et al., 2017), characteristics (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; López-Guzmán et al., 2017) and demographics (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Horng and Tsai, 2011). The local food experiences of European tourists have also been examined in several studies in other countries (Peštek and Činžarević, 2014; Sanchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). Nevertheless, the current understanding of tourists' satisfaction towards local food in Thailand remains limited.

Previous studies have examined tourists' opinions regarding food tourism in Thailand (Sirigunna, 2015; Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn, 2017; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee, 2013). However, no quantitative study and comparative study have focused explicitly on European and non-European tourists' satisfaction with local food in Thailand. In this case, the causal factors that influence such satisfaction must be examined. The differences amongst several groups of tourists warrant further investigation to shed light on these tourists' food satisfaction. To this end, this study examines the influence of food image on food satisfaction, and investigates the moderating effect of tourist groups (i.e., European and non-European groups) on the

relationship between food image and food satisfaction. The results of this study can provide managerial implications that can aid in the development of a food tourism strategy for Thailand.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Food tourism*

Food tourism is a form of cultural tourism that provides tourists with an opportunity to learn the culture of a certain destination (Updhyay and Sharma, 2014). Food tourism creates a unique experience for tourists (Antón et al., 2019) by teaching them how to cook and consume food prepared from local ingredients and purchase food products as souvenirs (Smith and Xiao, 2008). Food tourists travel with the primary intention of trying a variety of food (McKercher et al., 2008) and to engage in food-related activities, such as food festivals, trade shows, cooking demonstrations and food-tasting events (Lee et al., 2015). Food tourism is a phenomenon that results from the development of new tourism products and services to meet the needs of tourists who are looking for new experiences (World Tourism Organization, 2017).

Food plays the important role of promoting the identity of a country (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Similar to a cultural forwarder, food allows tourists to experience the unique characteristics (Antón et al., 2019) of a destination through its food and drink (Chen and Huang, 2018). Tourists travel to certain destinations and learn about their food, including their food preparation, food culture, food plate decorations, dining atmosphere, culinary arts and food-related stories (Tong et al., 2016). In this way, food tourism creates new knowledge for tourists (Oh et al., 2016) by exposing them to a new culture (Choe and Kim, 2018). Food tourism also involves the experience of eating local cuisine (Levitt et al., 2017) and is considered a key component in branding and enhancing the image of tourist destinations.

### *Local food*

Local food refers to food that is primarily created, processed, and sold locally. Terms related to local food typically include 'locally produced food', 'locally grown food' or 'local cuisine' (Granvik et al., 2017). Local food was described as systems or food chains in which the food is produced near the consumer (Birch and Memery, 2020; Roininen et al., 2006). Authenticity is described as the product of a continuous interaction between tradition and originality that can be broken down into an array of dimensions: geographic specificity, simplicity, personal connection, history and tradition and ethnic connection (Gerosa, 2020). Groves (2001) stated that the authenticity of food from a consumer perspective is frequently used to refer to a genuine version of a product with a specific place, region, or country of origin. Fusion food refers to food that seamlessly combines diverse culinary cultures to create a novel and innovative menu. Additionally, fusion cuisine is a cooking style that merges ingredients and techniques from different food spheres (Gerosa, 2020). For example, fusion restaurants offer blends of various cuisines and culinary traditions from several places.

Therefore, in this study, local food refers to food produced by a food outlet nearby a customer and consumed by the customer in the tourist area visited. Local food attributes encompass authentic food that uses ingredients and cooking style locally in a specific place and fusion food that merges cooking styles and traditions.

### *Food image*

Nelson (2016) defined images as the beliefs, opinions, and impressions that people have about something. Images are external characteristics of things that people use to form their own beliefs and perceptions. Based on this definition, food image refers to a process of developing opinions, feelings, beliefs, and impressions from a combination of one's own knowledge and experiences with food and results in the creation of thoughts and memories. Food represents the cultural heritage of a destination (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016) by providing insights into its culture, history and local lifestyle (World Tourism Organization, 2017). Tourists can experience a variety of activities stemming from food. Each dish can impart stories of wisdom, tradition and eating culture. Therefore, a destination should create a unique food image and provide new experiences for its tourists.

Previous studies have introduced the concept of food image (Chang and Mak, 2018; Lai et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016; Seo et al., 2014) and divided food image into two types. Firstly, cognitive image refers to the emotional benefits of food, including its quality and price. This type of image also concerns the perceptions, judgment, knowledge, attitudes, awareness and understanding of individuals about the physical characteristics and tangible attributes of food. Secondly, affective image refers to emotions and feelings (e.g., excitement) of individuals about food in a particular destination (Peštek and Činjurević, 2014; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Seo and Yun, 2015; Toudert and Bringas-Rábago, 2019). Several studies have conceptualised different elements of food image (Akdag et al., 2018; Chang and Mak 2018; Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn, 2017) and proposed several variables that comprise food image, namely, quality and taste, service quality, price, food culture, safety and hygiene and affective factor (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Elements of Food Image Widely Used in Previous Studies

The elements of food image	Authors
<b>Quality and taste</b>	Akdag et al. (2018), Chang and Mak (2018), Chen and Peng (2018), Choe and Kim (2018), Lai et al. (2018), Muskat, et al. (2019), Peštek and Činjurević (2014), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), Seo et al. (2014), and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017)
<b>Service quality</b>	Akdag et al. (2018), Choe and Kim (2018), Muskat et al. (2019), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017), and Tsai and Wang (2017)
<b>Price</b>	Akdag et al. (2018), Chang and Mak (2018), Choe and Kim (2018), Muskat et al. (2019), Peštek and Činjurević (2014), Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017), and Tsai and Wang (2017)
<b>Food culture</b>	Muskat et al. (2019), Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016), Chang and Mak (2018), Chen and Peng (2018), Peštek and Činjurević (2014), and Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019),
<b>Safety and hygiene</b>	Chang and Mak (2018), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), Seo, Kim, et al. (2013), Seo and Yun (2015), Seo et al. (2014), and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017)
<b>Affective factor</b>	Peštek and Činjurević (2014), Seo et al. (2013), Seo et al. (2014), Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017), and Tsai and Wang (2017)

### **Tourist food satisfaction**

Satisfaction is related to an individual's attitude towards the value of consuming goods and services, including their image, utility, reputation and price (Rust and Cooil, 1994). Value refers to the beliefs of individuals that they use as criteria for evaluating their satisfaction (Sandström et al., 2008). For example, customers set certain expectations with regard to the quality of food and services and then compare their expectations with their actual experience. If they find that the quality of food and services in a restaurant is equal to or exceeds their expectations, then they show satisfaction and develop a return intention (Oh, 2000).

In food consumption theory, consumption value is used to assess the benefits received by a consumer from a product or service. This value is perceived differently by consumers depending on the circumstances of their consumption (Zeithaml, 1988). Value realisation results from an individual's satisfaction with a product or service (Woodruff, 1997). This satisfaction triggers a form of action known as behaviour (Denys and Mendes, 2014). The behaviour of tourists results from their positive attitudes towards food, which in turn influence their travel motivation and destination choices and subsequently affect their travel satisfaction and experience (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017). Therefore, the value of local food consumption for tourists can explain their attitudes towards local food, food destination image and behavioural intentions (Choe and Kim, 2018).

### **Effects of food image on tourist food satisfaction**

Food leverages the value and enhances the image of a destination as a hub of cultural and exotic travel experiences. Gastronomic food experiences are founded on local and authentic food that represents a destination's local culture (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). The value of food image positively affects the attitudes of tourists towards local food (Rousta and Jamshidi, 2020). Previous studies show that food image is related to the satisfaction and intention of tourists to return to a food destination. Seo et al. (2014) stated that the preference for food at the destination can predict the intention of tourists to consume food products. In restaurants, food quality, service quality, ambience, interiors and food prices all affect the satisfaction and return intention of customers (Banerjee and Singhania, 2018; Yan et al., 2015). Destination food image also affects the revisit intention of tourists (Ngoc and Trinh, 2015) by determining their food consumption behaviour (Lai et al., 2018; Tsai and Wang, 2017).

The perception of tourists directly influences their satisfaction with food in a destination (Arasli and Baradarani, 2014; Chi et al., 2013). Those tourists with high motivation and involvement in food-related activities are highly likely to visit destinations that offer food-related activities (Levitt et al., 2017). Kunwar (2017) showed that the food experiences of tourists can influence their decision to revisit a destination in the future. Therefore, local food contributes to the satisfaction of tourists with their destinations (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; López-Guzmán et al., 2017).

The cognitive destination food image (Toudert and Bringas-Rábago, 2019), local cuisine and destination satisfaction of tourists can increase their return intention (Ngoc and Trinh, 2015). Compared with the affective image, the cognitive image has a stronger influence on the preferences and intention of tourists to consume food in a destination (Seo et al., 2014). Having high-quality facilities at a destination can also fulfil the expectations of tourists and result in their satisfaction (Žabkar et al., 2010). The following hypothesis is then proposed based on these arguments:

*H1: Local food image has a significant positive impact on tourist food satisfaction.*

### ***Moderating role of tourist groups***

Tourists are a dynamic group of people with diverse demographic and psychographic characteristics and varying extents of participation in food-related activities (Levitt et al., 2017). Behaviour is related to the thoughts, feelings and expressions of an individual and depends on his/her attitudes, experiences and perceptions. Three factors can affect the behaviour of an individual. Firstly, cultural factors are fundamental determinants of an individual's purchasing needs and behaviour. These factors include subcultures, races, religions, ethnic groups and regions. Secondly, social factors are relevant to the daily lives of consumers and can influence their behaviour. These factors include subjective norms, families and social status. Thirdly, personal factors are related to personal qualities, including age, occupation, lifestyle and economic status (Kotler and Keller, 2012), which lead to differences in the characteristics and behaviours of tourists.

Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) grouped tourists into survivors, enjoyers and experiencers, with each group holding different attitudes towards food tourism in a destination (López-Guzmán et al., 2017). They defined experiencers as a special interest group of tourists with highly favourable attitudes towards food tourism (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; López-Guzmán et al., 2017). The perceptions of these tourists towards the quality and authenticity of local food are significantly more favourable than those of other groups (López-Guzmán et al., 2017; López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012).

Comparative studies highlight differences in the food perceptions of tourists coming from various countries. For instance, Kim et al., (2014) found that tourists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand relate the Korean image with their intention to visit gastronomic tourist destinations given that the uniqueness of the Korean food culture significantly increases their intention to visit Korea. This finding is particularly salient amongst Thai tourists. Meanwhile, Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019) found that the factors of food image have a more favourable impact on the perceptions of Australian tourists than on those of Chinese tourists. Seo et al. (2014) found that food image in South Korea affects the food satisfaction and return intention of these tourists. Meanwhile, the perceptions of American tourists towards the cognitive image of a destination, including its quality, attractiveness, healthiness and cooking methods, are more favourable than those of Chinese and Japanese tourists. The cross-cultural differences amongst tourists with diverse nationalities (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Horng and Tsai, 2011) can also change their food perceptions. Given that the expectations and experiences of tourists are varying, tourists from each country assign different levels of importance to the value of food consumption.

Other important factors affect the tourists' behaviour, the interest in food experiencing cause tourists the closeness and openness actions. Both personal behaviours were found in European tourists. Closeness behaviour is observed amongst tourists with food experiences in strange destinations. Cohen and Avieli (2004) examined the behaviour of Western and Asian tourists when consuming local food in Asian and Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, China and Vietnam, and found that some of these tourists have negative experiences with local food. Specifically, they are reluctant to taste or eat food with unknown ingredients. In addition to their unfamiliarity as to how their food is prepared, how to use utensils and how people dine in their destinations, these tourists are unsure about the cleanliness of their food. The communication gaps between these tourists and the local people in destinations also create a challenge for tourists when ordering local food. For example, Western tourists in Thailand tend to order local dishes that are well-known yet are not widely available in their home countries (e.g. Thai fried noodles or fried rice). Such behaviour drives most restaurants to highlight 'iconic' dishes in their menus (Ferguson, 1981) that are usually sold in Thai restaurants abroad.

In another comparative study, it was found that Asian tourists tend to be less partake of local food at the destination than Western tourists (Cohen and Avieli, 2004). These tourists are also highly reluctant to consume local food in the local destinations. Asian tourists also prefer to eat at overseas restaurants that serve the local cuisine in their home countries. In sum, these tourists doubt the local food being served in their destinations, thereby preventing them from forming new food experiences (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Lenglet and Giannelloni, 2016).

The openness or variety-seeking behaviour is the tourists' personal behaviour that drives his or her intention to try out a variety of local food (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Such behaviour is a favourable factor that provided the tourists' experience varieties of food and established a demand for a variety of food cultures (Lenglet and Giannelloni, 2016; Molz, 2004). Openness behaviour has also been examined in previous studies. For example, European tourists from Italy, Spain and France are generally satisfied with the quality, price and variety of food in Jordan (Arasli and Baradarani, 2014). These tourists also exhibit positive attitudes towards culinary tourism in Spain and Slovenia. The opportunity to try out local food and beverages is vital to attract European tourists towards a destination (Sánchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). Peštek and Činžarević (2014) examined the overall satisfaction of Western and Eastern European tourists with their food experiences in Bosnia and found that Western European tourists have lower levels of satisfaction with the

uniqueness, cultural heritage, quality and prices of food compared with their Eastern or Central European counterparts.

Such intercountry cultural differences have also been observed in the Asian and European contexts (Kim et al., 2014). In Hong Kong, Choe and Kim (2018) observed that Asian tourists pay special attention to health and hygiene when consuming food. Food safety and hygiene in Thailand have been examined in several studies (Sirigunna, 2015; Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn, 2017; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee, 2013). Chinese and most European tourists focus on taste, and European tourists enjoy socialising whilst having their meals. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, European and Asian tourists show great interest in learning about the local culture in the local destinations (Choe and Kim, 2018). The results of their studies were concluded in Table2.

**Table 2:** Relationship between Food Image, Satisfaction, Attitude, and Behavioural Intention

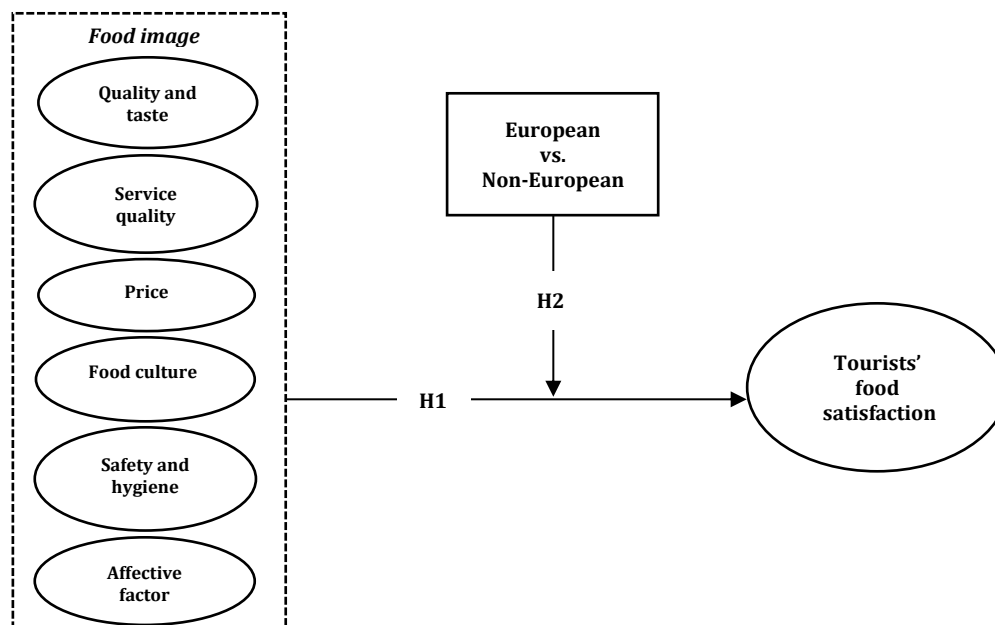
Directions	Methods/Samples	Results	Authors
Quality and taste → Attitude → Food image	Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling/1,008 samples in Hong Kong	Quality and taste, affective factor, and knowledge has a significant positive effect on food image in Hong Kong.	Choe and Kim (2018)
Food image → Cognitive and food culture	Confirmatory factor analysis/Chinese, Japanese and American tourists	The elements of food image—food safety, attractiveness, and food culture—have a positive impact on the image of South Korean cuisine.	Seo and Yun (2015)
Attitude → Food image	Partial least square structural equation modelling/1,200 tourists in Shiraz, Iran	Quality and taste value, health value, price value, emotional value, and prestige value have a positive effect on tourists' attitudes toward local food.	Rousta and Jamshidi (2020)
Food image → Behavioural intention	Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling/414 tourists in Tainan	Value for money is a significant factor affecting the image of street food in Tainan, Taiwan.	Tsai and Wang (2017)
Food image → Behavioural intention	Partial least squares structural equation modelling/320 tourists in Australia	Food quality, service quality, and the atmosphere and environment of the restaurant have a significant impact on the satisfaction and the intention to revisit.	Muskat et al. (2019)
Food image → Satisfaction	Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling/278 tourists in Malaysia	Tourists' perceived food image influenced food satisfaction and quality of culinary experience. Culinary quality mediates the effect of food image on tourists' behavioural intentions.	Chi et al. (2013)
Food image → Culinary quality			
Food image → Behavioural intention			
Food image → Satisfaction	Exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis: A comparative study for different group of tourists/ East European and West European tourists	Three components of food image—food quality and price, affective factor, and food culture—have a significant effect on tourists' satisfaction.	Peštek and Činžarević (2014)
Food image → Satisfaction	Exploratory factor analysis and regression: A comparative study for different group of tourists/837 tourists in Phuket	Food image in Thailand has a higher affect the satisfaction, food preference, and food consumption, to Australian tourists than Chinese tourists.	Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019)
Food image → Satisfaction	Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling:	The image of food in South Korea affects food satisfaction and the intention to return to all groups of tourists. American exhibits higher cognitive image than Chinese, and Japanese.	Seo et al. (2014)
Food image → Behavioural intention	A comparative study for different group of tourists/ Chinese, Japanese and American tourists		



The above studies that categorise tourists on the basis of their behaviour, demographic characteristics and regions highlight the diversity in tourist behaviour. These factors affect their level of satisfaction towards local food. The opportunity to try local food and beverages is vital to attract European tourists towards a destination. European tourists, in particular, are unique due to their high interest in local food. Food images highly appeal to them; hence, they exhibit positive attitudes towards culinary tourism. Other tourists, including non-European tourists, are afraid to explore new things, which may affect their attraction and satisfaction with food image. The differences in food satisfaction were reported amongst tourist groups. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed on the basis of these arguments:

*H2: Tourist groups have a significant moderating effect on the food satisfaction of tourists.*

Figure 1 exhibits the proposed model of tourist satisfaction and the moderating role of European and non-European tourists' group towards local food image.



**Figure 1:** Tourist Satisfaction and the Moderating Role of European and Non-European Tourists' Group towards Local Food Image

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *Sample and data collection*

The researchers collected the data from the check-in counter of the departure area at the Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Simple random sampling was employed to determine a sample of European and non-European foreign tourists who engaged in food-related activities in Bangkok, Thailand. A self-administered questionnaire was used to obtain data over the period of August 2019. To ensure agreeability and the quality of responses, only tourists who did not appear to be in a hurry (e.g., seated, resting, or queuing in a long line) were asked to participate in the survey. On this occasion, the tourists had spare time to answer the questionnaire. The contents in the questionnaire were certified by The Srinakharinviroj University Ethics Committee on Human Research. During the administration of the survey, respondents were informed by the researchers that their participation in the survey is voluntary. Respondents' data will be kept in anonymity and confidentially. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete. A total of 624 self-administered questionnaires were distributed. Among the returned questionnaires, 581 (93.11% of the collected questionnaires) contained usable data, consisting of 331 European tourists and 250 non-European tourists from America, Africa, Australia, and Asia.

#### *Operational constructs and measurements*

The original English questionnaire, which presented the three research constructs, was translated to Thai and then back-translated to English. The first part of the questionnaire asked for the demographic data of the respondents, and the answers were used to categorise these respondents according to their regions. The

second part of the questionnaire utilised a five-point Likert scale for rating the seven elements of food image. Firstly, quality and taste were measured by 10 items with scales synthesised from Choe and Kim (2018), Lai et al. (2018), Muskat et al. (2019), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), Seo and Yun (2015) and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017). Secondly, service quality was measured by 10 items with scales derived from Muskat et al. (2019) and Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019). Thirdly, price was measured by four items with scales synthesised from Choe and Kim (2018), Muskat et al. (2019) and Tsai and Wang (2017). Fourthly, food culture was measured by 10 items with scales synthesised from Lai et al. (2018), Peštek and Činjurević (2014), Seo and Yun (2015) and Seo et al. (2014). Fifthly, food safety and hygiene were measured by 10 items with scales synthesised from Chang and Mak (2018), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), Seo and Yun (2015) and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017). Sixthly, affective factor was measured by 10 items with scales derived from Choe and Kim (2018), Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017) and Tsai and Wang (2017). The third part of the questionnaire used seven items derived from Chen and Peng (2018), Choe and Kim (2018) and Muskat et al. (2019) to measure the satisfaction of tourists with food image as measured on a five-point Likert scale.

### ***Analysis methods***

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed by using Mplus version 7.3. A structural equation model was developed to test the hypotheses and to investigate the effect of food image on tourist satisfaction (H1). Then, multiple-group analysis was performed to test the differences amongst similar models that are estimated for various groups (H2). The moderating effects of tourist regions on the influence of food image on tourist satisfaction were also tested.

## **4. RESULTS**

### ***Descriptive profile of the sample***

Amongst the 581 respondents, 58.7% were male and 41.4% were female. In terms of age, 17.2%, 54.4%, 16.7% and 11.7% of the respondents were aged below 22 years, between 22 and 39 years, between 40 and 54 years and above 55 years, respectively. In terms of race, 57% of the respondents were European, whereas 43% were non-European. Most of the respondents were visiting Thailand for leisure (68.7%) and self-arranged their trips (84.9%). When eating out, 26.2%, 27.9% and 14.1% of the respondents go to night markets, street food stalls and hotel restaurants, respectively.

### ***Exploratory factor analysis***

Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify a set of latent constructs underlying a battery of measured variables and to select the important variables into the measurement model. The validity was tested by investigating factor loadings at 0.500 or higher, which are significant (Hair et al., 2010). Indicators that pass the validity test were grouped into seven constructs, and several indicators with factor loadings under 0.500 were eliminated. Thus, three items were selected as constructs of quality and taste, three items were selected as constructs of service quality, four items were selected as constructs of price, four items were selected as constructs of food culture, three items were selected as constructs of safety and hygiene of food, two items were selected as constructs of affective factor and five items were selected as constructs of satisfaction with food image. A total of 24 indicators were eventually included in the model.

### ***Confirmatory factor analysis***

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test the measurement model (Hair et al., 2010). The measurement model of each latent variable was tested to confirm the certain relations of the indicators to the latent variables. Model fitness was confirmed according to five criteria, namely, chi-square/degree of freedom (df) < 3, CFI > 0.920, TLI > 0.920, RMSEA < 0.070 and SRMR < 0.080. Table 3 presents the validity and reliability of the measurement scales.

The reliability of the observed variables in each construct was measured by using Cronbach's alpha. All coefficients ranged between 0.719 and 0.948, thereby satisfying the criteria. KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity was used to check the sample adequacy. The KMO of all constructs ranged from 0.500 to 0.896, whereas their Bartlett's test of sphericity was less than 0.050, thereby confirming the validity and suitability of the model.

The composite reliability (CR) score ranging from 0.718 to 0.944 was also obtained, which greatly exceeded the standard of 0.600 (Hair et al., 2010). Each construct had an average extracted variance (AVE) ranging from 0.546 to 0.771, which satisfied the criteria of convergent validity.

The first-ordered CFA model fit values were chi-square = 443.339, df = 225, CFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.972, RMSEA = 0.041 and SRMR = 0.035, whereas the CFA model fit values for each group were chi-square = 839.872



(European = 392.552/non-European = 447.321),  $df = 484$ , CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.050 and SRMR = 0.057 (Table 3).

The second-ordered CFA of food image included the same indicators used in the first-ordered CFA, namely, quality and taste, service quality, price, food culture, food safety and hygiene and affective factor. The model fit values were chi-square = 349.384,  $df = 143$ , CFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.050 and SRMR = 0.049 (Table 4). These results satisfied the model fit index criteria, thereby supporting the uni-dimensionality of the scales.

Table 5 presents the discriminant validity of the proposed model, which was assessed by comparing the square root of AVE in the diagonal with the correlation coefficients (off-diagonal) for each construct in the relevant rows. These coefficients ranged between 0.324 and 0.762. After the comparison, the square root of AVE for each construct (0.750 to 0.876) exceeded the correlation coefficients of their respective constructs. Therefore, the proposed model and its constructs demonstrated an acceptable discriminant validity.

**Table 3:** Validity and Reliability of the Measurement Scales of the First-Ordered Constructs

First ordered constructs	Total ( $n=581$ )		European ( $n=331$ )		Non-European ( $n=250$ )	
	$\alpha=0.852$ , $KMO=0.719$ , $CR=0.851$ , $AVE=0.658$		$\alpha=0.810$ , $KMO=0.706$ , $CR=0.821$ , $AVE=0.606$		$\alpha=0.883$ , $KMO=0.723$ , $CR=0.880$ , $AVE=0.712$	
<b>Quality and taste</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
I think that food in Thailand is tasty	0.904	66.346*	0.861	41.208*	0.932	61.591*
I think that food in Thailand provides appealing flavours	0.788	40.811*	0.752	29.853*	0.829	36.885*
Food in Thailand is colourful and aromatic	0.734	33.267*	0.716	26.978*	0.762	26.647*
	$\alpha=0.837$ , $KMO=0.712$ , $CR=0.840$ , $AVE=0.637$		$\alpha=0.834$ , $KMO=0.706$ , $CR=0.838$ , $AVE=0.634$		$\alpha=0.842$ , $KMO=0.715$ , $CR=0.841$ , $AVE=0.639$	
<b>Service quality</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
Helpful employees	0.852	44.965*	0.846	34.735*	0.862	36.159*
Friendly and courteous employees	0.811	39.907*	0.812	34.901*	0.805	27.868*
Prompt service	0.727	29.897*	0.727	25.517*	0.727	23.159*
	$\alpha=0.912$ , $KMO=0.823$ , $CR=0.898$ , $AVE=0.688$		$\alpha=0.903$ , $KMO=0.830$ , $CR=0.910$ , $AVE=0.721$		$\alpha=0.921$ , $KMO=0.807$ , $CR=0.917$ , $AVE=0.736$	
<b>Price</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
I am happy with food price in Thailand	0.885	62.202*	0.919	54.869*	0.851	38.819*
I think that food in Thailand offers value for money	0.839	51.307*	0.929	57.681*	0.907	57.412*
I think that food in Thailand is reasonably priced	0.796	38.792*	0.850	51.366*	0.915	60.131*
I think that paying for food in Thailand is convenient to buy	0.796	42.753*	0.675	25.642*	0.750	27.630*
	$\alpha=0.836$ , $KMO=0.812$ , $CR=0.837$ , $AVE=0.564$		$\alpha=0.821$ , $KMO=0.799$ , $CR=0.827$ , $AVE=0.546$		$\alpha=0.851$ , $KMO=0.819$ , $CR=0.853$ , $AVE=0.593$	
<b>Food culture</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
Food in Thailand gives a cultural experience	0.819	43.888*	0.804	33.186*	0.820	33.620*
Thailand offers a compelling lifestyle and food culture	0.765	35.559*	0.739	27.528*	0.801	30.831*
Food is part of Thai cultural heritage	0.736	32.292*	0.725	25.961*	0.745	25.476*
Food in Thailand is exotic	0.697	27.810*	0.684	22.845*	0.712	22.646*
	$\alpha=0.831$ , $KMO=0.717$ , $CR=0.871$ , $AVE=0.694$		$\alpha=0.835$ , $KMO=0.717$ , $CR=0.838$ , $AVE=0.633$		$\alpha=0.814$ , $KMO=0.708$ , $CR=0.814$ , $AVE=0.593$	
<b>Safety and hygiene of food</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
Food in Thailand is safe to consume	0.882	23.671*	0.780	28.098*	0.756	25.415*
Food in Thailand is reliable	0.874	24.198*	0.771	29.918*	0.752	22.907*
Food in Thailand is hygienic	0.737	22.439*	0.836	34.506*	0.803	27.460*
	$\alpha=0.730$ , $KMO=0.500$ , $CR=0.729$ , $AVE=0.574$		$\alpha=0.735$ , $KMO=0.500$ , $CR=0.733$ , $AVE=0.579$		$\alpha=0.719$ , $KMO=0.500$ , $CR=0.718$ , $AVE=0.561$	
<b>Affective factor</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
I think that eating food in Thailand let me forget worries	0.772	26.276*	0.773	23.857*	0.758	18.392*
I think that eating food in Thailand makes me feel like I am in another world	0.744	25.032*	0.749	21.760*	0.740	19.408*

**Table 3:** Validity and Reliability of the Measurement Scales of the First-Ordered Constructs (continued)

First ordered constructs	Total (n=581)		European (n=331)		Non-European (n=250)	
	$\alpha=0.944$ , $KMO=0.888$ , $CR=0.943$ , $AVE=0.769$		$\alpha=0.948$ , $KMO=0.896$ , $CR=0.944$ , $AVE=0.771$		$\alpha=0.938$ , $KMO=0.858$ , $CR=0.937$ , $AVE=0.748$	
<b>Food satisfaction</b>	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value
I really enjoy eating food in Thailand	0.904	86.895*	0.887	65.843*	0.893	54.522*
I am pleased to eat food in Thailand	0.888	84.694*	0.900	69.911*	0.885	60.528*
I feel pleasant with food in Thailand	0.887	75.905*	0.890	66.954*	0.873	48.791*
I am glad to eat food in Thailand	0.872	75.153*	0.883	61.464*	0.845	46.788*
I desire to eat food in Thailand	0.832	59.060*	0.831	46.065*	0.829	41.977*
<b>Model fit indices of total</b>						
$\chi^2 = 443.339$ , df = 225, CFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.972, RMSEA = 0.041, SRMR = 0.035						
<b>Model fit indices of separate group</b>						
$\chi^2 = 839.872$ (European 392.552/ non-European 447.321), df = 484, CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.050, SRMR = 0.057						

Note:  $\chi^2$  = chi-squared, df = degree of freedom,  $\beta$  = Standardized factor loading, t-value is significant at \*p<0.001,  $\alpha$  = Cronbach alpha reliability, KMO = KMO & Bartlett's test of sphericity significant at p<0.05, CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted

**Table 4:** Second-Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Food Image

Second ordered construct	First ordered construct	$\beta$	t-Value
Food image	Quality and taste	0.791	30.154*
	Service quality	0.580	15.605*
	Price	0.729	25.098*
	Food culture	0.833	33.208*
	Safety and hygiene of food	0.500	11.951*
	Affective factor	0.619	15.442*
<b>Model fit indices</b>			
$\chi^2 = 349.384$ , df = 143, CFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.050, SRMR = 0.049			

Note:  $\chi^2$  = chi-squared, df = degree of freedom,  $\beta$  = Standardized factor loading, df = degree of freedom, t-value is significant at \*p<0.001

**Table 5:** Discriminant Validity of all Constructs Considered in the Total Group

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Mean</b>	4.251	4.133	4.202	4.249	3.444	3.509	4.121
<b>Standard deviation</b>	0.726	0.754	0.804	0.633	0.794	0.948	0.816
<b>1. Quality and taste</b>	<b>(0.811)</b>						
<b>2. Service quality</b>	0.405	<b>(0.798)</b>					
<b>3. Price</b>	0.602	0.426	<b>(0.829)</b>				
<b>4. Food culture</b>	0.658	0.501	0.622	<b>(0.750)</b>			
<b>5. Safety and hygiene of food</b>	0.377	0.358	0.364	0.381	<b>(0.833)</b>		
<b>6. Affective factor</b>	0.500	0.324	0.382	0.502	0.460	<b>(0.757)</b>	
<b>7. Food satisfaction</b>	0.762	0.380	0.575	0.595	0.475	0.678	<b>(0.876)</b>

Note: The bold numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are the square root of average variance extracted

### Structural model

The results of the structural model showed an acceptable fit with index values of chi-square = 539.850, df = 237, CFI = 0.968, TLI = 0.963, RMSEA = 0.047 and SRMR = 0.049. Food image shows a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.860$ ,  $p^* < 0.001$ ), thereby supporting H1.

### Multiple group analysis

Multiple group analysis was performed to test H2. Table 6 reports the discriminant validity of the European (n=331) and non-European respondents (n=250). All values satisfied the criteria, thereby proving the discriminant validity of the measurement model and the constructs for each group of respondents.

**Table 6:** Discriminant Validity for Each Group of Tourists

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>European</b>							
<b>Mean</b>	4.328	4.158	4.300	4.327	3.323	3.432	4.158
<b>Standard deviation</b>	0.645	0.749	0.746	0.594	0.795	0.978	0.822
<b>Non-European</b>							
<b>Mean</b>	4.149	4.101	4.073	4.249	3.604	3.612	4.073
<b>Standard deviation</b>	0.812	0.760	0.859	0.680	0.765	0.899	0.806
<b>1. Quality and taste</b>	<b>(.778/.843)</b>	0.431	0.590	0.697	0.413	0.427	0.760
<b>2. Service quality</b>	0.399	<b>(.796/.799)</b>	0.432	0.470	0.475	0.308	0.440
<b>3. Price</b>	0.485	0.410	<b>(.849/.857)</b>	0.687	0.376	0.336	0.569
<b>4. Food culture</b>	0.636	0.528	0.504	<b>(.738/.770)</b>	0.516	0.458	0.669
<b>5. Safety and hygiene of food</b>	0.366	0.346	0.332	0.265	<b>(.795/.770)</b>	0.582	0.578
<b>6. Affective factor</b>	0.608	0.345	0.385	0.566	0.451	<b>(.760/.748)</b>	0.649
<b>7. Food satisfaction</b>	0.761	0.337	0.482	0.536	0.467	0.728	<b>(.878/.864)</b>

Note: The bold numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are the square root of average variance extracted, European = values under diagonal/ Non-European = values above diagonal

Before conducting a multiple group analysis, a multi-confirmatory factor analysis was performed to confirm the invariance of the measurement model across the two groups of respondents. Table 7 reports the results of the multi-confirmatory factor analysis, where the chi-square was compared with the comparative fit index (CFI). The invariance in the measurement model for the two tourist groups was proven by the insignificant chi-square differences amongst the configural, partial metric and metric models (Hair et al., 2010). Moreover, the difference in the CFI of the compared models was less than 0.01 (Cheung and Rensvold, 2002).

**Table 7:** Measurement Invariance between the European and Non-European Tourist Groups

<i>Invariance test</i>	<i>Model fit measures</i>				<i>Model differences</i>				
	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta$ p-value	$\Delta$ CFI
<b>European</b>	434.485								
<b>Non-European</b>	542.738								
<b>Configural</b>	977.222	462	0.000	0.946	0.936	0.062	0.050		
<b>Partial metric</b>	986.997	469	0.000	0.946	0.936	0.062	0.052	0.202	0.000
<b>Full metric</b>	1001.450	479	0.000	0.945	0.937	0.061	0.056	0.113	0.001
<b>Full scalar</b>	1097.662	503	0.000	0.938	0.932	0.064	0.064	0.000	0.007

Note: P-values were significant at \*p<0.05, CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean squared error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual

Both tourist groups demonstrate significant positive effects of food image on their food satisfaction. To test H2, researchers compared the path coefficients between two groups that followed the criterion of a significant change in the chi-squared (Hair et al., 2010; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004). After constraining the parameters, a change in the chi-square value proves the significant role of the moderator (p<0.05). Moderating effects were reported in the results (Table 8), with the European group showing stronger positive effects ( $\beta = 0.857$ ,  $p^* < 0.001$ ) than the non-European group ( $\beta = 0.826$ ,  $p^* < 0.001$ ). Therefore, the difference between tourist groups significantly moderates the effect of food image on tourist food satisfaction. European tourists show a significantly higher level of food satisfaction compared with non-European tourists.

**Table 8:** Multi-Group Analysis of the Structural Model

Hypothesis testing	Result	European		Non-European		Unconstrained model $\chi^2$ (df= 617)	Constrained model $\chi^2$ (df=618)	$\Delta \chi^2$	$\Delta p$ -value
		$\beta$	t-value	$\beta$	t-value				
H2: Tourist groups have a significant moderating effect on the food satisfaction of tourists.	accept	0.857	36.497*	0.826	26.651*	1243.905	1249.544	5.639	0.018

Note:  $\beta$  = Standardized factor loading,  $\chi^2$  = chi-squared, df = degree of freedom, \*p<0.05

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study's originality confirms the characteristics of food image, especially that of local food in Thailand: quality and taste, service quality, price, food culture, safety and hygiene and affective factor. In particular, the study's comparative method in understanding food satisfaction of diverse tourist groups is a new approach. The study gives practical suggestions that can help stakeholders develop and sustain food image factors, which contribute to food tourism, especially those that suit specific tourist groups.

Results show that food image positively affects the satisfaction of tourists with food. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies, such as Choe and Kim (2018), Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019) and Seo et al. (2014). Arasli and Baradarani (2014) discovered a relationship between food-related tourism and tourists' satisfaction with the local cuisine in a destination. They also identified food tourism as the most significant factor that manipulates tourists' satisfaction with their destination. The outstanding variety of Thai food can be mainly ascribed to their wide assortments of flavour. This finding is consistent with Chang and Mak (2018), who found that the image of food is affected by its uniqueness.

Food culture reflects food image more than food prices and service quality. This finding is consistent with those of Muskat et al. (2019) and Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016), who identified food culture as a component of food image in the cultural aspect. Food culture enhances the attractiveness and uniqueness of local food in a destination. Tourists want to experience culture and uniqueness along with traditional food.

Quality and taste create an inimitable food experience and contribute to the image of the food in a destination. The taste of food and the meticulousness of its cooking methods are cognitive images that shape the beliefs and knowledge of tourists about food. This finding is in line with that of Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), who found that the quality and taste of food can influence food image. Taste, quality and knowledge also have direct positive effects on food image, which echoes the findings of Akdag et al. (2018), Choe and Kim (2018) and Muskat et al. (2019), who argued that food quality and taste are vital indicators of destination food image, food recognition and destination brand image (Lai et al., 2018; Muskat et al., 2019).

The findings of this work also support those of Muskat et al. (2019), who found that food image, service quality and restaurant atmosphere and environment have important effects on the satisfaction and return intention of tourists.

Safety and hygiene are relevant factors that shape food image. These factors result from emotional states (affective image) that directly influence the feelings and attitudes of tourists towards food. This finding is in line with Chang and Mak (2018), Seo and Yun (2015) and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017), who found that these factors influence the destination image and revisit intention of tourists (Lai et al., 2018).

The results for the other components are consistent with those of Chang and Mak (2018), Muskat et al. (2019), Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017) and Tsai and Wang (2017), who identified price as an important factor that affects local food image. This factor also represents the value for money of the local food in a destination. Meanwhile, affective factor is a factor that not only represents the emotions, feelings and satisfaction of tourists but also plays an important role in developing street food image, shaping travel intentions and spreading word of mouth. This finding supports the results of Arasli and Baradarani (2014), Roustae and Jamshidi (2020) and Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017), who found that tourists prefer to eat local cuisine because of its quality, price and variety. In sum, these elements can be used as variables for measuring food image.

Meanwhile, the multiple-group comparative study reveals that food image has significantly different effects on the satisfaction of European and non-European tourists. Specifically, European tourists are more satisfied with the food image of Thailand compared with non-European tourists. The same behaviour is also observed among tourists from the same region because of the similarities in their cultural and social backgrounds (Kotler and Keller, 2012) and their levels of interest and involvement, all of which contribute to

their food experiences (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Molz, 2004). This result is consistent with the findings of Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016), Lenglet and Giannelloni (2016) and López-Guzmán et al. (2017), who argued that such behaviour stems from the highly favourable attitudes of individuals towards food. The above results are also consistent with the findings of Choe and Kim (2018), who reported that European tourists enjoy socialising and are interested in learning about the local culture of their destinations (Tong et al., 2016). Having an opportunity to try out the local food in a destination is a major motivator of tourists' travel intentions (Sanchez-Cañizares and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). Given that European tourists demonstrate both openness (Arasli and Baradarani, 2014) and closeness behaviours (Cohen and Avieli, 2004), they have a higher level of satisfaction compared with their non-European counterparts as influenced by food image. European tourists are also more open towards local food compared with their non-European counterparts.

Those non-Europeans who tend to demonstrate closeness behaviour when experiencing local food culture are highly concerned about food safety and hygiene. This result echoes the findings of Sirigunna, 2015; Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn, 2017; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee, 2013, who found that most tourists are worried about the cleanliness of local food in Thailand. These results are also in line with the findings of Choe and Kim (2018), who found that Asian tourists focus on the health and hygiene of food. When showing doubts, hesitation and uncertainty about how their food are being prepared, tourists may refuse to consume their food. The idea of Cohen and Avieli (2004) can also be used to explain why the non-European group have a lower satisfaction with local food compared with the European group. Such behaviour can be ascribed to communication gaps (i.e., menus written in local text), unfamiliarity of food, different dining behaviours and service quality in local restaurants. This kind of closeness behaviour makes tourists fence their new idea to try the new kind of food that they are not recognized (Lenglet and Giannelloni, 2016).

## 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Studying tourist behaviour from the food tourism perspective can contribute to competitive capability building, reveal those factors that influence such behaviour, help relevant parties in devising solutions and aid local businesses in improving their marketing strategies and achieving a competitive advantage in the market.

Given the importance of building the competitiveness of food tourism and establishing an effective food tourism marketing strategy in Thailand, the relevant stakeholders in this context, including marketers, entrepreneurs and service providers, should understand the different behaviours of tourists. Understanding such behaviours can support them in their formulation of marketing and management strategies that can grant improve the food-related experiences of a diverse group of tourists.

The openness behaviour of tourists creates a positive view that affects the food image of Thailand. Such behaviour reflects two vital factors that enhance the uniqueness of food in the country. To enhance the attractiveness of food image for tourists, the following attributes need to be maintained and enhanced:

1. Food culture represents the local food identity of Thailand and is an integral part of food experiences that adds value and creates a meaningful and unique experience for tourists. The cultural differences resulting from the consumption of local food leave a lasting impression upon tourists (Antón et al., 2019). Therefore, relevant stakeholders should preserve the identity and unique characteristics of their food. Entrepreneurs should also acknowledge and promote the importance and value of food culture. Each economic sector should focus on the unique characteristics of food that reflect the traditional culture of a destination given their important role in shaping the cultural experiences of tourists (Seo and Yun, 2015).

2. The quality and taste of food determine the food preferences and choices of tourists. Food is not only the taste but also the aesthetic creation of food appealing stories that make Thailand's local food valuable (DASTA, 2018). Thus, tourists can experience a variety of senses and tastes in local food. Therefore, stakeholders should focus on the quality and taste of food to stimulate the interest of tourists and to leave a lasting impression.

This study provides managerial implications to prevent a decrease in the satisfaction of some tourist groups with Thailand's local food. Furthermore, these implications help maintain other tourists' high satisfaction and enhance the following facets of local food.

### **Hygiene and sanitation**

When traveling in unfamiliar places, tourists are naturally concerned with food safety. Doubts on cleanliness, especially street food, may make them reluctant to eat, no matter how appetizing the dishes are. Therefore, the cleanliness of local food in Thailand needs to be enhanced. Local food outlets take the form of high-end restaurants, local restaurants, fast-food eateries, street food stands and food trucks. The sanitation standard in these places is not easy to control. Therefore, stakeholders should establish a food hygiene standard and create a seal of sanitation to build tourists' confidence. Food entrepreneurs need to pay attention

to the cleanliness of the environment, hygiene in cooking and sanitation of utensils. Drinking water and water used for handwashing must be safe from bacteria to prevent diarrhoea. Sanitation measures by the staff should involve wearing a uniform, following standard procedures and maintaining a hygienic appearance. Local food outlets that have upgraded their cleanliness standards should display the sanitation seal in their shops and undergo periodic sanitation checks by authorities.

#### ***Knowledge in ingredients and the cooking process***

Lack of information and uncertainty of tourists about local food may affect their food satisfaction. Thus, stakeholders can address this problem by providing information about the preparation process and ingredients of their food. Restaurants should provide English descriptions in their menu, especially for food items that are unfamiliar to foreigners. Staff should be equipped with sufficient knowledge to suggest food to tourists who are new to local food. For example, which ingredients, herbs and foods and drinks can enhance or distort certain flavours? Which dishes go well together? Which ingredients may cause food allergies?

#### ***Management and service***

Foodservice involves freshness; thus, the faster, the better. Ingredients should always be kept fresh. In fact, some dishes need to be served to customers within a time frame to maintain their quality. Restaurant operators should arrange the kitchen layout, workflow, and service procedures, including the service delivery system, to facilitate faster food service. Moreover, the time and process from the kitchen to tables, workforce management and the flow of food service can be optimised. Service staff should be required to understand clearly and convey messages correctly to avoid mistakes. Stakeholders can narrow the communication gap by improving their staff's communication skills, multi-cultural knowledge, and service quality.

#### ***Marketing***

Countries with iconic food have an attractive selling point in tourism. Foreigners often see food advertisements through online media, which motivate them to travel. Thus, Thailand's local food attributes should be presented in more detail. The public media content should be provided appropriately and reached easily. Campaigns should highlight the uniqueness and cleanliness of local Thai food. Moreover, different culinary styles, traditions, and way of life across destination regions should be introduced to gain recognition and confidence from tourists.

These strategies, especially those for sanitation and marketing, will be especially useful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tactics used in restaurants can be adapted for use in street food stands or food markets, as well as in food tourism activities to amplify the results.

## **7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES**

Despite the research's important implications, this study limits to explain why some tourist groups show different levels of satisfaction with local food image. Future studies should then perform in-depth interviews to further understand the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of tourists toward food image in Thailand and other countries. Other analysis techniques, such as multiple indicators multiple causes (MIMIC), may also be employed to manipulate a variety of the results of food experience and satisfaction. A study of other demographic profiles of tourists, which are nationalities, income, duration of stay, frequency of visit, experiencing level, knowledge level, and participating level, can also be conducted to test the different groups of tourists. Lastly, the study involves the issue of COVID-19 that impact food image in the tourism destination is also suggested.

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## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funder had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.



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