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Exploring Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination: A structural equation model approach

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Abstract: This study aims to construct an integrative model for understanding the factors that shape Chinese tourists' intentions to visit Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination. In detail, we investigate the relationships among cognitive experiences, emotional experiences, cultural experiences, affective destination image, cognitive destination image, and the intention to visit Thailand for culinary experiences. Utilizing an online survey method to gather 562 Chinese tourists who have experienced Thai gastronomy, this study continues to use structural equation model to process data. The findings reveal that cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences significantly influence tourists' affective and cognitive destination images, positively impacting their intention to visit Thailand for its culinary offerings. The affective and cognitive destination images act as crucial mediators, intricately linking these experiences with travel intentions. This approach improves our understanding of the dynamics involved. It also provides practical insights for developing targeted marketing strategies.

Keywords: gastronomic tourism; tourism destination image; tourism experience; Chinese tourists; Thailand; marketing strategies

1. Introduction

Gastronomic tourism, often called culinary tourism, involves travelling to a destination primarily to experience its cuisine (Stone et al., 2018). This form of tourism allows travelers to explore a region's food culture, which includes tasting local dishes, visiting food markets, attending cooking classes, and even engaging in farm-to-table experiences (Kuo et al., 2024). Gastronomic tourism goes beyond merely dining out; it is an immersive journey into the culinary heritage and traditions that shape a destination's identity (Cheng et al., 2023). Thailand's rich and diverse culinary traditions drive its emergence as a premier gastronomic tourism destination (Kang et al., 2023). Thai cuisine, renowned for its bold flavours and unique combinations of sweet, sour, salty, and spicy elements, has captivated food enthusiasts worldwide (Cheng et al., 2023). Unlike mass tourism destinations such as Bali, which emphasize beaches and resorts, Thailand's gastronomic tourism model capitalizes on its rich culinary diversity to attract tourists, offering a unique cultural immersion (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, unlike developed culinary destinations like Italy or France, Thailand's relatively lower costs and diverse regional food offerings make it particularly appealing to a broader range of tourists (Ma et al., 2021). Regional variations, each offering distinct flavours and specialities, characterize the country's culinary landscape. From the fiery curries of the South to the aromatic dishes of the North, Thailand's food culture provides a comprehensive gastronomic experience that

appeals to a wide array of palates.

Substantial data support Thailand's status as a significant tourist destination. Thailand welcomed nearly 40 million international tourists in 2019, generating over $60 billion in revenue (Fakfare et al., 2022). Tourists are drawn to the country's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and culinary offerings, contributing to the influx of visitors. Gastronomic tourism can also serve as a powerful tool for cultural exchange and diplomacy by enabling meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities, fostering mutual understanding and respect (Pramana et al., 2022). Through initiatives such as culinary festivals, food tours, and cooking classes, Thailand can leverage its culinary heritage to build stronger international relations and enhance its global image (Aguirre et al., 2023). Key cities contributing to Thailand's popularity include Bangkok, known for its bustling street food scene and upscale dining establishments (Fakfare et al., 2022)—Chiang Mai, famous for its traditional Lanna cuisine; and Phuket, where seafood reigns supreme. Cities like Pattaya, Hua Hin, and Krabi also attract visitors with unique culinary experiences and local delicacies (Fakfare et al., 2022).

Gastronomic tourism fosters the preservation of traditional culinary practices, bolstering local identity and pride while encouraging small-scale businesses like street vendors and artisanal producers, thereby promoting economic inclusivity (Cheng et al., 2023). The demand for authentic, locally sourced ingredients can drive sustainable agricultural practices, benefiting farmers and local supply chains (Piboonrungroj et al., 2023). Additionally, gastronomic tourism stimulates regional development by enhancing infrastructure and services, which improves residents' quality of life and reduces economic disparities between regions (Zhu et al., 2022). It facilitates cultural exchange and understanding, enhancing the global appreciation of local food heritage (Stylidis, 2022). Ultimately, this form of tourism can create sustainable economic models that balance cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community well-being, ensuring long-term regional growth (Lee and Park, 2023).

The gastronomic tourism economy is the activities generated by promoting and consuming a destination's culinary assets (Sgroi, 2021). Revenue from food-related tours, cooking classes, food festivals, and unique dining experiences contributes to the overall figures. The gastronomic tourism economy in Thailand plays a crucial role in the broader tourism sector. The country's food industry, comprising street food vendors, local markets, restaurants, and culinary schools, contributes significantly to employment and income generation (Fakfare and Wattanacharoensil, 2023). Additionally, to accommodate the influx of gastronomic tourists, there are significant implications for infrastructure development in Thailand. Enhancements in transportation, such as improved road networks and accessibility to culinary hubs, are vital to facilitate travel to diverse regions and food destinations (Jongsuksomsakul, 2024). Investments in hospitality facilities, including boutique hotels and restaurants that focus on local cuisine, can further enhance the tourist experience. These developments not only support tourism growth but also improve residents' quality of life, reducing regional disparities (Song and Fabinyi, 2022).

To bolster the development of the tourism economy, Thailand has implemented several policies and initiatives, such as the China-Thailand Mutual visa exemption agreement, direct flight approvals, culinary tourism campaigns, mandarin training for

hospitality, and safety and quality guidelines (Swaspitchayaskun, 2024). These policies collectively create an environment conducive to gastronomic tourism, making them pivotal to understanding the factors influencing Chinese tourists' intentions to consider Thailand a gastronomic destination.

The benefits of gastronomic tourism to Thailand are multifaceted. Economically, it drives significant revenue, supports local businesses, and creates jobs across the food and tourism sectors (Piboonrungroj et al., 2023). Socially, it fosters cultural exchange and enhances the global appreciation of Thai culinary traditions. Gastronomic tourism also encourages the preservation of local food heritage and sustainable agricultural practices as the demand for authentic and high-quality ingredients rises (Kattiyapornpong et al., 2022). Additionally, it promotes regional development, as tourists are drawn to various parts of the country to explore diverse culinary landscapes, distributing economic benefits more evenly.

In 2019, the Chinese tourist market saw a significant influx of visitors, with 10.98 million tourists arriving, highlighting the country's strong appeal and robust tourism infrastructure (Wang et al., 2022). However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a drastic decline, with tourist numbers plummeting to 4.02 million, reflecting the global travel restrictions and health concerns (Pramana et al., 2022). In 2021, there was a moderate recovery, as the number of tourists increased to 5.98 million, indicating a gradual resurgence in travel confidence and easing of restrictions. This upward trend continued into 2022, with tourist arrivals reaching 6.97 million, showing sustained growth and adaptation to the new normal in travel (Li et al., 2023). However, 2023 saw a dip again to 4.65 million, possibly due to lingering pandemic effects, economic factors, or geopolitical issues, underscoring the continued volatility and challenges in the global tourism landscape (Hamida, 2024).

Chinese tourists choose Thailand as their travel destination primarily due to the country's diverse natural and cultural attractions and its array of entertainment options (Wan, 2022). From renowned beaches and islands such as Phuket and Koh Samui to historical temples and cultural sites like the Grand Palace in Bangkok and the Old City in Chiang Mai, Thailand offers diverse attractions. Furthermore, activities like shopping, spas, and nightlife are often included in Chinese tourists' itineraries in Thailand (Lam and Gao, 2020). However, compared to these more "traditional" tourism activities, Thai cuisine culture frequently receives little attention despite the abundance of attractions (Aguirre et al., 2023). In the Chinese market, Thai food, well-known worldwide for its bold flavours and various ingredients, is frequently disregarded (Kim et al., 2022). When travelling, food is frequently viewed as a supplementary or secondary experience, overshadowed by scenic views and engaging in recreational activities (Sthapit et al., 2023).

In facing the challenges of the Chinese market, Thailand's tourism industry has encountered several difficulties (Li et al., 2021). Fluctuations in exchange rates can impact the affordability of Thailand as a tourist destination for Chinese travellers (Xie and Tveterås, 2020). Other Southeast Asian destinations, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, compete for the Chinese tourism market (Song and Fabinyi, 2022). During these challenges, food tourism presents itself as a potential new avenue for exploration.

Food tourism is increasingly popular in China (Ying et al., 2021). Chinese tourists

increasingly seek authentic and unique experiences, extending beyond traditional sightseeing and leaning towards more profound cultural and culinary journeys (Jin, 2020). In recent years, the Chinese government has also issued a series of guidelines and notifications providing information to Chinese citizens travelling to Thailand, covering topics such as travel safety, local customs, and particularly food safety and dietary guidelines, which are crucial for food tourists (Wen and Liu-Lastres, 2023).

Thailand's image as a food tourism destination is primarily reflected in its vibrant street food culture, renowned culinary traditions, and diverse flavours representing its various regions (Jongsuksomsakul, 2024). Bangkok's bustling street markets, such as Chatuchak and Yaowarat, are iconic representations of Thai culinary culture, offering everything from pad Thai and Som tam to exotic fruits and desserts (Chan, 2023). On the other hand, Chiang Mai showcases the rich heritage of Northern Thai cuisine with dishes like khao soi, while the coastal regions highlight their abundant seafood delicacies (Jongsuksomsakul, 2024). This multifaceted culinary image is essential in attracting tourists who seek authentic and diverse food experiences (Kaur and Kaur, 2024).

Tourist experience is a critical component of gastronomic tourism, encompassing food's sensory enjoyment and the cultural, social, and environmental context in which people enjoy it. (Moreno-Lobato et al., 2024). Chinese tourists' current food tourism experience in Thailand is generally positive, characterized by enthusiastic engagement with local cuisines, participation in cooking classes, and exploration of food markets (Zhu et al., 2022). However, there are also negative aspects that need addressing. Issues such as language barriers, food safety concerns, and inconsistent quality of food experiences can detract from tourists' overall satisfaction (Pham et al., 2023). Additionally, the commercialization and commodification of specific food experiences may lead to a loss of authenticity, further impacting the perceived value of the culinary journey (Park et al., 2023).

Despite the positive reception, some Chinese tourists have reported other negative experiences. These include the overcrowding of popular food spots, which diminishes the enjoyment and comfort of culinary exploration (Park and Widyanta, 2022). There are also concerns about the hygiene standards in some street food venues, which can lead to health issues and a subsequent decline in the destination's reputation (Cifci et al., 2022). Furthermore, the disparity in service levels between high-end restaurants and local eateries can create an uneven experience, potentially leaving tourists with mixed feelings about their gastronomic journey in Thailand. Hence, this research aims to 1) determine the path of influence of the experience of Thailand as a food tourism destination on Chinese tourists' intention to choose Thailand as a food tourism destination. 2) explore the mediating role played by the image of Thailand as a food tourism destination in the relationship between food tourism experiences and intentions to choose Thailand as a food tourism destination. 3) construct the strategies framework for the stakeholders, hence, to promote the gastronomic tourism destination in Thailand.

2. Literature review

Tourism destination image theory (TDIT) offers a robust multidimensional

framework for analyzing tourist behaviour and decision-making (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). Tourism experience theory (TET) provides an insightful framework to understand how tourists interact with and perceive their travel destinations, which is particularly useful for analyzing gastronomic tourism in Thailand for Chinese tourists (Kattiyapornpong et al., 2022).

Cognitive experience refers to the accumulation of knowledge and perceptions that tourists gather from their interactions with and exposure to a destination's tangible and intangible elements (Ma et al., 2021). Gastronomic tourism includes learning about the local ingredients used in Thai cuisine, the preparation methods, and the cultural significance of specific dishes (Chang et al., 2021). These experiences are crucial as they form the foundation upon which tourists build their understanding and expectations of the destination.

Tourists' emotional responses shape affective destination image (ADI) due to their cognitive experiences (Stylidis, 2022). ADI is not merely about the knowledge acquired but how that knowledge makes tourists feel about the destination. Stone et al. (2018) have previously examined the role of emotional responses in forming ADI, emphasizing that positive emotional experiences can significantly enhance a destination's attractiveness，which primarily focuses on the general emotional responses evoked by a destination's physical attributes, such as landscapes or infrastructure, rather than the more intricate emotional engagements resulting from cultural and gastronomic elements. This limitation research overlooks how specific cultural contexts, like those found in Thailand's unique culinary tourism, can evoke complex emotional responses that contribute more richly to the ADI. Additionally, their framework does not account for the dynamic interplay between cognitive and affective dimensions that shape tourists' destination images in gastronomic tourism. For instance, discovering the rich history behind a traditional Thai dish might evoke feelings of admiration and joy, contributing to a more positive emotional connection with Thailand. The affective image captures these feelings of pleasure, excitement, or even spiritual connection (Yoo et al., 2022).

Cognitive destination image (CDI) involves the mental representation tourists form based on factual data about the destination, such as landmarks, cultural practices, and local cuisine (Yoo et al., 2022). It is a more structured and objective component of the destination image that results from direct or indirect interactions with the destination (Stylidis, 2022). For gastronomic tourists in Thailand, it includes perceptions formed by experiencing or learning about the variety and quality of food offerings. Cognitive experiences form an enriched image that enhances tourists' factual knowledge and appreciation for Thailand, such as learning about the spices and cultural narratives behind Thai dishes. These cognitive inputs then stimulate emotional responses that contribute to an affective image of the destination, manifesting as feelings of pleasure and cultural enrichment. This dual-image framework supports the assumption that positive cognitive experiences enhance the cognitive destination image and positively affect the affective image, ultimately influencing tourists' intentions to revisit or recommend Thailand as a culinary destination (Perpiña et al., 2021). Thus, this study develops:

H1: Cognitive experience positively affects the affective destination image.

H2: Cognitive experience positively affects the cognitive destination image.

H3: Cognitive experience positively affects the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

Emotional experience in the context of tourism refers to the array of feelings and emotional responses that tourists encounter during their interactions with a destination (Kelly, 2022). In gastronomic tourism, such experiences range from the excitement of tasting new and exotic flavours to the comfort and nostalgia of enjoying familiar dishes in a foreign land. Emotional experiences are particularly impactful because they can transform a tourist's overall perception of a destination, contributing significantly to the affective dimension of the destination image (Mohamed et al., 2024). They act as powerful motivators that colour immediate perceptions and can affect long-term attitudes and behaviours, such as the desire to revisit or recommend the destination to others. Joyful experiences associated with Thai cuisine can make aspects like culinary diversity more prominent in tourists' minds. Such emotional experiences are pivotal as they shape immediate perceptions and influence future behaviours, such as the intention to revisit or recommend Thailand (Ratnasari et al., 2021). Thus, this study develops:

H4: Emotional experience positively affects the affective destination image.

H5: Emotional experience positively affects the cognitive destination image.

H6: Emotional experience positively affects the Intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

Cultural experience covers a wide range of interactions between tourists and a destination's unique cultural and social elements, including participating in traditional activities, experiencing festivals, tasting authentic food and observing customs (Richards et al., 2020). In Thai food tourism, cultural experience is not limited to the enjoyment of taste buds but also extends to understanding the historical background of Thai cuisine, participation in food preparation, and interaction with the local community. These in-depth contacts enrich tourists' travel experience and deepen their cognitive and emotional connections with Thailand, affecting their perception, evaluation and memory of the journey (Yu and Na, 2022).

Cultural experiences are vital in shaping tourists' emotional and cognitive images and behavioural intentions toward Thailand destinations (Akgün et al., 2020). In Thailand's food tourism context, these experiences are not limited to food taste but also an emotional exchange with the land, its people and its deep traditions (Lee, 2023).

For Chinese tourists, combining their familiarity with the culture with Thailand's unique customs can arouse emotional solid resonance, enhance emotional attachment and positive feelings towards Thailand, and shape their emotional destination image. At the same time, these cultural experiences deepen tourists' understanding of Thailand's destinations, enrich their understanding and belief in Thai culture, and strengthen their cognitive destination image (Lee and Park, 2023).

This comprehensive and in-depth cultural understanding and emotional contact inspires tourists to participate further in Thai food tourism. Therefore, this rich cultural interaction enhances tourists' appreciation and understanding of Thailand's cultural and culinary heritage and increases their likelihood of revisiting or recommending Thailand. The impact of cultural immersion not only shapes the emotional and

cognitive destination image but also lays a solid foundation for the positive impact of Thai food tourism intentions. Thus, this study develops:

H7: Cultural experience positively affects the affective destination image.

H8: Cultural experience positively affects the cognitive destination image.

H9: Cultural experience positively affects the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

Cognitive and emotional images are the two core elements that constitute tourists' perception of a destination, especially in food tourism (Woosnam et al., 2020). In Thailand's food tourism context, tourists form an emotional image of the destination through sensory experiences such as the aroma and taste of food, and this pleasant emotional response significantly enhances their favourable impression of Thailand (Nghiêm-Phú, 2020). At the same time, tourists' understanding of Thai food diversity, health benefits and other knowledge builds a cognitive image, and their positive beliefs and understanding further enhance tourists' interest in Thai food.

When Chinese tourists have a positive perception of the uniqueness of Thai cuisine, their willingness to travel increases; this is further enhanced by pleasurable emotional responses to food, such as excitement about new flavours or nostalgia for traditional dishes. Inspiring tourists to pursue these experiences (Sheldon, 2020).

Thus, this study develops:

H10: Affective destination image positively affects the Intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

H11: Cognitive destination image positively affects the Intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

In gastronomic tourism, the intricate intertwining of cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences among Chinese tourists in Thailand collaboratively shapes their perception of the destination and influences their travel intentions. Cognitive experiences involve tourists acquiring, interpreting, and integrating information regarding Thai cuisine, which constructs knowledge and deepens understanding of the culinary landscape (Han et al., 2020).

The cognitive processes elicit emotional responses, culminating in a compelling destination image—a sentimental and emotional evaluation of the destination influenced by personal encounters with the culinary milieu. The affective image serves as a pivotal conduit, transforming cognitive and emotional engagements into a pronounced intention to engage in gastronomic tourism in Thailand. Similarly, cultural experiences, encompassing interactions with local customs and participation in culinary traditions, enrich the affective destination image, subsequently strengthening the desire to revisit or recommend Thailand as a gastronomic destination (Park and Widyanta, 2022).

These experiences—cognitive, emotional, and cultural—collectively nourish the affective destination image, which mediates their impact on tourists' intentions, underscoring the complex and dynamic interplay between perception and behavioural predispositions within the tourism context. Thus, this study develops:

H12: Affective destination image mediates the relationship between the cognitive experience and intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

H13: Affective destination image mediates the relationship between the emotional experience and intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism

destination.

H14: Affective destination image mediates the relationship between the cultural experience and the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

In gastronomic tourism, the cognitive and emotional dimensions of tourists' experiences play pivotal roles in shaping their travel intentions. Specifically, cognitive experiences involving assimilating and interpreting information about Thai cuisine help construct a cognitive image of Thailand (Li et al., 2021). This image encapsulates tourists' perceptions and beliefs about Thai gastronomy, influencing their overall cognitive destination image, a more comprehensive mental portrayal of Thailand shaped by these specific gastronomic impressions. Such a well-formed cognitive destination image significantly increases the likelihood of Chinese tourists choosing Thailand for their culinary explorations, as it acts as a mediating factor that transforms specific cognitive perceptions into concrete travel intentions (Maghrifani et al., 2022).

Emotional and cultural experiences further enrich this process. The emotions Chinese tourists experience, such as joy or excitement from engaging with Thai cuisine, contribute to shaping their cognitive destination image (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2022). This emotional engagement enhances the tourists' overall perception of Thailand, making the destination more appealing and increasing their intention to visit. Similarly, cultural experiences, which include interactions with Thai cultural and culinary traditions, profoundly influence the cognitive destination image. Engaging with the local culture, such as participating in food festivals or traditional cooking sessions, enriches the tourists' understanding and solidifies their image of Thailand as an authentic culinary destination. This enriched cognitive destination image is crucial in translating these profound cultural and emotional experiences into a stronger intention to engage in gastronomic tourism in Thailand. Thus, this study develops:

H15: Cognitive destination image mediates the relationship between the cognitive image and intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

H16: Cognitive destination image mediates the relationship between the emotional experience and intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

H17: Cognitive destination image mediates the relationship between the cultural experience and the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

Hence, combine with the hypothesis, **Figure 1** portrays conceptual framework for this research.
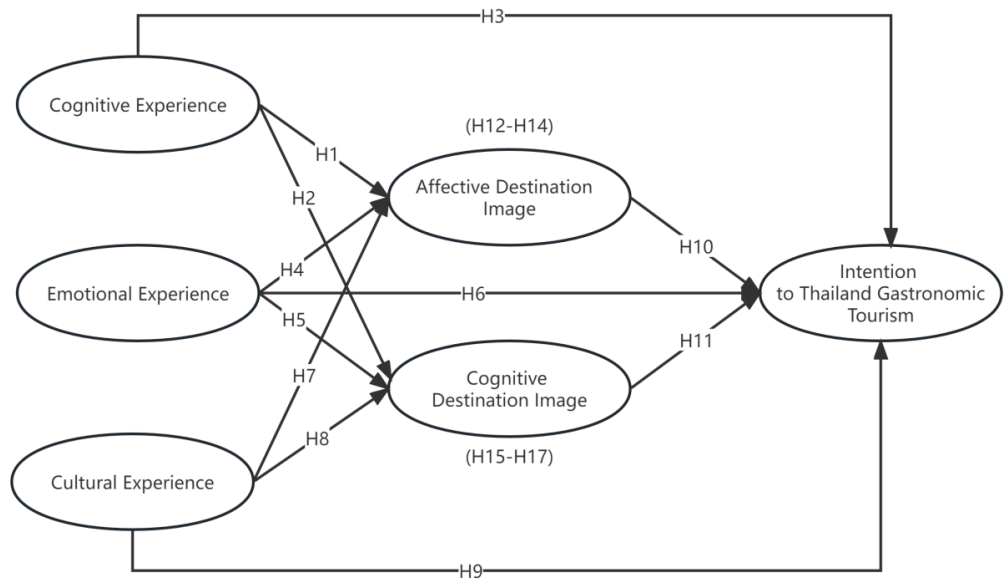
Figure 1. The empirical framework of this research.

3. Research method

This study distributes 700 questionnaires to explore the motivations behind choosing Thailand as a travel destination, focusing mainly on its culinary attractions. The questionnaire was disseminated via popular online platforms frequented by Chinese travelers, such as WeChat and travel forums, to reach a broad yet specific audience. To ensure data reliability and validity, several measures were implemented. Out of the 632 responses received, we deemed 562 valid through a rigorous screening process. This process ensured that respondents' answers were coherent and met crucial research criteria, such as visits to Thailand, primary attractions, and the importance of gastronomy in travel choices. We considered only the most pertinent responses for insights into gastronomic tourism in Thailand.

The demographic profile of the respondents, detailed in **Table 1**, shows a diverse geographical distribution across major Chinese cities, with notable percentages from Nanjing (25.1%), Guangzhou (21.5%), Beijing (19.2%), Shanghai (17.3%), and Chongqing (16.9%). This variety offers a broad spectrum of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, enriching the study's insights into regional preferences for gastronomic tourism. The sample is highly educated, with 33.3% holding a Master's degree, 30.4% a Bachelor's degree, and 16.0% a Doctorate, indicating a sample that may have a greater appreciation for culinary diversity. The economic statuses represented vary, with a substantial segment earning more than 300,000￥, pointing to considerable purchasing power relevant to tourism choices. The gender and age distributions are nearly balanced, ensuring the findings represent male and female perspectives across various age groups.

Table 1. Essential information.

		Frequency	Per cent
Where are you from	Chongqing	95	16.9
	Beijing	108	19.2
	Nanjing	141	25.1
	Shanghai	97	17.3
	Guangzhou	121	21.5
Education Level	Under Bachelor's degree	114	20.3
	Bachelor's degree	171	30.4
	Master's degree	187	33.3
	Doctor's degree	90	16.0
Annual Family Income	< ￥100,000	55	9.8
	￥100,000–￥150,000	54	9.6
	￥150,000–￥200,000	157	27.9
	￥200,000–￥300,000	136	24.2
	> ￥300,000	160	28.5
Gender	Male	288	51.2
	Female	274	48.8
Age	< 18	82	14.6
	18–25	96	17.1
	25–35	91	16.2
	35–45	95	16.9
	45–55	94	16.7
	> 55	104	18.5
Marriage Status	Married	293	52.1
	Unmarried	269	47.9

3.1. Instrument

The questionnaire is structured to assess various dimensions of the gastronomic tourism experience in Thailand and is segmented into six parts, each focusing on specific variables. These variables are measured using a Likert 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The first part focuses on the cognitive experience of Thai gastronomic tourism. This section includes five questions: CE1, Thailand gastronomic tourism experience was exploratory; CE2, I gained much information during Thailand gastronomic tourism; CE3, I experienced new Thai culture from gastronomic tourism; CE4, The Thai gastronomic experiences deepened my knowledge about the local customs and traditions; and CE5, I felt deeply engaged during my gastronomic activities in Thailand (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). These questions aim to evaluate the intellectual and informational gains from the gastronomic tourism experience, drawing on the literature on cognitive engagement in tourism and highlighting the importance of intellectual enrichment in enhancing the tourist experience.

The second part addresses the Emotional Experience in Thai Gastronomic

Tourism, comprising five questions: EE1, My experience on Thailand gastronomic tourism put me in a positive mood; EE2, My experience on Thailand gastronomic tourism made me respond emotionally; EE3, My experience on Thailand gastronomic tourism appealed to my feelings; EE4, The Thai foods and culinary activities evoked nostalgic feelings in me; and EE5, The gastronomic experiences in Thailand were joyous and memorable for me (Li et al, 2021). This section aims to capture the emotional responses elicited by gastronomic experiences, with theoretical underpinning found in studies on emotional engagement in tourism, emphasizing the role of affective responses in shaping tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

The third part evaluates the Cultural Experience in Thai Gastronomic Tourism through five questions: CLE1, I had good impressions about the Thai people who cook Thai food; CLE2, I closely experienced the Thai culture through the food; CLE3, Thai people working in gastronomic tourism destinations were friendly; CLE4, I participated in Thai cultural activities or events during my gastronomic journey; and CLE5, I felt a deep connection with the Thai community during my gastronomic journey (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). This segment examines the participant's engagement with and perception of Thai culture during their gastronomic journey, with the literature on cultural tourism providing a basis, emphasizing the significance of cultural interactions in enriching the tourism experience.

The fourth part investigates the Affective Destination Image of Thai Gastronomic Tourism with five questions: AD1, Thailand gastronomic tourism is excellent; AD2, Thailand gastronomic tourism is fun; AD3, Thailand gastronomic tourism is relaxing; AD4, Thailand gastronomic tourism is exciting; and AD5, Thailand gastronomic tourism is inspiring (Huete-Alcocer and Hernandez-Rojas, 2022). This section seeks to understand the emotional impressions and feelings about Thailand as a gastronomic destination, with the concept of affective destination image well-documented in tourism research, highlighting how emotional impressions influence destination attractiveness.

The fifth part explores the Cognitive Destination Image of Thai Gastronomic Tourism, consisting of seven questions: CD1, It is easily accessible from Thai regions and has good infrastructure in Thai gastronomic tourism; CD2, Good value for money in Thai accommodation in gastronomic tourism; CD3, Good value for money in Thai restaurants; CD4, Thai residents are friendly and hospitable in gastronomic tourism; CD5, Thailand is an excellent place to visit with the family to enjoy the gastronomic tourism; CD6, Thailand has good, helpful tourist information offices for gastronomic tourism; and CD7, Thailand has a pleasant climate for gastronomic tourism (Huete-Alcocer and Hernandez-Rojas, 2022). This part assesses Thailand's practical and cognitive perceptions as a gastronomic destination, with the theoretical framework rooted in studies on cognitive destination image, which focuses on tangible attributes that shape destination perception.

The final part addresses the Intention to Visit Thailand for Gastronomic Tourism, with five items. IT1, I predict I will visit Thailand for gastronomic tourism in the future; IT2, I would instead visit Thailand for gastronomic tourism more than anywhere else; IT3, if everything goes as I think, I will plan to visit Thailand for gastronomic tourism in the future; IT4, I am actively considering a trip to Thailand for gastronomic tourism soon; and IT5, I have recommended or will recommend Thailand

for gastronomic tourism to friends and family (Joo et al., 2023). This section measures the future intentions of respondents regarding gastronomic tourism in Thailand, with the intention-behavior relationship in tourism well-explored in the literature, emphasizing how past experiences and satisfaction influence future travel intentions.

3.2. Data analysis tool

The study will undertake a rigorous series of analyses to examine the factors influencing the choice of Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination. Initially, the reliability of the constructs will be assessed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ensuring internal consistency and robustness of the survey items. Next, we will evaluate validity using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity to confirm whether the data are suitable for factor analysis. We will then perform a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model. This analysis will examine the factor loadings, composite reliability (C.R.), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct to ensure convergent and discriminant validity. We will then employ a Structural Equation Model (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. We will use fit indices such as Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio (χ^2/df), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) to evaluate the model's fit. Path analysis will identify the direct and indirect effects of cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences on the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination, mediated by affective and cognitive destination images.

The research targets Chinese nationals who have experienced Thai gastronomy, utilizing purposive sampling to select participants who can provide the most relevant information related to the research questions. The sample size will be determined based on statistical considerations such as the desired confidence level and margin of error, alongside practical constraints like participant availability and resource limitations. We will collect data using a structured online questionnaire that includes a range of question types—closed-ended, Likert-scale, and demographic (Mattar et al., 2022). Before full-scale deployment, the questionnaire will undergo a pilot testing phase to ensure its clarity, relevance, and reliability.

4. Results

Table 2 reports Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct examined, reflecting the internal consistency and reliability of the survey items. The constructs—Cognitive Experience, Emotional Experience, Cultural Experience, Affective Destination Image, Cognitive Destination Image, and Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism—each showed high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values: Cognitive Experience ($\alpha = 0.869$), Emotional Experience ($\alpha = 0.855$), Cultural Experience ($\alpha = 0.871$), Affective Destination Image ($\alpha = 0.864$), Cognitive Destination Image ($\alpha = 0.902$), and Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism ($\alpha = 0.861$). All values exceed the accepted threshold of 0.7, indicating a robust measurement of the constructs, with the Cognitive Destination Image construct

displaying the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.902$). The notable consistency across various constructs highlights the methodological robustness of the study, ensuring that the findings on the factors influencing the choice of Thailand as a gastronomic destination rest on a solid empirical foundation.

Table 2. Reliability statistics.

Study variables	Number of questions	Cronbach's α
Cognitive Experience	5	0.869
Emotional Experience	5	0.855
Cultural Experience	5	0.871
Affective Destination image	5	0.864
Cognitive Destination image	7	0.902
Intention to choose Thailand for gastronomic tourism	5	0.861

The research instrument's validity was rigorously appraised by employing the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, as detailed in **Table 3**. Notably, the KMO = 0.955 (> 0.9) signifies a remarkable degree of shared variance among the items, affirming the data's appropriateness for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity also corroborated these findings, yielding a Chi-Square value of 9721.962 with 496 degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.000. The results reject the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, indicating that the variables are interconnected and suitable for detecting structure through factor analysis.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's test.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		**0.955**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	9721.962
	df	496
	Sig.	0.000

Figure 2 of the study illustrates the measurement model employed in the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Each ellipse represents a latent construct within this model, including cognitive experience, emotional experience, cultural experience, affective destination image, cognitive destination image, and intention to Thailand's gastronomic tourism.

The rectangles signify observed variables associated with these constructs, such as CE1, EE1, and CLE1. Single-headed arrows directed from the constructs to the variables indicate hypothesized factor loadings, quantifying the strength of the associations. The numerical values adjacent to these arrows indicate the magnitude of these relationships. For example, a factor loading of 0.757 for CE1 suggests a robust association with its corresponding latent construct, cognitive experience. Additionally, double-headed arrows connecting constructs represent covariances, exemplified by the covariance of 0.619 between cognitive and emotional experience, indicating a substantial positive correlation. Error terms, designated as e1, e2, and adjacent to the rectangles, represent the unexplained variance in the observed variables by the latent

constructs, reflecting measurement errors or unique variances. Furthermore, standardized regression weights displayed atop the single-headed arrows provide insights into the adequacy of the observed variables in measuring the latent constructs. Values approaching 1 suggest strong measurement capabilities.
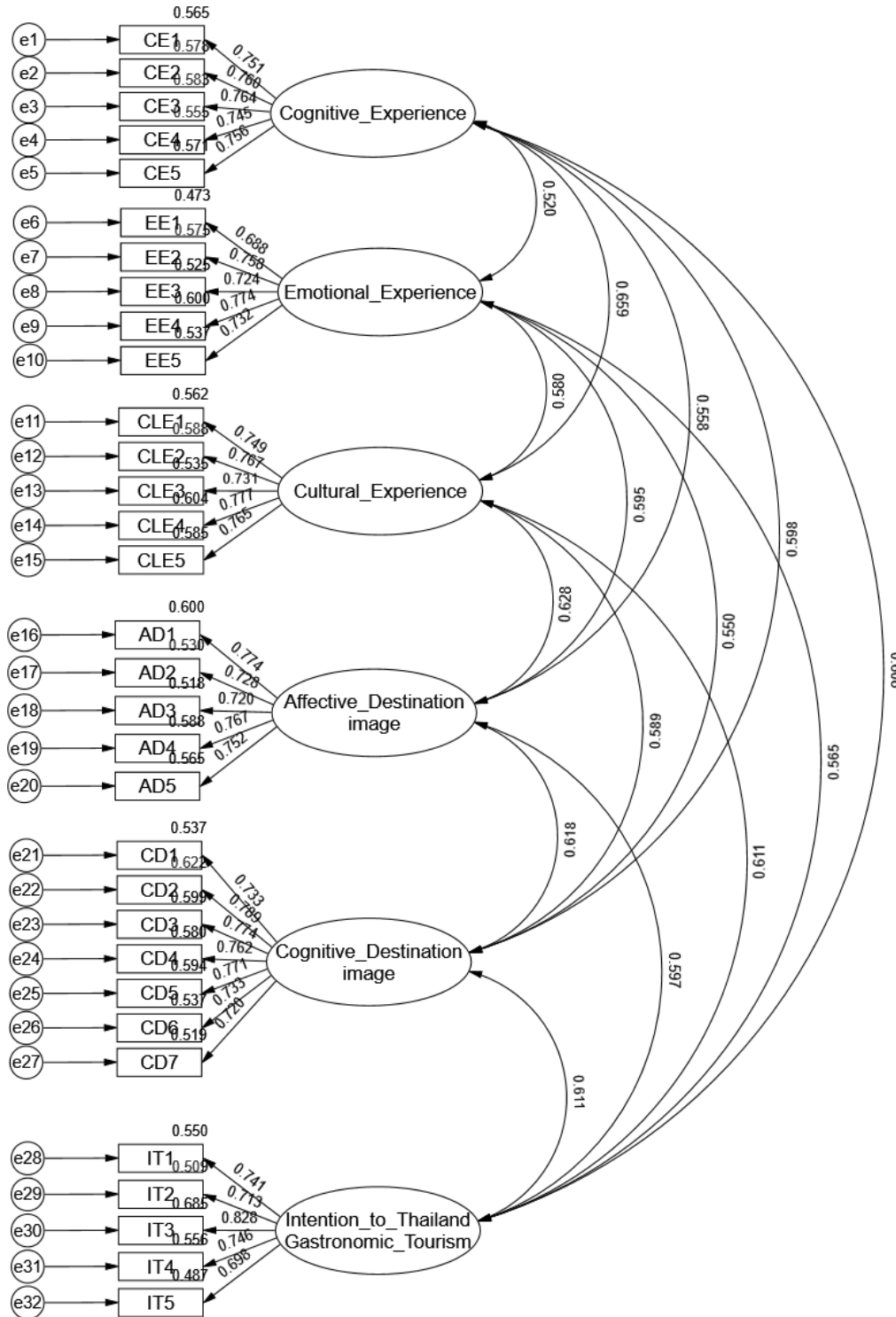

Figure 2. Measurement model.

We evaluate the measurement model's alignment with the empirical data using a

diverse set of fit indices, as outlined in **Table 4**. These indices rigorously assess the model's compatibility with the observed data. The χ^2/df = 1.353, (<3), indicating the model's parsimony and an optimal balance between complexity and goodness of fit. The RMSEA = 0.025 (<0.08) suggests minimal approximation errors and a high probability of the model's applicability to similar datasets. Furthermore, GFI and AGFI score high at 0.940 and 0.929, respectively, exceeding the benchmark of 0.9, indicating a substantial proportion of variance explained by the model. Comparative fit indices, including the NFI, TLI, and CFI, exhibit excellent model fit with values of 0.939, 0.981, and 0.983, respectively. These indices collectively demonstrate a significant improvement in fit compared to a null model, validating the robustness of the hypothesized model and its theoretical structure in exploring the dynamics that influence the choice of Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination.

Table 4. Measure model fit metrics.

Fit index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI
Reference standards	< 3	< 0.08	> 0.9	> 0.85	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9
Result	1.353	0.025	0.940	0.929	0.939	0.981	0.983

Table 5 offers a meticulous evaluation of convergent validity within the confirmatory factor analysis framework. The assessment focuses on the factor loadings, composite reliability (C.R.), and average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent variable, encompassing a diverse set of constructs such as cognitive experience, emotional experience, cultural experience, affective destination image, cognitive destination image, and intention to choose Thailand gastronomic tourism destination. Convergent validity is paramount as it ensures that all observation indicators of a latent construct coherently measure the same underlying theoretical concept, thus validating their representativeness. Examining the factor loadings, it is evident that each indicator across the latent constructs exhibits values that surpass the 0.7 benchmark. This significant correlation with their respective constructs underscores the strength and reliability of the measurement model.

Table 5. Convergence validity.

Latent variables	Observation indicators	Factor loading	CR	AVE
	CE1	0.751		
	CE2	0.760		
Cognitive Experience	CE3	0.764	0.869	0.571
	CE4	0.745		
	CE5	0.756		
	EE1	0.688		
	EE2	0.758		
Emotional Experience	EE3	0.724	0.855	0.541
	EE4	0.774		
	EE5	0.732		

Table 5. (*Continued*).

Latent variables	Observation indicators	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Cultural Experience	CLE1	0.749		
	CLE2	0.767		
	CLE3	0.731	0.871	0.574
	CLE4	0.777		
	CLE5	0.765		
Affective Destination image	AD1	0.774		
	AD2	0.728		
	AD3	0.720	0.864	0.560
	AD4	0.767		
	AD5	0.752		
Cognitive Destination image	CD1	0.733		
	CD2	0.789		
	CD3	0.774		
	CD4	0.762	0.903	0.570
	CD5	0.771		
	CD6	0.733		
	CD7	0.720		
Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism	IT1	0.741		
	IT2	0.713		
	IT3	0.828	0.863	0.557
	IT4	0.746		
	IT5	0.698		

Furthermore, composite reliability (C.R.) scores, considering the varying impacts of individual factor loadings, exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7, ranging from 0.855 to 0.903. This finding reflects a high degree of internal consistency among the constructs, validating their reliability as measures within the model. Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for these constructs exceed the minimum threshold of 0.50, with values ranging from 0.541 to 0.574. This achievement demonstrates that a substantial portion of the variance observed in the indicators is attributable to their respective latent constructs.

Discriminant validity is a fundamental aspect of construct validity, ensuring that latent variables within a measurement model retain their uniqueness and avoid undue overlap. **Table 6** offers a meticulous discriminant validity assessment, presenting the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct diagonally across the matrix. These diagonal values, ranging from 0.736 to 0.756, represent the distinctiveness of constructs such as Cognitive Experience, Emotional Experience, and Cultural Experience. Crucially, these diagonal values consistently surpass the inter-construct correlation coefficients listed in the off-diagonal cells, indicating that each construct exhibits a higher degree of variance with its indicators than those about other constructs. This observation underscores the distinctiveness of each construct and validates the discriminant validity within the model.

The test results confirm the presence of discriminant validity and underscore the statistical significance of the inter-construct correlations, marked as significant at $p < 0.001$. Despite these significant relationships, it is noteworthy that the magnitudes of these correlations remain below the diagonal AVE square roots, providing further evidence for the discriminant validity within the model. This distinction is crucial for maintaining the theoretical integrity of the study, reassuring that constructs like cognitive experience, emotional experience, cultural experience, and others contribute uniquely to exploring factors that influence tourists' intentions toward choosing Thailand as a gastronomic destination. By upholding discriminant validity, the study ensures that each construct maintains its conceptual clarity and specificity, contributing distinctively to understanding tourists' preferences and behaviours.

Table 6. Discriminant validity test.

Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cognitive Experience	0.756					
Emotional Experience	0.520 ***	0.736				
Cultural Experience	0.659 ***	0.580 ***	0.758			
Affective Destination image	0.558 ***	0.595 ***	0.628 ***	0.748		
Cognitive Destination image	0.598 ***	0.550 ***	0.589 ***	0.618 ***	0.755	
Intention to choose Thailand gastronomic tourism destination	0.608 ***	0.565 ***	0.611 ***	0.597 ***	0.611 ***	0.746 3A

Note: The diagonal is the square root of the corresponding dimension AVE.
***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 7. Model fit metrics.

Fit index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI
Reference standards	< 3	< 0.08	> 0.9	> 0.85	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9
Result	1.49	0.027	0.937	0.926	0.936	0.978	0.980

Table 7 exhibits the model fit indices for the structural equation model (SEM) employed to investigate the determinants of tourists' intention to select Thailand as a gastronomic destination. The χ^2/df = 1.49 (<3) reflects a superior model fit. Complementing this, RMSEA = 0.027 (<0.08) further corroborates the model's appropriateness for the target population. Moreover, the GFI and AGFI stand robust at 0.937 and 0.926, respectively, underscoring the model's effectiveness in explaining the variance and covariance patterns within the data. Additionally, the NFI, TLI, and CFI exceed the benchmark value of 0.9, with respective scores of 0.936, 0.978, and 0.980, indicating a superior fit compared to a null model. These metrics confirm that the SEM accurately captures the intricate relationships among cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences, destination images, and tourism intentions, providing a robust and reliable foundation for the study's conclusions and broader implications.

Table 8 in the study meticulously presents the path coefficients within the structural equation model (SEM), aimed at rigorously testing the hypotheses that

delineate the interactions influencing the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination. These hypotheses (H1 through H11) map the proposed relationships among critical constructs such as cognitive experience (C.E.), emotional experience (E.E.), cultural experience (CLE), affective destination image (A.D.), cognitive destination image (CD), and Intention to choose Thailand gastronomic tourism destination (I.T.). Each pathway's strength and significance are quantitatively analyzed, with results reported in terms of estimates (β), standard errors (S.E.), critical ratios (C.R.), and *p*-values, collectively offering a robust evaluation of the model's theoretical base.

Table 8. Structural equation model path test.

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	*P*	Results
H1	CE → AD	0.191	0.186	0.058	3.278	0.001	Supported
H2	CE → CD	0.304	0.307	0.057	5.344	***	Supported
H3	CE → IT	0.204	0.209	0.058	3.539	***	Supported
H4	EE → AD	0.342	0.318	0.058	5.912	***	Supported
H5	EE → CD	0.267	0.258	0.054	4.957	***	Supported
H6	EE → IT	0.158	0.154	0.057	2.770	0.006	Supported
H7	CLE → AD	0.337	0.330	0.063	5.337	***	Supported
H8	CLE → CD	0.243	0.248	0.059	4.134	***	Supported
H9	CLE → IT	0.158	0.163	0.061	2.580	0.010	Supported
H10	AD → IT	0.150	0.158	0.055	2.753	0.006	Supported
H11	CD → IT	0.207	0.209	0.053	3.869	***	Supported

Note: C.E.: Cognitive Experience; E.E.: Emotional Experience; CLE: Cultural Experience; A.D.: Affective Destination image; CD: Cognitive Destination image; I.T.: Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism.
***: $p < 0.001$.

The statistical significance of each path coefficient is determined using the critical ratio (C.R.), where values above 1.96 signify significance at a 95% confidence interval. The evaluation criteria include *p*-values less than 0.05, marking substantial support for the hypothesized relationships across most paths; specific exceptions (H2, H3, H4, H5, H7, H8, and H11) demonstrate even more vital significance with *p*-values below 0.001. The path expressions for the variables are as follows:

$$AD = 0.186CE + 0.318EE + 0.330CLE$$
$$CD = 0.307CE + 0.258EE + 0.248CLE$$
$$IT = 0.209CE + 0.154EE + 0.163CLE + 0.158AD + 0.209CD$$

With R^2 values of 0.507, 0.479, and 0.532, respectively.

These *R*-squared values indicate that the model explains a significant proportion of the variance in the dependent constructs, demonstrating substantial explanatory power and affirming the significant influence of experiential constructs on both destination images and tourism intentions.

The findings clearly depict the significant impact that Cognitive, Emotional, and Cultural Experiences have on shaping both Affective and Cognitive Destination Images and directly influencing the intention toward gastronomic tourism in Thailand. The structural model highlights the mediatory role of Affective and Cognitive

Destination Images, underpinning a complex interplay among the constructs that significantly contribute to the overall intention of tourists. This robust analysis confirms the efficacy of the SEM in encapsulating the intricate relationships within the theoretical framework, offering valuable insights into the determinants of gastronomic tourism intentions.

Figure 3 represents relationships among the critical latent constructs: cognitive experience (C.E.), emotional experience (E.E.), cultural experience (CLE), affective destination image (A.D.), cognitive destination Image (CD), and intention to Thailand gastronomic tourism (I.T.). We depict the latent constructs as ellipses connected by single-headed arrows that signify directional relationships. Path coefficients associated with these arrows indicate the strength and directionality of the connections. Double-headed arrows, on the other hand, represent correlations between the constructs.
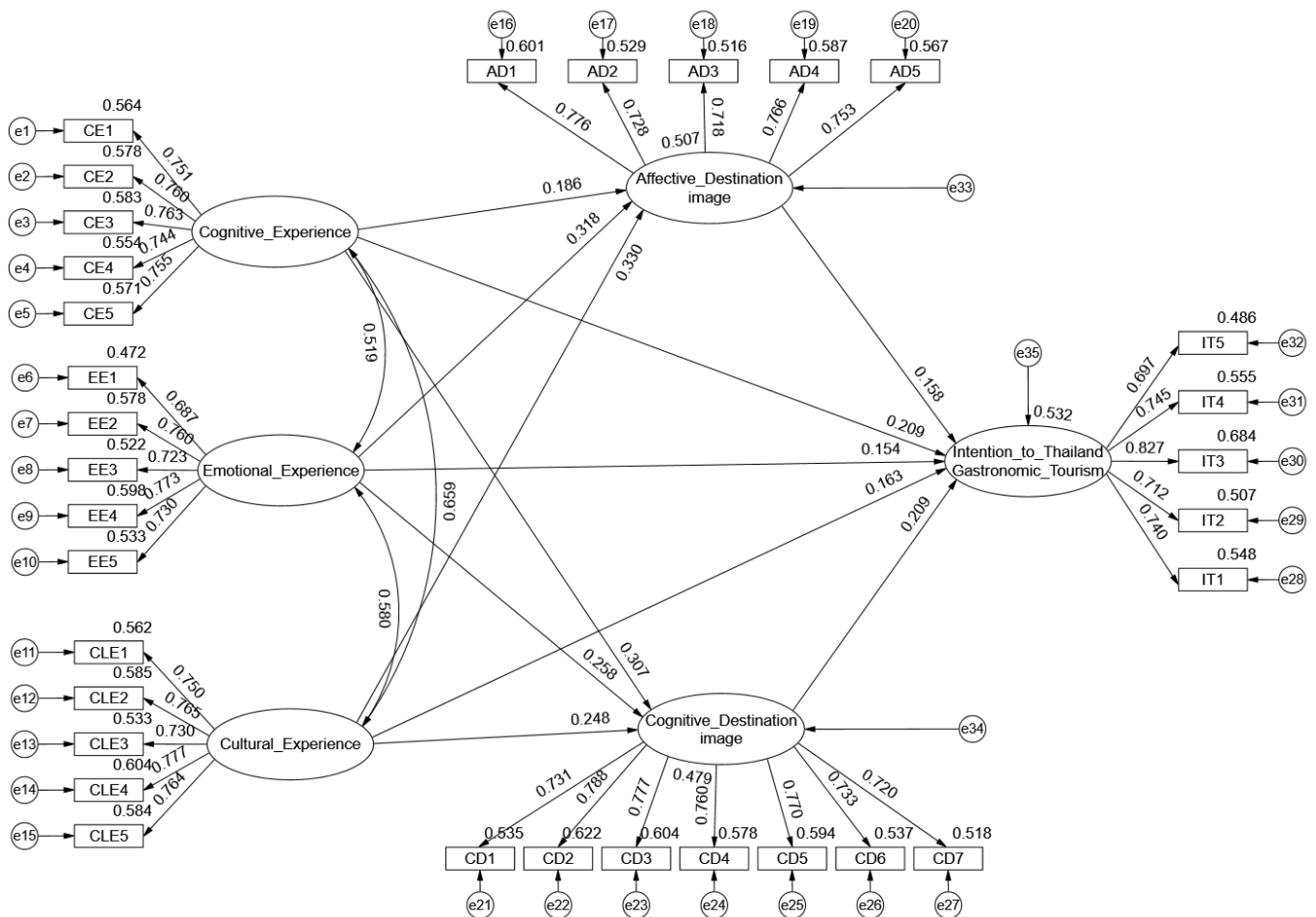

Figure 3. Path diagram for the structural equation model.

Furthermore, the model includes detailed factor loadings from each latent construct to its corresponding observed variables, along with error terms and R-squared values that indicate the variance explained by the constructs within the model. Notably, the significant paths, such as those extending from cognitive experience (C.E.), emotional experience (E.E.), and cultural experience (CLE) to affective destination image (A.D.) and cognitive destination Image (CD), and subsequently

from these destination images to intention to Thailand gastronomic tourism (I.T.), are emphasized.

Table 9 employs a mediation effect bootstrap test to meticulously analyze the indirect effects within the structural model, explicitly focusing on the mediating roles of affective destination Image (A.D.) and cognitive destination image (CD) in the relationships between experiential constructs such as cognitive experience (C.E.), emotional experience (E.E.), and cultural experience (CLE), and intention to Thailand gastronomic tourism (I.T.). This non-parametric resampling procedure accurately quantifies the effect sizes of each mediation path, along with their standard errors (S.E.s) and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (C.I.s), taking into account potential skewness in the resampling distribution. The results support all hypotheses (H12 through H17), with effect sizes ranging from 0.029 to 0.063 and statistically significant 95% C.I.s excluding zero. The results validate the pivotal mediating role of destination images. For instance, the path extending from C.E. to I.T. through the mediation of A.D. demonstrates a significant indirect effect with an effect size of 0.029 and a 95% CI that excludes zero. This analysis strengthens the theoretical model's assertions, demonstrating that destination images significantly mediate the relationship between experiential factors and tourism intentions. It provides crucial insights into how cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences collectively influence tourists' decisions to participate in gastronomic tourism in Thailand.

Table 9. Mediation effect bootstrap test.

Hypothesis	Mediation path	Effect size	SE	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		Results
H12	CE → AD → IT	0.029	0.021	0.001	0.095	Supported
H13	EE → AD → IT	0.051	0.033	0.004	0.135	Supported
H14	CLE → AD → IT	0.051	0.033	0.000	0.131	Supported
H15	CE → CD → IT	0.063	0.032	0.009	0.135	Supported
H16	EE → CD → IT	0.055	0.029	0.010	0.125	Supported
H17	CLE → CD → IT	0.050	0.028	0.007	0.114	Supported

Note: C.E.: Cognitive Experience; E.E.: Emotional Experience; CLE: Cultural Experience; A.D.: Affective Destination image; CD: Cognitive Destination image; I.T.: Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism.

Table 10 offers a comprehensive overview of the total effects of various predictors on the intention to choose Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination (I.T.), elucidating the intricate relationships between experiential and image-related constructs and tourist decisions. The effect sizes and their bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals demonstrate the robustness of these relationships. Notably, cognitive experience (C.E.) emerges as the strongest predictor of I.T., with an effect size of 0.296, indicating a substantial impact. The confidence interval, ranging from 0.122 to 0.481, underscores the significance and positive influence of C.E. on I.T. Additionally, emotional experience (E.E.) and cultural experience (CLE) exhibit notable effects, with sizes of 0.265 and 0.259, respectively, suggesting that both emotional and cultural dimensions of the tourist experience contribute significantly to their intentionality towards gastronomic tourism. Although the destination images,

affective (A.D.) and cognitive (C.D.), have smaller effect sizes of 0.150 and 0.207, respectively, their meaningful contributions to I.T. are supported by their confidence intervals. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of factors driving the intention to engage in gastronomic tourism, validating the theoretical constructs within the structural equation model and enhancing our understanding of the intricate interplay between cognitive, emotional, cultural experiences, and destination images in shaping tourism behaviours.

Table 10. Total effect.

Effect path	Effect size	Bias-Corrected	
		95% CI	
CE → IT	0.296	0.122	0.481
EE → IT	0.265	0.101	0.453
CLE → IT	0.259	0.086	0.427
AD → IT	0.150	0.015	0.326
CD → IT	0.207	0.022	0.362

Note: C.E.: Cognitive Experience; E.E.: Emotional Experience; CLE: Cultural Experience; A.D.: Affective Destination image; CD: Cognitive Destination image; I.T.: Intention to Thailand Gastronomic Tourism.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the existing knowledge of gastronomic tourism by providing a nuanced understanding of how cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences influence tourists' intentions. Previous research has often segmented these experiences; however, our integrated approach reveals the interconnectedness of these dimensions, offering a more holistic view of the tourist experience.

Comparing the findings with those of Lamers et al. (2017), who emphasized the role of cognitive and emotional satisfaction in shaping tourism behaviours, our study further elucidates the significant mediating role of cultural experiences. While Lin et al. focused on the separate impacts of cognitive and emotional factors, our findings highlight how cultural immersion enhances the tourism experience, leading to a more profound affective response.

Moreover, Wondirad et al. (2021) explored the influence of culinary experiences on destination image but did not integrate the cultural aspect as comprehensively as our study. Our research extends their work by demonstrating that cultural experiences contribute to the destination's cognitive and affective images and act as a crucial mediator in shaping tourists' intentions. This finding is significant as it underscores the necessity of incorporating cultural elements into gastronomic tourism strategies.

In contrast to Akkemik (2012), who focused on the sensory dimensions of food tourism, our study emphasizes the cognitive and emotional dimensions, showing that these factors significantly enhance the overall destination image. While sensory experiences are undoubtedly meaningful, our research indicates that cognitive understanding and emotional connections are equally vital in fostering a favourable destination image and driving tourism intentions.

Marques et al. (2021) reveal the role of food in destination marketing aligns with our findings, particularly in highlighting the importance of a compelling destination image. However, our study provides a more detailed analysis of how cognitive and emotional experiences contribute to this image, offering a comprehensive view of the mechanisms at play.

Furthermore, Kesgin et al. (2022) discussed the impact of food tourism on local economies but did not explore the underlying psychological processes influencing tourist behaviour. Our research bridges this gap by connecting cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences to tourists' intentions, offering a holistic understanding of how gastronomic tourism can enhance destination attractiveness. This aligns with theories on tourism development that emphasize the role of psychological experiences in economic outcomes.

Expanding on the theoretical context, this study also integrates perspectives on the relationship between tourism growth, economic policy, and infrastructure development. This study suggest that well-developed infrastructure not only facilitates easier access to cultural and gastronomic experiences but also enhances the overall quality of these experiences. This, in turn, leads to a more favorable destination image and stronger tourism intentions.

Additionally, the role of economic policy in shaping infrastructure and tourism growth cannot be understated. Economic policies that prioritize infrastructure development—such as transportation networks, hospitality facilities, and cultural heritage preservation—create a supportive environment that enhances the cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the tourist experience.

Cai et al. (2021) explored food tourism within the broader spectrum of tourism studies, our study provides specific insights into the Thai gastronomic context, adding depth to their generalized findings. We demonstrate that Thailand's unique cultural and culinary attributes significantly influence tourists' cognitive and affective destination images, which in turn drive their intention to visit.

Lastly, Su et al. (2020) focused on the motivations behind food tourism, identifying various intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Our study complements their work by showing how these motivations translate into actual travel intentions through the mediating effects of destination image components. Understanding tourists' experiences underscores the practical applications in designing effective marketing strategies.

In summary, our research contributes new knowledge by integrating cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences within the framework of gastronomic tourism. By comparing our findings with previous studies, we highlight the unique contributions of our work, particularly in demonstrating the interconnectedness of these experiences and their collective impact on destination image and tourist intentions.

5.2. Practical implications

The insights gained from this study offer valuable guidance to tourism policymakers and marketers in Thailand by unpacking the factors that significantly influence Chinese tourists' gastronomic tourism intentions. The findings suggest several practical steps stakeholders can take to enhance Thailand's image as a prime

gastronomic destination.

Improving Thailand's cognitive destination image emphasizes the country's diverse and rich culinary experiences. Stakeholders should focus on promoting the variety and uniqueness of Thai cuisine, showcasing traditional dishes and regional specialities. Achieving this involves targeted media campaigns, culinary festivals, and partnerships with influencers and food bloggers who can authentically highlight the distinctiveness of Thai food. The study confirms the significant impact of cognitive experiences on tourists' intentions (H1), suggesting that enhancing awareness and knowledge about Thai cuisine can positively influence their decision to visit.

The emotional experience of tourists should also be a focal point. The study reveals that emotional experiences significantly affect affective and cognitive destination images (H4, H5), highlighting the need for strategies that evoke positive emotions. Tourism marketers should create emotionally engaging content that portrays the joy and excitement of culinary adventures in Thailand. Storytelling through videos and social media posts that capture tourists' personal experiences, emphasizing the sensory delights of Thai food and the warmth of Thai hospitality, can achieve this. Additionally, promoting activities that offer interactive and immersive culinary experiences, such as cooking classes and food tours, can deepen tourists' emotional connection to the destination.

Improving the cultural experience is another critical area. The research indicates that cultural experiences significantly influence tourists' intentions (H9). Therefore, it is essential to enhance the cultural aspects of gastronomic tourism by offering authentic and immersive experiences that allow tourists to engage with local traditions and customs. Promoting visits to local markets, encouraging interactions with local chefs, and highlighting the cultural significance of various dishes can achieve this. Tourism providers should ensure that these experiences are accessible and enjoyable for tourists, thus fostering a deeper appreciation of Thai culture.

Addressing Thai cuisine's emotional and nostalgic elements can enhance the compelling destination image. The study shows that affective destination image mediates translating cognitive and emotional experiences into actual travel intentions (H10). Stakeholders should create marketing content that evokes nostalgia and positive emotions associated with Thai food. Sharing stories and memories related to Thai cuisine, highlighting how it brings people together and creates lasting memories, can achieve this. Additionally, ensuring that the dining environments in Thailand are comfortable and inviting can enhance the overall affective experience.

From a policy perspective, we should implement practical measures to support these marketing strategies. The government and tourism authorities should facilitate initiatives such as the China-Thailand Mutual Visa Exemption Agreement, Direct Flight Approvals, Culinary Tourism Campaigns, Mandarin Training for Hospitality, and Safety and Quality Guidelines. These policies can help create a favourable environment for Chinese tourists, making it easier for them to travel to Thailand and have a positive gastronomic experience.

In conclusion, the practical implications of this study highlight the need for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to promoting Thailand as a gastronomic tourism destination. By enhancing cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences, stakeholders can significantly influence tourists' intentions and ensure that Thailand

remains a top choice for gastronomic tourism. These strategies, grounded in the empirical findings of this research, provide actionable insights that can guide the efforts of tourism policymakers, marketers, and service providers in creating a compelling and memorable gastronomic experience for tourists.

6. Conclusion

This study has systematically explored the intricate dynamics between cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences and their impact on the intentions of Chinese tourists to select Thailand as a gastronomic destination. By adeptly integrating tourism destination image theory and tourism experience theory, the research has unveiled how these layered experiences shape both the cognitive and affective perceptions of the destination, significantly influencing tourist intentions. The empirical findings from this research underscore the crucial role of a holistic destination image, which acts as a mediator, transforming these diverse experiences into definitive travel decisions. This integration of theories has validated their significance and demonstrated their combined efficacy in providing a deeper understanding of tourist behaviour in the context of gastronomic tourism.

The implications of this study are profound for tourism policymakers and marketers in Thailand, offering a clear directive to leverage the multifaceted tourist experiences to enhance the destination's appeal and competitiveness in the gastronomic tourism market. The study's outcomes suggest that targeted strategies that amplify the visibility and attractiveness of Thailand's culinary offerings can significantly influence the travel intentions of Chinese tourists. This approach requires a cohesive integration of marketing initiatives highlighting Thailand's rich culinary diversity and authentic dining experiences, paired with strategic media portrayals to magnify their appeal in the Chinese market.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the theoretical literature by demonstrating how to apply combined theoretical frameworks and provides practical insights that can optimize Thailand's gastronomic allure. Future studies could extend this research by exploring other demographic segments and incorporating longitudinal data to capture gastronomic tourism's evolving trends and impacts. By continuing to explore these dimensions, stakeholders can better tailor their strategies to meet the nuanced needs of international tourists, thereby fostering sustainable growth in Thailand's tourism sector.

Despite its valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. The sample is restricted to Chinese tourists, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other nationalities with different cultural backgrounds and gastronomic preferences. Different cultural groups may engage with and perceive Thai gastronomic tourism in distinct ways, shaped by their unique culinary traditions, social norms, and tourism expectations. Future research could incorporate a comparative element to explore these cross-cultural dynamics more thoroughly, potentially drawing on existing literature to examine how various demographic groups experience and value gastronomic tourism in Thailand. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional nature provides a snapshot in time, potentially overlooking the evolving nature of tourists' experiences and perceptions over time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal

approach to capture these dynamics more comprehensively. Furthermore, while the study integrates cognitive, emotional, and cultural experiences, it does not fully explore other potentially influential factors, such as economic considerations, social influences, and technological advancements in tourism marketing. Expanding the scope to include these variables could offer a more holistic understanding of the determinants of gastronomic tourism intentions. Finally, incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, could enrich the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into tourists' narratives and experiences. Future research directions should also consider comparative studies across different gastronomic destinations to identify unique and common factors that drive gastronomic tourism, thereby enhancing the robustness and applicability of the findings.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, JC and SJ; methodology, JC; software, SJ; validation, JC and SJ; formal analysis, SJ; investigation, SJ; resources, JC; data curation, JC; writing—original draft preparation, SJ; writing—review and editing, SJ; visualization, JC and SJ; supervision, JC and SJ; project administration, JC and SJ; funding acquisition, JC and SJ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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