Factors Influencing Tourist Satisfaction with Local Cuisines in Vietnam

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Abstract: *The objective of this study is to identify culinary tourism destinations by identifying destination attribute factors based on the perception of tourists. Recognising the key and side aspects of a culinary tourism destination is essential to shape tourist experiences and tourism goals. To achieve this, the study developed a conceptual model and formulated measurement variables for the attributes of culinary tourism based on tourist ratings. A total of 174 questionnaire replies were received from domestic and international tourists visiting Quang Ninh. The proposed survey model contains five independent variables, one mediating variable and one dependent variable, plus four control variables. The independent variables provide a comprehensive overview of the five dimensions of the culinary destination characteristics: the physical environment, the social environment, the service environment, the culinary culture and the presentation of the food, comprising 23 indicators in total. A new aspect of this survey is to focus on how destination attributes affect the perception of culinary destinations by tourists. The study contributes significantly to the body of culinary tourism literature by clarifying the multidimensional structure and validating the scale of measurement of culinary tourism characteristics. In addition, it provides practical insights for destination marketing organisations and tourism management bodies to design effective positioning and brand strategies.*

Keywords: *Local cuisine; gastronomic tourism; Tourist satisfaction; Influencing factors; Tourism attributes, Vietnam.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Local cuisine plays a crucial role in shaping tourist satisfaction and improving the overall image of a destination. Tourists are increasing showing interest in culinary heritage and local culinary experiences (Anne-Mette Hjalager & Pia Heike Johansen, 2012). According to the World Food Travel Association (2019), food and drinks are a major travel motivator with an estimated 80% of tourists visiting specific destinations for gastronomic experiences. Getz et al. (2014) further claim that local food and tourism are fundamental components influencing tourist behavior (Getz et al., 2014). Consuming local cuisine is an important part of the travel experience, offering novelty and exciting throughout the trip (Tikkanen, 2007). Consequently, food is a decisive factor in tourists' choice of destination (Y. H. Kim et al., 2011). Local gastronomy acts as a "lever factor" in tourism by attracting and attracting visitors (Getz et al., 2014), improving the destination's image (Henderson, 2009; Chang et al., 2010) and reflecting the unique cultural identity of a place (Timothy, 2015). In addition, it contributes to higher tourist satisfaction (Erkmen, 2019; Vuksanović & Bajrami, 2020) and promotes a competitive advantage in the tourism sector (Erkmen, 2019).

Kandampully (2000) stated: "Tourism is a connected industry that integrates both tangible products and intangible services, which are mainly related to nature, food and travel destinations". Among the various forms of tourism, culinary tourism is differentiated by its main motivation — gastronomy (Lee et al., 2015; Choe & Kim, 2018). Currently, this sector is one of the fastest growing, most dynamic, and fascinating segments of the tourism industry (Y. H. Kim et al., 2011; Shalini & Duggal, 2015). Given its rapid expansion, extensive research on culinary tourism has emerged in recent decades (Chen et al.,

2024b). These studies examined the role of local foods in tourism planning and development (Sims, 2009), explored culinary landscapes and gastronomic travel destinations (Su et al., 2020, Lai et al., 2018; (Mohamed et al., 2021); assessed various dimensions of the culinary tourism experience, including service spaces, service quality, gastronomic experiences, experience spaces, festival spaces, culinary heritage, and food culture (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019).

Although culinary tourism is a growing field of research (Ellis et al., 2018), there remains a lack of in-depth studies to measure gastronomic destination attributes based on tourist perception (Chen et al., 2024b). Destination attributes serve as a basis for the attractiveness and competitiveness of travel destinations and significantly influence various aspects of the tourist experience, including emotional responses (J.-H. Kim et al., 2022), engagement (Biswas et al., 2021), memorable experiences (Chen et al., 2024), perceived service quality (Schlesinger et al., 2020), satisfaction (Albayrak & Caber, 2013) and revisit intentionen (Raina et al., 2020). Therefore, tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine is influenced by several factors, among which the characteristics of the destination play a decisive role.

Several researchers have identified food quality, destination image, service quality, heritage, and the natural environment as important predictors of tourist satisfaction (Catherine Henderson, 2014; Wang et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2018). According to Ting et al. (2016), consumers show greater enthusiasm when they discover foods with different flavors and strong cultural identities, as these fulfill their travel goals (Ting et al., 2016). In addition, Rahman et al. (2018) highlight that the perceived quality of service positively effects on tourist satisfaction when purchasing local food (Rahman et al., 2018). Results from previous research further suggest that in future studies, perceived value should be investigated as a decisive factor for understanding food behavior in tourism. Although this line of research has attracted increasing scientific attention, Ali et al. (2020) emphasize that there is still a lack of comprehensive studies explaining tourist satisfaction associated with choosing local foods (Ali et al., 2020). Local cuisine has now become a growing trend in tourism literature (Ali et al., 2020). To enhance the competitiveness of a tourist destination, a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the dimensions and determinants of tourists' satisfaction with local gastronomy is therefore essential. Such insights can serve as a basis for strategic planning and management, ensuring that culinary tourism contributes significantly to the appeal and overall visitor experience of a destination.

To strengthen the role of local cuisine in shaping culinary tourism and establishing the identity of gastronomic destinations, this study focuses on developing a measurement model that explores key local culinary characteristics that impact tourist satisfaction. To achieve this goal, the research aims to answer the following key questions:

1. How do environmental factors — including the physical environment, social environment, and service environment — affect tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine, and to what extent do these factors have their influence?

2. How do cultural gastronomy, food presentation and food perception affect tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine, and what is their influence?

3. What moderating role do monthly income and the controlling effects of age and gender play within the research model?

This study attempts to explore the determinants of tourist satisfaction when choosing local cuisine in Quang Ninh as a destination. Quang Ninh is often referred to as "miniature Vietnam," a region rich in cultural heritage. Additionally, this destination boasts an exceptionally diverse and rich culinary landscape, distinguished by its uniqueness and appeal and serves as a magnet for tourists. As a region home to 22 ethnic groups, every place in Quang Ninh is characterized by different culinary traditions, preparation methods and eating habits, which contribute to the uniqueness and fascination of the gastronomy. However, despite its potential, local cuisine has not yet to develop a distinctive identity and remains underutilized as a factor for attracting tourists. Furthermore, gastronomic tourism,

including special culinary tours, is not yet fully developed and the impact of culinary tourism on the destination remains unclear. With our research, we are therefore trying to provide empirical insights into how local gastronomy can be used to increase the attractiveness of Quang Ninh as a tourist destination. To achieve this goal, the paper is divided into main sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Literature Review and Hypothesis Development, (3) Research Methodology, (4) Research Results and Discussion, and (5) Conclusions and Recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Literature Review

The term "culinity" originates from the Latin word culīna (Wondirad et al., 2020). Gastronomy can be understood as the appreciation of food and drink or the art of cooking (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Accordingly, culinary tourism is defined by the experience of gastronomic activities and cultural consumption, as well as by the underlying motivations that underlie individual participation (Smith & Xiao, 2008; Silkes et al., 2013). Since Belisle's (1983) exploration of the intersection between food and tourism, the topic of culinary tourism – particularly the complex relationship between gastronomy and travel – has become an important area of tourism research over the last three decades (Ellis et al., 2018).

In principle, local food has been identified as a decisive factor for increasing tourist attractiveness (McKercher et al., 2008; Getz et al., 2014). Existing literature suggests that local cuisine plays an important role in shaping tourists' overall experience of a destination. Local cuisine refers to dishes prepared using traditional culinary methods specific to a particular region, even if ingredients from the region are not necessarily used (Vuksanović & Bajrami, 2020). Local cuisine with a distinctive regional identity can be differentiated from non-local foods. Both local and local foods are an attractive part of tourism offerings. Tourism research highlights the diverse roles that food plays in the travel experience, particularly in rural areas, where it can promote tourism engagement and provide sensory experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017). In addition, local foods contribute to sustainable development by promoting innovation, increasing production, and promoting sales of regional food products (Mitchell & Hall, 2005). It also strengthens the attractiveness of the destination and improves its overall image (K. Kim et al., 2012). Furthermore, culinary experiences are a key element in creating tourist destinations and constructing regional identity by highlighting the uniqueness of local gastronomy (Shahrim Ab Karim & Christina Geng-Qing Chi, 2010; (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012).

A culinary tourism destination comprises a number of attributes that tourists find appealing (Chen et al., 2024b). Destination attributes refer to the various elements that attract visitors to a specific location (J.-H. Kim & Ritchie, 2014). They essentially represent the factors that increase the attractiveness of a travel destination. Destination attributes, therefore, serve as the foundation for the image, competitiveness and overall attractiveness of a travel destination (Khoshkam, M., Marzuki, A., Nunkoo, R., Pirmohammadzadeh, A., & Kiumarsi, 2018). They exert multidimensional effects on tourists and influence their emotional responses (Y. Kim et al., 2022). Therefore, the characteristics that tourists perceive in a culinary tourism destination provide valuable insights for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism management authorities when designing and promoting culinary tourism experiences (Chen et al., 2024b).

In tourism research, the concept of satisfaction is becoming increasingly complex when examined in connection with tourists' food choices. Breiby & Slåtten (2018) conceptualized tourist satisfaction as a multidimensional construct. Similarly, Phillips & Roberts (2013) found that satisfaction is a subjective assessment of consumer experiences that is influenced by various factors such as attractions, accommodations, experiences, food, and activities (Phillips & Roberts, 2013). Tourist satisfaction is defined as the overall experience experienced at a specific destination, determined by comparing actual experiences with previous expectations (Tagmanov & Ulema, 2023). Tourists are considered satisfied when their perceived experience exceeds their expectations. In this study, we use a measurement approach to assess tourist satisfaction, which evaluates the overall service experience in terms of local

foods and the destination. In doing so, we are guided by the framework set by Vuksanović & Bajrami (2020).

2.2 Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

When examining the factors that influence tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine, this study applies self-concept theory (SCT) and explores the theory of consumer values (TCV). Self-concept theory, introduced by Swann et al. (1992), assumes that the congruence between a person's self-perception and their perception of a brand or product reinforces their preference for that brand or product as it affirms and reinforces their self-identity (Swann et al., 1992). Similarly, Sirgy (2014) explains self-concept as the degree of agreement between a consumer's perception of a product or brand and their self-perception. Chon's (1992) study introduced self-concept theory to tourism research and showed a positive relationship between self-concept and customer satisfaction (Gonçalves et al., 2016). The theory of consumer values, developed by Sheth et al. (1991) attempts to explain why consumers buy (or do not buy) a particular product or service and why they prefer one product category over another (Gonçalves et al., 2016). According to this theory, consumers make informed decisions based on multiple dimensions of value, including quality, enjoyment, monetary value, social value, and trade-offs in consumption (Awuni & Du, 2016). Building on the theoretical basis of the theory of consumption values (TCV), value can be regarded as a critical variable in marketing (Yeo et al., 2016). Consumers' decisions are influenced by multiple consumption values, including perceived value, functional value, and social value. Chen et al. (2024) used TCV to study destination attributes and categorized these attributes into core attributes and complementary characteristics of a culinary tourism destination (Chen et al., 2024b). By integrating self-concept theory and consumer value theory, this study investigates tourist satisfaction by analyzing their perception of factors influencing local cuisine in relation to their personal preferences and individual needs.

2.2.1 Additional characteristics of a culinary tourism destination: service environment, food quality and food prices

Service environment, food quality, and pricing are often identified in research as complementary features of culinary tourism destinations (Su et al., 2020). The service environment, which includes facilities, layout, ambiance, and service personnel, significantly influences customer satisfaction, perceived quality, overall satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Ryu & Jang, 2007; Leri & Theodoridis, 2019)s. A comfortable atmosphere, clean dining areas, and friendly service staff have a positive effect on customer attitudes and behavioural intentions (Jeaheng & Han, 2020). In culinary tourism destinations, service providers are not only expected to be hospitable but also to have in-depth knowledge of local cuisine (Soonsan et al., 2023). Food quality, which includes both hygienic and functional values, consists of sensory characteristics such as freshness, food safety, health benefits and nutritional value (Khoshkam, M., Marzuki, A., Nunkoo, R., Pirmohammadzadeh, A., & Kiumarsi, 2018). Freshness generally refers to the intrinsic quality of foods and indicates whether they are freshly prepared or unprocessed (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Food safety remains a top priority for consumers and, in the context of tourism, is particularly important for eating in restaurants and buying food (Li et al., 2022). Characteristics related to food quality have a significant impact on tourists' preferences and consumption patterns (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019).

In addition to other factors, the attractiveness of a culinary tourism destination is also influenced by its geographical location and environmental context (Khoshkam, M., Marzuki, A., Nunkoo, R., Pirmohammadzadeh, A., & Kiumarsi, 2018). The location and geographical environment provide information about the origin of food and the influence of climate on culinary practices (Bessière, 2013; Lin, YC, Pearson & Cai, 2011). The environmental dimension in designing travel destinations was also identified by Su et al. (2020) as a decisive factor for the attractiveness of travel destinations (Su et al., 2020). Furthermore, the service environment is described as a physical or environmental context that includes environmental conditions, signage, symbols, artifacts, and spatial functions created by service providers to improve the visitor experience (Mohan et al., 2012).

Based on the aforementioned arguments, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *The physical environment has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine at the destination.*

H2: *The social environment has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine at their destination.*

H3: *The service environment has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine at their destination.*

Key features of a culinary tourism destination the core features of a culinary tourism destination include culinary culture, food presentation, and sensory perception of food.

Culinary tourism emphasizes the interaction between tourists and destinations through gastronomy and culinary culture (Ellis et al., 2018). The term "culinary culture" covers a broad spectrum that goes beyond the food itself and includes ingredients, cooking methods, flavors, presentation styles, food etiquette, and service approaches (Khoshkam et al., 2023). At a more specific level, culinary culture relates to local gastronomy, the origins and history of food, and the local way of life. The attractiveness of local food culture ensures customer loyalty through functional values such as quality indicators and is reinforced by the availability of local restaurants and a well-maintained restaurant environment (Shahrim Ab Karim & Christina Geng-Qing Chi, 2010; Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2019). In addition, the variety of food, its presentation, and the uniqueness of the various food types and restaurants further contribute to the overall culinary tourism experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2019; Mohammad et al., 2022).

The above discussion serves as a basis for formulating the following research hypotheses:

H4: *Culinary culture has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine at the destination.*

H5: *The presentation of food has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with the local cuisine at the destination.*

In addition, the sensory perception of food—a critical component—includes taste, aroma, and texture (Mak et al., 2012). Culinary tourism destinations are often proud of their distinctive sensory culinary experiences, which influence tourists' preferences and consumption patterns (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). Research has identified food perception as a key dimension that includes characteristics such as deliciousness, appropriate flavor profiles, preferred textures (Chang & Mak, 2018) and richness, aroma, and spiciness (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). Based on this reasoning, the following research hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Food perception has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine at the destination.*

On the other hand, the theory of consumption values (TCV), proposed by Sheth et al. (1991), assumes that consumer decisions are influenced by multiple consumption values, including emotional, functional, cognitive, and social values (Sheth et al., 1991). However, each level of consumption can have different effects in different contexts and consumer segments. Therefore, this study explores the moderating role of certain demographic variables — gender (SEX) and age (AGE) — in tourists' assessment of the factors that influence their satisfaction with local cuisine. In addition, monthly income (MOI) is regarded as a moderating variable in the relationship between these influencing factors and tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine. On the basis of this theoretical basis, the following research hypotheses are developed:

H7: Monthly income serves as a moderating factor for the relationship between influencing factors and tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine.

H8: *Gender acts as a control variable when evaluating the impact of factors influencing tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine.*

H9: *Age serves as a control variable when evaluating the impact of factors influencing tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine.*
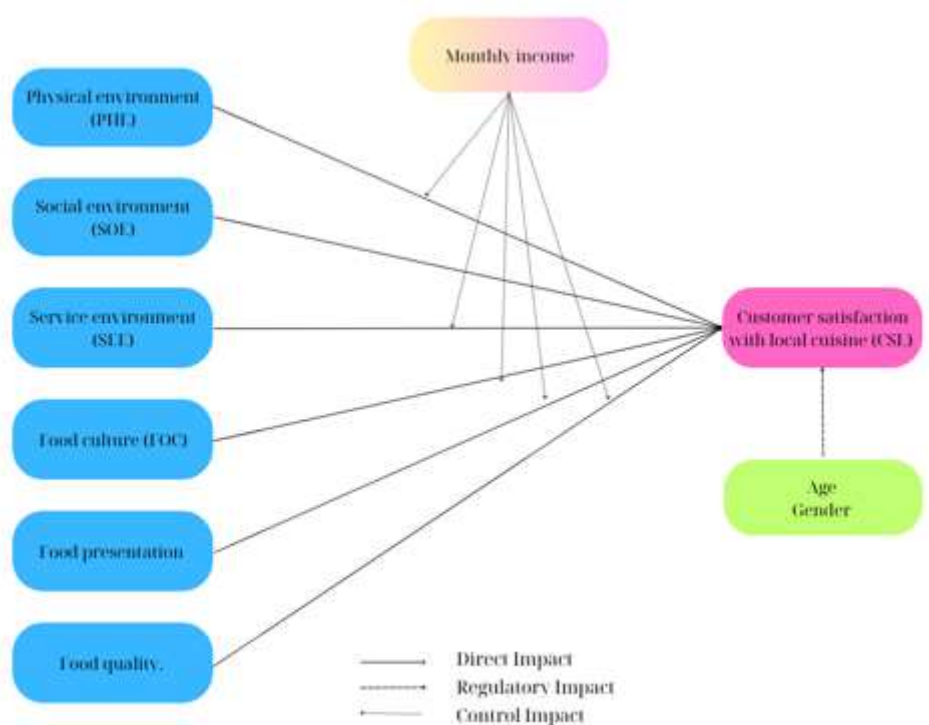
Figure 1. Proposed research model

Source: Author's proposal, 2025

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research sample

The research focuses on tourists visiting Ha Long who have used culinary services in the region, including both international and domestic visitors. The study uses a random sampling method and is aimed at tourists in the period from October to November 2024. The data collection process is carried out with the assistance of tour guides from ten travel agents who bring visitors to Ha Long, as well as employees of five luxury cruise ships operating in Ha Long Bay. The sample size is determined on the basis of Bollen's 5:1 criterion (1988), which ensures statistical appropriateness (Bollen, 1988). According to Bollen, robust exploratory factor analysis (EFA) requires at least five observations per measurement variable, with the total number of observations not lower than 100. The sample size is therefore calculated as n=n×5N = n multiplied by 5n=n×5, where NNN is the total sample size and nnn is the number of measurement scales or criteria. Since the study comprises 34 observed variables on seven measurement scales, the required sample size is 140 responses. However, taking into account a 10% error rate, the adjusted sample size is 154, which is rounded to 160 responses for the final survey.

3.2 Research tools

The study employs a structured questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire is divided into two sections: personal information and reviews from tourists. The assessment section is based on the research model, which consists of five independent variables, one moderating variable, one dependent variable, and two control variables. These variables are synthesized based on the literature review and further refined using consumer value theory (Appendix 1). The evaluation section consists of closed questions, which are measured using a five-point Likert scale. It ranges from (1) voice not at all to (5) completely agree.

3.3 Data analysis

The study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as the primary method

to test the research model, which includes both the measurement model and the structural model. The PLS path modeling algorithm assumes a normal distribution, takes into account small sample sizes, and addresses concerns about multicollinearity. Compared to other modelling techniques, PLS-SEM imposes fewer restrictions (Anderson & Swaminathan, 2011). In addition, Hair et al. (2017) emphasize that PLS-SEM is particularly beneficial in the following scenarios: (i) when the research goal is to predict important constructs or latent variables, and (ii) when the sample size is limited (Hair Jr et al., 2017). Accordingly, this study applies structural equation modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS 4.1.0.8 to validate the measurement model and analyze direct and mediating effects within the research framework. The research team collected data through a combination of in-person and online surveys. There were 179 responses in total, 174 of which were valid. In doing so, they met the criteria for data analysis. The demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: Gender distribution: 67.7% male, 29.0% female and 3.3% identify themselves as others. Tourist origin: 45.7% international visitors and 44.3% domestic tourists. Age group: 64.5% of respondents were between 26 and 45 years old. Educational background: 51.6% had an associate degree, followed by 18.6% a university degree.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DEBATE

4.1 Research finding

Tourist's assessments of the characteristics of gastronomic tourism destinations exhibit a relative high level of consistency, which is reflected in the averages and standard deviation values. The mean values (M) for all variables exceed 3 (Table 2), where the lowest measured mean is FOS3 (M = 3.434) and the highest is FOS8 (M = 4.335). The standard deviation (SD) values range from 0.745 (SOE8) to 1.157 (SEE2), which indicates a different degree of variation in the response variables. Validation of the measurement model The PLS algorithm is considered to be the most appropriate method for evaluating measurement scales, as it evaluates the measurement model based on the reliability, convergence validity, and discriminant validity of the constructs (Camilleri & Filieri, 2023) (Appendix 1). The composite reliability values for all measurement variables exceed 0.9, which indicates a high level of internal consistency. In addition, Cronbach's alpha and Rho_A values are all above 0.8 and thus exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7. In addition, the values for extracting the average variance (AVE) are above the standard benchmark of 0.5, which ensures that all measurement variables meet the criteria for reliability and convergent validity.

Moreover, the discriminant validity is confirmed through the Fornell & Larcker (1981) and HTMT (Heterotrait- Monotrait Ratio) criteria according to Henseler, J. et al (2015) are the main approaches to assess discriminant reliability table 1 (Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, 2015). In which, the Fornell & Larcker (1981) criterion ensures that the square root of the AVE for each latent variable is higher than all correlations between the latent variables with each other (Fornell, C., & Larcker, 1981). Meanwhile, the HTMT (Heterotrait- Monotrait Ratio) index is from 0.601 to 0.892, ensuring that it is less than 0.9, so there is discrimination between the two latent variables.

Table 1: Discriminant validity indices of measurement scales

Construct		HTMT						Fornell and Larcker						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Tourists' contentment with local cuisine (CSL)							0.915						
2	Food culture (FOC)	0.612						0.850	0.883					
3	Food presentation (FOP)	0.727	0.427					0.871	0.859	0.900				

4	Food experience (FOS)	0.601	0.874	0.509				0.864	0.812	0.856	0.878			
5	Physical Environment (PHE)	0.847	0.892	0.868	0.844			0.775	0.784	0.777	0.772	0.935		
6	Service environment (SEE)	0.804	0.436	0.882	0.806	0.713		0.752	0.856	0.807	0.752	0.805	0.832	
7	Social environment (SOE)	0.781	0.416	0.771	0.855	0.617	0.634	0.720	0.828	0.877	0.791	0.798	0.840	0.827

Source: Questionnaire data processing with Smart PLS 4, 2025.

The PLS algorithm provides detailed insights into direct, indirect and total effects within the structural model (Ringle, C. M., Becker, J. M., Cheah, J. H., & Sarstedt, 2022). This algorithm also provides comprehensive variance inflation factor (VIF) information for each observed variable. The results of the inner model suggest that there is no multicollinearity when VIF values remain below 5 (Hair, J. F., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, 2013). Based on test results, all VIF values are below 5.0, which confirms that there are no multicollinearity problems (Table 2).

Table 2: Discriminant validity indices of the measurement scale

Items	VIF	Items	VIF	Items	VIF	Items	VIF
PHE2	2.308	SEE1	2.644	FOC2	2.587	FOS2	4.007
PHE3	2.308	SEE2	3.631	FOC4	2.265	FOS3	2.212
SOE1	1.688	SEE3	2.248	FOP1	2.723	FOS4	4.655
SOE3	2.858	SEE4	4.878	FOP2	3.080	FOS5	3.450
SOE4	2.574	SEE5	3.676	FOP3	4.053	FOS6	3.309
SOE5	2.362	SEE6	3.247	FOP4	3.380	FOS7	2.908
SOE6	2.280	FOC1	1.743	FOS1	3.341	FOS8	3.097
						FOS9	3.171

Source: Questionnaire data processing with Smart PLS 4, 2025.

Furthermore, the R^2 value for Tourist Satisfaction with Local Cuisine (CSL) is 0.905 (Table 3). This indicates that the independent variables in the SEM model explain 90.5% of the variance in CSL. Consequently, the research model meets the required standards, as a multiple regression model is considered acceptable when $R^2 \geq 50\%$.

Additionally, an examination of the Q^2 index reveals that the out-of-sample predictive power of the independent variables on CSL is 0.755, signifying a high level of predictive accuracy (Table 3).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity Indices of the Measurement Scale

Construct	R-square (R^2)	R-quare adjusted
Tourist satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL)	0.913	0.905
Construct	**Q^2predict**	**RMSE**
Tourist satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL)	211.718	0.755

**Source:** Questionnaire data processing with Smart PLS 4, 2025

The bootstrapping technique is used to test the research hypotheses. This method uses 5,000 samples

with 1,458 cases (Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sinkovics, 2009). Table 4 shows the results, including standardized beta coefficients, standard deviation values, t-statistics, and statistical significance (p-values).

Table 4: Hypothesis test results from bootstrapping analysis

	Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	P values	Decision
H1	PHE -> CSL	0.143	0.158	0.083	0.003	Supported
H2	SOE -> CSL	0.203	0.205	0.132	0.022	Supported
H3	SEE -> CSL	0.118	0.129	0.069	0.015	Supported
H4	FOC -> CSL	0.323	0.315	0.096	0.001	Supported
H5	FOP -> CSL	0.505	0.514	0.113	0.000	Supported
H6	FOS -> CSL	0.260	0.259	0.070	0.000	Supported
H7	MOI -> CSL	0.023	0.024	0.079	0.775	Not Supported
H7a	MOI x PHE -> CSL	-0.119	-0.126	0.072	0.100	Not Supported
H7b	MOI x FOP -> CSL	-0.238	-0.225	0.155	0.124	Not Supported
H7c	MOI x FOC -> CSL	-0.121	-0.121	0.140	0.388	Not Supported
H7d	MOI x FOS -> CSL	0.012	0.018	0.061	0.845	Not Supported
H7e	MOI x SOE -> CSL	0.546	0.538	0.196	0.005	Supported
H7f	MOI x SEE -> CSL	0.090	0.091	0.093	0.037	Supported
H8	SEX -> CSL	0.006	0.006	0.024	0.784	Not Supported
H9	AGE -> CSL	0.161	0.168	0.077	0.036	Supported

Source: *Questionnaire data processing with Smart PLS 4, 2025*

Figure 2. Structural Measurement Model of the Research Framework**.**

Source: Questionnaire data processing with Smart PLS 4, 2025.
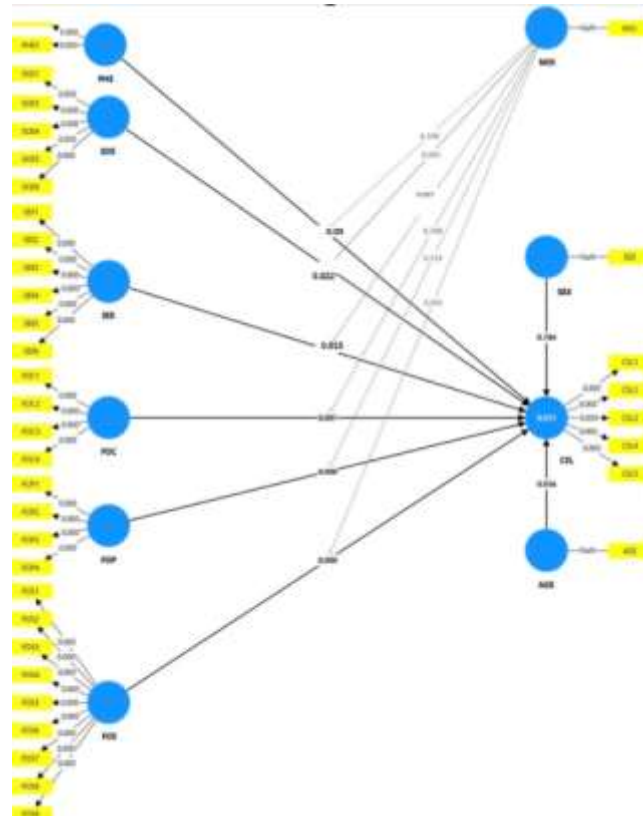
Direct effects: The results of the structural model test using the bootstrapping technique show significant direct effects of various factors on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL). Specifically: Food Presentation (FOP) has the strongest influence on CSL (H5: O = 0.505, M = 0.514, p = 0.000). The second strongest effect comes from Food Culture (FOC) (H4: O = 0.323, M = 0.315, p = 0.001). Perceived food quality (FOS) has the third highest impact on CSL (H6: O = 0.260, M = 0.259, p = 0.001). In contrast, the service environment (SEE) has a minimal direct effect on CSL (H3: O = 0.118, M = 0.129, p = 0.015). The physical environment (PHE) has the second-lowest direct effect (H1: O = 0.143, M = 0.158, p = 0.003). The social environment (SOE) is in third place in terms of direct effects (H2: O = 0.203, M = 0.205, p = 0.022). These results confirm that the direct links between the characteristics of the destination — including the physical environment, social environment, service environment, food culture, and food presentation — and the perception of food by tourists are confirmed, meaning that hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 are accepted.

Moderating role: The "monthly income" (MOI) variable shows limited moderating effects on the relationship between influencing factors and CSL. It is noteworthy that the MOI only attenuates the effects of: the social environment (SOE) on the CSL (H6: O = 0.546, M = 0.538, p = 0.005). Service environment (SEE) on CSL (H6: O = 0.090, M = 0.091, p = 0.037). Thus, the proposed hypothesis on the moderating role of income is partially supported. The results suggest that tourists with different income levels perceive the impact of the social and service environment on their satisfaction with local cuisine differently.

Control effects: The study also examines the control effects of socio-demographic variables such as gender (SEX) and age (AGE): Age (AGE) significantly influences CSL (H6: O = 0.161, M = 0.168, P = 0.036), which suggests that age differences influence how tourists rate the factors that influence satisfaction with local cuisine. However, gender (GENDER) has no significant control effect as the p-value exceeds 0.05. These results show that tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine varies by age, with people of different age groups — with different preferences and income levels — assessing the influencing factors at the destination differently.

4.2 Discussion

The study proposes an integrated model that examines the influence of various factors — including the physical environment, social environment, service environment, dining culture, food presentation, and food perception — on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL). This framework is based on self-concept theory (SCT) and the theory of consumer values (TCV). A culinary tourism destination is shaped by environmental factors (physical, social, and service influences), which collectively enable the creation of unique gastronomic experiences. Combined with a distinctive food culture and careful presentation of food, these elements contribute to the emotional, spiritual and health-related values that tourists perceive and are satisfied with (Chen et al., 2024). Among these factors, food presentation (FOP) exerts the strongest influence on CSL (O = 0.514). The crucial role of food presentation in designing culinary tourism destinations has been well established in previous research (Lai et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2024; (Khoshkam et al., 2014). In addition to food culture, taste and cooking techniques, this factor is considered a core attribute of a culinary destination, as emphasized by Khoshkam, M. et al. (2018), Chen et al. (2024). The importance of Food Presentation is reflected in its ability to improve the overall culinary tourism experience through meal design, food uniqueness, and variety of dining options (Khoshkam, M. et al.; 2018; Yang, FX et al., 2020).

In addition, food culture has the second-largest influence on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL) (O = 0.323). This impact has been highlighted in previous studies by Ab Karim & Chi (2010) and Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen (2019). The relationship between Food Culture and CSL is reinforced by the appeal of local culinary traditions, which not only provide benefits for consumers but also contribute to an enriching gastronomic experience by offering diverse local restaurants and unique food variations (Björk, P., & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2019); (Mohammad, N., Hanafiah, MH & Zahari, 2022; Yang, Q., Shen, Y., Foster, T., & Hort, 2020) . In addition, Food Perception (FOS) also shows a

significant effect on CSL (O = 0.260). When tourists experience a positive emotional engagement with food, they derive greater enjoyment (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Moreover, the perception of unique and distinctive foods influences tourists' preferences and consumption patterns and influences their overall assessment of a culinary tourism destination (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). As a result, the perception of food — including the sensory properties of food — plays a central role in providing an immersive and satisfying gastronomic experience. As Mak et al. (2012) stated, food perception is a fundamental part of culinary tourism, while Chang & Mak (2018) emphasized its role as a key dimension in shaping tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (Chang & Mak, 2018).

By contrast, the service environment (SEE) had a very weak impact on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL) (O = 0.118). The importance of this factor has been widely recognized in previous studies. According to Ryu & Jang (2007), W. G. Kim & Moon (2009) and Leri & Theodoridis (2019), the service environment — consisting of infrastructure, layout, ambiance, and service personnel — plays a decisive role in shaping customer satisfaction, perceived quality, and behavioral intentions (Leri & Theodoridis, 2019). Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that the service environment (SEE) does not significantly influence CSL. Survey results suggest that this is primarily due to high restaurant costs in the Quang Ninh destination, which are considered disproportionate to the quality of service. In addition, respndents reported dissatisfaction with overcrowding and extended wait times during high season, which further reduced the impact of the service environment on their overall satisfaction.

The study also discovered that the variable Monthly Income (MOI) played an unclear moderating function in the link between influencing factors and Customer Satisfaction with Local Cuisine. Specifically, MOI only moderated the effects of Social Environment (SOE) and Service Environment (SEE) on Customer Satisfaction with Local Cuisine. Furthermore, the study examined gender as a demographic variable to determine whether it had a controlling effect on Customer Satisfaction with Local Cuisine. Age differences influence preferences, needs, and taste inclinations, leading to variations in the perception of culinary tourism destinations. Moreover, the academic literature on gastronomic tourism has consistently conceptualized functional value in terms of price value, quality value, or health-related functional value (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the aim of developing a research model to assess the factors that influence tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine, this study is based on the authors' deep understanding of the existing research gap regarding the relationship between core and additional characteristics of gastronomic tourism destinations. In addition, the study takes into account the moderating and controlling effects of certain demographic variables. To fill this research gap, our initial investigation focuses on conducting a comprehensive literature review, developing a research framework, conducting a survey, and using structural equation models (SEM) for analysis.

The study yielded results that are consistent with the proposed hypotheses on the direct relationships within the research model after validating the measurement model and evaluating the structural model using PLS-SEM software (version 4). The results suggest that the destination characteristics have a direct impact on tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine (CSL). Among these factors, food presentation (FOP) had the strongest influence, followed by food perception (FOS), while the service environment (SEE) had the weakest effect on tourists' satisfaction with local gastronomy. In addition, the moderating role of monthly income (MOI) was only evident in the relationship between the social environment (SOE) and the service environment (SEE) in relation to tourists' satisfaction with local cuisine. Furthermore, the study confirmed the crucial role of age (AGE) in evaluating the impact of various factors on tourists' satisfaction with local gastronomy, while other demographic variables had no significant moderating effects.

The results of this study provide valuable insights for marketers, culinary service providers and local policymakers regarding the crucial role of various factors in designing and increasing the attractiveness of gastronomic tourism destinations. By identifying and prioritizing these influencing factors, destination managers should consider strategies to improve tourists' experiences and emotional engagement through the uniqueness of local culinary culture, professionalism in service delivery, safety and exquisite flavors of food, and an aesthetic presentation that stimulates guests' various senses. In addition, stakeholders should explore ways to incorporate educational experiences into culinary tourism to increase its perceived value. This can be achieved by developing immersive activities, such as allowing tourists to participate in harvesting seafood or by taking part in hands-on cooking experiences with local delicacies. More importantly, tourism authorities are working with gastronomic companies to diversify the gastronomic offerings, strategically position the destination, and improve Quảng Ninh's brand image as a world-class culinary tourism destination on national and international tourism maps.

Despite our dedicated efforts in conceptualizing and achieving the research objectives, this study has certain limitations. Notably, it has not yet reached a broad international tourist audience, and the sample size remains limited. Additionally, the study has not focused on analyzing differences in perceptions among distinct tourist segments, particularly between domestic and international visitors.

These limitations will be addressed in future research, where we aim to further explore tourist behavior in gastronomic tourism and identify, develop, and position the brand image of Quảng Ninh as a culinary tourism destination. This endeavor seeks to enhance the destination's appeal and competitiveness, ultimately elevating its status on the global tourism stage.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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