

Chef's Table Experience as a Soft-Power and Nation-Brand Mechanism in MICE Marketing: A PLS-SEM Test of an Integrated Five-Layer Model in Thailand

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Abstract

Although the experience-economy, soft-power, and nation-branding literatures each address gastronomic destination experiences, they have remained largely parallel, leaving unspecified how an on-site dining experience translates into perceived national competitive advantage. This study examined (1) the influence of four exogenous 4E experience dimensions (entertainment, education, escapism, aesthetics) on five cultural-value mediators (authenticity, storytelling, localness, participation, memorability) within the Chef's Table experience; (2) how these mediators transmit effects to soft-power perception, nation-brand perception, national image, and trust-and-affect among MICE delegates in Thailand; and (3) the variance in perceived national competitive advantage explained by the integrated five-layer model and its out-of-sample predictive performance. A purposive sample of 200 MICE delegates attending Chef's Table programs in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Phuket during the 2024–2025 cycle, screened for firsthand attendance, completed a 57-item reflective questionnaire measuring 14 latent constructs on a 5-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4. All eight paths from 4E antecedents to cultural-value mediators were supported, with education and escapism dominant, channeled through localness and participatory co-creation, respectively. All eleven paths from cultural value through soft-power and nation-brand perception into national image and trust-and-affect were supported, with participation the strongest antecedent of nation-brand perception and trust-and-affect the most strongly predicted construct. The integrated five-layer model explained 56.7% of the variance in perceived national competitive advantage and demonstrated robust out-of-sample predictive performance. The findings supply soft-power theory with its long-missing microfoundation, provide Thai DMOs with a sequenced lever map for evidence-based gastrodipomatic investment, and integrate three previously parallel literatures into a single, predictively valid mechanism linking individual gastronomic experience to national competitive advantage.

Keywords: Chef's Table; MICE marketing; soft power; nation branding; PLS-SEM

Introduction

The post-pandemic recalibration of the global MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) industry has elevated experiential, place-rooted programming from a peripheral amenity to a strategic differentiator in destination competition (Cabral et al., 2025; Rafiqi & Maksum, 2025). National convention bureaus and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) increasingly anchor delegate itineraries with signature gastronomic events — single, sensorially immersive sittings designed to condense a destination's cultural narrative into a single evening. Thailand's royal Thai cuisine Chef's Table programming, Singapore's Asia's 50 Best satellite events, Peru's APEC-linked gastrodiploamacy showcases, and Japan's sake-anchored Cool Japan dinners in Europe collectively illustrate a coordinated international turn toward chef-fronted, narrative-led dining as an instrument of national-image projection. For Thailand specifically, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) has positioned Chef's Table programming as a flagship vehicle through which gastronomic soft power is transmitted to international and domestic delegates — making this format strategically central not only to the country's MICE competitiveness but also to its broader national-image projection in the contested post-pandemic destination market. The scale of this opportunity is substantial: in fiscal year 2024, Thailand hosted 25.35 million MICE travelers — including 1.17 million international delegates — generating 148.34 billion baht in revenue, and the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau has set a target of 34 million travelers and 200 billion baht for 2025 (Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, 2024; The Nation, 2024). Globally, the culinary tourism market was valued at approximately USD 16.11 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach USD 76.36 billion by 2033, at a compound annual growth rate of 21.9%, with Asia Pacific the fastest-growing region (Grand View Research, 2025). Crucially, the Chef's Table format is uniquely suited to driving nation-brand equity in a way that standard food events are not: it concentrates a destination's culinary identity into a single, curated, chef-fronted sitting in which provenance, technique, and narrative are delivered face-to-face to a captive professional audience. Unlike buffets, food festivals, or incidental hotel dining, the format combines scarcity, personal authorship, and immersive staging—conditions that, in experiential terms, maximize the depth of encoding and therefore the likelihood that the experience is retained as a distinctive national association rather than a generic meal.

Three independently mature literatures speak to this phenomenon. First, Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework — with its four exogenous realms of entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics (4E) — has been widely applied to hospitality and tourism contexts (Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Oh et al., 2007) and is the dominant lens for measuring on-site experiential antecedents. Second, Nye's (2004) soft-power theory positions culture, and gastronomic culture in particular, as a primary mechanism through which states attract rather than coerce; Cabral et al.'s (2025) rapid review of 86 studies documents the

strategic use of food to enhance national soft power, while Castilla–Corzo and Colmenares–Castro (2026) and Rockower (2012) further specify gastrodiploacy as a cuisine–based form of soft–power projection. Third, Dinnie's (2008) competitive–identity framework, together with Anholt (2007) and Aronczyk (2013), conceptualizes nation–brand equity as accumulating through repeated, distinctive, sensorially rich encounters — precisely the encounter the Chef's Table format is engineered to produce. Lee and Kim (2021) provide one of the few empirical demonstrations that gastronomic cultural–value attributes translate directly into nation–brand equity, in the case of Singapore's UNESCO hawker–culture bid.

Despite the maturity of each of these three streams, they have remained largely parallel rather than integrated, leaving three specific knowledge gaps. Theoretically, established 4E studies typically terminate at the experience–satisfaction–loyalty pathway (Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Oh et al., 2007), and the framework has rarely been chained to Nye's (2004) soft–power theory and Dinnie's (2008) nation–brand framework within a single structural model; soft–power scholarship, in turn, has been criticized for lacking the microfoundation that would explain how cultural attraction is produced at the level of individual experience (Cabral et al., 2025; El–Dabt et al., 2025; Mashiah, 2024). Contextually, although Thai DMOs have adopted the Chef's Table format as a flagship MICE programming vehicle, no published study has systematically modeled it as a soft–power and nation–brand mechanism with national–level competitive outcomes; experiential evaluations by the very delegates through whom gastronomic soft power is transmitted have not been linked to perceived competitive advantage within a measurement architecture. Methodologically, prior soft–power and nation–branding work has been predominantly qualitative, single–mediation, or restricted to bilateral case comparisons; to the authors' knowledge, no published study deploys a multi–layer serial–mediation structural model paired with contemporary predictive–validation procedures — namely PLSpredict (Shmueli et al., 2019) and the cross–validated predictive ability test, CVPAT (Liengard et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2019) — in the Thai gastronomic MICE literature.

Consequently, several questions remain unresolved. Which of the four 4E experiential dimensions most strongly activates which cultural–value carriers in a chef–fronted gastronomic setting? How do those cultural value carriers transmit effects through soft–power and nation–brand perceptions into the destination's cognitive and affective image? Moreover, how much of the variance in perceived national competitive advantage can a fully integrated experiential–cultural–reputational architecture actually explain, and does that explanatory account survive contemporary out–of–sample predictive scrutiny?

To address these gaps, this study presents a quantitative test of a five–layer structural model that integrates Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy, Nye's (2004) soft–power theory, and Dinnie's (2008) nation–branding framework into a single empirically tractable causal

chain. The model was tested on 200 MICE delegates attending Chef's Table programs across Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Phuket during the 2024–2025 cycle, using PLS–SEM (SmartPLS 4) with 5,000–subsample one–tailed bootstrapping, PLSpredict, and CVPAT. The study pursues three coordinated objectives: (1) to examine the influence of the four exogenous 4E experience dimensions (entertainment, education, escapism, aesthetics) on five cultural–value mediators (authenticity, storytelling, localness, participation, memorability); (2) to test how those cultural–value mediators transmit effects to soft–power perception, nation–brand perception, national image, and trust–and–affect among MICE delegates in Thailand; and (3) to quantify the variance in perceived national competitive advantage explained by the integrated five–layer model and to validate its out–of–sample predictive performance. In so doing, the study contributes a measurement architecture that supplies soft–power theory with its long–missing microfoundation, repositions the Chef's Table from an isolated marketing artifact into a theoretically grounded national–competitiveness mechanism, and provides Thai DMOs with a sequenced lever map for evidence–based gastrodipomatic investment. These three objectives map directly onto the three gaps identified above: the first and second objectives address the theoretical gap—and soft power's missing microfoundation—by tracing how 4E stimuli activate cultural–value carriers and how those carriers transmit through soft–power and nation–brand perception into image and affect, while the third addresses the contextual and methodological gaps by quantifying and predictively validating the model's explanation of national competitive advantage in the Thai MICE setting. A five–layer serial design is adopted because it is the minimum structure capable of representing the full conversion from individual experience to national–level reputational outcome without collapsing theoretically distinct mediators into a single undifferentiated step.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the three theoretical streams — experience economy, soft power and gastrodipomacy, and nation branding — and synthesizes the gaps they jointly leave open. The Research Conceptual Framework section then specifies the five–layer model and its 21 directional hypotheses. The Research Methodology section details the cross–sectional survey design, the 57–item reflective instrument, and the PLS–SEM analytical procedures. The Results section reports findings organized by the three research objectives. The Discussion interprets these findings in light of prior literature, and the Conclusion summarizes theoretical and managerial contributions before closing with directions for future research.

Objectives

1. To examine the influence of the four exogenous 4E experience dimensions (entertainment, education, escapism, aesthetics) on five cultural–value mediators (authenticity, storytelling, localness, participation, memorability) within the Chef's Table experience, estimated

concurrently within a single unified structural framework rather than as isolated bivariate relationships.

2. To test how cultural-value mediators transmit effects to soft-power perception, nation-brand perception, national image, and trust-and-affect among MICE delegates in Thailand, specified as a serial (sequential) transmission through successive mediating layers.

3. To quantify the variance in perceived national competitive advantage explained by the integrated five-layer model, and to assess the out-of-sample predictive relevance of that explanatory account.

Literature Review

The literature review draws on three independently mature streams of scholarship that, to date, have operated in parallel literatures rather than being integrated into a single empirical chain. The review proceeds in four parts and concludes with a synthesis of how the reviewed theories are applied in this research.

1. Experience Economy and Cultural Value

Pine and Gilmore (1999) propose that memorable experiences emerge along two axes — guest participation (passive to active) and connection to the environment (absorption to immersion) — yielding four realms: entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics (4E). The framework has been widely applied to hospitality and tourism contexts (Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Oh et al., 2007), but established 4E studies typically conclude at the experience-satisfaction-loyalty pathway, leaving the experience-to-nation-level mechanism unspecified. This termination, rooted in satisfaction and loyalty, is not accidental. It reflects two barriers: a disciplinary one, in that experience-economy research has been situated largely within consumer-behavior and service-marketing traditions whose dependent variables are individual attitudinal and behavioral intentions rather than reputational or geopolitical constructs; and a measurement one, in that bridging to macro-level outcomes such as soft power or nation brand requires intermediate cultural-value and perceptual constructs that the original 4E instrument does not contain. The present study removes the measurement barrier by explicitly specifying the intermediate carriers. Five cultural-value mediators carry experiential stimuli into deeper perceptual outcomes: authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Wang, 1999), storytelling (Lund et al., 2018; Mossberg, 2008), localness (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Sims, 2009), participation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Prebensen & Foss, 2011), and memorability (Kim et al., 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

2. Soft Power and Gastrodiplomacy

Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a state to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, resting on culture, political values, and foreign policy. Of these pillars, the cultural pillar is most directly activated by gastronomic experience. Cabral et al. (2025) and Rockower (2012)

document that nations strategically employ food to enhance soft power, while Castilla–Corzo and Colmenares–Castro (2026) detail Colombian gastrodiploacy as a cuisine–based form of soft power and nation branding. Lee and Kim (2021) demonstrate that cultural–value attributes of food translate directly into nation–brand equity in the Singapore case. However, this body of work remains largely conceptual or case–based, lacking a measurement architecture that links on–site experiential antecedents to soft–power outcomes. A persistent ambiguity in this literature concerns how individual–level perceptions aggregate into national–level attraction. Soft power is theorized at the level of the state, yet it is produced through countless individual encounters; the bridge between the two is rarely specified. The position taken here is that individual attraction is the necessary microfoundation—the unit at which cultural value is first registered—while national–level soft power emerges through the repetition, convergence, and diffusion of such perceptions across many delegates and over time. Measuring the individual link, as this study does, is therefore a precondition for, not a substitute for, macro–level claims. In the Thai context specifically, gastronomy, soft power, and MICE have begun to attract domestic scholarly attention (e.g., Chantanaroj, 2023, on Thai cuisine as a soft–power resource for tourism promotion; Kaewanant & Sirisunhirun, 2024, on the direction of Thai soft–power policy; Lee–Anant et al., 2025, on Pattaya's tourism positioning; and Phrammanachot et al., 2026, on the transmission of culinary heritage in Phuket), yet none has modeled the chef's–table experience as a soft–power mechanism with competitive outcomes—underscoring both the international and the Thai contribution of the present study.

3. Nation Branding and Place–Based Equity

Dinnie's (2008) competitive–identity model posits that nation–brand assets accumulate through repeated, distinctive, sensorially rich encounters that anchor associations in foreign publics' minds. Anholt (2007) and Aronczyk (2013) further argue that nation branding has shifted from logo–centric communication to lived experiential encounters. Kotler and Gertner (2002) conceptualize country image as the cognitive aggregate of beliefs, ideas, and impressions held about a place; Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Zenker and Braun (2017) introduce a parallel affective component—trust, warmth, and emotional resonance—alongside cognition. El–Dabt et al. (2025) and Mashiah (2024) confirm that soft–power and nation–brand signals reliably feed both cognitive image and affective trust.

4. Competitive Advantage and Predictive PLS–SEM

The country–of–origin literature (Roth & Romeo, 1992) establishes that national image directly informs evaluative judgments about a country's offerings; Crouch and Ritchie (1999) identify perceived country attractiveness as a primary determinant of destination competitive positioning. Tripathi and Kumar (2026) and Alharbi (2026) further confirm that affective trust contributes incremental variance in competitive–advantage perceptions beyond cognitive

evaluations. Methodologically, Hair et al. (2019, 2022) and Shmueli et al. (2019) advocate predictive validation through PLSpredict and CVPAT (Liengaard et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2023) alongside conventional explanatory assessment.

Summary of the Literature Review

Three interlocking knowledge gaps emerge from the review. Theoretically, the 4E framework has rarely been chained to Nye's (2004) soft-power theory and Dinnie's (2008) nation-brand framework within a single structural model. Contextually, the Thai Chef's Table has not been systematically modeled as a flagship MICE programming format with national-level competitive outcomes. Methodologically, no published study employs a five-layer serial mediation model paired with PLSpredict and CVPAT in the gastronomic MICE literature. The authors therefore apply Pine and Gilmore's 4E framework to specify the experiential antecedents, Nye's soft-power theory to specify the cultural-attraction mediator, and Dinnie's nation-brand framework to specify the brand-equity mediator, integrating them through cultural-value, image-affect, and competitive-advantage layers into a single empirically testable mechanism. Read together, the reviewed studies are individually insufficient for three reasons: experience-economy studies measure the antecedents but stop short of reputational outcomes; soft-power and gastrodiploacy studies assert cultural attraction but supply no measurement model linking it to on-site experience; and nation-branding studies theorize equity accumulation but seldom test it against a competitive-advantage endpoint. A serial-mediation configuration is the appropriate response to this collective shortfall because the three frameworks describe sequential, not parallel, stages of a single conversion process—experience must become cultural value before it can become reputation. Reputation must become image and affect before it can plausibly inform competitive judgment. Modeling these as a chain, rather than as separate direct effects, is therefore a theoretical commitment rather than a mere analytical convenience. Table 1 summarizes the key prior studies by theoretical stream, context and method, and the limitation each leaves open.

Table 1 Comparison of the reviewed literature streams and the gaps each leaves open

Literature stream	Representative studies	Context & method	Limitation this study addresses
Experience economy (4E)	Pine & Gilmore (1999); Oh et al. (2007); Hwang & Lyu (2015)	Hospitality/tourism; survey, SEM	Terminates at satisfaction-loyalty; no link to nation-level outcomes
Soft power & gastrodiploacy	Nye (2004); Rockower (2012); Cabral et al. (2025); Castilla-Corzo & Colmenares-Castro (2026)	Diplomacy/IR; conceptual & case-based	No measurement microfoundation linking on-site experience to soft power

Literature stream	Representative studies	Context & method	Limitation this study addresses
Nation branding & place equity	Dinnie (2008); Anholt (2007); Lee & Kim (2021)	Nation/place branding; conceptual & single-case	Equity seldom tested against a competitive-advantage endpoint
Cultural-value carriers	Wang (1999); Kolar & Zabkar (2010); Mossberg (2008); Sims (2009); Tung & Ritchie (2011)	Tourism experience; survey	Treated as outcomes, not as mediators between 4E and reputation
Competitive advantage & predictive PLS-SEM	Crouch & Ritchie (1999); Roth & Romeo (1992); Shmueli et al. (2019); Liengaard et al. (2021)	Destination competitiveness; PLS-SEM	Explanatory only; PLSpredict/CVPAT validation rarely applied
This study	Wongjunpen et al. (2026)	Thai MICE Chef's Table; PLS-SEM + PLSpredict + CVPAT (N = 200)	Integrates all streams into one serial-mediation chain with predictive validation

Note. This comparison table is numbered Table 1; the respondent-profile table is Table 2; the construct descriptive-statistics table is Table 3; the previous result tables have accordingly been renumbered Tables 4, 5, and 6; the ranking table in the Results section is Table 7; and all in-text references have been updated to match.

Conceptual Framework

This research is a cross-sectional, deductive, quantitative study. The conceptual framework is grounded in Pine and Gilmore's (1999) 4E experience economy, Nye's (2004) soft-power theory, and Dinnie's (2008) nation-brand framework, integrated into a five-layer serial-mediation architecture comprising 14 latent constructs and 21 directional paths. Figure 1 presents the synthesized model.

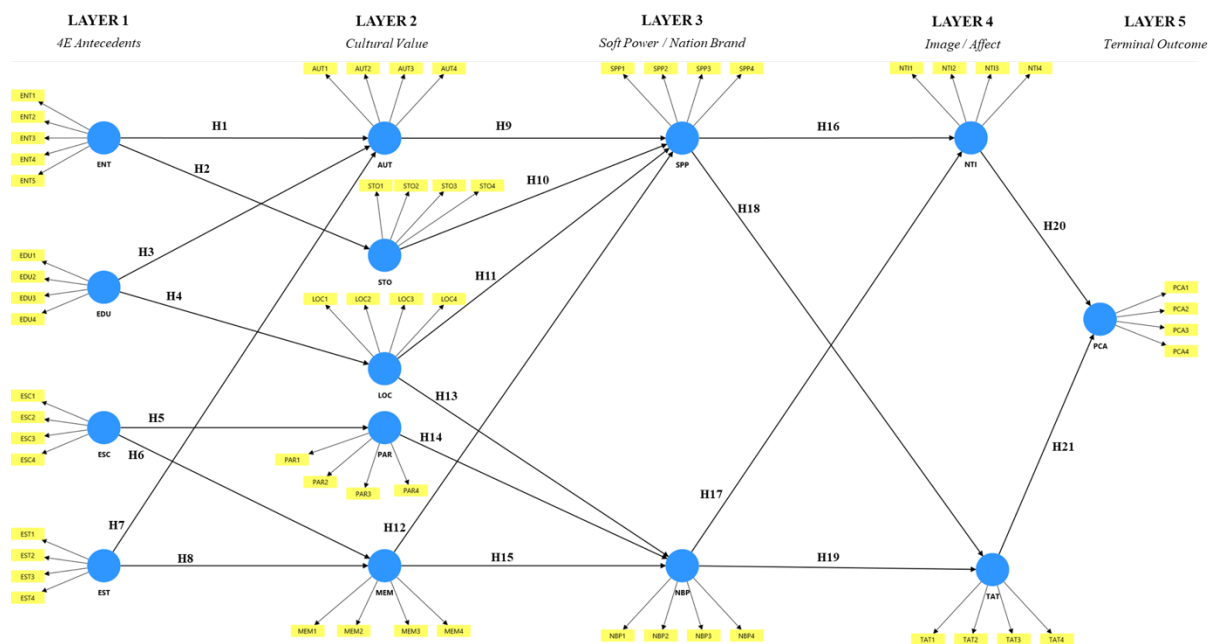


Figure 1 Five-layer PLS-SEM research model: from experiential antecedents to perceived competitive advantage

The model arranges constructs in five structural layers. Layer 1 contains the four exogenous 4E antecedents: entertainment (ENT), education (EDU), escapism (ESC), and aesthetics (EST). Layer 2 contains five cultural-value mediators: authenticity (AUT), storytelling (STO), localness (LOC), participation (PAR), and memorability (MEM). Layer 3 contains the two parallel cultural-strategic mediators: soft-power perception (SPP) and nation-brand perception (NBP). Layer 4 contains the cognitive and affective image mediators: national image (NTI) and trust-and-affect (TAT). Layer 5 contains the terminal endogenous outcome, perceived competitive advantage (PCA). Localness and memorability serve as dual mediators that feed both SPP and NBP, whereas soft power and nation-brand perception function as parallel rather than sequential mediators of image and affect.

Twenty-one directional hypotheses are advanced. For Layer 1 → Layer 2 (4E → cultural value): H1–H2 (ENT → AUT, STO); H3–H4 (EDU → AUT, LOC); H5–H6 (ESC → PAR, MEM); H7–H8 (EST → AUT, MEM). For Layer 2 → Layer 3 (cultural value → SPP/NBP): H9–H12 (AUT, STO, LOC, MEM → SPP); H13–H15 (LOC, PAR, MEM → NBP). For Layer 3 → Layer 4 (SPP/NBP → NTI/TAT): H16–H19 (SPP → NTI, TAT; NBP → NTI, TAT). For Layer 4 → Layer 5 (NTI/TAT → PCA): H20 (NTI → PCA), H21 (TAT → PCA). All hypotheses are directional and positive; therefore, one-tailed tests are applied.

Three design decisions in this architecture warrant explicit justification. First, the model deliberately omits direct 4E → PCA paths, imposing a full-mediation assumption: the framework holds that raw experiential stimuli acquire competitive value only after they are transduced into cultural meaning, reputational perception, and cognitive-affective image. A direct experiential shortcut to national competitive advantage would be theoretically incoherent, because competitive advantage is a reputational rather than a sensory construct; it can only be inferred once experience has been encoded as soft-power and nation-brand signals. Second, localness (LOC) and memorability (MEM) are specified as dual mediators feeding both SPP and NBP because each carries two distinct meanings simultaneously — territorial provenance and cultural distinctiveness signal soft-power attraction, while their accumulation as distinctive, repeatable associations builds nation-brand equity in the Dinnie (2008) sense. Third, soft-power perception and nation-brand perception are modeled as parallel rather than sequential mediators because Nye's (2004) attraction mechanism and Dinnie's (2008) competitive-identity mechanism operate as conceptually independent routes to destination image: one rooted in cultural attraction, the other in brand-equity accumulation. Treating them as sequential would impose an unwarranted causal ordering between two co-equal reputational pathways.

Research Methodology

This research is a quantitative study employing a cross-sectional survey design. The research area is Thai MICE programming featuring Chef's Table events across four destination cities: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Phuket. The population comprised international and domestic delegates who attended MICE events in Thailand that featured a Chef's Table program during the 2024–2025 cycle, including meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions. The sample was 200 MICE delegates. The selection method was purposive sampling with a mandatory screening item confirming first-hand attendance at the Chef's Table during the focal MICE engagement. Of 348 invitations issued across two recruitment modes (on-site delegate desks and a QR-coded online follow-up within 48 hours), 247 responses were received (response rate 71.0%); 47 were excluded at screening, partial-completion, or straightlining stages, yielding an analytical sample of $N = 200$. The achieved sample exceeds the 10-times rule (Hair et al., 2022), the a priori power benchmark (Cohen, 1992), and the inverse-square-root method maximum of $N = 175$ at $\alpha = .01$, power = .80 (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). Purposive sampling was adopted because the study population is defined by a specific, non-enumerable experiential qualification — firsthand attendance at a Chef's Table during a focal MICE engagement — for which no sampling frame exists; probability sampling was therefore infeasible. Inclusion criteria were: (i) age 18 years or older; (ii) attendance, as either an international or a domestic delegate, at a qualifying MICE event (meeting, incentive, conference, or exhibition) in one of the four focal cities; and (iii) confirmed firsthand participation in the Chef's Table component, verified by the mandatory screening item. To minimize selection bias, delegates were approached consecutively rather than selectively at on-site desks across all four cities, and the online follow-up was issued to the full delegate roster of each event rather than to a self-selected subset. Because data were gathered through two modes, responses were compared across the on-site and online groups on key demographic and substantive indicators; no material differences emerged, indicating that mode of administration did not introduce systematic response bias. As the design is cross-sectional and relies on single-source self-reported perceptions, the potential for common-method variance is acknowledged and was addressed through the procedural and statistical remedies reported below. The research instrument was a 57-item reflective questionnaire measuring 14 latent constructs on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire comprised: (i) a screening item; (ii) demographic items (gender, age, nationality, MICE travel purpose, prior visits to Thailand, expenditure band); (iii) 57 substantive items adapted from previously validated scales (Anholt, 2007; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dinnie, 2008; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Fan, 2008; Kim et al., 2012; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Lund et al., 2018; Mossberg, 2008; Nye, 2008; Oh et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prebensen & Foss, 2011; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Sims, 2009; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Wang, 1999); and (iv) an open-ended policy-recommendation prompt. A Brislin (1970) forward–

backward translation procedure produced the Thai version. Bilingual translators independently produced the forward and back translations; two bilingual experts holding postgraduate degrees in hospitality and tourism, and the research team reconciled the translations to ensure conceptual and psychometric equivalence across the English and Thai versions. The questionnaire was content-validated through the Item-Objective Congruence procedure (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977; Turner & Carlson, 2003); all 57 items exceeded the 0.67 retention threshold (range: 0.80–1.00; grand mean: 0.91). A pilot study ($N = 30$) confirmed instrument reliability, with Cronbach's α ranging from .867 to .971 and all item-total correlations exceeding .40 (Hair et al., 2010).

Data were collected between January and February 2026. Quantitative data were analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024) through a two-stage approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Stage 1 (measurement model assessment) used outer loadings $\geq .708$, Cronbach's α / ρ_A / composite reliability ρ_c within .70–.95, AVE $\geq .50$, and HTMT $< .85$ / $< .90$ for discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015). Stage 2 (structural model assessment) used inner VIF < 3.0 (Kock, 2015); non-parametric bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples for one-tailed significance of all 21 directional paths, with both percentile and bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals; R^2 and adjusted R^2 interpreted against Henseler et al.'s (2009) thresholds; Cohen's f^2 effect sizes; and out-of-sample predictive validation via PLSpredict ($k = 10$ folds, 10 repetitions; Shmueli et al., 2019) and CVPAT against indicator-average and linear-model benchmarks (Liengard et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2023). Common-method bias was assessed a priori (procedural separation, anonymity, varied anchors; Podsakoff et al., 2003) and post hoc through Harman's single-factor test and full-collinearity assessment (Kock, 2015).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Silpakorn University prior to data collection (Project Code: REC 69.0206-023-1160; COA 69.0328-034; approved 28 March 2026, valid through 27 March 2027). Informed consent was obtained electronically before participation. Responses were collected anonymously and contained no direct personal identifiers. Completed records were stored in encrypted, password-protected files accessible only to the research team, retained solely for this study and scheduled for deletion after the mandated retention period, in accordance with the approved ethics protocol.

Research Results

Respondent Profile and Descriptive Statistics

Before the structural model was estimated, the achieved sample ($N = 200$) was profiled to confirm the suitability of the data for PLS-SEM estimation. The respondent profile is summarized in Table 2. The sample was predominantly male (54.50%) and concentrated in the 35–44 (50.50%) and 45–54 (30.50%) age bands; international delegates outnumbered Thai delegates by roughly

three to one (76.50% versus 23.50%); and participation was concentrated in Bangkok (40.50%), followed by Chiang Mai (17.50%), Pattaya (17.00%), and Phuket (16.00%). International conferences (56.50%) and incentive travel (49.00%) were the most frequent trip purposes, and most respondents reported moderate (38.50%) or high (36.00%) overall trip expenditure. As Table 3 shows, all 14 constructs scored in the highest interpretive band of the five-point scale (construct means 4.421–4.520; overall $M = 4.473$, $SD = 0.682$), with memorability ($M = 4.520$) and entertainment ($M = 4.518$) rated highest and cultural authenticity ($M = 4.421$) lowest. Standard deviations were low and uniform (0.659–0.705), indicating consistent agreement across respondents; item-level means and standard deviations followed the same pattern. Because responses cluster near the upper end of the scale, the data depart from normality, which is one reason the study uses PLS-SEM with non-parametric bootstrapping. This approach does not assume multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2022). These descriptive results precede and contextualize the measurement- and structural-model assessment that follows.

Table 2 Frequency and percentage of respondents' general characteristics (n = 200)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender identity		
Male	109	54.50
Female	83	41.50
Prefer not to say	7	3.50
LGBTQIA+	1	0.50
Age		
18–25 years	6	3.00
25–34 years	15	7.50
35–44 years	101	50.50
45–54 years	61	30.50
Over 55 years	17	8.50
Nationality		
Thai	47	23.50
International (non-Thai)	153	76.50
City of participation		
Bangkok	81	40.50
Chiang Mai	35	17.50
Pattaya	34	17.00
Phuket	32	16.00
Other/unspecified	18	9.00
Number of visits to Thailand		
Based in Thailand	46	23.00
More than 5 times	43	21.50

Characteristic	n	%
2–3 times	41	20.50
Once	38	19.00
4–5 times	32	16.00
Overall trip expenditure (THB)		
Moderate (50,000–100,000)	77	38.50
High (100,000–200,000)	72	36.00
Low (30,000–50,000)	40	20.00
Very high (≥200,000)	11	5.50
Purpose of trip (multiple responses permitted)		
Conference	113	56.50
Incentive travel	98	49.00
Meeting	91	45.50
Exhibition	80	40.00

Note. Percentages for trip purpose sum to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one purpose.

Table 3 Means and standard deviations of respondents' opinions toward the model constructs (n = 200)

Construct	M	SD	Level
Entertainment (ENT)	4.518	0.659	Very high
Education (EDU)	4.440	0.691	Very high
Escapism (ESC)	4.450	0.702	Very high
Esthetics (EST)	4.491	0.664	Very high
Cultural authenticity (AUT)	4.421	0.705	Very high
Storytelling (STO)	4.484	0.697	Very high
Localness (LOC)	4.499	0.691	Very high
Participation (PAR)	4.479	0.675	Very high
Memorability (MEM)	4.520	0.684	Very high
Soft-power perception (SPP)	4.452	0.692	Very high
Nation-brand perception (NBP)	4.485	0.667	Very high
National image (NTI)	4.465	0.672	Very high
Trust and affect (TAT)	4.474	0.671	Very high
Perceived competitive advantage (PCA)	4.447	0.678	Very high
Overall	4.473	0.682	Very high

Note. Five-point interpretive bands: 1.00–1.80 = lowest; 1.81–2.60 = low; 2.61–3.40 = moderate; 3.41–4.20 = high; 4.21–5.00 = very high. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Objective 1. The research results found that:

Objective 1 examined the influence of the four exogenous 4E experience dimensions on five cultural-value mediators. Prior to hypothesis testing, the measurement model was assessed. All 57 indicator loadings exceeded the .708 threshold (range: .788–.902); Cronbach's α ranged from .850 (SPP) to .905 (LOC); ρ_A ranged from .853 to .906; composite reliability ρ_c ranged

from .898 to .933; and AVE ranged from .689 to .778, all within recommended bands. HTMT values fell below the .90 ceiling for all 91 inter-construct pairs, with the highest off-diagonal at .838 (LOC $\leftrightarrow$ EDU). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was satisfied for every construct. Inner VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.702 ($M = 1.227$), confirming the absence of structural collinearity (Kock, 2015). Harman's single-factor test yielded a first unrotated factor that accounted for 38.7% of the total variance, well below the 50% threshold; common-method bias is therefore not a substantive threat.

Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples and one-tailed testing produced statistical support for all eight Layer 1 $\rightarrow$ Layer 2 hypotheses (H1–H8). The strongest effect in the entire model was EDU $\rightarrow$ LOC ($\beta = .744$, $t = 23.890$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 1.236$), followed by ESC $\rightarrow$ PAR ($\beta = .715$, $t = 19.486$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 1.048$). Education is therefore the dominant pathway into local-sourcing perception, and escapism is the dominant pathway into participatory co-creation. Table 4 reports the eight Cluster-1 path estimates. The exceptionally large EDU $\rightarrow$ LOC coefficient should be read in light of two considerations. Statistically, the inner VIF for this path (within the 1.000–1.702 range reported above) and the HTMT of .838 between EDU and LOC indicate that the magnitude is not an artifact of multicollinearity. However, the closeness of these two constructs in the gastronomic setting is itself substantively meaningful. Contextually, in chef-fronted Thai programming the educational content of the experience—provenance narration, ingredient briefings, and technique demonstration—is delivered almost entirely through references to local sourcing, so that the educational and local-sourcing dimensions are experientially tightly coupled for delegates.

Table 4 Structural model results for Objective 1 hypotheses (Layer 1 $\rightarrow$ Layer 2)

H	Path	β	t	p	95% BCa CI	f^2	Decision
H1	ENT $\rightarrow$ AUT	.424	8.467	< .001	[.323, .518]	.395	Supported
H2	ENT $\rightarrow$ STO	.488	8.836	< .001	[.376, .591]	.312	Supported
H3	EDU $\rightarrow$ AUT	.399	8.259	< .001	[.302, .489]	.339	Supported
H4	EDU $\rightarrow$ LOC	.744	23.890	< .001	[.679, .799]	1.236	Supported
H5	ESC $\rightarrow$ PAR	.715	19.486	< .001	[.638, .780]	1.048	Supported
H6	ESC $\rightarrow$ MEM	.479	9.916	< .001	[.383, .569]	.477	Supported
H7	EST $\rightarrow$ AUT	.356	6.587	< .001	[.245, .456]	.270	Supported
H8	EST $\rightarrow$ MEM	.482	9.795	< .001	[.380, .576]	.484	Supported

Note. β = standardized path coefficient; t = bootstrap t-statistic; p-values one-tailed; 95% BCa CI = bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 subsamples); f^2 = Cohen's effect size.

Explanatory power for the Layer-2 endogenous constructs was substantial: AUT ($R^2 = .545$), LOC ($R^2 = .553$), MEM ($R^2 = .531$), PAR ($R^2 = .512$); STO recorded the lowest value ($R^2 = .238$), an exception treated theoretically in the Discussion. Statistically, this means that the two 4E

antecedents specified for storytelling (ENT and, indirectly, the experiential set) jointly account for only 23.8% of its variance—roughly half the explanatory power achieved for the other four mediators—so that approximately three-quarters of the variance in storytelling reception remains attributable to antecedents outside the 4E frame. This weaker prediction is flagged here and interpreted substantively in the Discussion and New Knowledge sections.

Objective 2. The research results found that:

Objective 2 tested how cultural-value mediators transmit effects on soft-power perception, nation-brand perception, national image, and trust and affect. All eleven Cluster-2 and Cluster-3 hypotheses (H9–H19) were statistically supported. Within Cluster 2 (cultural value $\rightarrow$ SPP/NBP), PAR $\rightarrow$ NBP was the strongest path ($\beta = .454$, $t = 10.237$, $p < .001$) and AUT $\rightarrow$ SPP the weakest among supported paths ($\beta = .247$, $t = 4.568$, $p < .001$). LOC and MEM each fed both SPP and NBP, empirically confirming the dual-mediation pattern. Within Cluster 3 (SPP/NBP $\rightarrow$ NTI/TAT), the four paths were of similar magnitude ($\beta = .448$ to $.479$), with NBP $\rightarrow$ TAT ($\beta = .479$) leading the cluster. Table 5 summarizes the eleven path estimates for Clusters 2 and 3.

Table 5 Structural model results for Objective 2 hypotheses (Layers 2–3–4)

H	Path	β	t	p	95% BCa CI	f^2	Decision
H9	AUT $\rightarrow$ SPP	.247	4.568	< .001	[.140, .349]	.091	Supported
H10	STO $\rightarrow$ SPP	.345	6.693	< .001	[.241, .443]	.205	Supported
H11	LOC $\rightarrow$ SPP	.240	4.746	< .001	[.140, .340]	.115	Supported
H12	MEM $\rightarrow$ SPP	.302	6.087	< .001	[.204, .398]	.184	Supported
H13	LOC $\rightarrow$ NBP	.335	7.168	< .001	[.241, .424]	.277	Supported
H14	PAR $\rightarrow$ NBP	.454	10.237	< .001	[.367, .540]	.408	Supported
H15	MEM $\rightarrow$ NBP	.361	7.590	< .001	[.267, .452]	.258	Supported
H16	SPP $\rightarrow$ NTI	.448	9.112	< .001	[.349, .544]	.386	Supported
H17	NBP $\rightarrow$ NTI	.449	8.039	< .001	[.337, .553]	.388	Supported
H18	SPP $\rightarrow$ TAT	.463	9.933	< .001	[.370, .553]	.478	Supported
H19	NBP $\rightarrow$ TAT	.479	10.838	< .001	[.391, .564]	.510	Supported

Note. β = standardized path coefficient; t = bootstrap t-statistic; p-values one-tailed; 95% BCa CI = bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 subsamples); f^2 = Cohen's effect size.

Explanatory power for the Layer-3 and Layer-4 endogenous constructs was substantial: SPP ($R^2 = .594$), NBP ($R^2 = .595$), NTI ($R^2 = .569$), and TAT ($R^2 = .628$). Trust-and-affect was therefore the most strongly predicted construct in the model, reflecting the joint affective influence of both soft-power and nation-brand perception.

Objective 3. The research results found that:

Objective 3 quantified the explanatory and predictive power of the integrated five-layer model on perceived national competitive advantage. Both terminal-layer hypotheses were

statistically supported: $\text{NTI} \rightarrow \text{PCA}$ (H_{20} : $\beta = .450$, $t = 7.516$, $p < .001$) and $\text{TAT} \rightarrow \text{PCA}$ (H_{21} : $\beta = .380$, $t = 6.363$, $p < .001$). Perceived competitive advantage recorded $R^2 = .567$ ($R^2_{\text{adj}} = .563$), indicating that the integrated five-layer model explains 56.7% of the variance in the terminal endogenous outcome. The cognitive route ($\text{NTI} \rightarrow \text{PCA}$) was modestly stronger than the affective route ($\text{TAT} \rightarrow \text{PCA}$), with both routes contributing measurably. Table 6 reports the two Cluster-4 paths, along with the explanatory power summary for all ten endogenous constructs.

Table 6 Cluster-4 path estimates and explanatory power (R^2 / R^2_{adj}) for endogenous constructs

Endogenous LV	R^2	R^2_{adj}	Q^2_{predict}	CVPAT (LM)	Strength
TAT	.628	.624	.418	Superior	Substantial
NBP	.595	.588	.422	Superior	Mod-Subst.
SPP	.594	.586	.411	n.s.	Mod-Subst.
NTI	.569	.565	.381	Superior	Substantial
PCA	.567	.563	.315	Superior	Substantial
LOC	.553	.551	.548	Superior	Substantial
AUT	.545	.539	.398	Superior	Substantial
MEM	.531	.527	.394	Superior	Substantial
PAR	.512	.509	.458	Superior	Substantial
STO	.238	.234	.226	LM superior	Weak

Note. CVPAT (LM) = cross-validated predictive ability test against the linear-model benchmark; “Superior” indicates PLS-SEM significantly outperforms the LM at $p < .01$; “n.s.” = non-significant difference; “LM superior” = the linear model marginally outperforms PLS-SEM ($p = .008$). Strength thresholds: Henseler et al. (2009).

Out-of-sample predictive validation provided convergent evidence. Under PLSpredict (Shmueli et al., 2019), all ten endogenous latent variables exhibited $Q^2_{\text{predict}} > 0$ (range: .226 [STO] to .548 [LOC]), confirming that the model outperforms the naïve indicator-mean benchmark. Under CVPAT (Liengard et al., 2021), PLS-SEM significantly outperformed the indicator-average benchmark on all ten endogenous LVs and overall (average loss difference = $-.459$, $t = 10.893$, $p < .001$). Against the more demanding linear-model benchmark, PLS-SEM significantly outperformed on eight of ten constructs; the linear model was marginally superior for STO ($p = .008$), and the SPP comparison was non-significant ($p = .354$). Goodness-of-fit indices, although supplementary in PLS-SEM, were within acceptable ranges: SRMR (saturated) = .049, SRMR (estimated) = .083; both d_{ULS} and d_{G} fell within their bootstrap-based 95% upper bounds. In practical terms, the non-significant CVPAT result for soft-power perception ($p = .354$) does not indicate that SPP is poorly modeled—its Q^2_{predict} (.411) and R^2 (.594) remain substantial—but rather that, for this construct alone, a simple linear benchmark predicts new cases about as well as the full PLS path model. The implication for users of the model is that SPP can be reliably predicted without the additional complexity of a structural specification. In contrast, the remaining constructs derive genuine predictive gain from the integrated architecture. This signals that future

refinement of the soft-power measurement (e.g., additional or sharper indicators) may yield the largest marginal improvement in predictive performance.

Mediation analysis confirmed full (complementary) mediation under the Zhao et al. (2010) decision tree: because the model contains no direct $4E \rightarrow PCA$ path, every supported indirect chain represents complete mediation. The largest five-link serial indirect effects on PCA originated from escapism and education, routed through the PAR/LOC $\rightarrow$ NBP corridor: $ESC \rightarrow PAR \rightarrow NBP \rightarrow NTI \rightarrow PCA$ ($\beta = .066$, $t = 4.210$, $p < .001$) and $EDU \rightarrow LOC \rightarrow NBP \rightarrow NTI \rightarrow PCA$ ($\beta = .050$, $t = 4.318$, $p < .001$).

To make the relative influence of each pathway immediately visible, Table 7 ranks all 21 structural paths by the magnitude of their standardized coefficients (β), with ties broken by t -values; the underlying estimates are those reported in Tables 4–6 (formerly Tables 1–3).

Table 7 Ranking of the strongest and weakest structural relationships in the model

Rank	H	Path	β	t	f^2	Interpretation
1	H4	EDU $\rightarrow$ LOC	.744	23.890	1.236	Dominant 4E $\rightarrow$ cultural-value pathway
2	H5	ESC $\rightarrow$ PAR	.715	19.486	1.048	Dominant escapism $\rightarrow$ co-creation pathway
3	H2	ENT $\rightarrow$ STO	.488	8.836	.312	Strongest antecedent of storytelling
4	H8	EST $\rightarrow$ MEM	.482	9.795	.484	Aesthetics $\rightarrow$ memorability
5	H19	NBP $\rightarrow$ TAT	.479	10.838	.510	Strongest reputational $\rightarrow$ affect link
6	H6	ESC $\rightarrow$ MEM	.479	9.916	.477	Strong escapism $\rightarrow$ memorability pathway
7	H18	SPP $\rightarrow$ TAT	.463	9.933	.478	Soft-power $\rightarrow$ trust-and-affect link
8	H14	PAR $\rightarrow$ NBP	.454	10.237	.408	Co-creation $\rightarrow$ nation-brand pathway
9	H20	NTI $\rightarrow$ PCA	.450	7.516	.275	National image $\rightarrow$ competitive advantage
10	H17	NBP $\rightarrow$ NTI	.449	8.039	.388	Nation-brand $\rightarrow$ national-image link
11	H16	SPP $\rightarrow$ NTI	.448	9.112	.386	Soft-power $\rightarrow$ national-image link
12	H1	ENT $\rightarrow$ AUT	.424	8.467	.395	Entertainment $\rightarrow$ authenticity pathway
13	H3	EDU $\rightarrow$ AUT	.399	8.259	.339	Education $\rightarrow$ authenticity pathway
14	H21	TAT $\rightarrow$ PCA	.380	6.363	.196	Trust-and-affect $\rightarrow$ competitive advantage
15	H15	MEM $\rightarrow$ NBP	.361	7.590	.258	Memorability $\rightarrow$ nation-brand pathway
16	H7	EST $\rightarrow$ AUT	.356	6.587	.270	Aesthetics $\rightarrow$ authenticity pathway
17	H10	STO $\rightarrow$ SPP	.345	6.693	.205	Among weakest cultural-value $\rightarrow$ SPP paths
18	H13	LOC $\rightarrow$ NBP	.335	7.168	.277	Lower-magnitude territorial $\rightarrow$ brand path
19	H12	MEM $\rightarrow$ SPP	.302	6.087	.184	Modest memorability $\rightarrow$ soft-power path
20	H9	AUT $\rightarrow$ SPP	.247	4.568	.091	Weakest supported soft-power antecedent
21	H11	LOC $\rightarrow$ SPP	.240	4.746	.115	Smallest standardized effect in the model

Note. All values are reproduced from the bootstrap results reported in Tables 4–6 (5,000-subsample bootstrap, as specified in the Methodology). Paths are ranked by β ; ties were broken by t -value. All 21 paths were statistically significant ($p < .001$). Four of the five weakest relationships are cultural-value $\rightarrow$ soft-power-perception (SPP) paths, consistent with soft-power perception being determined jointly by several modest antecedents rather than by any single dominant one.

Discussion

The results of the research objective 1 found that.

The eight Layer 1 → Layer 2 hypotheses were all statistically supported, extending Pine and Gilmore's (1999) 4E framework beyond its conventional satisfaction–loyalty endpoints (Hwang & Lyu, 2015; Oh et al., 2007) to cultural–value mediators. Each of the four Es mapped onto a distinguishable cultural–value mediator with theoretically coherent specialization. The disproportionately large education–to–localness effect ($\beta = .744$, $f^2 = 1.236$) refines Pine and Gilmore's largely symmetric treatment of the four Es. It suggests that, in the gastronomic context, the educational realm carries strategic weight beyond what the original framework anticipates. This converges with Chai et al. (2022), Do and Nguyen (2025), and Phrammanachot et al. (2026), all of whom identify learning–rich exposure as the gateway to deeper perception of cultural value. The under–prediction of storytelling ($R^2 = .238$) implies that culinary narrative reception draws on antecedents outside the 4E framework — plausibly chef charisma and stage presence, prior media exposure, pre–event marketing salience, and cultural familiarity — a substantive issue further addressed in the New Knowledge section. This pattern is also consistent with the behavior of contemporary MICE delegates, who increasingly expect substantive, learning–rich engagement rather than passive hospitality. For a professional audience attending in a business capacity, the educational framing of provenance and technique appears to be the channel through which a meal is read as an authentic expression of place. With respect to the divergent storytelling result, a plausible way to incorporate the newly proposed antecedents is to specify them as an additional exogenous block feeding STO within Layer 1—chef charisma and stage presence as a performer–level construct, and prior media exposure, pre–event marketing salience, and cultural familiarity as pre–experience priming constructs—thereby extending rather than replacing the existing 4E specification.

The results of the research objective 2 found that.

All eleven Layer 2 → Layer 3 and Layer 3 → Layer 4 hypotheses were supported, operationalizing Nye's (2004) attraction mechanism through measurable indicators and confirming Dinnie's (2008) argument that nation–brand equity accumulates through repeated micro–experiences. Soft–power perception was driven jointly by narrative (STO → SPP), embodied (MEM → SPP; AUT → SPP), and territorial (LOC → SPP) elements — the microfoundation that Cabral et al. (2025) explicitly note has been historically absent from soft–power scholarship. Participation emerged as the strongest single antecedent of nation–brand perception ($\beta = .454$, $f^2 = .408$), supporting the substantive implication that nation–brand equity is built through active engagement rather than passive exposure, converging with Lee and Kim (2021) on Singapore's hawker–culture UNESCO bid and Castilla–Corzo and Colmenares–Castro (2026) on Colombian

gastrodiplomacy. The dual-mediation pattern through LOC and MEM further specifies how cultural value is transduced across the soft-power and brand-equity layers, a structural feature not available in single-mediator models. A note of caution is warranted regarding the leap from these individual-level perceptions to macro-level outcomes. The model establishes that on-site experience reliably produces soft-power and nation-brand perceptions at the level of the individual delegate; it does not, and cannot, demonstrate that these perceptions aggregate directly into long-term political or economic influence at the state level. The mechanism specified here is best understood as the microfoundational first link in a longer causal chain: individual attraction is a necessary precursor to, but not a sufficient guarantee of, national-level soft-power returns, which depend on additional aggregation, repetition, and diffusion processes beyond the scope of a single cross-sectional study. This positioning is consistent with Nye's (2004) own treatment of soft power as a diffuse, cumulative resource rather than a directly convertible asset.

The results of the research objective 3 found that.

The integrated five-layer model explained 56.7% of the variance in perceived national competitive advantage, with both NTI $\rightarrow$ PCA and TAT $\rightarrow$ PCA paths statistically supported. The dual-driver specification — cognitive NTI and affective TAT — is consistent with contemporary dual-process accounts of competitive judgment (Wei et al., 2023) and avoids the limitation of single-route models that conflate cognition and affect. Tripathi and Kumar (2026) and Alharbi (2026) reinforce the view that affective trust contributes incremental variance to competitive-advantage perceptions beyond cognitive evaluations. The convergent evidence from PLSpredict and CVPAT supports the model's out-of-sample predictive relevance against the indicator-average benchmark for all ten endogenous constructs and against the linear-model benchmark for eight of ten constructs. The storytelling exception under CVPAT is methodologically instructive: it shows that CVPAT can flag construct-level predictive vulnerabilities that aggregate Q^2_{predict} scores can obscure, supporting Liengaard et al. (2021) and Sharma et al. (2023) in their argument that CVPAT should be standard practice in contemporary PLS-SEM reporting.

New Knowledge from Research

This research produced a synthesized, empirically tested causal architecture that integrates three independently mature theoretical frameworks — Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy, Nye's soft power theory, and Dinnie's nation branding theory — into a single five-layer mechanism. The architecture moves the field beyond piecemeal applications of any one framework by specifying how experiential stimuli at the chef's table translate, through a sequence of cultural and perceptual mediators, into perceived competitive advantage at the national level. Figure 2 presents the study's conceptual contribution model, developed by the authors to distinguish the

three novel contributions—the soft-power microfoundation, the sequenced lever map, and the storytelling boundary—from the established relationships among the five layers.

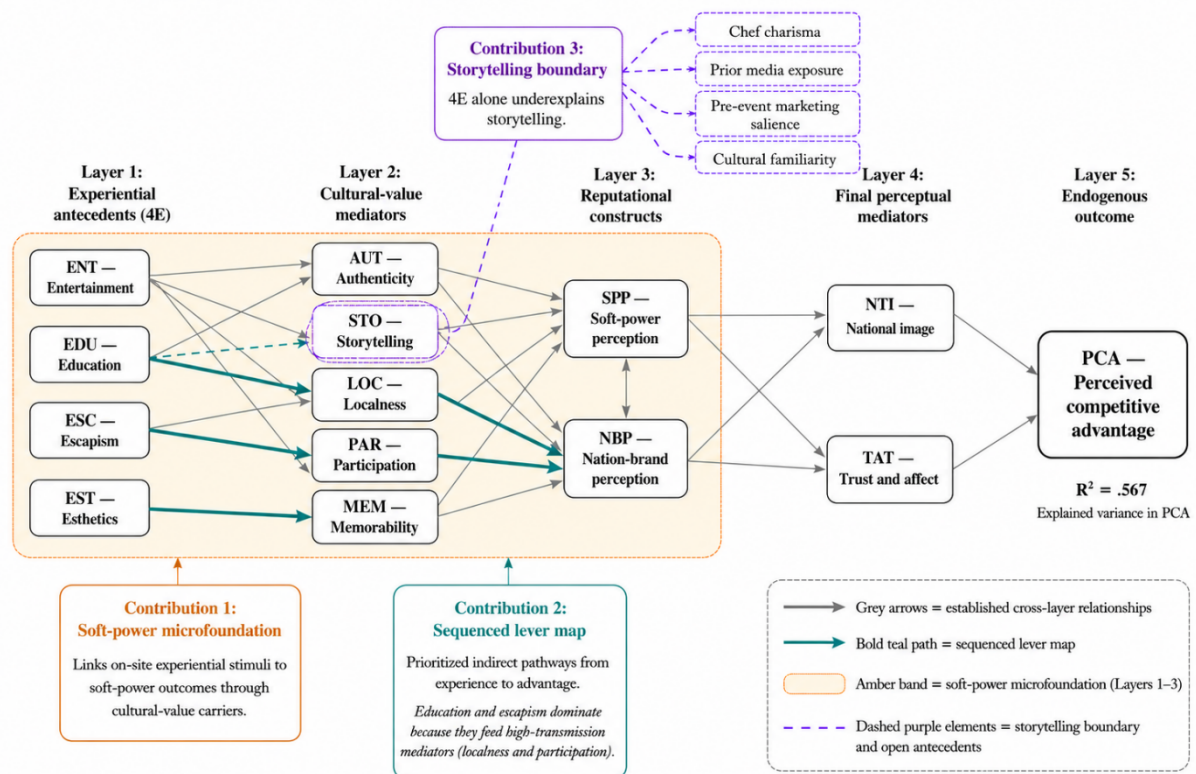


Figure 2 From experience to advantage: The causal architecture of soft power

Note. Original conceptual diagram developed by the authors. Grey arrows denote established cross-layer relationships; the bold teal path marks the study's sequenced lever map; the amber band marks the soft-power microfoundation (Layers 1–3); and the dashed purple elements mark the storytelling boundary and its open antecedents. Construct codes follow the manuscript: ENT = entertainment; EDU = education; ESC = escapism; EST = esthetics; AUT = authenticity; STO = storytelling; LOC = localness; PAR = participation; MEM = memorability; SPP = soft-power perception; NBP = nation-brand perception; NTI = national image; TAT = trust and affect; PCA = perceived competitive advantage. The 56.7% figure is the R^2 (explained variance) when PCA is used as the endogenous outcome and should not be interpreted as out-of-sample predictive accuracy.

As shown in Figure 2, the model unfolds across five sequenced layers. The first layer specifies the four exogenous experiential antecedents drawn from Pine and Gilmore's 4E framework — entertainment (ENT), education (EDU), escapism (ESC), and esthetics (EST) — which capture the on-site stimuli encountered by participants. The second layer comprises five cultural-value mediators activated by those stimuli: authenticity (AUT), storytelling (STO), localness (LOC), participation (PAR), and memorability (MEM). The third layer translates these cultural values into two reputational constructs — soft power perception (SPP) and nation brand perception (NBP) — through which the gastronomic experience acquires geopolitical and commercial meaning. The fourth layer captures national image (NTI) and trust and affect (TAT) as the final perceptual

mediators, and the fifth layer terminates in the single endogenous outcome, perceived competitive advantage (PCA), which the model explains with an R^2 of .567. The theoretical significance of this figure lies not in its size alone but in what it explains and how it does so. That a chain originating in on-site dining stimuli accounts for more than half the variance in a national-level reputational outcome—using only experiential and perceptual antecedents, with no economic, political, or infrastructural predictors—indicates that gastronomic experience is a substantively important, not marginal, contributor to perceived competitive advantage. At the same time, the remaining 43% explicitly bounds the claim: experiential gastrodiploacy is one meaningful lever among several, situating the chef's-table mechanism as a genuine but partial determinant of competitive positioning rather than a self-sufficient explanation.

Three contributions to knowledge follow directly from this architecture, and each maps onto a distinct portion of Figure 2.

First, the model supplies soft-power theory with the microfoundation it has historically lacked. Whereas prior soft-power scholarship has treated cultural attraction as a macro-level resource without specifying how it is produced at the level of individual experience, the present study specifies and empirically estimates a measurement architecture linking on-site experiential stimuli (Layer 1) to soft-power outcomes (Layer 3) through identifiable cultural-value carriers (Layer 2). The chef's table is thus repositioned from an isolated marketing artifact to a theoretically grounded mechanism for converting intangible cultural assets into perceptible soft-power signals. Second, the model identifies what the architecture renders visible as a *sequenced lever map*: a prioritized configuration of experiential investments — education-rich local sourcing, escapist participation, aesthetic memorability, and storytelling quality — through which gastronomic experiences yield measurable indirect returns on national image, trust and affect, and ultimately perceived competitive advantage. This finding shifts the practical contribution from generic experiential design recommendations to a sequenced, empirically calibrated set of strategic priorities. The lever map is significant precisely because it links Layer 1 inputs to Layer 5 outcomes through quantified indirect paths, making the conversion process from experience to advantage operationally tractable for MICE policymakers and destination marketers. The reason some inputs yield higher indirect returns than others is structural rather than incidental: an indirect effect is the product of every coefficient along its path, so an input return is maximized when a strong Layer 1 → Layer 2 effect feeds a mediator that itself has a strong onward path. Education and escapism dominate the lever map not merely because they have the largest first-stage coefficients (EDU → LOC, ESC → PAR) but because they feed localness and participation, the two mediators with the strongest links into nation-brand perception—so their advantage compounds across the chain. Inputs whose strong first-stage effect feeds a weakly transmitting mediator (as with storytelling)

deliver smaller cumulative returns, which is why the lever map ranks investments by their full multiplicative path rather than by any single coefficient.

Third, the underprediction of storytelling (STO), evident in its comparatively modest R^2 relative to the other cultural-value mediators, constitutes a substantive theoretical contribution in its own right rather than a methodological limitation. It demarcates the *boundary of 4E sufficiency* in the gastronomic context: the four experiential antecedents alone do not fully explain how compelling culinary narratives emerge. This boundary condition identifies a previously unexplored set of antecedents — chef charisma, prior media exposure, pre-event marketing salience, and cultural familiarity — that future research should incorporate to close the explanatory gap. In this sense, the finding is generative: it not only refines the scope claims of experience-economy theory in gastronomic settings but also charts a concrete research agenda for extending the model in subsequent studies.

Taken together, these three contributions — the microfoundational grounding of soft-power theory, the sequenced lever map, and the demarcated boundary of storytelling — establish the integrated five-layer architecture as both an explanatory and a predictive contribution to the literature on experiential marketing, soft power, and nation branding in the MICE context.

Conclusion

This research examined how the on-site Chef's Table experience translates, through specific mediating mechanisms, into perceived national competitive advantage in MICE marketing. Drawing on Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy, Nye's (2004) soft-power theory, and Dinnie's (2008) nation-brand framework, a five-layer PLS-SEM model was specified and tested on MICE delegates attending Chef's Table programs in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Phuket. All 21 directional hypotheses received empirical support within the Thai context studied. The model explains a substantial share of the variance in perceived competitive advantage and demonstrates out-of-sample predictive relevance under both PLSpredict and CVPAT, with the storytelling construct identified as the principal substantive exception requiring further theoretical attention.

Theoretically, the study integrates three independently mature frameworks into a single empirically tractable causal chain and supplies soft-power theory with the microfoundation it has historically lacked. Managerially, the model provides Thai DMOs and convention bureaus with a sequenced lever map to support evidence-based prioritization of gastrodipomatic investments. Within the boundaries articulated below, the Chef's Table programming examined here serves as a measurable instrument for national-competitive positioning. It provides MICE policymakers with a defensible analytical basis for decisions on experiential investment.

These contributions should be read against several boundaries. First, the sample was drawn through non-probability purposive sampling. Hence, the findings describe the population of Chef's Table attendees rather than a statistically representative cross-section of all MICE

delegates, and generalization beyond this frame should be made with caution. Second, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and therefore cannot establish the temporal stability of the modeled relationships or rule out reverse causation. Third, the study is geographically bounded to four Thai destination cities; the soft-power and nation-brand mechanisms it documents may operate differently in other national and cultural contexts. Fourth, all constructs were measured through self-reported perceptions, which—although addressed through procedural and statistical common-method remedies—remain susceptible to perceptual and social-desirability biases and do not capture behavioral or macro-level outcomes. These boundaries delimit the claims advanced here and motivate the research directions set out below.

More broadly, by joining the experience-economy, soft-power, and nation-branding frameworks into one tractable chain, the study reframes destination marketing in the MICE sector: it shows that the value of a signature gastronomic experience lies not in the event itself but in its capacity to be transduced, step by step, into reputational capital. Understood this way, the measurement architecture offered here is a durable analytical instrument—one that positions the chef's table, and experiential gastrodiploacy more generally, as a measurable lever of national competitiveness rather than a fleeting cultural amenity.

Suggestions

Based on the research findings, the researchers make the following recommendations:

1. Suggestion for Implementing the Research Findings

The results of research objective 1 revealed that education and escapism are the strongest experiential antecedents of cultural value, with $EDU \rightarrow LOC$ and $ESC \rightarrow PAR$ carrying the largest standardized effects in the model. Therefore, Thai DMOs, convention bureaus, and MICE event organizers should: (i) embed pre-event chef briefings on ingredient provenance and supplier-specific sourcing; (ii) introduce table-side narration linking each course to its geographic and cultural origin; (iii) build interactive cooking segments and multi-sensory pacing into Chef's Table programming; and (iv) deliberately remove guest-stage barriers to enable co-creation moments. Because these multi-sensory and interactive enhancements carry real cost and logistical implications—chef and staff time, smaller table-to-host ratios, sourcing relationships with local producers, and venue reconfiguration—organizers should phase them by expected return: the model indicates that investment in educational local-sourcing content and participatory co-creation yields the largest indirect effects, so where budgets are constrained these two levers should be prioritized before more capital-intensive aesthetic staging. Public funding bodies such as TCEB could underwrite pilot programs to defray the initial outlay and to test feasibility at scale before broader roll-out.

The results of research objective 2 revealed that participation is the strongest single antecedent of nation-brand perception, and that localness and memorability function as dual mediators feeding both soft power and nation brand. Therefore, relevant agencies should: (i) prioritize active-engagement formats over passive-spectatorship formats in flagship Chef's Table events; (ii) treat memorability as a strategic asset by engineering sensorial high points into the menu progression; and (iii) anchor cultural-distinctiveness claims in clearly identifiable territorial-provenance cues.

The results of research objective 3 revealed that both cognitive (national image) and affective (trust-and-affect) routes carry the Chef's Table experience into perceived competitive advantage, with the integrated model accounting for 56.7% of variance. Therefore, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau and analogous DMOs should adopt this serial-mediation architecture as a KPI hierarchy for grant-funded gastrodiploacy programs, allocating budgets across the full 4E → cultural-value → soft-power/nation-brand → image-affect → competitive-advantage pathway rather than at single nodes.

2. Suggestion for Future Research

This research yielded an empirically supported five-layer mediation architecture linking experiential gastronomy to perceived national competitive advantage. The findings can be applied to other gastrodiploacy settings and to non-gastronomic MICE formats. Priority should be given to: (i) longitudinal replication across consecutive MICE cycles to test temporal stability; (ii) multi-group analysis by delegate nationality and dietary background to identify culturally invariant versus contingent pathways; and (iii) cross-cultural replication in Peruvian, Japanese, South Korean, and Colombian gastrodiploacy contexts to test whether the proposed mechanism is convergent or culturally contingent. For future research, the focus should be on identifying additional antecedents of storytelling beyond the 4E frame — chef charisma and stage presence, prior media exposure, pre-event marketing salience, and cultural familiarity — and on extending the model to incorporate importance-performance map analysis (IPMA) and necessary condition analysis (NCA). When applying the five-layer architecture across cultural contexts, researchers should not assume that the construct meanings and indicator loadings are equivalent across groups. Reconciliation is best handled in two steps: first, establish measurement invariance (e.g., the MICOM procedure for composite models) to confirm that the constructs are understood comparably before any cross-cultural comparison of path coefficients; and second, treat the substantive content of each cultural-value mediator—particularly authenticity and localness, which are culturally laden—as potentially context-specific, allowing the indicators to be re-specified to local culinary meanings while preserving the structural logic of the layers. This separates what is theorized to be universal (the sequence experience → cultural value → reputation → image → advantage) from what is expected to be culturally contingent (the specific experiential cues that activate each mediator).

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