

Exploring Memorable Thai Food Experiences: A Segmentation Approach in Culinary Tourism

Siripan Deesilatham^{1,*}

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Abstract

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Keywords: memorable food experience, food tourism, gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism segmentation, satisfaction, behavioural intention

¹ Lecturer, Business School, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce

* Corresponding author: siripan_dee@utcc.ac.th

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1. Introduction

Thailand has long been a renowned destination, attracting around 28 million international tourists in 2023 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023). In addition to natural beautiful scenery and its rich cultures and heritage, Thailand is also one of the world's most popular destinations for its vibrant and diverse culinary culture, specifically Thai food, drawing food enthusiasts from around the globe. As culinary tourism continues to grow, it has been recognised as a significant economic benefit (Choe & Kim, 2018; Mak et al., 2012). Several studies have shown that tourists spend more than one-third of their total tourism expenditure on food (Correia et al., 2008; Henderson et al., 2012; Jeaheng & Han, 2020; Robinson & Getz, 2014). In Thailand, food and beverage products generated approximately 115,305 million baht in tourist expenditure in 2021 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, (2021). Local food, such as Thai food, has its own identity that can enhance the destination's image. Therefore, numerous tourism destinations often use local food-related activities and culinary experiences to attract international tourists (Chieh & Scott, 2020; Jeaheng & Han, 2020; Lai et al., 2018; Robinson & Getz, 2014).

Over the past decade, gastronomic or culinary tourism has gained significant popularity in the tourism research field. Numerous studies have been conducted to explore various aspects of tourists' interactions with food, such as local food consumption behaviour (Choe & Kim, 2018; Hsu et al., 2018), food experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Chieh & Scott, 2020; Chompupor et al., 2024; Rewtrakunphaiboon & Sawangdee, 2022), factors influencing tourists' food consumption (Mak et al., 2012), perceptions of risk and benefits associated with food consumption (Choi et al., 2013), segmentation in food tourism (Au & Law, 2002; Hsu et al., 2023; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Robinson & Getz, 2014; Santos et al., 2020; Stone & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024), branding in food tourism (Tsai & Wang, 2017), memorable experiences in food tourism (Akhoondnejad, 2024; Park et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2018), and food image (Lertputtarak, 2012).

Food tourism research has been conducted in various contexts. Several studies have concentrated on street food (Choi et al., 2013; Chompupor et al., 2024; Jeaheng & Han, 2020; Rewtrakunphaiboon & Sawangdee, 2022; Torres Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017), but fewer studies have explored ethnic food (Ting et al., 2019) and local food (Choe & Kim, 2018; Hsu et al., 2018). Past studies have confirmed that food experiences have a significant influence on tourist satisfaction (Rewtrakunphaiboon & Sawangdee, 2022), behavioural intentions (Chieh & Scott, 2020; Choe & Kim, 2018; Choi et al., 2013; Chompupor et al., 2024; Hsu et al., 2018; Jeaheng & Han, 2020; Stone et al., 2019; Torres Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017), place attachment (Chieh & Scott, 2020), and destination image (Chieh & Scott, 2020; Choe & Kim, 2018). Some researchers have applied the theory of planned behaviour to examine tourist experiences in terms of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in relation to food tourism and outcomes such as behavioural intentions (Hsu et al., 2018; Levitt et al., 2019; Torres Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017). Previous studies indicated that memorable food experiences tend to encourage tourists to revisit a destination (Akhoondnejad, 2024; Stone et al., 2018). Additionally, the sensory enjoyment and emotional connections these experiences foster are likely to enhance tourists' overall satisfaction, increasing their intention to return. However, the underlying role of memorable food experiences in shaping behaviour remains underexplored.

Many studies have examined food experiences in Thailand, but most have focused on street food (Chompupor et al., 2024; Jeaheng & Han, 2020; Rewtrakunphaiboon & Sawangdee, 2022; Torres Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017). Additionally, several studies have explored food safety (Choovanichchannon, 2015; Sirigunna, 2015; Yiamjanya & Wongleedee, 2013), and one study investigated food image (Lertputtarak, 2012). To date, researchers have yet to explore memorable food experiences of Thai food in general, including all types of Thai cuisine that tourists encounter during their stay in Thailand, particularly using a segmentation perspective.

This paper's objectives are twofold: first, to empirically identify distinguishable patterns of memorable Thai food experiences among tourists and second, to investigate the relationships between tourists' memorable Thai food experiences and the evaluations of satisfaction and behavioural intentions. A two-step cluster analysis which combines hierarchical clustering to identify initial clusters with K-means clustering for refinement, was performed to classify respondents into groups based on mean scores for their memorable Thai food experiences. This analysis revealed that three clusters were classified: Culinary Novices, Sentimental Culinary Lovers, and Culinary Immersionists. The findings of this study advance the segmentation literature by examining tourists' memorable food experiences, satisfaction levels, and behavioural intentions concerning the destination. Findings also offer implications for destinations to design marketing and branding strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Memorable Food Experiences in Tourism Research

Memorable tourism experiences are important aspects of achieving competitive advantages for destinations (Brochado et al., 2022; Sthapit et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Past experiences tend to influence tourists' travel decision choices (Brochado et al., 2022; Mak et al., 2012; Sthapit, 2017). Memorable tourism experiences are the key factor in predicting tourists' behavioural intentions concerning a destination—the intention to revisit, intention to recommend, or both (Adongo et al., 2015; Brochado et al., 2022; Hosany et al., 2022; Lončarić et al., 2021;

Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Sthapit et al., 2020; Tsai, 2016). Researchers have made several attempts to understand and capture the nature of experiences. Cohen (1979) proposed the value concept for understanding the tourism experience, which consists of five constructs: recreational, diversional, experiential, experimental, and existential. However, additional empirical studies are needed to strengthen the validity and applicability of this notion. Otto and Ritchie (2012) developed and tested scales to measure tourism experiences across tourism sectors such as hotels, airlines, tours, and attractions. They identified four tourism experience factors, including hedonics, peace of mind, involvement, and personal recognition. Kim et al. (2012) criticised the fact that previous scales overlooked the memory aspect of experiences, which is an important reflection of tourism experiences and influences future intentions. They developed the memorable tourism experiences (MTE) scale, which consists of 24 items in seven dimensions, including hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. The scale has been applied in several studies on food tourism (Adongo et al., 2015; Sthapit et al., 2020; Tsai, 2016). However, it has received several criticisms. The MTE scale is considered too broad and inadequate to capture the unique aspects of memorable food experiences (Stone et al., 2018). The scale emphasises interactions and relationship experiences with local people rather than focusing on local food experiences, which play important roles in contributing to memorable experiences (Sthapit et al., 2019). One important criticism is that the samples Kim et al. (2012) used were collected solely from college students, who may not represent typical tourists who come from diverse backgrounds, belong to different age groups, and vary in travel motivations. Their limited travel experiences might affect the understanding of factors that contribute to memorable tourism experiences. Additionally, the MTE scale's focus on novelty seems to overlook familiarity and emotional connections to past experiences, which are also significant factors in creating memorable experiences (Stone et al., 2018). Although the MTE scale seems to be an appropriate research framework for studying memorable experiences, adaptation is needed due to the particular characteristics of memorable food experiences (Stone et al., 2018).

Recently, several tourism studies have investigated memorable food experiences (Adongo et al., 2015; Akhoondnejad, 2024; Huang et al., 2019; Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Sthapit, 2017; Stone et al., 2018; Tsai, 2016; Williams et al., 2019). For instance, Adongo and colleagues (2015) studied 654 international tourists who experienced Ghanaian cuisines. The study extended the MTE scale by Kim et al. (2012) by adding a negative or adverse experience construct to their measure. They identified five dimensions through factor analysis, which comprise local culture, knowledge, novelty, hedonism–meaningfulness, and adverse experiences. Although only four dimensions are consistent with the original MTE scale, expanding the adverse experiences construct further extends the existing knowledge that negative factors significantly affect memorable experiences. The study revealed that food history and the novelty and uniqueness of food experiences can enhance lasting memories and influence word of mouth. However, negative attributes of food experiences, such as those related to cleanliness, food hygiene, food safety, and unfair pricing, can distort positive memorable experiences and negatively affect tourists' intentions to recommend local food. Building on the research by Kim (2010) and Kim et al. (2012), Tsai (2016) adopted the MTE scale to capture memorable experiences of local cuisines among 378 tourists visiting Tainan. The confirmatory factor analysis results indicated that all seven constructs of the MTE scale remained consistent with the original dimensions. The study showed that experiencing local food can create positive and unforgettable memories that further strengthen tourists' emotional

connections to a place and influence their behavioural intention. However, despite findings that aligned with those of Kim et al. (2012), the sample in Tsai's study was limited to Taiwan residential tourists. Including more diverse background samples would provide a richer understanding of the factors that contribute to memorable experiences. Likewise, Huang et al. (2019) adapted the scale from Quan and Wang (2004) and Tsai (2016) to capture memorable tourism experiences from 374 tourists at the Macao food festival. The MTE scale in this study included only two items, indicating that it was inadequate for measuring memorable experiences.

Researchers have previously attempted to employ qualitative research approaches such as grounded theory, consumer culture theory, interviews, and open-ended surveys to explore the emotional, psychological, and personal factors that shape memorable food experiences. For example, Goolaup and Mossberg (2017) interviewed 15 tourists who had visited an oyster bar located on Kåringön, an island on the west coast of Sweden. They aimed to examine the tourists' perspective on the extraordinary nature-based food experience. The findings, based on the ground theory approach, revealed that food tourists' extraordinary nature-based experiences could be classified into six dimensions, including nonordinary, togetherness, insightful, hospitality, luxurious, genuine, and peripheral. However, this study was focused on a specific sample at an oyster bar, so the findings may not represent broader food tourism experiences. Additionally, the oyster bar operates only in winter, which may attract a specific type of tourist, leading to a potential bias in the findings. This study may not reflect the experiences of tourists who prefer warm weather or different seasons. Similarly, Sthapit (2017) interviewed 22 tourists in Rovaniemi, Finland, using grounded theory to examine the factors contributing to their memorable food experiences. Findings revealed seven factors that enhance tourists' memorable food experiences, consisting of local specialities and taste, authenticity, novelty, togetherness, social interaction, hospitality, and servicescape. The study also showed that active cocreation of the food experience by engaging with other tourists and service personnel can enhance tourists' enjoyment in learning about local food cultures. However, the sample was limited to the individuals who had visited Rovaniemi in the last 2 years. The memorable food experiences may not have been adequate to capture a broader range of tourists from various backgrounds. In contrast to these place-specific studies, Stone et al. (2018) conducted a study on memorable food and drink experiences in the context of culinary tourism. They collected 1,188 online surveys across four countries: Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The findings revealed five elements contributing to memorable food or drink tourism experiences, including the type of food and drink consumed, location/setting, companions, occasion, and touristic elements. These dimensions can be categorised as follows: food/drink and location/setting can be referred to as physical environment, occasion and companions can be classified as social engagement, and touristic elements can be described as psychological aspects or experiential dimensions. Building upon the MTE framework of Kim et al. (2012), Stone et al. (2018) extended the insights into memorable food experiences in geographic and cultural contexts. They revealed that memorable food experiences can arise from both familiar and novel contexts. The findings also indicate that the locality of food experiences and settings plays a significant role in the memorability of the tourists' experiences. Subsequently, Williams et al. (2019) provided further insights into the emotional, social, and behavioural aspects of memorable gastro-tourism experiences by gathering data from 200 online surveys and 20 interviews with tourists who had participated in food tourism activities within the past 2 years. They identified seven elements consisting of deliberate and incidental gastro-tourists, travel stages, foodie risk-taking,

interdependent cocreated relationships, authenticity, sociability, and emotions. However, similar to previous studies, the study by Williams et al. (2019) also had limitations regarding recency. The participants had to recall experiences from the previous 2 years, which did not account for the immediacy of recent trips or current tourists. Memories may become less vivid when responding to survey and interview questions, which could affect the richness and accuracy of the data.

Despite previous studies attempting to identify the attributes that enhance memorable food experiences, so far, there is still no consensus on the dimensions that constitute these experiences. The lack of alignment may be due to contextual differences such as cultural, geographical, and situational factors, which could influence the dimension of memorable food experiences. In addition, most studies have used qualitative methods. Responding to the call by Stone et al. (2018), this study is intended to address the gaps by extending the factors that contribute to memorable food experiences based on the touristic elements identified in the work of Stone et al. (2018) study. This research is based on a quantitative method to categorize memorable food experiences in the Thai food context among international tourists during their stay in Thailand.

2.2 Segmentation in Food Tourism

Market segmentation classifies the overall market into meaningful segments based on demographic, psychographic, and behavioural variables (Hsu et al., 2023). Segmenting tourist food experiences into smaller and more homogeneous groups can be a useful tool to better understand the market for food tourism stakeholders. At the same time, understanding the various interests of different segments may enable destination managers to develop specific products and offerings that cater to the unique needs of each segment visiting specific gastronomy destinations (Levitt et al., 2019; Martín et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2018). The uniqueness, authenticity, and quality of local cuisine at gastronomy tourist destinations can attract more tourists with potentially higher spending power (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Martín et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018).

In food tourism, segmentation has generally been based on motivations, lifestyle, and sociodemographics (Martín et al., 2020). For example, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) simply segmented based on age and motives, identifying that the key motives of the younger tourists were new experiences and socialisation, and middle-aged tourists prioritised relaxation and food experiences. The elder tourists showed the lowest mean across all motivations. Crespi-Vallbona and Dimitrovski (2016) identified two clusters: Food-market lovers were attracted by health concerns, sensory appeal, and interaction with local vendors, and apathetic-market visitors seemed uninterested in all of these motives. Leveraging Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) study, Pérez-Gálvez et al. (2020) determined three segments: Survivors seemed uninterested in food tourism experiences, enjoyers had positive attitudes across all motives, and experiencers had the highest mean in cultural experience, sensorial appeal, and interpersonal relationships across the three clusters, indicating that they had the greatest interest in gastronomy.

Some studies focused heavily on only particular dimensions, such as service attributes or satisfaction. For instance, Ko et al. (2018) classified tourists based on their attitudes toward food-tour service attributes into four clusters: Authenticity seekers focused most on creditability, authenticity, and tour guides; knowledge seekers prioritised educational value; guidance seekers were most concerned with creditability; and experience seekers paid attention to all service attributes. Martín et al. (2020) applied a hybrid fuzzy clustering technique to classify tourists based on

gastronomy satisfaction into three clusters: Foodies expressed high satisfaction with gastronomy experiences, no-foodies were tourists who were extremely dissatisfied with food experiences, and those in the intermediate category were moderately satisfied with all attributes except for price and facilities. The measure was based solely on satisfaction, and other critical dimensions such as emotional factors seem to have been overlooked, which may not be adequate to fully capture food experiences.

Several studies related to food tourism attempted to classify tourists using the involvement theory. For example, Robinson et al. (2018) identified two segments based on food involvement: highbrows were tourists who engaged in elite activities, such as dining at Michelin star restaurants and degustation banquets, and lowbrows seemed uninterested in expensive food experiences. However, the food involvement measurement was not adequate to capture food tourism experiences (Stone & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024). Levitt et al. (2019) used both motivation and involvement constructs to cluster the tourists into three segments: highly motivated and involved, opportunity, and accidental tourists. The three clusters were distinct regarding involvement but exhibited no differences in demographic profiles except for educational level. Recently, the findings of Stone and Castillo-Ortiz (2024) on clustering based on involvement confirmed the work of Levitt et al. (2019), classifying high-, medium-, and low-involvement segments. Despite many researchers attempting to use various psychological variables, such as motivation satisfaction and involvement, to segment tourists in food tourism literature, memorable food experiences seem to have largely been overlooked. To date, no known study has applied the concept of memorable tourism experiences to segmentation analysis, particularly memorable food experiences using cluster analysis. To address this gap in the literature, this study extends the work of Stone et al. (2018) work by adapting memorable food experience constructs to segment international tourists in Thailand.

2.3 Objectives of the Study

This study has two main objectives:

- 1) To identify distinct patterns of memorable Thai food experiences by applying a two-step cluster analysis. The study categorises international tourists based on their memorable Thai food experiences.
- 2) To examine the relationship between memorable food experiences, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions by analysing how these food experiences impact tourists' satisfaction and future intentions, such as revisiting Thailand or recommending it as a culinary destination.

2.4 Contributions of the Study

This study makes several key contributions to culinary tourism research and destination marketing:

- 1) Advancing segmentation research in tourism by categorising tourists based on memorable food experiences rather than traditional demographic or behavioural factors, providing a fresh perspective on culinary tourism segmentation.
- 2) Refining measurement constructs for memorable food experiences builds on Stone et al. (2018) framework by identifying four refined dimensions: culinary delight, culinary nostalgia, culinary novelty, and culinary memories of youth.
- 3) Enhancing destination marketing and branding strategies by providing valuable insights for destination marketers and tourism boards to design experiences that enhance tourists' emotional connections with Thai cuisine.

4) Bridging qualitative and quantitative culinary tourism research by responding to calls for quantitative validation in culinary tourism research, using a data-driven approach to strengthen existing theories. It highlights the psychological and emotional impact of food experiences on tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions, offering practical implications for enhancing culinary tourism strategies.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Questionnaire Development

Memorable Thai food experiences were captured using scales containing seven constructs, including novelty, authenticity, nostalgia, variety, surprise, emotions/sensuality, and hedonism. The scales for each construct were developed based on the touristic elements identified in the qualitative study by Stone et al. (2018), except for the nostalgia scale, which was adapted from Marchegiani and Phau (2013). Since Stone et al. (2018) provided only the constructs and not specific measurement items, the scale used to measure memorable food experiences was reviewed by experts in the field to ensure content validity. This review ensured that all items accurately reflected the intended constructs and captured the essence of each dimension of memorable food experiences. Each construct consisted of four items, except for nostalgia, which contained six items. In total, two experts reviewed all nine constructs, comprising 41 items, to confirm content validity (DeVellis, 2016). The behavioural intention scale was adapted from existing literature (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Di-Clemente et al., 2019; Tsai & Wang, 2017), and the satisfaction scale was adapted from Stone et al. (2019) and Stone and Castillo-Ortiz (2024). Respondents had to rate the level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree).

Following the recommendations of DeVellis's (2016), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed to determine whether the items accurately represented each construct, ensuring that the scales effectively captured the intended dimensions of memorable Thai food experiences, behavioural intention, and satisfaction. The principal components method with varimax rotation was used to extract factors and determine which items loaded significantly on each factor. The items with factor loadings above the cut-off point of 0.60 were retained for further analysis, while those that cross-loaded on more than one factor were eliminated (Hair et al., 2019). A reliability analysis was then conducted to examine the internal consistency of each item within its construct. Cronbach alpha scores met the minimum acceptable cut-off of 0.70, indicating that the variables exhibited moderate correlation with their respective factor groupings and can be regarded as internally consistent and stable (Hair et al., 2019). All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 25 software. The EFA results (Table 1) for memorable Thai food experiences revealed that 13 items were retained from the original 33 items, grouped into four factors: culinary delight, culinary memories of youth, delightful culinary nostalgia, and culinary novelty. This finding aligns with the study of Wong and Law (2002), which retained 16 items from the 36 in the original. Wong and Law demonstrated that a well-defined set of items can effectively capture the essence of a construct. Despite the reduced number of items concerning memorable Thai food experiences from the EFA process, the final set of items demonstrated high internal consistency, and factor loadings confirmed that the items accurately represented each dimension. The factor loadings ranged from 0.65–0.92, and the variance accounted for 70.47%. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure exceeded 0.5 (KMO = 0.752), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1825.79$, $p < .001$), indicating the factor analysis was appropriate. Each construct's

reliability exceeded 0.7, ranging from 0.70–0.89. The item reduction process, using EFA and reliability analysis, helped distil each construct to its most essential elements, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the measure. EFA results indicated that satisfaction was a unidimensional construct. However, only three items had factor loadings above 0.60 (ranging from 0.79 to 0.89). The variance accounted for 69.53%, the KMO measure was 0.685, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 287.053$, $p < .001$), and reliability was 0.781. For the behavioural intention scale, the four items formed a unidimensional construct, with factor loadings ranging from 0.60 to 0.85. The variance accounted for 56.53%, the KMO measure was 0.722, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 326.646$ ($p < .001$), and reliability was 0.732. The results from the purification of all scales using EFA, which selected items based on their factor loadings and relevance to the construct, indicate that retained items are the most relevant to enhancing the robustness of the measurement in further analysis.

3.2 Sample Design and Data Collection

The aim of this research was to investigate the segmentation of tourists based on memorable Thai food experiences. The sample frame was restricted to international tourists who had experiences with Thai food during their stay in Thailand. To estimate this proportion, a pilot study of 30 tourists was conducted to assess how many had encountered Thai food during their visit. The result shows that 24 out of 30 participants (80%) had such experiences. Given the infinite population of international tourists, the estimated proportion of interest (0.8) and the formula provided by Levine, Stephan and Szabat (2017, p. 281), the sample size of 246 was calculated to ensure statistical adequacy. Therefore, 246 samples are considered sufficient to reliably represent the target population. Additionally, this study followed the recommendation of Mooi, Sarstedt, and Mooi-Reci (2018, pp. 319-320), which suggests using a sample size of at least ten times the number of clustering variables. After purifying the scale using exploratory factor analysis, 13 items related to memorable food experiences remained. The final sample size of this study was 334, which exceeds both the minimum sample size required for cluster analysis (130 samples) and the sample size calculated based on the proportion formula (246 samples). This ensures the reliability and robustness of the analysis.

This study took place on Khao San Road in Bangkok, one of Thailand's most popular tourist destinations. Known for its vibrant atmosphere, Khao San Road attracts international tourists by offering a unique blend of diverse culinary experiences, ranging from traditional Thai cuisine to international fare. The target respondents were international tourists who had experiences with Thai food during their stay in Thailand. Data collection was carried out by five trained postgraduate students stationed onsite. A total of 400 self-administered questionnaires were distributed using convenience sampling. Three screening questions were applied to ensure participants were tourists, had experienced Thai food during their stay, and were willing to participate in the survey. Out of the 400 distributed questionnaires, 334 usable responses were retained, resulting in a response rate of 83.5%.

The sample consisted of 55% males and 45% females. Approximately 40% were aged between 26 and 35 years old. The majority of respondents were well educated, with 50.8% holding at least an undergraduate degree and 20.6% possessing a postgraduate degree. Forty-two percent of the respondents reported living comfortably in terms of finances, and 40.9% indicated that they were able to save some money monthly. Nearly 60% were full-time employees. Most of the tourists (69.8%) came from European countries. Forty-five percent of respondents were visiting Thailand for the first time, while the remaining 55% had visited once or twice (33.9%), three to four times (8%), or more than four times (13%). Respondents mainly travelled with their spouses or partners (27.6%), followed by those travelling with family (17.4%).

Table 1 Exploratory Factor Analysis for Memorable Thai Food Experiences

	Mean	SD	Factor Loadings	Reliability	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained
Culinary Delight						
I will remember many positive things about my Thai food experiences.	6.04	1.27	0.77	0.83	3.24	24.92
During the trip, I enjoyed experimenting and tasting the variety of recommended Thai food.	5.81	1.28	0.76			
I enjoyed eating Thai dishes that locals eat too.	5.71	1.43	0.75			
I have wonderful memories of my Thai food experiences.	5.88	1.42	0.74			
I found Thai food to be delicious.	5.99	1.45	0.71			
I will not forget my Thai food experiences.	6.02	1.32	0.65			
Culinary Memories of Youth						
During this trip, eating Thai food makes me think about my childhood memories.	2.65	1.97	0.92	0.89	2.53	19.46
Having Thai food on this Trip make me recall memories of being a kid	2.64	1.96	0.89			
My Thai food experiences remind me of something from when I was young.	2.86	2.06	0.86			
Delightful Culinary Nostalgia						
Thai food experiences during this trip is a pleasant reminder of my past memories.	4.24	2.11	0.91	0.87	1.84	14.19
Eating Thai food makes me think about good times from my past.	4.06	2.15	0.88			
Culinary Novelty						
It is my first time to ever try Thai food.	3.40	2.44	0.89	0.70	1.55	11.91
Having Thai food during my trip to Thailand is a new experience.	4.46	2.31	0.84			

3.3 Data Analysis

In this study, 13 memorable Thai food experience items (after purification and validation) were utilised to identify meaningful segments of international tourists who had experienced Thai cuisine during their stay in Thailand. Although many segmentation studies in tourism literature commonly use a factor-cluster analysis to categorise tourists (e.g., Andriotis et al., 2008; Cha et al., 1995; Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Hsu et al., 2023; Park & Yoon, 2009; Prayag, 2010; Sarigollu & Huang, 2005), this approach has faced considerable criticism (Dolnicar, 2008; Dolnicar et al., 2012; Dolnicar & Grün, 2008). One significant issue is that this method leads to data transformation, causing a loss of approximately 40%–50% of the original data, which can distort the original scales (Prayag & Hosany, 2014). To retain a greater degree of the original data, applying the original scores can offer a more precise way to segment tourists (Pérez-Gálvez et al., 2020; Prayag & Hosany, 2014; Sheppard, 1996). Therefore, this study was built on the common-sense approach recommended by Dolnicar (2008), segmenting based on the original items. The data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the 13 original scores for the memorable Thai food experiences were used to cluster the respondents into homogeneous groups. Second, discriminant analysis was applied to confirm the validity of the cluster solution. Third, the segments were profiled against the memorable Thai food experience items and demographic variables. Finally, the segments were tested for external validity based on satisfaction and behavioural intentions. All of these procedures were performed using IBM SPSS 25 software.

4. Findings

4.1 Segment Identification

The raw scores of the 13 memorable Thai food experience items were utilised in cluster analysis. This study employed a two-step cluster analysis recommended by Punj and Stewart (1983) to classify respondents into groups based on mean scores for their memorable Thai food experiences. The two-step cluster analysis combines hierarchical clustering to identify initial clusters with K-means clustering to refine them, ensuring a robust and efficient clustering process even with moderately sized datasets. In the first step, Ward's hierarchical method with squared Euclidean distance was used to identify the preliminary cluster solution. The agglomeration schedule suggested the presence of two to four clusters. Subsequently, K-means, a non-hierarchical clustering algorithm, was applied for refinement to develop two to four clusters. An examination of group membership, group sizes, and the associated dendrograms indicated that a three-cluster solution was most appropriate.

As shown in Table 2, the distribution of the cases across the clusters was unequal. Cluster I had relatively few cases ($n = 79$), contained 23.65% of respondents and was labelled Culinary Novices. This group assigned the lowest level of agreement across all 13 memorable Thai food experience scales. Key memorable experiences for this segment included trying Thai food for the first time ($M = 4.23$) and experiencing Thai food as something new ($M = 5.25$). However, this group expressed the lowest scores for the culinary delight factor, including sentiments such as finding Thai food delicious ($M = 4.22$), having wonderful memories of their Thai food experiences ($M = 4.44$), enjoying eating local Thai dishes ($M = 4.45$), enjoying experimenting and tasting the variety of recommended Thai food ($M = 4.81$), remembering many positive things about their Thai food experiences ($M = 4.86$), and finding their Thai food experiences unforgettable ($M = 4.91$).

Cluster III, the largest segment, accounted for 39.82% of the sample and illustrated the highest mean scores in the culinary delight factor. This segment, labelled Culinary Immersionists, reported the highest level of memorable experiences, such as finding Thai food delicious ($M = 6.66$), having wonderful memories of their Thai food experiences ($M = 6.53$), finding their Thai food experiences unforgettable ($M = 6.47$), remembering many positive things about their Thai food experiences ($M = 6.42$), and enjoying eating Thai local dishes ($M = 6.20$). Additionally, Culinary Immersionists reported the highest mean for items concerning delightful culinary nostalgia factors, such as finding Thai food experiences a pleasant reminder of past memories ($M = 6.05$), and having Thai food prompt recollections of good times from the past ($M = 6.07$).

Cluster II, Sentimental Culinary Lovers, constituted 36.52% of the respondents. This group displayed relatively high mean scores of the culinary delight factor, with items such as finding Thai food delicious ($M = 6.42$), remembering many positive things about their Thai food experiences ($M = 6.39$), finding their Thai food experiences unforgettable ($M = 6.25$), enjoying experimenting and tasting the variety of recommended Thai food ($M = 6.19$), having wonderful memories of their Thai food experiences ($M = 6.11$), and enjoying eating local Thai dishes ($M = 5.99$). However, Sentimental Culinary Lovers expressed the lowest mean scores in the culinary memories of youth and delightful culinary nostalgia factors—for example, linking Thai food and childhood memories during this trip ($M = 1.44$), Thai food experiences as a reminder of youthful memories ($M = 1.41$), recalling childhood memories through Thai food ($M = 1.39$), finding Thai food experiences a pleasant reminder of memories ($M = 2.68$), and Thai food bringing recollections of good times from the past ($M = 2.27$).

The findings indicate that the culinary delight factor had the highest mean scores among Sentimental Culinary Lovers and Culinary Immersionists, and relatively high scores among Culinary Novices, supporting the concept that the delight derived from Thai food is the key experiential value for international tourists.

The most important segment was Culinary Immersionists, who had the highest mean scores across all factors except for culinary novelty, suggesting that these tourists were already familiar with Thai food. In contrast, the Culinary Novices segment had the highest mean scores for the culinary novelty factor, indicating that trying Thai food was a new experience for them. To measure the external validity of the cluster, a multiple discriminant analysis was conducted to assess the accuracy of the three-cluster solution (Punj & Stewart, 1983).

Table 3 shows that two discriminant functions were extracted, explaining the majority of variance. Wilks's lambda values lower than 1 are often interpreted as evidence of strong group separation (Hair et al., 2019). Similarly, eigenvalues greater than 1.0 indicate that the associated discriminant function contributes meaningfully to the differentiation between groups (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The Wilks's lambda test, eigenvalues, and the univariate F test show that memorable Thai food experience items made a statistically significant contribution to the discriminant functions. The canonical correlations for both functions were high and significant ($p < .001$), suggesting that the model explains a significant relationship between the functions and the dependent variable. Additionally, the classification results of respondents showed that 95.2% of the cases were classified correctly in their respective groups, indicating a very high accuracy rate (Hair et al., 2019).

4.2 Linking Patterns of Memorable Thai Food Experiences to Satisfaction and Behavioural Intention

To further validate the cluster solution's external validity, a statistical comparison with relevant theoretical variables was performed (Singh, 1990). Satisfaction and behavioural intentions were utilised to examine the validity of the cluster solution. A one-way ANOVA was performed with satisfaction and behavioural intention items as dependent variables and cluster membership as the fixed factor. As shown in Table 4, the results indicated significant differences across satisfaction and behavioural intention items.

The post hoc test results revealed that Culinary Immersionists (Cluster III) had the highest mean scores for satisfaction and behavioural intention items, followed by Sentimental Culinary Lovers (Cluster II), while Culinary Novices (Cluster I) demonstrated the lowest mean scores across these variables. The mean scores of Culinary Novices (Cluster I) were significantly different from those of Sentimental Culinary Lovers (Cluster II) and Culinary Immersionists (Cluster III). Although most of the satisfaction and behavioural intention items of Culinary Immersionists and Sentimental Culinary Lovers were not significantly different, the results showed significant differences in specific areas. These included the return likelihood ("Having positive Thai food experiences on a trip makes me more likely to return to the destination"; $M_{\text{cluster-III}} = 6.16$, $M_{\text{cluster-II}} = 5.81$), product recommendation ("I would recommend Thai food products to others"; $M_{\text{cluster-III}} = 6.15$, $M_{\text{cluster-II}} = 5.79$), and future visit intentions ("I plan to visit Thailand again"; $M_{\text{cluster-III}} = 6.41$, $M_{\text{cluster-II}} = 6.04$).

4.3 Cluster Profiling by Demographics

To further identify the demographic characteristics of the memorable Thai food experience clusters, each cluster was cross-tabulated with demographic variables and travel characteristics. Chi-square test results (Table 5) revealed statistically significant differences between the three clusters in terms of age, visitation status, and travel companion. A large proportion (44.6%) of Sentimental Culinary Lovers were aged between 26 and 35 years old. Most of them were first-time visitors to Thailand (64.7%) and primarily travelled with a partner or spouse (39.8%). Similar to Sentimental Culinary Lovers, Culinary Immersionists were predominantly aged 26 to 35, but the majority were repeat visitors (71.9%) and typically travelled with friends (31%). In contrast, Culinary Novices were mainly younger tourists (39.2%), with a high proportion on their first visit to Thailand (42.7%) and primarily travelling with friends (50%).

Table 2 Cluster Description

	Cluster I			Cluster II			Cluster III			Post-hoc tests		
	Culinary Novices n=79 (23.65%)			Sentimental Culinary Lovers n=122 (36.52%)			Culinary Immersionists n=133 (39.82%)			P-value		
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD		I-II	I-III	II-III
Culinary Delight												
I will remember many positive things about my Thai food experiences.	4.86	1.59		6.39	0.91		6.42	0.86	60.077	***	***	0.981
During the trip, I enjoyed experimenting and tasting the variety of recommended Thai food.	4.81	1.39		6.19	0.93		6.05	1.19	38.888	***	***	0.552
I enjoyed eating Thai dishes that locals eat too.	4.45	1.53		5.99	1.25		6.20	1.03	53.968	***	***	0.328
I have wonderful memories of my Thai food experiences.	4.44	1.62		6.11	1.09		6.53	0.88	83.749	***	***	**
I found Thai food to be delicious.	4.22	1.62		6.42	0.99		6.66	0.61	147.041	***	***	*
I will not forget my Thai food experiences.	4.91	1.54		6.25	1.08		6.47	0.97	47.713	***	***	0.205
Culinary Memories of Youth												
During this trip, eating Thai food makes me think about my childhood memories.	3.54	1.76		1.44	1.13		3.23	2.15	47.142	***	0.507	***
Having Thai food on this Trip make me recall memories of being a kid	3.56	1.88		1.39	0.88		3.24	2.14	52.11	***	0.511	***
My Thai food experiences remind me of something from when I was young.	3.64	1.89		1.41	0.88		3.72	2.19	66.425	***	0.955	***
Delightful Culinary Nostalgia												
Thai food experiences during this trip is a pleasant reminder of my past memories.	3.60	1.54		2.68	1.74		6.05	1.13	175.997	***	***	***
Eating Thai food makes me think about good times from my past.	3.46	1.59		2.27	1.43		6.07	1.03	270.188	***	***	***
Culinary Novelty												
It is my first time to ever try Thai food.	4.23	2.01		3.45	2.63		2.87	2.37	8.013	***	**	0.16
Having Thai food during my trip to Thailand is a new experience.	5.25	1.65		4.66	2.31		3.80	2.46	11.231	***	*	***

NB; * p < .1, ** p < .05, *** p < .001.

Table 3 Discriminant Analysis

Summary results of multiple discriminant analysis				
Memorable Thai food experience	Function1	Function2		
Eating Thai food makes me think about good times from my past.	.822*			
Thai food experiences during this trip is a pleasant reminder of my past memories.	.659*			
My Thai food experiences remind me of something from when I was young.	.376*			
Having Thai food on this Trip make me recall memories of being a kid	.306*			
During this trip, eating Thai food makes me think about my childhood memories.	.291*			
I found Thai food to be delicious.		.732*		
I have wonderful memories of my Thai food experiences.		.540*		
I will remember many positive things about my Thai food experiences.		.471*		
I enjoyed eating Thai dishes that locals eat too.		.442*		
I will not forget my Thai food experiences.		.414*		
During the trip, I enjoyed experimenting and tasting the variety of recommended Thai food.		.378*		
Having Thai food during my trip to Thailand is a new experience.		-.151*		
It is my first time to ever try Thai food.		-.149*		
Clusters	Group centroids			
Cluster I	-0.066	-2.284		
Cluster II	-1.799	0.744		
Cluster III	1.69	0.674		
Eigenvalue	2.341	1.631		
Canonical correlation	0.837	0.787		
Wilk's Lambada	0.114	0.38		
Chi-square	706.475	314.44		
Significance	0.000	0.000		
Classification results				
Actual group	# of cases	Predicted group membership		
		I	II	III
Cluster I	79	74 (93.7)	4 (5.1%)	1 (1.3%)
Cluster II	122	3 (2.5%)	113 (92.6%)	6 (4.9%)
Cluster III	133	2 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	131 (98.5%)

NB; Bold figures indicate a number of respondents correctly classified in each cluster. Hit-ratio = 95.2%. * p < 0.001

Table 4 Cluster Profiling Based on Satisfaction and Behavioural Intention

	Cluster I Culinary Novices n=79 (23.65%)		Cluster II Sentimental Culinary Lovers n=122 (36.52%)		Cluster III Culinary Immersionists n=133 (39.82%)		F- value	p- value	Post-hoc tests		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			I-II	I-III	II-III
Satisfaction Experiences											
Thai food experiences are important to the overall satisfaction of my trip.	5.01	1.68	6.10	1.28	6.21	1.06	23.218	***	***	***	0.747
Eating authentic, local food at a travel destination helps create a lasting impression of a destination.	4.88	1.55	6.11	1.10	6.19	0.91	36.544	***	***	***	0.824
When I think back to trips I have enjoyed, food experiences are an important part of the memories.	4.89	1.63	5.83	1.37	6.11	1.11	21.043	***	***	***	0.174
Behavioural Intentions											
Having positive Thai food experiences on a trip makes me more likely to return to the destination.	4.95	1.44	5.81	1.23	6.16	1.03	25.03	***	***	***	**
Having positive Thai food experiences on a trip make me more likely to recommend the destination.	4.88	1.46	6.08	1.18	6.27	0.93	38.355	***	***	***	0.327
I would recommend Thai food products to others.	4.89	1.54	5.79	1.40	6.15	1.23	21.042	***	***	***	*
I plan to visit Thailand again.	5.14	1.46	6.04	1.32	6.41	0.94	27.264	***	***	***	***

NB; *p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .001.

Table 5 Cluster Profiling Based on Demographic and Travel Characteristics

	Cluster I Culinary Novices		Cluster II Sentimental Culinary Lovers		Cluster III Culinary Immersionists		X ²	p-value
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent		
Gender								
Male	37	53.6	63	52.9	70	57.9	0.654	0.721
Female	32	46.4	56	47.1	51	42.1		
Total	69	100	119	100	121	100		
Age Group								
18-25	29	39.2	43	35.5	26	20.6	32.058	***
26-35	27	36.5	54	44.6	48	38.1		
36-45	11	14.9	6	5	28	22.2		
46-55	2	2.7	12	9.9	15	11.9		
56-65	4	5.4	1	0.8	7	5.6		
More than 65	1	1.4	5	4.1	2	1.6		
Total	74	100	121	100	126	100		
Highest Level of Education Attained								
High school graduate or less	11	14.3	24	20.2	16	12.4	10.697	0.382
College/University graduate	46	59.7	55	46.2	64	49.6		
Postgraduate degree	11	14.3	25	21	31	24		
Doctoral degree	3	3.9	3	2.5	1	0.8		
Professional qualification	5	6.5	11	9.2	14	10.9		
Other please specify	1	1.3	1	0.8	3	2.3		
Total	77	100	119	100	129	100		
Household income indicator								
I don't earn income yet	11	15.1	9	7.6	6	4.7	10.052	0.261
I can afford basic needs	7	9.6	8	6.8	9	7		
I am able to save some money monthly	29	39.7	47	39.8	55	42.6		
I live with some comfort	25	34.2	54	45.8	58	45		
I hardly make it to live	1	1.4	0	0	1	0.8		
Total	73	100	118	100	129	100		
Occupation status								
Employed full-time	43	55.8	64	54.2	82	63.6	13.117	0.361
Self-employed	10	13	17	14.4	15	11.6		
Employed part-time	5	6.5	11	9.3	12	9.3		
Housewife/husband	1	1.3	0	0	2	1.6		
Retired	2	2.6	5	4.2	4	3.1		
Student	13	16.9	10	8.5	8	6.2		
Unemployed	3	3.9	11	9.3	6	4.7		
Total	77	100	118	100	129	100		
Regions								
Asia	12	17.6	8	6.9	15	12.4	9.273	0.506
Europe	46	67.6	85	73.3	82	67.8		

	Cluster I Culinary Novices		Cluster II Sentimental Culinary Lovers		Cluster III Culinary Immersionists		X ²	p-value
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent		
Africa	0	0	0	0	1	0.8		
North America	4	5.9	13	11.2	15	12.4		
South America	3	4.4	3	2.6	3	2.5		
Oceania	3	4.4	7	6	5	4.1		
Total	68	100	116	100	121	100		
Frequency of Previous Visits to Thailand								
No previous visits	32	42.7	77	64.7	36	28.1	66.835	***
1 time	26	34.7	21	17.6	18	14.1		
2 times	11	14.7	8	6.7	25	19.5		
3 times	2	2.7	3	2.5	9	7		
4 times	1	1.3	2	1.7	9	7		
More than 4 times	3	4	8	6.7	31	24.2		
Total	75	100	119	100	128	100		
Trip Companionship								
Alone	15	19.7	16	13.6	22	17.1	26.159	**
With your Spouse/Partner	8	10.5	47	39.8	34	26.4		
With Family Members	0	17.7	0	13.9	0	20.3		
With Friends	38	50	35	29.7	40	31		
With Colleagues	1	1.3	1	0.8	3	2.3		
Organized Tour	0	0	2	1.7	3	2.3		
Total	76	100	118	100	129	100		

NB; **p < .05, ***p < .001.

5. Discussions and Implications

The present study examined a multifaceted conceptualisation of memorable Thai food experiences to categorise international tourists' onsite experiences during their stay in Thailand. Samples in this study were both intentional and serendipitous food tourists (Stone et al., 2018). This study responds to the call of Stone et al. (2018) by extending their qualitative research through the development of measurement items to capture each construct identified in their work. Experts in the field reviewed the items to ensure validity, and the scale was refined using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) following the recommendations of DeVellis (2016). This process ensured that the items accurately represented each construct and effectively captured the intended dimensions of memorable Thai food experiences. However, despite expert validation of the initial items, EFA revealed the need to consolidate constructs, reflecting patterns in the data that are specific to Thai food experiences.

The items from the original seven constructs did not load as expected, possibly due to contextual differences. The work of Stone et al. (2018) primarily used panel data to examine general culinary experiences during travel, without focusing on a specific type of cuisine. Additionally, the unique characteristics of Thai food experiences or cultural factors may have influenced participant responses. Although the EFA results diverged from the original seven-construct framework, this study identified a stronger underlying structure with four constructs. These were supported by factor loadings greater than 0.60, Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019), and a total variance explained of 70.48%. While the results differ from the initial theoretical framework, this data-driven approach ensures that the final model is both empirically valid and contextually relevant. The new structure aligns more closely with the cultural and sensory aspects of Thai food experiences, offering insights specific to this context and providing practical dimensions directly applicable to designing marketing strategies and enhancing tourist experiences in the Thai culinary tourism sector.

This study further examined the differences in post consumption emotional state, including satisfaction and behavioural intention. Four dimensions of memorable Thai food experiences have been identified, including culinary delight, culinary memories of youth, delightful culinary nostalgia, and culinary novelty. In contrast to the work of Adongo et al. (2015), the negative dimension was discarded during the items' purification stage in the EFA. Specifically, culinary delight exhibited the largest proportion of total variance and the highest mean value, indicating that strong positive perceptions toward Thai food were the tourists' main memorable Thai food experience. The delightful culinary nostalgia factor, which contains relatively high mean-score items, implies that tourists perceived that Thai food experiences reminded them of past good times linked to personal positive reminiscences. The culinary novelty factor, which includes items with above-average mean scores, suggests excitement and interest in trying Thai food for the first time among tourists. For the culinary memories of youth, although the means are the lowest, the high factor loadings, reliability, and variance indicate that this dimension is a significant and impactful part of the tourists' memorable Thai food experiences.

Three segments were classified based on memorable Thai food experiences: Culinary Novices, Sentimental Culinary Lovers, and Culinary Immersionists. Results showed that these three types of memorable Thai food experiences segments differed significantly in sociodemographic, including age group, as well as the frequency of previous visits to Thailand, trip companionship, satisfaction, and behavioural intention. Across these three segments,

the Culinary Immersionists (Cluster III) perceived the highest mean scores of memorable Thai food experiences in terms of culinary delight, culinary memories of youth, and delightful culinary nostalgia, while the culinary novelty mean scores were the lowest. This segment also demonstrated the highest satisfaction and behavioural intention in all aspects. In their memorable experiences, they were familiar with Thai food, and they deeply enjoyed the diverse offerings of Thai cuisine and appreciated the traditional and nostalgic aspects of Thai food. A highly pleasant Thai food experience not only led to a greater intention to return to Thailand (Girish & Chen, 2017; Hsu et al., 2023) but also increased the willingness to recommend Thai food products and Thailand to others (Hsu et al., 2023; Jung et al., 2015). Familiarity had a positive influence on memorable experiences with Thai food and postconsumption behaviour, which is consistent with several existing studies (Bagozzi et al., 2000; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Kim, 2010). Most of those in Cluster III were repeat visitors to Thailand and were financially stable. Therefore, destination marketers and policymakers should focus on culinary delight in tourism, as Culinary Immersionists seem to be good advocates for great Thai food experiences in Thailand. Practitioners should offer impressive memorable experiences with competitive pricing as strong value propositions (Levitt et al., 2019; Voss et al., 2008). Additionally, a real-time rating platform should be developed to help Thai food providers such as restaurants, food courts, and street food vendors identify these tourists. Cooperation among relevant stakeholders in promoting culinary tourism initiatives plays a vital role in creating memorable culinary experiences (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2013). Encouraging them to share their experiences with Thai food with others through social media during their stay in Thailand (Hsu et al., 2023; Levitt et al., 2019; López-Guzmán et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2005; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and rewarding them with free gifts or upfront discount coupons in dining areas would enhance their engagement.

Cluster II, Sentimental Culinary Lovers, shared similar memorable Thai food experiences with Culinary Immersionists regarding culinary delight and demonstrated moderately high scores in culinary novelty. However, this group perceived the lowest scores on nostalgic dimensions such as culinary memories of youth and delightful culinary nostalgia. They recalled the appreciation of the sensory attributes of Thai cuisine, especially the taste and experimentation of Thai cuisine. They did not feel strong connections between Thai food experiences and their past experiences but rather felt pleasure at the current moment of experiencing Thai food. Aligning with the study of Stone et al. (2018), novelty was not always required for a memorable food experience because individuals could enjoy familiar foods and return to previously memorable experiences. They seemed to be familiar with Thai food, but they were still open and willing to explore new menus and a variety of aspects of Thai cuisine. The majority of tourists in this segment were first-time visitors to Thailand, and they were financially stable at a level similar to other segments. Most were aged between 26 and 35 years and travelled with a spouse or partner, similar to Culinary Immersionists. Strong expressed perceptions of memorable food experiences led to highly positive and desirable satisfaction (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimitrovski, 2016) as well as a high intention to return to Thailand and recommend Thai food to others (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimitrovski, 2016; Tsai, 2016). This indicates that food experiences significantly contribute to overall travel satisfaction, which is consistent with previous literature (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; López-Guzmán et al., 2017; Pérez-Gálvez et al., 2020). Therefore, marketing strategies should focus on creating fresh, memorable experiences by highlighting the quality and diversity of Thai cuisine and encouraging tourists to try unique and trendy Thai dishes full of flavours, variety, and fantastic presentation. Destination managers should provide a reliable local

food quality rating system and offer programs that encourage tourists to learn about Thai food cultures and gain delightful memorable experiences (Tsai, 2016).

Cluster I, Culinary Novices, demonstrated the lowest levels of memorable Thai food experiences in culinary delight, while culinary novelty and delightful culinary nostalgia exhibited the highest mean scores among the three segments. Additionally, this cluster had relatively high mean scores in culinary memories of youth. Although this segment illustrated a less delightful Thai food experience compared to the other two segments, they recalled that experiencing Thai cuisine had evoked a sense of familiarity and comfort as well as an association with their history. Consistent with the study of Kim (2013), experiencing Thai food and local Thai culture may evoke meaningful aspects for tourists, which would contribute significantly to the memorability of their food experiences. A majority of this group were young tourists aged between 18 and 25 years who travelled alone and were financially stable. The novelty of trying Thai food was the most memorable aspect for them, reinforcing the previous literature (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). However, this excitement about novelty was not reflected in strong emotional or sensory engagement with Thai food itself. Such consequences also demonstrated the lowest emotional state in satisfaction and behavioural intention across the three clusters. The experiences of local cuisine in different societies, such as Thai food, can be enhanced by the expression of social and cultural aspects of food that represent local culture and identity (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2013; Park et al., 2023). Marketing efforts focusing on this group require enriching activities and programs that educate this segment about exploring the aspects of Thai cuisine by offering more guided and customised food experiences, such as fool-proof Thai cooking classes for beginners or local food tours. Destination marketers should emphasise tourism programs that encourage tourists to cocreate memorable food experiences (Kim, 2013). Furthermore, storytelling is a powerful tool for delivering knowledge and values, helping to interpret and communicate, as well as transforming complex or unfamiliar cultures into familiar ones (Park et al., 2023; Swap et al., 2001). This can help enhance tourists' interest and elevate their engagement with Thai food.

The findings of this study have implications for research in the area of food tourism. Many studies have been conducted to identify memorable food experience factors, but most of these studies consist of qualitative research (Akhoondnejad, 2024; Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Sthapit, 2017; Stone et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Therefore, this study adds to the insufficient knowledge of tourism literature by adapting and refining the memorable Thai food experience scale based on the work of Stone et al. (2018), followed by segmentation analysis based on this scale. This research responds to the call for quantitative research made by Stone et al. (2018) in a further study of memorable food experiences. This construct has not yet been used to develop a measurement scale or profile international tourists regarding memorable Thai food experiences. Despite many segmentation studies existing in food tourism research (e.g., Cho et al., 2017; Ko et al., 2018; Levitt et al., 2019; Martín et al., 2020; Nella & Christou, 2021), as far as is known, this empirical study is the first to classify tourists using memorable food experiences. Accordingly, this segmentation analysis offers more comprehensive insights for further understanding tourists' memories of Thai food experiences in each particular segment and how each segment differs in its post consumption appraisal in terms of satisfaction and behavioural intention.

For managerial and practical implications, this study offers valuable insights for the tourism and hospitality industry, particularly in the context of culinary tourism. The identification of three types—Culinary Novices, Sentimental

Culinary Lovers, and Culinary Immersionists—offers a deeper understanding of tourists' needs and preferences based on their memorable Thai food experiences. Understanding what influences these experiences is essential for developing not only food products and services but also effective Thai food image communication and promotional campaigns tailored to each segment. This knowledge enables destination marketers and service providers to design targeted marketing strategies that appeal to diverse tourist segments. For instance, catering to the needs of Culinary Novices may involve promoting introductory and accessible Thai dishes to help them explore the cuisine. Meanwhile, engaging Culinary Immersionists and Sentimental Culinary Lovers may require offering authentic and immersive food-related experiences, such as cooking classes, local food tours or dining events emphasising traditional Thai cuisine. Furthermore, promotional campaigns can be tailored to educate Culinary Novices about Thai food and its cultural significance, while specific campaigns highlighting unique food tours and authentic dining experiences could attract Culinary Immersionists and Sentimental Culinary Lovers. These efforts have the potential to elevate the global reputation of Thai cuisine and position Thailand as a premier culinary destination. Finally, the reputation of Thai food experiences in Thailand should be managed strategically through tailored approaches that address the unique preferences of each tourist segment. This will not only enhance tourists' satisfaction but also strengthen Thailand's position as a leading food tourism destination on the global stage.

6. Limitations and Future Recommendations

6.1 Limitation of the study

Although this study provided insights into memorable Thai food experiences across three clusters and outlined its implications, some limitations remain. This study utilised data from international tourists at a single location, Khao San Road in Bangkok. The sample size of 334 participants, while sufficient for analysis, presents limitations in terms of generalisability. Future research could address this by expanding the scope to include participants from a broader range of geographic locations and collecting a larger sample size. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of memorable Thai food experiences from tourists from different destinations. Regarding the measurement of memorable Thai food experiences, this research adapted items based on the touristic elements of memorable food tourism experiences based on the work of Stone et al. (2018). More than half of these items were dropped, possibly due to the context differences leading to statements not adequately capturing the memorable food experiences related to Thai cuisine. Further development of this measurement scale is needed.

6.2 Future Recommendations

Future studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches that integrate qualitative insights with quantitative validation to provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of memorable food experiences. The research could begin with qualitative research on international tourists' memorable Thai food experiences during their stay in Thailand to develop and refine scales suitable for capturing these experiences. Quantitative research could then follow to validate the newly refined scales and confirm their reliability. Additionally, the relationship between memorable food experiences and other psychological or behavioural variables remains underexplored, and warrants further investigation. For example, future research could investigate the connections between memorable Thai food experiences and other variables, such as involvement (Moreo et al., 2022; Stone & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024) and past

experiences (Mak et al., 2012; Sthapit, 2017), providing further insights into the factors influencing these experiences. As individual experiences at a destination vary based on tourists' home contexts and past travel experiences, future studies should include background information travel history, and demographics, to better understand these influences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). Finally, comparative studies examining tourists from multiple geographic locations in Thailand could offer a more comprehensive and holistic view of their Thai food-related experiences across different regions.

7. Conclusions

This study extended the existing food tourism literature on the inbound travel market in Thailand by classifying three segments based on memorable Thai food experiences. The findings reveal that international tourists have varying perceptions of Thai food experiences. Revisiting travellers felt familiar with Thai food and indicated the greatest delight with the Thai food experiences offered in Thailand. On the other hand, first-time visitors put relatively high emphasis on the novelty of Thai cuisine, with these experiences often recalling pleasurable memories. Despite this study's contributions to food tourism research in the inbound travel market, some limitations exist, offering directions for future research. Expanding the scope to include participants from a wider range of geographic areas and gathering a larger sample size would enhance generalisation. Future researchers should attempt to investigate the relationships between memorable Thai food experiences and other variables, such as involvement and past experiences. However, this study is only in its exploratory stage, and future research can use these findings as a starting point for further developing knowledge on memorable Thai food experiences for the inbound food tourism market.

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