



Gastronomic Knowledge, Culinary Heritage, and Involvement: A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Destination Brand Equity in Thailand

Butsakorn Julbanyong^{1*} and Theerakorn Udomratanamane²

¹Graduate student, Business school, University of The Thai Chamber of Commerce.

² Business school, University of The Thai Chamber of Commerce.

*Corresponding author, E-mail: butsakornpoppy@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the relationships between gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, gastronomic involvement, and destination brand equity in the context of Thailand through a comprehensive literature review. It emphasizes the role of gastronomy in destination branding, highlighting how tourists' culinary engagement can influence a destination's brand perception, particularly in Thailand, known for its rich food culture. The study proposes a conceptual framework that outlines these relationships, offering a theoretical structure for understanding how gastronomic elements contribute to Thailand's brand equity. By synthesizing existing research, the study provides an understanding of how Thailand can leverage its local food culture to build a distinct identity, enhance tourist involvement, and attract culinary-focused travelers. The proposed framework serves as a foundation for future research on the role of gastronomy in tourism and destination branding, specifically within the Thai context.

Keywords: Gastronomic, Culinary, Heritage, Destination Brand Equity in Thailand

Introduction

The tourism landscape has evolved significantly, with gastronomy emerging as a critical component that enriches travel experiences and drives economic benefits (Pencarelli, 2020). Gastronomic tourism, defined as the exploration of food and culinary practices as a central element of travel, has gained global popularity (Sio et al., 2024). This phenomenon extends beyond mere indulgence in local cuisines, encompassing cultural, social, and sensory engagements that profoundly impact tourists' perceptions and satisfaction (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). The growing interest in food tourism underscores the need to explore the dimensions influencing tourists' gastronomic experiences and motivations.

Gastronomic tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping destination experiences by promoting cultural exchange, stimulating local economic development, and contributing to the preservation of culinary heritage (Vuksanović et al., 2024). Through food-related activities, tourists immerse themselves in the unique cultural narratives of a place, allowing



them to engage with regional identity and traditions on a deeper level (Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020). This interaction not only enriches the travel experience but also supports the continuity of local foodways and artisanal practices. Despite the growing recognition of its significance, scholarly research in this area remains fragmented, with a notable absence of comprehensive theoretical models that holistically integrate gastronomic motivations, knowledge acquisition, and heritage appreciation. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how gastronomic knowledge and culinary heritage influence tourists' gastronomic involvement. In turn, it investigates how this involvement contributes to perceptions of destination brand equity, thereby offering a more integrated understanding of the role of gastronomy in destination branding.

In Thailand, gastronomic tourism has emerged as an innovative strategy to revitalize the struggling tourism industry, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kattiyapornpong et al., 2021). While prior studies have identified motivations for gastronomic tourism, few have explored the interplay between gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, and gastronomic involvement in shaping destination brand equity (Sio et al., 2024). Additionally, the role of personal and product involvement in shaping gastronomic experiences remains underexplored (Richards, 2021). This study bridges these gaps by proposing a framework that integrates these constructions, offering insights into how destinations can leverage gastronomy to enhance their brand equity.

Objectives

This study aims to examine the dimensions of gastronomic tourism and its impact on tourist experiences and destination branding. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. To review the literature on gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, and gastronomy involvement as drivers of destination brand equity in Thailand's gastronomic tourism.
2. To propose a conceptual framework illustrating the relationships between these variables and their impact on destination brand equity.

Literature Review

This section reviews literature on gastronomic experiences and destination brand equity, introducing key constructs, developing hypotheses, and proposing a framework for the study.

Designation brand equity

Destination brand equity is a key concept in tourism marketing, reflecting a destination's perceived value among tourists and stakeholders. It extends traditional brand equity principles to tourism by emphasizing unique attributes and experiences that



differentiate destinations in a competitive market (San Martín et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2022). Strong destination brand equity enhances tourist attraction, loyalty, and economic benefits through strategic marketing, consistent branding, and high-quality experiences (Abbasi et al., 2024).

Effective management requires continuous monitoring of tourist perceptions and market trends, alongside collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, businesses, and local communities (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Digital platforms, particularly online reviews, and social media, play a crucial role in shaping destination brand equity (Abbasi et al., 2024).

Gastronomic experiences significantly influence destination brand equity, as seen in countries like Italy, France, and Japan, which leverage their culinary heritage to attract tourists (Cardoso et al., 2020). Gastronomic tourism supports local economies and preserves culinary traditions, while strategic branding of food culture, festivals, and culinary tours fosters authenticity, emotional engagement, and competitive differentiation (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019; Vuksanović et al., 2024).

Gastronomic involvement and destination brand equity

Gastronomic involvement is defined as an individual's interest in and engagement with food-related activities, shaping their appreciation and understanding of gastronomy (Leong et al., 2017; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). It encompasses activities such as cooking, dining, exploring diverse cuisines, and studying culinary traditions. Individuals with high gastronomic involvement perceive food as central to their lifestyle, engaging in gourmet dining, recipe experimentation, and food-related hobbies (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019).

Cultural background, personal preferences, and social influences collectively shape gastronomic involvement (Gálvez et al., 2017). National culinary traditions and familial practices provide a foundational influence, while individual tastes and peer dynamics further inform gastronomic engagement (Lin et al., 2022).

A thorough understanding of gastronomic involvement enables culinary professionals, marketers, and tourism operators to design tailored experiences (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). Empirical studies demonstrate that gastronomic involvement enhances destination brand equity by increasing the perceived value of a destination's food culture (Horng et al., 2012; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Highly involved tourists actively seek destinations offering immersive culinary experiences, thereby reinforcing brand image (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Horng et al. (2012) emphasize that participation in activities such as fine dining, food festivals, and cooking classes strengthens a destination's reputation. Furthermore, Yang et al. (2020) suggest that catering to gastronomic involvement fosters tourist loyalty, repeat visitation, and positive word-of-mouth, enhancing destination brand equity (Tsai & Wang, 2017).



Gastronomic knowledge

Gastronomic knowledge refers to the understanding of food, culinary practices, and their cultural and historical contexts (Kovalenko et al., 2023). It encompasses knowledge of ingredients, cooking techniques, regional cuisines, and dining traditions (Richards, 2021). Beyond knowing how to cook or what to eat, it involves recognizing the connections between food, culture, health, and the environment (Gillespie & Cousins, 2012).

Gastronomic knowledge enhances culinary experiences by providing deeper insights into food's cultural and historical significance (Richards, 2021). Those with greater knowledge appreciate the authenticity of local cuisine, leading to more meaningful culinary engagement (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

The relationship between gastronomic knowledge and gastronomic involvement is well-documented, showing that understanding culinary practices fosters deeper engagement with food (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). Knowledgeable individuals demonstrate higher personal and product involvement, appreciating the finer details of culinary arts, from ingredient selection to cooking techniques (Richards, 2021). Cordova-Buiza et al. (2021) suggest that they invest more time in sourcing quality ingredients and refining cooking methods, reflecting greater product involvement. Personal involvement is also heightened, as they engage in culinary hobbies, attend food-related events, and continuously expand their repertoire (Kovalenko et al., 2023).

Gastronomic knowledge also strengthens destination brand equity by deepening tourists' appreciation of a location's culinary identity (Kovalenko et al., 2023). Visitors with knowledge of local food, ingredients, and culinary traditions develop a stronger emotional connection to a destination, positively influencing brand perception. Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2020) found that knowledgeable tourists feel more culturally enriched, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty. They associate destinations with authenticity and quality, reinforcing brand equity through positive word-of-mouth and repeat visits.

By educating tourists on the cultural significance of food, destinations can position themselves as unique culinary hubs, enhancing brand equity and gaining a competitive edge in the tourism market.

Culinary heritage

Culinary heritage encompasses traditional food practices, recipes, ingredients, and techniques passed down through generations, reflecting a region's cultural identity and way of life (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009; Bessière, 1998). It extends beyond food, incorporating the stories, customs, and rituals associated with its preparation and consumption, offering a rich cultural experience (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

Preserving culinary heritage is vital for maintaining cultural diversity and fostering community identity (Montanari, 2006). It serves as a living archive of traditions, providing



insight into historical interactions with the environment. Ensuring its continuity safeguards cultural legacies for future generations (Alonso et al., 2018).

The link between culinary heritage and gastronomic involvement underscores how traditional food practices deepen engagement with food. Individuals with a strong interest in culinary heritage exhibit higher levels of gastronomic involvement, enjoying traditional dishes and participating in related activities (Richards, 2002). Cooking classes, food festivals, and culinary tours enhance this involvement, fostering appreciation for traditional cuisine.

The immersive nature of culinary heritage experiences strengthens individuals' connection to food and its cultural context, increasing personal and product involvement (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). This engagement encourages individuals to invest time in learning and preserving traditional culinary practices, enhancing their gastronomic knowledge and skills (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019).

Culinary heritage also enhances destination brand equity by reinforcing cultural authenticity. Tourists are drawn to destinations that celebrate traditional cuisine, associating them with authenticity and uniqueness (Valverde-Roda et al., 2023). Engaging with culinary heritage deepens tourists' connection to a destination's history and culture, fostering attachment and loyalty (Mora et al., 2022). Promoting culinary heritage in tourism strengthens brand equity by differentiating destinations and cultivating positive brand associations.

Research Methodology

This study employs a literature review to explore the relationships between gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, gastronomic involvement, and destination brand equity, with a focus on Thailand's tourism context. Scholarly databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched for relevant articles. From an initial pool of 250 articles, 45 were selected based on inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed, English-language, and directly relevant to the research objectives. The review highlights how gastronomic knowledge and culinary heritage influence gastronomic involvement, which in turn enhances destination brand equity. The findings inform a conceptual framework that integrates these constructs, offering a theoretical structure for understanding how gastronomy can strengthen Thailand's tourism branding and appeal to culinary-focused travelers.

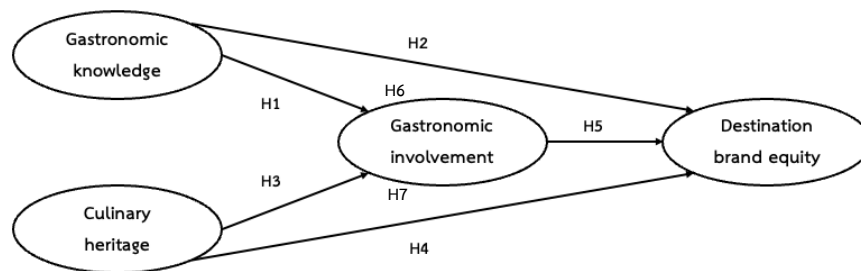


Figure 1: The proposed framework.

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, gastronomic involvement, and destination brand equity. The study supports the following hypotheses:

H1: Gastronomic knowledge positively influences gastronomic involvement. Tourists with more knowledge about local cuisine are more likely to engage in food-related activities.

H2: Gastronomic knowledge positively influences destination brand equity. Culinary knowledge enhances perceptions of the destination as authentic and culturally rich.

H3: Culinary heritage positively influences gastronomic involvement. Exposure to traditional food practices encourages tourists to participate more in gastronomic experiences.

H4: Culinary heritage positively influences destination brand equity. Recognizing culinary heritage strengthens the destination's unique identity and appeal.

H5: Gastronomic involvement positively influences destination brand equity. Active engagement in local food culture leads to stronger emotional connections with the destination.

H6: Gastronomic involvement mediates the relationship between gastronomic knowledge and destination brand equity. Tourists' culinary knowledge enhances destination brand equity more strongly when it leads to active participation in food experiences, deepening their connection to the destination.

H7: Gastronomic involvement mediates the relationship between culinary heritage and destination brand equity.

Appreciation of culinary heritage fosters stronger destination brand equity when tourists engage directly with local food traditions through immersive experiences.



These findings highlight the strategic value of promoting gastronomic knowledge and heritage to increase tourist involvement and enhance the overall brand equity of destinations.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings provide the proposed framework, demonstrating the interconnected relationships between gastronomic knowledge, culinary heritage, gastronomic involvement, and destination brand equity.

Gastronomic knowledge significantly influences gastronomic involvement (H1), reinforcing that individuals with deeper culinary knowledge engage more actively in food-related experiences (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019; Richards, 2021). It also positively affects destination brand equity (H2), as knowledgeable tourists develop stronger emotional connections with destinations through their culinary identity, enhancing authenticity and perceived quality (Kovalenko et al., 2023; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020).

Similarly, culinary heritage enhances gastronomic involvement (H3) by fostering appreciation for traditional food practices and encouraging participation in cultural culinary experiences (Richards, 2002; Hjalager & Richards, 2002). It also strengthens destination brand equity (H4) by positioning destinations as authentic cultural hubs, appealing to tourists seeking immersive gastronomic experiences (Valverde-Roda et al., 2023; Mora et al., 2022).

Furthermore, gastronomic involvement positively impacts destination brand equity (H5), suggesting that active participation in food-related activities fosters emotional connections, leading to greater tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth promotion (Tsai & Wang, 2017; Yang et al., 2020).

These findings emphasize the strategic role of gastronomy in destination branding. Tourism stakeholders should promote culinary education, preserve traditional food practices, and create immersive experiences to enhance destination appeal. Future research could explore digital engagement and sustainability as additional factors shaping gastronomic tourism and brand equity.

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