

## Storytelling in Thai Gastronomy: Strategic Promotion for Sustainable Global Tourism

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### KEYWORDS

Food presentation strategy, Storytelling Strategies, Sustainable food consumption, Thai food culture

### ABSTRACT

Thailand National Strategic Plan 2018-2037 emphasizes promoting Thailand tourism, a policy aimed at upgrading tourism products and services to generate revenue in various dimensions. It focuses on collaboration across all sectors, including government agencies, the private sector, educational institutions, and the general public. Thailand's tourism initiatives are designed to meet the diverse needs of travelers while maintaining the country's distinctive identity, traditions, and cultural heritage.

This research contributes to the implementation of the National Strategic Plan, aiming to achieve its goals. The objectives of this research were: 1) to explore the tourism behavior and Thai food consumption preferences and style of both domestic and international tourists and 2) to distill strategic approaches to promote and present Thai food to quality tourists. This study employs a mixed-method approach. Quantitative research, utilizing online and paper-based questionnaires, aims to comprehend the overall experiences and behaviors of tourists. Samples are 726 domestic and international tourists who have traveled in Thailand. Qualitative research, involving multidisciplinary 13 experts focus group session, seeks to gain in-depth understanding and develop strategies for promoting Thai cuisine.

The findings reveal three significant patterns in tourist preferences. First, tourists consistently prioritize food safety and hygiene standards above traditional aspects such as taste and presentation, reflecting evolving global tourism standards. Second, cultural narratives and sustainability significantly influence dining choices, with international tourists demonstrating high familiarity with Thai cuisine and showing particular interest in food heritage, origin stories, and traditional preparation methods. Third, while digital platforms serve as primary promotional channels for domestic tourists, international visitors rely more heavily on personal recommendations and authentic local experiences. The study also identifies distinct market segments, with Asian tourists representing the majority of international respondents, suggesting opportunities for targeted marketing strategies.

Based on these insights, the research proposes a strategic framework for enhancing Thailand's gastronomic tourism through three key components: integration of cultural authenticity with modern service excellence; implementation of comprehensive digital storytelling strategies; and development of immersive culinary experiences. The framework emphasizes preserving traditional cooking methods and food culture while adapting to contemporary service standards and tourist expectations. Additionally, the study recommends developing certification systems for food safety and authenticity, creating engaging digital content that showcases Thai culinary heritage, and designing experiential dining programs that combine cultural learning with memorable gastronomic experiences. This balanced approach provides a sustainable model for tourism development while maintaining Thailand's distinctive culinary identity. This research contributes to the implementation of the National Strategic Plan, aiming to enhance the global recognition of Thai food.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a social phenomenon and an industry that plays a crucial role in economic growth across nearly all countries worldwide. As a large-scale industry, tourism is interconnected with various other industrial sectors. For this reason, Thailand has incorporated tourism industry development as one of the key strategic pillars in its economic development agenda, as outlined in the Thailand National Strategic Plan 2018-2037 [1].

Thailand possesses diverse cultural capital and traditional wisdom. Tourism development that builds upon existing cultural foundations, integrated with creativity, knowledge, and new technologies, will result in Thailand achieving remarkable distinction in terms of both intrinsic value and immense economic value [2].

Thailand places continuous emphasis on developing tourism strategies. Currently, the country is implementing the Third National Tourism Development Plan (2023-2027) [3], which focuses on preparing for various forms of change and promoting domestic tourism. The Third National Tourism Development Plan (2023-2027) presents a 5-year vision for comprehensive and inclusive tourism development and implementation: 'Thailand's tourism industry emphasizes value, demonstrates adaptability, and achieves sustainable and inclusive growth (Rebuilding High Value Tourism Industry with Resilience, Sustainability and Inclusive Growth). Moving forward, Thailand's tourism development will focus on strengthening and elevating the tourism industry, transforming crises into opportunities for change, and developing the industry to align with the Next Normal, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. This aims to achieve inclusive growth through a holistic approach and enhance the quality of personnel and entrepreneurs in the tourism industry [3]. Contemporary tourism encompasses various types, depending on tourist preferences. Understanding tourist behavior significantly impacts marketing planning and product design. Reference [3] shows the Global Tourism trends report, 76% of global travelers prefer sustainable tourism, a trend that has increased in the post-COVID-19 era. This aligns with the article [5] and [6], which notes that tourists are increasingly planning their travels based on sustainability principles, choosing more local destinations, and spending at local establishments rather than supporting large corporate businesses. Studying and understanding the changing tastes, contexts, and directions of tourism can create significant competitive advantages and generate substantial revenue for the tourism industry.

## **2. Gastronomic Tourism**

Gastronomic Tourism is gaining increasing popularity worldwide, with many tourists placing greater emphasis on food, culture, and local experiences rather than traditional tourism. In developing food-based tourism attractions, local communities should focus on improving food product development, marketing communications and information dissemination, as well as services at tourist destinations and various basic facilities that meet the needs of target tourists.

Gastronomic Tourism has become a global tourism phenomenon. According to the Global Culinary Tourism Market 2020-2027 report, gastronomic tourism generates significant economic value. The global culinary tourism market is growing at an average rate of 16.8% annually and is expected to reach a market value of \$1,796.5 billion by 2027. Thailand's culinary tourism market size in 2022 was \$23,285 million, representing nearly 4% market share of the global culinary tourism market, which is considered substantial (Travel & Luxury Travel, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Thai culinary tourism generated 20% of total tourism revenue, valued at 456 billion baht, divided between international tourist revenue of 282 billion baht and domestic tourist revenue of 174 billion baht [7].

Food tourism encompasses unique culinary tourism experiences that are not necessarily limited to high-end restaurants. Tourists visiting food tourism destinations often find themselves more impressed by affordable street-side establishments or lesser-known eateries, provided these places can create memorable experiences. Food tourism is influenced by cultural, social, environmental, and economic factors, and has gained attention due to various trending aspects [8]. Reference [9] identified key factors affecting tourist food consumption through an in-depth synthesis of food consumption data and sociological research, noting that social and cultural factors influence tourist food consumption through cultural influences, religion, socio-demographic factors, learning, and tourists' past experiences.

Reference [8] defined Gastronomy Tourism as travel to an area for leisure purposes, including visits to food events, food festivals, food fairs, cooking demonstrations, and sampling quality local food products. Through this, tourists can simultaneously experience the country's or local culture through food tasting. This form of tourism engages all senses, making food central to the tourism experience. Thus, Gastronomy tourism is not limited to mere food tasting but encompasses traveling to

experience the culinary aspects of each region. A research [10] explains that food tourism holds value beyond just consuming famous dishes at tourist destinations. It extends to production aspects (such as agritourism, visiting local production sites) through to post-consumption activities (such as producing value-added souvenirs or even food waste management). This continuity provides tourists with opportunities to fulfill their experiences and engage in various tourism activities stemming from food, benefiting the socio-economic aspects of all sectors involved in the tourism industry [10].

Reference [12] further states that significant culinary tourism comprises both tourism products and factors influencing consumer decision-making. Therefore, entrepreneurs need to employ creativity in various aspects to create compelling connections that result in diverse forms of food tourism interest, based on both tourist preferences and geographical conditions, to provide options for tourists. Reference [13] further argue that local cuisine is another attractive element for tourists as it clearly represents the intangible heritage of tourist destinations, forming a unique identity for each locality. Tourists gain authentic cultural experiences, and local cuisine serves as a branding tool that differentiates tourist destinations in each area. This presents an opportunity for tourism stakeholders to collaborate in developing destinations to be more interesting and attractive to tourists. According to [14], food is considered a social culture comprising various elements including ingredients, seasonings, food preservation, food procurement, cooking methods, kitchen utensils, eating methods, dining utensils, food arrangement and decoration, food-related beliefs, and food values. The definitions of food culture, both internationally and in Thailand, clearly demonstrate that food culture encompasses not just food itself but also various dimensions related to food, from determining what should be eaten, establishing methods of procurement or production, food processing, storage and maintenance, distribution through various methods, cooking, decoration, service, consumption, and even post-consumption practices. These aspects are interconnected with socio-cultural and historical contexts of different groups, as well as other factors such as environment, social class, gender, age, etc., enabling people within the same group or society to practice appropriately. Based on the above literature review, there are multiple dimensional components influencing tourist decision-making in terms of using food as a tourism attraction. This research aims: 1) to explore the tourism behavior and Thai food consumption preferences and style of both domestic and international tourists and 2) to distill strategic approaches to promote and present Thai food to quality tourists.

### **3. Research Design**

This study employs a mixed-method approach over two phases. Phase 1 involves collecting data from both Thai and international tourists to understand their tourism behavior and Thai food consumption patterns through questionnaire surveys. Phase 2 builds upon findings from Phase 1 by conducting focus group discussions with food experts and specialists from related disciplines to analyze and interpret the results. A summary of the two phases is illustrated in Fig 1.

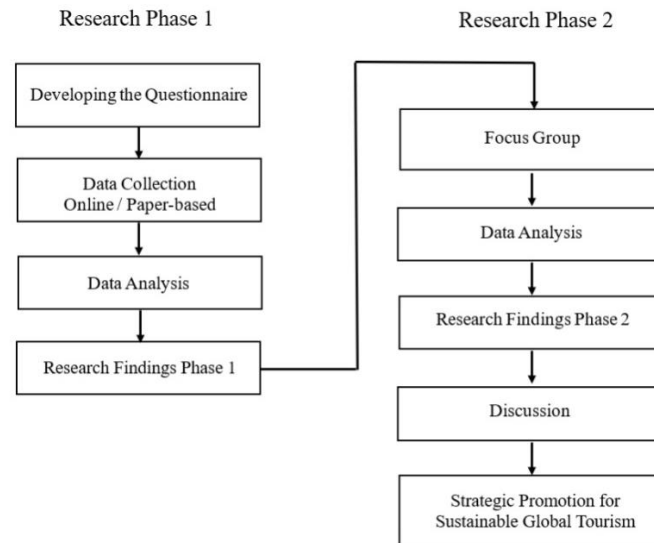


Fig. 1.The Research Design

The focus of the Research Phase was on studying in individual differences in tourist behavior patterns, as well as examining food consumption behaviors with an emphasis on Thai cuisine among both domestic Thai tourists and international visitors. It began with a survey. Reference [15] states that questionnaire is one of the most widely methods used for collecting preliminary data-both quantitative data and qualitative data. It is an effective way of collecting responses from a large sample. Data collection was conducted in June 2024, After the Research Phase 1 was completed, an initial template [16] was produced combining elements from the literature and the findings from the data analysis. This led to the Research Phase 2 which was collected from experts through focus group discussion. A qualitative approach was used to follow up the survey, based on focus group. Reference [17] describes the focus group as an unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of people. It is not a rigidly constructed question-and-answer session, but a flexible formation that encourages discussion of the research issue. Also, the topical objective of a focus group is often a new product or product concept.

The audio recording of focus group was fully transcribed word for word into textual format. Data has been categorized and coded using template analysis technique. The initial template was refined and expanded during the process. Following a discussion of the findings, the conclusions and recommendations were produced.

## 4. Results

### Research Phase 1

Overall, 726 questionnaires were returned. The findings presented here are some selected summary response.

Some selected findings about survey respondents:

- The majority of respondents were female and the age range was between 26 and 43 (45.04%)
- Most respondents (49.31%) had completed bachelor's degrees as their highest level of education.
- The majority of Thai tourists were government officers or state enterprise employees (31.04%), followed by company employees (24.93%). As for international tourists, the vast majority were from Asia (83.93%), with company employees comprising the largest group (37.05%), followed by university students (23.21%).

Selected findings from the survey were:

- Both Thai and international tourists placed similar importance on accommodation and food & beverage expenses, accounting for 28.64% and 24.66% of their total expenditure, respectively.
- International tourists allocated a significantly higher proportion (18%) of their spending to tourism activities, while Thai tourists dedicated only 11.76% of their budget to such activities
- Thai tourists place extremely high importance on delicious and palatable food, accounting for 98.12 percent of respondents.
- The majority of respondents chose to have special meals on occasions such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, or significant family events.
- 95% of international tourists are familiar with and have experienced Thai cuisine
- The most effective communication channels for Thai tourists regarding food are online media (84.03%), followed by celebrities such as singers and actors (50.75%), and television media like food programs (49.25%). For international tourists, the primary channels for Thai food communication are personal connections (64.29%) such as family and friends, followed by online media (50%), and Thai restaurants in their residential areas (41.07%)
- Overall, tourists showed the highest interest in food presentation that maintains Thai identity, with a mean score of 4.37, followed by strong interest in food presentation with appetizing colors, scoring 4.35
- Regarding food quality, tourists rated cleanliness and hygiene as their top concern, with a mean score of 4.75, followed by authentic Thai flavors with multiple taste components in a single dish, scoring 4.58.
- In terms of service aspects, tourists placed the highest importance on Thai-style service characteristics, such as polite demeanor, service with a smile, and Thai etiquette, scoring 4.56, followed by food serving methods according to local cultural or ethnic traditions, with a mean score of 4.31.
- For promotional aspects, tourists showed the highest interest in using online media to convey Thai food stories, with a mean score of 4.56, followed by collaboration with recognized organizations such as Michelin Guide for Thai food standard assessment, scoring 4.36.
- Regarding cultural aspects, tourists expressed the highest interest in Thai cooking methods and preparation techniques, with a mean score of 4.49, followed by strong interest in local food consumption cultures, scoring 4.44.

## **Research Phase 2**

Following the survey, focus groups with 13 experts were conducted. These experts work across diverse fields, including food culture, food engineering, food research, food product development, marketing, restaurant entrepreneurship, language and communication, food and restaurant business, Thai arts and culture, and strategic and policy making. The major themes emerged from the focus group are summarized as followed:

### **Culture Authentication and Modern Presentation:**

- The high mean score for Thai identity preservation in food presentation indicates a strong market demand for cultural authenticity.
- This finding aligns with contemporary tourism theories emphasizing 'authenticity-seeking behavior' in cultural tourism, suggesting a strategic opportunity to position Thai cuisine as a vehicle for cultural immersion.

### **Quality-Centric Service Development**



- The high mean score for Thai identity preservation in food presentation indicates a strong market demand for cultural authenticity.
- The exceptionally high prioritization of hygiene and cleanliness reflects evolving global tourism standards and presents a critical area for strategic focus.
- The emphasis on authentic Thai flavors coupled with Thai-style service characteristics suggests the potential for developing a comprehensive service excellence framework that integrates both tangible and intangible cultural elements.

#### Digital Transformation in Gastronomic Tourism

- The significant preference for online media among questionnaire result indicates a critical need for digital-first marketing strategies
- This digital inclination presents opportunities for creating immersive online experiences that showcase Thai culinary heritage while facilitating tourist engagement.

#### Market Segmentation and Targeting Strategies

- The distinct difference in tourism activity expenditure between international and Thai tourists suggests the need for differentiated pricing and product strategies.
- The high percentage of Asian tourists (83.93%) indicates potential for targeted regional marketing campaigns that emphasize shared cultural values while highlighting unique Thai culinary attributes.

#### Experiential Value Creation

- The preference for special occasion dining suggests potential for developing premium experiential dining products that capitalize on significant life events.
- The high interest in cooking methods (4.49) and local food consumption cultures (4.44) indicates opportunities for developing interactive culinary experiences.

#### Word-of-Mouth Marketing Optimization

- The high reliance on personal recommendations among international tourists suggests the need for strategies that facilitate and amplify positive word-of-mouth.
- This could be integrated with the strong online media presence to create a hybrid marketing approach that combines traditional relationship-based marketing with digital engagement.

#### Educational Content Strategy

- The high interest in Thai cooking methods and local food culture suggests potential for developing educational content that enhances tourist engagement with Thai gastronomy
- This presents opportunities for creating value-added products such as cooking classes, food tours, and cultural workshops.

#### Quality Standards Implementation

- The high prioritization of cleanliness and authentic flavors indicates the need for developing comprehensive quality standards that address both operational and cultural aspects of food service.
- This potential for creating a national certification program for Thai restaurants catering to tourists.

## **Cultural Sustainability Framework**

- The strong interest in Thai identity preservation suggests the need for developing guidelines that ensure cultural sustainability in gastronomic tourism development.
- This includes strategies for maintaining authenticity while adapting to contemporary tourist preferences and global health standards.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This mixed-methods study, combining quantitative surveys (n=726) and qualitative expert focus groups (n=13), reveals significant insights into leveraging Thai gastronomy for tourism development. The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between cultural authenticity and tourist satisfaction, with particular emphasis on preserving Thai culinary identity (mean=4.37) while meeting contemporary service standards. Notably, the research identifies distinct market segments between domestic and international tourists, with Asian tourists comprising 83.93% of international respondents, suggesting targeted marketing opportunities.

The study highlights three critical success factors for Thai gastronomic tourism development. First, the integration of cultural authenticity with modern service excellence, evidenced by high tourist priorities for both hygiene standards (mean=4.75) and traditional Thai service characteristics (mean=4.56). Second, the emergence of digital transformation as a key driver, with online media being the primary information channel for Thai tourists (84.03%) and significant for international tourists (50%). Third, the importance of experiential value creation, particularly through special occasion dining and interactive culinary experiences.

These findings contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in gastronomic tourism development. They suggest that successful Thai culinary tourism requires a balanced approach between preserving cultural authenticity and meeting contemporary tourist expectations, supported by digital innovation and strategic market segmentation.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on our comprehensive mixed-methods research, this study proposes strategic recommendations to enhance Thailand's culinary tourism, emphasizing both the preservation of cultural authenticity and adaptation to contemporary tourist expectations. Notably, the establishment of food safety standards and hygiene certification systems is paramount, as these aspects rank highest in tourists' concerns. This should be complemented by effective digital marketing strategies that leverage high engagement rates on online platforms through cultural storytelling and interactive content. Storytelling can occur simultaneously with other activities such as communal dining, cooking, and sharing photographic experiences. Storytelling serves as a distinctive communication method for content delivery, creating engagement and memorable experiences, as well as persuading and inducing various behaviors, including Thai food consumption. This transforms Thai food consumption into more than just eating, ultimately leading to recognition and acceptance of the unique characteristics of Thailand's culinary tourism.

To ensure sustainable development, this research proposes establishing a comprehensive quality control system, and community engagement initiatives should be supported through activities or projects that document food narratives, recipes, and traditional techniques, alongside sustainable practices in food preparation and sourcing. These recommendations require collaboration between government agencies, private sector stakeholders, and local communities, along with regular effectiveness evaluations of implementations. Future research should focus on measuring the impact of these strategies on tourist satisfaction and economic development while preserving Thai culinary heritage. Future research should explore the implementation effectiveness of these strategies across different tourist segments and destinations.

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