

Gastronomical Charm in Decoding Tourist Consumption Patterns in Sarawak, Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i1/23882> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i1/23882

Published Date: 07 January 2025

Abstract

Kuching Sarawak's currently recognized as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy underscores, its significance in terms of diverse types of food and environmental heritage. The aim of this research is to identify the underlying dimensions of predictors of tourists' consumption behavior toward local gastronomy in Sarawak and, to examine the influences on tourists of consumption behaviors in the context of environmental factors effect on tourists' intention. By selecting Sarawak as the location of this study, the quantitative method using a questionnaire is employed which data then analyze by using Smart PLS 4.0 contribute to the findings of the significant roles of tourists' behaviors traits of a local gastronomy in Sarawak. Additionally, the findings reveal that the relationship of six of the predictors; gastronomy knowledge ($\beta = 0.099$, $t=2.077$, $p<0.038$), cultural awareness ($\beta = 0.107$, $t=2.272$, $p<0.023$), food safety ($\beta = 0.087$, $t=2.305$, $p<0.021$), gastronomy image ($\beta = 0.158$, $t=2.538$, $p<0.011$), epistemic value ($\beta = 0.344$, $t=5.660$, $p<0.000$) and environmental factor ($\beta = 0.233$, $t=5.730$, $p<0.000$) demonstrate a positive relationship with the environmental factor, thus confirming the support for the hypothesis. The findings shows the significant contribution through the development of plans local food and tourism industries, as well as the preservation and promotion of traditional Sarawakian culinary culture, the findings can significantly increase economic growth.

Keywords: Gastronomy, Environmental Factor, Predictors, Smartpls, Sarawak

Introduction

The impact of tourism on economic growth and expansion has been widely acknowledged for quite some time (Bhattarai & Karmacharya, 2022). Worldwide, the tourism sector is a vital component of the global economy, significantly contributing to employment, generating substantial income, and fostering economic prosperity (Geoffrey et al., 2019; He et al., 2023; Odunga et al., 2020). (Pratt et al., 2020), mention that gastronomy tourism is

recognized as one of the fastest-growing industries. Gastronomic tourism is on the rise within the tourism sector, with a noticeable uptick in the number of tourists seeking culinary experiences and immersion in food-related cultures (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019).

Sarawak holds promise as a significant contributor to ASEAN economic development, particularly in the realm of food (LING, 2023). According to the Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts (MTCP), the tourism industry already contributed 37%, or nearly one-third of Sarawak's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023. However, compared with 2018, the figure showed a decreasing trend in number, whereby tourism was able to contribute more than in 2023, which accounted for 8.72% of Sarawak's GDP (Bong, 2024). Thus, the tourism industry has received a very encouraging response recently, especially in 2023, and at the same time, it has also had a positive impact on the food industry (Zain et al., 2023).

As mentioned by (Sanip et al., 2024), there has been a noticeable shift toward highlighting gastronomy as a primary tourist attraction in recent times, underscoring the necessity for travel agencies, hotel managers, and local governments to devise efficient strategies to entice both domestic and international travelers to explore Malaysia. This research delves into the factors that influence the consumption of local gastronomy in Sarawak. In the present day, the tourism sector is experiencing notable growth, with cultural tourism serving as a significant contributor to a nation's revenue generation.

In Sarawak, food heritage and landscapes safeguard and showcase 'food' as integral components of the cultural and environmental significance of regions. Foodies seek to explore destinations through their culinary offerings and appreciate the value associated with food production and consumption (Berno & Fusté-forné, 2023). Moreover, food and beverage tourism has undergone extensive analysis over recent decades, with investigations conducted from destination management and marketing perspectives (C. Michael Hall, Liz Sharples, Richard Mitchell, Niki Macionis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2018; Francesc Fusté-Forné, 2023; Long, 2004), as well as through economic and social lens. Research has also explored the significance of food and beverage tourism from both supply and demand standpoints (Balıkçioğlu Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Blenkinsopp et al., 2017) (Balıkçioğlu Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; James & Halkier, 2016; Pamukçu et al., 2021), examining its contributions to regional development (Gössling et al., 2016; Rachão et al., 2019), and the attribution of tourism values to food (Francesc Fusté-Forné, 2023; Tracy Berno ORCID Icon, Gobie Rajalingam ORCID Icon, Agueda Isolina Miranda, 2022).

The tourism industry in Sarawak is experiencing notable growth in various aspects. Extensive promotional campaigns have been launched to establish Sarawak as a must-visit destination for all travelers. The region has successfully hosted numerous local and international events, each carefully designed to attract tourists to explore and immerse themselves in Sarawak's rich and diverse landscapes (Naratif et al., 2024). Based on the statistics from Tourism Malaysia (2020) in 2019, Sarawak contributed RM11.0 billion to the Gross Value-Added Tourism Industry (GVATI), which is equivalent to 7.5% of Sarawak's GDP. GVATI income primarily comprises revenue from retail trade and accommodation, the leading contributors to Sarawak's tourism sector, accounting for 31.5% (RM3.5 billion), followed closely by food and beverage industries at 31.3% (RM3.4 billion). Further

supporting tourism as a pivotal contributor to Sarawak's economy is the employment opportunities it generates for the local population. In 2018, the tourism sector alone provided employment for 240,000 individuals in Sarawak, constituting 19.1% of the state's total employment of 1.3 million (Abdurahman et al., 2021).

The environmental factor also significantly influences tourists' inclination to indulge in Sarawak's local cuisine. As mentioned by (Arrobas et al., 2020), much research has touched on environmental factors, but most of it has focused on the relationship to sustainable tourism and its direct effect to consumption behavior. Moreover, (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020) revealed that the influence of local food consumption on tourist behavior remains an underdeveloped topic and that the mediating factor has not been fully discussed in tourism studies. Due to this scenario, the current study attempts to explore the environmental factor, which is the mediating variable for the predictors that influence tourist consumption behavior toward local gastronomy in Sarawak. Food can be viewed as a cultural artifact that embodies the essence of local culture and provides visitors with a taste of the destination's unique lifestyle (Harrington et al., 2011). Consequently, food serves as a reflection of specific characteristics of a locality (R. N. S. Robinson, 2013). Meanwhile, research conducted by (Mora & Miguel, 2021), key findings of this study, confirmed that the level of satisfaction with local cuisine is influenced by culinary motivations. Visitors express high satisfaction with their dining experiences, which varies depending on their stated interest in gastronomy. Likewise, heightened interest leads to significantly varied perceptions of local cuisine attributes, with traditional gastronomy, prices and food quality being valued more extensively.

However, changing food habits is notoriously challenging because they are deeply fixed in people's lifestyles (Flaherty et al., 2017; Sonestedt et al., 2005) and influenced by their socio-cultural surroundings (Cairns, 2019; Carrus et al., 2018; Nancarrow & Kwok, 2001). Additionally, food choices are influenced by marketing campaigns by food companies, which can alter dietary norms, preferences in food and drink categories at a population level, and the cultural values associated with food behaviors (Cairns, 2019). The complexity of food-related decisions makes them susceptible to various social, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors (Bublitz et al., 2010). In summary, efforts to promote environmentally-sustainable food consumption compete with numerous other contextual influences on people's food choices.

Review of Literature

The consumption behavior of tourists toward local gastronomy is influenced by various factors that shape their perceptions, preferences, and decisions (Baby & Joseph, 2023). This literature review examines six key predictors that play crucial roles in determining tourists' engagement with Sarawak's gastronomy which include the gastronomy knowledge, gastronomy experience, cultural awareness, food safety, epistemic value, and gastronomy image. These predictors are interconnected and collectively contribute to tourists' overall consumption behaviors. Gastronomy knowledge forms the foundation of tourists' understanding of local cuisine, while gastronomy experience encompasses practical interactions with food (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Prayag et al., 2020). Cultural awareness provides context for appreciating culinary traditions, and food safety considerations impact tourists' willingness to try local dishes (Adhianata et al., 2024; Chioru et al., 2023). The epistemic value relates to the novelty and learning aspects of gastronomic experiences, and

the image of gastronomy represents the overall perception of Sarawak's culinary offerings (Hsu et al., 2022; Onat & Güneren, 2024; Yeap et al., 2020). By examining these six predictors, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence tourists' decisions to engage with and consume Sarawak's gastronomy. This analysis will provide valuable insights for stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industries to enhance visitors' gastronomic experiences and promote Sarawak's unique culinary heritage.

Gastronomy Knowledge (GK)

Likewise, knowledge has been acknowledged as a critical aspect of the gastronomy tourism industry. According to (Bertella, 2011), knowledge of gastronomy has effectively exposed local traditional regional gastronomy to the youth as a way to raise their understanding and preserve food in tourism. Local ethnic gastronomy can be preserved by incorporating gastronomy fabrication in tourism destinations as an example of creative tactics to convey country-specific gastronomy knowledge to tourists (Bertella, 2011). To be sure, knowledge has a huge influence on cultural institutions in tourism destinations. Nonetheless, previous studies have clarified that eating local cuisine is the most important means of transmitting food knowledge to tourists, thus indicating a region's cultural wealth (Fonte, 2008; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). This form of knowledge, in terms of Sarawak cuisine, includes a comprehension of the esthetic value, authenticity, and uniqueness of the dish, sensory perception, and cooking technique.

The connection between environmental factors and food gastronomy is an extensive and essential component of sustainable culinary practices. Environmental issues have a huge influence on how people experience and prepare food. The significance of sustainability and environmental awareness in gastronomic pursuits is underscored by notions like eco-gastronomy (Altuna et al., 2017). It is essential to understand how environmental concerns and food gastronomy relate to encourage sustainable practices, conserve cultural heritage, and improve cuisines as a whole (Teng et al., 2014). Stakeholders can support local communities, aid in resource conservation, and provide genuine, environmentally friendly culinary experiences by incorporating environmental considerations into gastronomic activities (Arslan et al., 2023; Pieroni, 2016). The nexus between tourist awareness and environmental factors in gastronomic knowledge is believed to significantly influence tourists' inclinations toward consuming local cuisine and visiting Sarawak soon. "The crucial cognitive component enabling tourists to engage in responsible behaviors and mitigate their adverse environmental impact is environmental knowledge"(Su et al., 2020). Numerous studies have underscored the interplay among food, knowledge, and environmental factors in gastronomic consumption, a notion substantiated by prior research. For instance, scholars have emphasized the pivotal role of environmental information in food consumption (Akhoondnejad et al., 2022; Kvalsvik & Øgaard, 2021; Robinson & Beesley, 2010; Smith, 2008). Meanwhile, referring to past investigations, an increasing tourist interest in "local gastronomy" is considered a response to growing issues about globalization, which has driven people to question the food system on which they rely and demand greater openness about the origins of their food (Hempel & Hamm, 2016a; Pearson et al., 2011). Further to the above research deficiencies, the possibility that knowledge of local gastronomy that is involved with environmental concerns in Sarawak can form GS within tourists remains unknown. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Gastronomy knowledge significantly influences environmental factors.

Gastronomy Experience (GE)

Prior experience as the background of customers' engagement, information and production that reflect their degree of competence (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020). The aforementioned studies also clearly stated that this construct may explain overall purchasing behavior since it serves as the foundation of consumer knowledge about a product and is connected with both objective and subjective information (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Goossens, 2000). Prior experience is defined in tourism research as past knowledge gained through previous involvement that may influence future decisions such as length of stay, frequency of purchasing, repeat visitation, planning behavior, quality evaluation of services, and consumers expected real experience at a destination (S. Huang & Hsu, 2009; Ryu & Han, 2011).

Tourist experiences are multidimensional, with numerous clusters of experience, and several researchers have discovered many components of tourist experience in diverse study settings (Lee & Jan, 2022). (Pine & James H., 1998), presented a four-dimensional experience structure (education, entertainment, esthetics, and escapism) manifesting over two continuous dimensions: consumer involvement (active or passive participation) and connection (absorption and immersion). The application of Pine and Gilmore's model has been widely analyzed and validated in various contexts in tourism literature, including cruise tourism (Hosany & Witham, 2010), senior tourism (Hwang et al., 2020), bed-and-breakfast accommodation (Oh et al., 2007), wine tourism (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012), music festivals (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011), and traditional Korean houses "Hanok" (Lee & Kim, 2021). Based on the above discussion, it can be predicted that gastronomy experiences have a direct positive influence on environmental factors. Thus, the second hypothesis was proposed as follows:

Further to the above research deficiencies, the possibility that awareness of local cuisine that is involved with gastronomy tourism in Sarawak can form food awareness among tourists remains unknown. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

H2: Gastronomy experiences significantly influence environmental factors.

Cultural Awareness (CA)

(Merkle, 1984), investigated awareness as the ability to make more accurate, forced-choice judgments regarding the identification or presence of primes, suggesting that participants were considered unaware of the primes when their decisions reached chance levels. (Morin, 2011), defined awareness as the capacity to become the center of one's own attention, in which individuals actively recognize, process, and retain information about themselves. Hence, it is reasonable to predict that increased awareness of tourism's negative environmental implications will influence both locals' and tourists' attribution of responsibility for environmental activities or issues (Confente & Scarpi, 2021). To add, it is vital to increase awareness of the negative environmental implications of tourism to promote solid duty attribution, proactive behavior, and environmentally responsible behavior (Confente & Scarpi, 2021).

Thus, (Galati, 2023) observed that heightened awareness of local cuisine correlates with increased tourist visits. Sarawak, renowned for its abundant biodiversity and unique ecosystems, has a culinary tradition that is deeply rooted in rich heritage and natural

resources. Amid pressures of globalization, preserving the distinctive local character cherished by tourists has become paramount (Henderson, 2009). Consequently, concerted efforts are necessary to safeguard and empower indigenous producers, ensuring they derive maximum benefit from gastronomy tourism. These concerns warrant significant attention through integrated economic policies. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that economic activities stemming from tourist spending on food, including the development of supply chains, can offer valuable support, particularly in less fortunate nations (Ernest et al., 2023). (Henderson, 2009), emphasizes the need for collaboration between the tourism and food sectors to underscore the significance of gastronomy in visitor engagement and enhance quality through joint efforts in product development and cooperative marketing.

In Sarawak, where gastronomy tourism is relatively promising, the awareness of local cuisine, which serves as a primary motivation for travel, remains underexplored, largely due to insufficient consideration of tourists' value propositions or aspirations. (Affandy & Gani, 2024) found that respondents exhibited diverse perspectives on Sarawak cuisine and gastronomic tourism, underscoring the importance of comprehensive data collection. Generally, (Galati, 2023) confirms that the increased environmental and social awareness of tourists that has evolved in recent years also defines gastronomy tourism, adding to the knowledge base in the tourism research area. Although previous researchers have studied and investigated the relationship between destination and tourism value in various cultural and gastronomy settings, understanding the effects of these factors on cultural awareness of local gastronomy mediated by environmental awareness remains a key issue that requires further examination. Therefore, it could be postulated that

H3: Cultural Awareness significantly influence the Environmental factor.

Food Safety (FS)

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2019), secure food sources can bolster national economies, trade, and tourism while also contributing to food and nutrition security, thereby serving as the foundation for sustainable development. Hence, urbanization and shifts in consumer behavior have led to a rise in the consumption of food purchased and consumed in public venues. Globalization has spurred an expanding consumer appetite for a diverse range of foods, leading to the development of a more intricate and extended global food supply chain ((WHO), 2019). To add, according to research conducted by (Ying & Voo, 2020), past researchers have reduced the chances of food being unsafe by checking for risks at each step of making and delivering food. They do this through food safety programs. By using risk analysis and its three parts, risk assessment (RA), risk management, and risk communication, past researchers have developed a science-based plan to lower the chances of food causing safety problems for people who consume it (Ying & Voo, 2020).

Numerous explanations have been given to explain the consumption of foods that cause oral characteristic aromas and irritations, both of which are unpleasant feelings (Byrnes & Hayes, 2013). These include culturally related social and associative variables (Online et al., 2018), repetitive exposure to a certain style of cuisine (Ventura & Worobey, 2013), food quality and preference (Bartels & Reinders, 2010), and physiological distinctions such as taste type or oral anatomy (Breslin & Huang, 2006). Meanwhile, referring to past investigations, an increasing tourist interest in "local food" is considered to be a response

to growing issues about globalization, which has driven people to question the food system on which they rely and demand greater openness about the origins of their food (Hempel & Hamm, 2016b; Stalmirska, 2024). Further to the above research deficiencies, the possibility that awareness of local cuisine that is involved with gastronomy tourism in Sarawak can form food awareness among tourists remains unknown. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

H4: Food safety significantly influences environmental factors.

Gastronomic Image (GI)

A popular tourist destination is often known for its local cuisine and cultural identity (Hall & Scott, 2013). Research suggests that associating a specific location with unique gastronomic traits can strengthen a restaurant's food reputation and foster a sense of belonging (Karim et al., 2010; Nistor, 2022; Wondirad et al., 2021). (Jung et al., 2020) argue that tourists prefer places with a strong sense of locality and a distinct food culture, emphasizing the importance of understanding local culinary traditions to create an appealing image. (Horng & (Simon) Tsai, 2010; Seyitglu et al., 2023) highlighted the significance of factors like gastronomic image, brand, and promotional efforts, whether gastronomy serves as a complement or a primary focus of tourism. Therefore, for a destination to succeed as a gastronomic hotspot, it must establish a robust gastronomic identity and brand to compete effectively with other culinary destinations.

Additionally, scholars have paid considerable attention to the importance of culinary tourism and its connection to the gastronomic reputation of a tourist destination (Chieh & Scott, 2020; Huete-alcocer & Hernandez-rojas, 2022). The perception of a destination's gastronomy varies depending on various demographic factors, behaviors, and, notably, awareness (Zhang & Rathjens, 2023). Numerous studies have examined the impact of a destination's culinary reputation on tourists' behavioral intentions, revealing that the destination's food image plays a crucial role in visitors' affinity for that location (Karim et al., 2010).

Drawing from earlier research, the gastronomic image of a destination refers to a tourist's overall mental perception, emotional state, and knowledge of that specific place (Assaker et al., 2011; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Jeong & Kim, 2020). For instance, Sarawak's culinary reputation contributes to positive cultural experiences, significantly impacting tourist satisfaction (Huang et al., 2023). It is recognized that a destination may present various culinary images to tourists, especially when the regional cultural elements of the cuisine are diverse (Wan & Choi, 2022). Consequently, evidence indicates that a destination's gastronomic image plays a role in strengthening a tourist's intention to consume local food during their visit. Therefore, it is crucial for the Sarawak government to grasp the implications for tourists' perceptions of local cuisine, its value, and their loyalty to the destination.

Based on (Wan & Choi, 2022), inquiries were made regarding the perception of restaurants to assess the overall image of gastronomic establishments. Because many culinary experiences occur in hotels, food-themed events, and local festivals, these events are vital for promoting culinary resources (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Limited existing literature advises that tourists with diverse demographics and visiting behaviors perceive gastronomic images

differently, with gastronomy image being one aspect (Choi et al., 2017). Given the support from previous literature and the lack of studies on gastronomical images in tourism contexts, the following hypothesis is proposed

H5: Gastronomy image significantly influences environmental factors.

Epistemic Value (EV)

Consumption behavior, according to theory, is shaped by functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional values (Um & Yoon, 2021). A review of past consumption behavior influenced by epistemic values emphasizes the pursuit of novelty, which is explained by various definitions. Epistemic value refers to the ability of a product to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, or satisfy a thirst for knowledge (Sheth et al., 1991). (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007) associate epistemic value with a desire for knowledge, driven by intellectual curiosity or the quest for novelty. (Schmitt, 2008) suggested that curiosity involves drawing attention to a subject and creating a unique motivational drive to learn about it. Additionally, (Phau et al., 2014) suggested that tourists experience epistemic value when encountering something new or unique. The term "epistemic" relates to the human desire for knowledge (Denys & Mendes, 2014). (Caber et al., 2020) noted that epistemic value is linked to curiosity, novelty, and cognitive benefits that arise from products. Therefore, the theory of consumption values serves as a foundational theory for identifying factors that influence purchasing intention (Um & Yoon, 2021).

A destination's epistemic value refers to its ability to spark interest, offer novelty, and/or satisfy a craving for knowledge (Phau et al., 2014). Additionally, tourists influenced by epistemic values tend to choose options that fulfill their desire for something new, unique, or trendy (Phau et al., 2014). Regarding awareness of local cuisine, the impact of epistemic value on public acceptance of genetically modified foods was examined by (Chen et al., 2022). Their findings recommend that once consumers become familiar with these items, epistemic value can influence their acceptance of modified foods. These findings are significant because previous research has shown that epistemic factors can greatly affect behavioral intentions (Mason & Scirica, 2006). Furthermore, epistemic values positively affect tourists' perceptions of food, and these attitudes influence behavioral intentions, such as the intention to visit or recommend a destination (Choe & Kim, 2018). Therefore, based on literature research by (Mason & Scirica, 2006) literature research, it is established that epistemic value has the greatest impact on food purchase intentions, particularly influencing domestic tourists' behavioral intentions toward heritage foods in the study area.

However, prior research indicates that environmental awareness positively influences purchasing behavior (Hansen et al., 2018; Prakash et al., 2018). Consequently, environmental awareness has been explored as a moderator in examining the connection between specific consumption values, intentions toward ethical consumption, and actual choice behaviors (Kushwah et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a need to regulate the nature of the relationship between environmental awareness and epistemic value from the perspective of gastronomy tourists. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6: Epistemic value significantly influences environmental factors

Environmental Factor (EF)

The importance of the environment in shaping a tourist's experience is linked to the destination's image, as described by (Rodríguez Molina et al., 2013). According to , the awareness and perception of a destination directly shape its overall image, which in turn influences tourists' intentions to travel to that location (Sriboonlue, 2023). However, (Güzel et al., 2020) noted that previous tourist interpretations of environmental aspects have lacked the complexity needed to capture the diverse colors and atmospheres found in destination images worldwide. An comprehensive model of a product's environment, asserting that six environmental variables shape the macro-environment of a destination: demographic, economic, natural, technical, political, and cultural influences, which some believe influence the tourist experience and perception of a destination (Ward & Russell, 1981).

From this perspective, a destination's physical, social, cultural, technical, political, and economic aspects combine to generate an environmental impact that shapes tourists' perceptions and experiences (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). Therefore, previous studies have typically proposed that destination components often constitute the fundamental factors influencing the environmental impact on tourists. The findings presented by (Du et al., 2018) in the journal indicate that environmental awareness increased from 2006 to 2015, primarily reflected in improved environmental behaviors and an increased understanding of environmental issues due to enhancements in rural infrastructure and the increased provision of environmental information to rural residents.

The environmental factors of respondents were notably influenced by their place of residence, with inhabitants in eco-communities demonstrating higher environmental awareness than those in conventional farming communities. It is a positive relationship between the inclusiveness of local environmental management measures and environmental factors (Du et al., 2018). However, as per the findings of (Zsóka et al., 2013), people generally lack enthusiasm for environmental involvement because of insufficient environmental awareness. Therefore, understanding the shift in environmental factors is particularly crucial in regions experiencing rapid growth and social transformation, such as rural areas in Sarawak.

H7: Environmental factors significantly influence directly to the tourist's consumption behavior

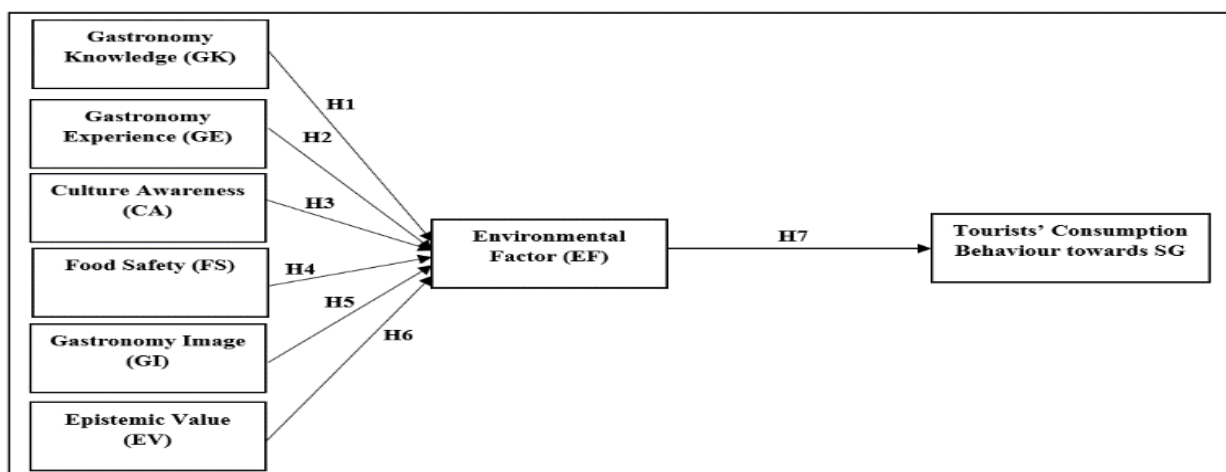


Figure 1. *Research framework*

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

During data collection, the present research administered survey questionnaires to the participants. Using a purposive sampling method based on specific and relevant characteristics for the study, in this case, having eaten local gastronomy while traveling. This is because this study requires subjects with those particular characteristics to answer the research questions. In this context, the researcher wants to identify the perceptions of tourists who have eaten local food, so this method is suitable for dividing respondents into two groups: local respondents (58%) and international respondents (42%). According to the Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry, and Performing Arts Sarawak (2020), Sarawak welcomed 4,662,419 tourists in 2019. In this study, the F-test of regression was performed using the G*Power tool. Power analysis was conducted for multiple regression with 9 variables to determine the appropriate sample size. The test was conducted with a significance level (alpha) of 0.05, power of 0.80, and medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.5$). Because most social science research considers 80% to be the minimum acceptable power (Dattalo, 2008), the optimal sample size was determined to be 114. Additionally, (Lenth, 2001) provided a guideline for sample sizing that supports the concept of minimum sample size. As illustrated in the sample size guidelines by (Lenth, 2001). The minimum sample size for a medium effect size with a maximum of 9 predictors ranges from 113 to 116, as 117 is reached when the number of predictors is 10. However, to minimize errors during the survey process or potential data omissions, the sample size was increased, leading to a total distribution of 400 questionnaires. Consequently, 400 tourists were selected as the minimum sample size for this study. The results indicate that 40% of the respondents were male and 50% were female. The predominant age group in the study comprised individuals aged 31 to 40 years (129 respondents, followed by those aged 21 to 30 years (109 respondents. Regarding income, the highest distribution comes from income in the range of RM 2,600–RM 3,500, with 23.3%.

Questionnaire and Measurements

There are two sections in the questionnaire, in which section (A) focuses on the main constructs that were modified from past studies, and Section (B) reflects the respondent's profile. One section focuses on the main constructs that were modified from past studies, including environmental factors (Tech et al., 2020), gastronomy knowledge (Flynn & Goldsmith, 1999; Januszewska et al., 2011; Kwik, 2008), gastronomy experience (J. Huang, 2017; Jalis et al., 2009; Toyama & Yamada, 2012), cultural awareness (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Fu & Luo, 2023; F. Güzel et al., 2020; J. Huang, 2017; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Y. Lee et al., 2009; Li, 2014; Pizam, 1978; Steptoe et al., 1995), food safety (Onat & Güneren, 2024), and gastronomy (Horng et al., 2012), epistemic value (Lin & Huang, 2012; Shin et al., 2021), and tourists' consumption behavior on SG (Ting et al., 2019). This study applied a five-point Likert scale to all main constructs, which represents (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

This study used a quantitative research approach with a focus on four key cities: Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu, and Miri, to examine the eating habits of tourists in Sarawak. The researchers used convenience sampling to conduct in-person surveys at several tourist destinations with a focus on both domestic and foreign tourists. After the process of data screening, 400 surveys that were initially gathered were considered suitable for study. To guarantee

dependability, pre- and pilot testing were conducted to improve the study tools. The JKEUPM (Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects) approved the study to resolve ethical concerns and guarantee the study's integrity as well as the protection of participants during the data gathering process.

Results

Measurement Model

Before conducting the structural model analysis, the initial step involved establishing the measurement model. As noted by (Memon et al., 2021), a factor loading of 0.708 or higher is recommended. However, a loading between 0.700 and 0.500 is deemed acceptable if both the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) are high. For AVE, a score exceeding 0.500 is considered adequate, whereas CR should exceed 0.700 (Hair Jr. et al., 2017). As shown in Table 1, all factor loadings for AVE and CR surpassed the minimum threshold, thus fulfilling the necessary criterion. Additionally, discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with (Ab Hamid et al., 2017) recommending a value below 0.90. Table 2 shows that all values for the reflective items exceeded this threshold, affirming the establishment of discriminant validity for the measurement model.

Table 1

Measurement Properties of Reflective Construct (Factor Loading, AVE and CR)

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	CR
GK	GK1	0.767	0.650	0.881
	GK2	0.831		
	GK4	0.836		
	GK5	0.787		
	GK3	0.821		
GE	GE 1	0.821	0.720	0.911
	GE 2	0.826		
	GE 3	0.882		
	GE 4	0.865		
CA	CA1	0.778	0.652	0.849
	CA2	0.825		
	CA3	0.818		
FS	FS 2	0.705	0.580	0.846
	FS 3	0.752		
	FS 4	0.747		
	FS 5	0.837		
GI	GI1	0.735	0.570	0.869
	GI2	0.744		
	GI3	0.784		
	GI4	0.792		
	GI5	0.719		
EV	EV 1	0.817	0.669	0.910
	EV 2	0.817		
	EV 3	0.861		
	EV 4	0.816		
	EV 5	0.777		
EF	EF1	0.727	0.602	0.858
	EF3	0.738		
	EF4	0.824		
	EF5	0.810		
	EF2	0.771		
TCB	TCB1	0.828	0.637	0.898
	TCB2	0.839		
	TCB3	0.789		
	TCB4	0.771		
	TCB5	0.760		

Note: GK (Gastronomy Knowledge), GE (Gastronomy Experience), CA (Cultural Awareness), FS (Food Safety), GI (Gastronomy Image), EV (Epistemic Value), EF (Environmental Factor), and TCB (Tourist Consumption Behavior)

Table 2

Discriminant Validity using Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT)

	CA	TCB	EF	EV	FS	GE	GI	GK
CA								
TCB	0.761							
EF	0.573	0.594						
EV	0.729	0.752	0.668					
FS	0.261	0.148	0.271	0.226				
GE	0.557	0.522	0.455	0.532	0.120			
GI	0.654	0.706	0.616	0.728	0.281	0.556		
GK	0.437	0.309	0.375	0.286	0.145	0.618	0.484	

Note: CA (Cultural Awareness), TCB (Tourist Consumption Behavior), EF (Environmental Factor), EV (Epistemic Value), GE (Gastronomy Experience), FS (Food Safety), GI (Gastronomy Image), and GK (Gastronomy Knowledge)

Structural Model

Before the current study measures the path coefficient to evaluate the hypotheses, the collinearity issue is first assessed. As mentioned earlier, the value of VIF should be less than 5 (Hair, et al., 2016), in which the constructs for the current study met all conditions (GK = 1.475; GE = 1.703; CA= 1.399; FS = 1.069; GI = 1.453; EV = 2.035; EF = 1.297; TCB = 1.000). Thus, collinearity issues did not occur in this study.

Subsequently, this study analyzes the path coefficients to assess the significance of the hypotheses using a bootstrapping technique. As depicted in Table 3, all hypotheses received support except for H2, where the results show that gastronomy experience ($\beta = 0.043$, $t = 0.832$, $p > 0.405$), while the results suggest that other predictors such as gastronomy knowledge ($\beta = 0.099$, $t = 2.077$, $p < 0.038$), cultural awareness ($\beta = 0.107$, $t = 2.272$, $p < 0.023$), food safety ($\beta = 0.087$, $t = 2.305$, $p < 0.021$), gastronomy image ($\beta = 0.158$, $t = 2.538$, $p < 0.011$), epistemic value ($\beta = 0.344$, $t = 5.660$, $p < 0.000$) and environmental factor ($\beta = 0.233$, $t = 5.730$, $p < 0.000$) demonstrate a positive relationship with the environmental factor, thus confirming the support for H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7. On the other hand, H2 indicates that Sarawak’s gastronomic tourism is still developing. As a relatively new niche, environmental aspects may not be well-integrated into the overall experience yet (Azahar & Hussain, 2018). Tourists’ expectations and perceptions are still developing. In summary, the lack of a significant relationship between gastronomy experience and environmental factor is not significant in Sarawak could be due to the current state of gastronomic tourism, tourists’ priorities, and the specific context of rural destinations. More research is needed to fully understand this dynamic.

Table 3

Path Coefficient Assessment

H	R/ship	Std. Beta (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	GK > EF	0.099	0.048	2.077**	0.038	Significant
H2	GE > EF	0.043	0.052	0.832	0.405	Not Significant
H3	CA > EF	0.107	0.047	2.272**	0.023	Significant
H4	FS > EF	0.087	0.038	2.305**	0.021	Significant
H5	GI > EF	0.158	0.063	2.538**	0.011	Significant
H6	EV > EF	0.344	0.061	5.660**	0.000	Significant
H7	EF > TCB	0.233	0.041	5.730**	0.000	Significant

Note: H (Hypothesis), GK (Gastronomy Knowledge), GE (Gastronomy Experience), CA (Cultural Awareness), FS (Food Safety), GI (Gastronomy Image), EV (Epistemic Value), EF (Environmental Factor), and TCB (Tourist Consumption Behavior)

Contributions and Conclusions

This study explored the relationships between various gastronomic and environmental factors influencing tourists' eating behavior in Sarawak's four largest cities. The findings revealed that gastronomy knowledge, cultural awareness, food safety, gastronomy image, epistemic value, and environmental factors all had a significant positive relationship with environmental factors, confirming hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7. However, gastronomy experience did not show a significant relationship with environmental factors, highlighting a gap in how environmental aspects are integrated into Sarawak's gastronomic tourism. This suggests that the sector is still in a developmental phase, where environmental considerations have yet to become a key part of the overall tourist dining experience. The results underline the importance of strengthening the connection between gastronomy and environmental sustainability. Stakeholders are encouraged to embed environmental elements into the gastronomic experience by promoting eco-friendly dining options, using locally sourced ingredients, and aligning food experiences with sustainable tourism practices. Awareness campaigns emphasizing the intersection of gastronomy and sustainability, as well as collaborations with local chefs and restaurateurs, can help elevate tourist perceptions of Sarawak as an eco-culinary destination. However from the findings also the lack of a significant relationship between gastronomy experience and environmental factors also points to the need for further research. Future studies should examine the underlying reasons behind this discrepancy, such as tourists' cultural influences, expectations, or varying levels of culinary interest and expertise. Additionally, expanding research beyond Sarawak's largest cities could offer a more comprehensive understanding of gastronomic tourism across the state. These findings provide a solid foundation for policymakers and practitioners to develop strategies that strengthen Sarawak's position as a leading culinary tourism destination while addressing the evolving expectations of tourists.

Through an examination of variables such as gastronomy knowledge, experiences, cultural sensitivity, and environmental concerns among domestic and foreign tourists, this study theoretically contribute insightful information for local tourism development, food enterprises, and policy makers. Through the development of plans to improve the local food and tourism industries, as well as the preservation and promotion of traditional Sarawakian

culinary culture, the findings can significantly increase economic growth. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on environmental aspects can direct the creation of more environmentally friendly culinary tourism techniques. From a marketing standpoint, the knowledge gained can be used to develop focused marketing plans that attract food-loving travelers and improve Sarawak's reputation as a gourmet destination. This thorough analysis of visitors' gastronomic preferences and behaviors in Sarawak's distinctive culinary landscape can significantly influence the region's approach to gastronomy tourism by enhancing visitor experiences, producing better economic results, and promoting more sustainable tourism practices.

In conclusion, while the study supported several hypotheses regarding the positive relationship between various predictors and environmental factors in Sarawak's gastronomic tourism, the lack of significance in the relationship between gastronomy experience and environmental factors indicates a unique aspect of the region's tourism landscape. The current state of gastronomic tourism, evolving tourist priorities and the specific context of rural destinations may contribute to this finding. Further research is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between gastronomy, environmental factors, and tourist perceptions in Sarawak's tourism industry. This study provides valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers to enhance the development of Sarawak's gastronomic tourism sector and align it with evolving tourist preferences and sustainability goals.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the *Jawatankuasa Penyelidikan Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKP UPM)*.

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