THE INFLUENCE OF FOOD IMAGE ON TOURIST SATISFACTION AND WORD-OF-MOUTH INTENTION: THE CASE OF DALAT, LAM DONG PROVINCE, VIETNAM

Nguyen Thi Thanh Ngan[a]*

[a]*The Faculty of Tourism, Dalat University, Lam Dong, Vietnam*
*Corresponding author: Email: nganntt@dlu.edu.vn

Abstract

Local food influences destination choice and enhances destination attractiveness. This study explores the links among food image, tourist satisfaction, and word-of-mouth (WOM) intention regarding local food in Dalat, Lam Dong Province, Vietnam. A quantitative method was applied to a sample of 327 domestic tourists chosen by convenience sampling. A model was proposed and then tested using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. The results confirm the existence of significant relationships among food image, tourist satisfaction, and WOM intention. Tourist satisfaction is influenced by three significant dimensions of food image: food safety and health, restaurant service, and food taste and popularity. This study explores how restaurant service influences both tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. A negative relationship between food safety and health and WOM intention was found. Moreover, the results demonstrate that tourist satisfaction has a critical effect on WOM intention. The study also suggests some managerial implications for enhancing the use of local food and its image to encourage tourist satisfaction and WOM intention.

Keywords: Dalat; Food image; Local food; Satisfaction; Word-of-mouth intention.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Food is an important source of energy in our daily lives and on tourist trips. The food theme has received much attention in both academic studies and practice. Nowadays, food is a significant aspect of the tourism offering and a key factor in destination attraction (Nguyen et al., 2019; Nummedal & Hall, 2006). Promoting local food in tourism helps to enhance the local economy by promoting local farming activities and involving residents (Chen & Huang, 2019; Seyfang, 2008). As a result, local food in tourism has a high potential for generating income for both producers and providers, as well as contributing significantly to tourism employment (Nummedal & Hall, 2006). The link between tourism and food production can facilitate sustainable farming practices. Similarly, local cuisine has been acknowledged as a vital aspect of local culture and identity, helping to raise environmental awareness and preserve traditional ways of life (Birch & Memery, 2020). Thus, local food has been used in many destination-marketing and development strategies to foster community pride, preserve authenticity, increase destination attractiveness, empower communities, strengthen creation and commercial activities, and strengthen brand identity (Nguyen et al., 2019; Nummedal & Hall, 2006; Sims, 2009; Stalmirska, 2021). Tourists can enhance the overall experience by tasting local food delicacies and learning more about a different and authentic culture (Nummedal & Hall, 2006; Sims, 2009). Additionally, a destination's local cuisine has a significant role in contributing to the attractiveness of the destination, the destination's qualities, and the overall tourist experience (Ha & Jang, 2010; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2013; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ryu & Han, 2010). Furthermore, the relationship between food and tourism has been used to establish a rural food brand and local food image (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Local food is considered an opportunity for tourists to understand a destination's intangible heritage and its food and drinking culture (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016).

Dalat is located on the Lam Vien Plateau, Lam Dong Province, at an elevation of 1,500 m above sea level. Dalat is a popular tourist destination in Vietnam. The Dalat tourism industry is regarded as the main pillar of Lam Dong's economic development. In the past, this mountain destination attracted numerous tourists because of its local distinctiveness (Truong et al., 2017). Dalat is known as the "Flower Festival City," "Little Paris," "The City of Love," and many other evocative names. This city has much potential in terms of tourist spots, climate, landscape, forests, and organic farming. According to a report by the Lam Dong Provincial Party Committee (Đảng bộ Tỉnh Lâm Đồng, 2022), the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays has shown a steady increase in the 2016–2019 period, from 5.4 million in 2016 to 7.1 million in 2019, with an average growth rate of 8.9%, and the average number of overnight stays has increased by 11.9%. Dalat tourism recovered after the COVID-19 pandemic, with the number of visitors reaching 5.5 million in 2022. The majority of tourist arrivals (more than 90%) are domestic tourists. The average length of stay for all tourists is approximately two days, which indicates that Dalat is an attractive tourist destination for short trips and excursions. Along with the increase in the number of tourists, the food and beverage facilities have also grown rapidly in quality.

Dalat cuisine is the convergence of a variety of dishes from regions of traditional Vietnamese cuisine combined with Dalat agricultural products, thus creating a distinctive and enticing blend. Recently, Dalat food tourism has emerged as a strong driving force for the local tourism industry. Dalat has the positive destination image of a "culinary paradise" of traditional Vietnamese food and beverages, or a fusion of different flavors created by various chefs. The growing number of tourist arrivals each year has increased local food consumption. Therefore, it is important to understand how tourists perceive local food because this can enhance the level of tourist satisfaction and increase their willingness to revisit the destination.

Many previous studies have attempted to better understand the role of local food in tourism (Ilbery et al., 2006; Morris et al., 2020; Nummedal & Hall, 2006); the effect of local food on food tourism experiences (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2020; Quan & Wang, 2004); environmental effects on consumer satisfaction and word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations of Korean restaurants (Babin et al., 2005; Ryu & Han, 2010); the impact of gastronomic experience quality and accommodation experiences on tourists' satisfaction, trust, and the promotion of repeat visits and WOM intention in Bangladesh (Hossain et al., 2023); factors influencing tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM in the selection of local food in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2020), or food image in various regions, such as Malaysia, Thailand, the western Balkans, and Korea (Leong et al., 2012; Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Yasami et al., 2021). Food image in tourism research has been conceptualized as a multi-attribute construct to measure tourists' perceived image of food, and it has also been considered a significant predictor of tourist satisfaction and their intention to revisit (Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Seo & Yun, 2015). Despite the fast-growing literature on local food and its image in the tourism and hospitality industries, it comes as a surprise to understand the attributes of local food that make up the multidimensional construct of food image. There is still a shortage of research on both the food image and its components (Leong et al., 2012; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Yasami et al., 2021). Therefore, this research aims to fill the research gap by describing a comprehensive investigation into the food image dimension and its influence on tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, as a theoretical contribution, this study identifies the body of knowledge relating to food image by offering insights into the food image dimension and the relationship between food image, tourist satisfaction, and WOM intention. Second, as a practical contribution, this study provides managerial implications for enhancing the perspective of managers on how to use local food and its image to encourage WOM intention among tourists about Dalat cuisine.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response theory

Stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) theory was introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and has been applied in various fields. S-O-R theory is described as an environment cue (stimulus, S) that influences an individual's perception (organism, O)

and negative or positive behavior (response, R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Previous studies have used various external factors on stimulus within the S-O-R framework. Emir et al. (2016) investigated factors influencing customers' intentions using five independent variables (stimulus) that influenced perceived value (organism) and online hotel booking intention (response). Kim et al. (2020) explored the authentic experience of tourism-related virtual reality (VR) activities as a stimulus and attachment to VR as a response within the VR tourism setting. The results identified that cognitive authentic experience is an important factor in VR tourism and that cognitive and affective responses are significant mediators in predicting attachment and visit intention. Hossain et al. (2023) showed that the quality of tourists' gastronomic and accommodation experiences (stimulus) has an impact on tourists' positive emotional and cognitive reactions, such as satisfaction and trust (organism), which govern tourists' WOM and revisit intentions as response variables. Similarly, Yasami et al. (2021) used food image with cognitive scales as the stimulus, food satisfaction as the organism, and loyalty intentions as the response. The results showed that food image impacts the satisfaction and loyalty intentions of Chinese tourists, but the degree of influence is different. Many previous studies have revealed the impact of destination image on tourist behavior (Ngo et al., 2023; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Yasami et al., 2021), and applying S-O-R theory in the travel context is a significant endeavor in predicting tourists' loyalty intentions (Yasami et al., 2021). Therefore, on the basis of this theory, the local food image (stimulus) in this study is expected to influence tourist satisfaction (organism), which consequently influences the WOM intention (response) of domestic tourists.

2.2. Local food in tourism

Local food can be a major motivator when choosing a travel destination (Galati et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020) and is considered a potential determinant of a destination's tourism image (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Nummedal & Hall, 2006). Local food is a necessary element that contributes to the local economy and the survival of local communities. Moreover, local food attracts tourists to the destination in the off-season (Stalmirska, 2021). Recently, the role of local food in tourism has received more attention in academic research (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Meyerding et al., 2019; Sims, 2009). As evident from the literature, the most common approach that defines this term as a geographical concept is predominantly related to the distance between producers and consumers (Nummedal & Hall, 2006; Stalmirska, 2021). When researching Malaysian cuisine, Leong et al. (2012, p. 312) highlighted five factors that define Malaysian cuisine: "diverse sensory experiences, cultural food, hot and spicy, binding grounds, and meeting of cultures". Many previous studies of the local food at tourist destinations addressed authentic aspects (Sims, 2009; Truong et al., 2017). Sims (2009) defined local food as an authentic product that represents the place and culture of a destination. Truong et al. (2017) investigated this as the variety of the local cuisine in Dalat destination distinctiveness, including local specialties, folk cuisine, typical drinks, Dalat wine, fruit, and vegetable juices; the cuisine of ethnic minorities; and the taste of different regions. This finding shows that locality, authenticity, typicality, and specialization all emphasize the unique features of local food. This finding supports the idea that tourists are motivated

to travel for the authenticity of local food. As a result, experiencing the attributes of local food at a tourist destination can also influence tourist satisfaction.

2.3. Food image

Food image is increasingly used in the marketing of a tourism destination. According to Chi et al. (2013), an image of an object is formed by a combination of beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and feelings about it; as a result, the food image is specifically related to tourists' perceptual evaluations of Malaysian food. An empirical study by Leong et al. (2012) applied a qualitative approach by using focus group interviews on the image of Malaysian gastronomy through definitions, characteristics, and types of food. Food can be a flamboyant image for tourists to retain information about a particular destination, and through eating local food, tourists can experience a truly authentic cultural tradition and have a longer-lasting memory of a particular destination. Previous studies have asserted that food image includes cognitive and affective images (Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). A common agreement among researchers is that the cognitive image comes first, and then the affective image is generated. Lertputtarak (2012) examined the perceptions of foreign tourists in Pattaya, Thailand, toward destination image and Thai food image and the relationship between these images and tourists' intentions to revisit. The results confirmed Pattaya's image as having exciting nightlife and entertainment, communicative people, and attractive tourist sightseeing and activities. Similarly, the image of Thai food includes a good cultural experience, a unique serving style, delicious, nourishing food, and exotic cooking methods. Additionally, the findings showed a strong correlation between Pattaya's image, the image of Thai food, and tourists' intention to revisit. Peštek and Činjarević (2014) identified the key cuisine attributes and dimensions of the local cuisine image in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their results suggested that the local cuisine image encompasses four dimensions: food uniqueness and cultural heritage, quality and price, nutrition and health benefits, and the affective image of food. Yasami et al. (2021) conducted a survey of 411 Chinese tourists in Phuket, Thailand, that focused on the food service aspect. Their findings revealed four dimensions that pertain to the cognitive image of local food: restaurant service, food safety and hygiene, variety and table manners, and food taste and popularity. Most studies of food image are based on the perspectives of international tourists (Lertputtarak, 2012; Ling et al., 2010; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Yasami et al., 2021). Many studies have agreed that the image of the local cuisine should be considered a multidimensional phenomenon that includes not only beliefs about the attributes of the food but also tourists' feelings relating to the food experience (Chi et al., 2013; Gani et al., 2017; Lertputtarak, 2012; Ling et al., 2010). Although the image of local food is a key component in tourists' overall perception of destination image, the literature discussing the attributes of local cuisine from the perspective of tourists is rather limited (Peštek & Činjarević, 2014). Therefore, this study is based on key food attributes as a multidimensional phenomenon to explore the image of local food.

2.4. Tourist satisfaction

Oliver (1980) developed a theory of customer satisfaction based mainly on expectation and customer confirmation or disconfirmation. Accordingly, customer satisfaction results from a comparison between what the customer expects and what they receive. Customer satisfaction research emerged in the 1990s as the most frequent application of market research (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001). Customer satisfaction has become one of the most critical marketing priorities because it is generally assumed to be a significant determinant of repeat sales, positive WOM, and customer loyalty (Ryu & Han, 2010). In the tourism sector, tourist satisfaction plays an important role in the decision to return and as a marketing tool to attract customers and plan which products and services to offer (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Accordingly, tourist satisfaction is a very important factor to be evaluated in order to improve services and products in the tourism industry and to evaluate whether a marketing strategy is successful or not (Gani et al., 2017). Tourist satisfaction has been conceptualized as a multifaceted concept that is determined by many factors (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). It is commonly believed that higher-quality service can increase overall customer satisfaction (Lee et al., 2020; Setiawan, 2019; Wang et al., 2017). Customer satisfaction is also a key mediator in the relationship between image or perceived value and behavioral intention (Chi et al., 2013; Ling et al., 2010; Ryu et al., 2008; Vesel & Zabkar, 2009).

2.5. WOM intention

According to Buttle (1998), WOM has more influence on behavior than marketer-controlled sources. Harrison-Walker (2001, p. 63) based on some studies and defined WOM as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service." There are two different forms of WOM: traditional and electronic. Traditional WOM occurs in face-to-face communications, whereas electronic WOM occurs online. It is information sharing without face-to-face interaction and is large-scale, anonymous, and not geographically bound (Chaudhary, 2017; King et al., 2014). Mai and Bui (2018, p. 30) studied the effects of international tourists' food satisfaction on WOM in Vietnamese cuisine and defined the WOM concept as "the sharing of ideas, feelings, and thoughts about Vietnamese cuisine." Good WOM not only creates a positive image of a destination, but it can also raise awareness of a destination among those unfamiliar with it and bring in new visitors (Phillips et al., 2013). Negative WOM can be conceptualized as an outcome of an unsatisfactory imbalance between expectation and perception (Buttle, 1998), and positive WOM means that tourists are more willing to spread positive information and excitedly describe their experience with a destination's food (Mai & Bui, 2018). Jalilvand et al. (2017) emphasized that the WOM intention literature is quite limited for the food industry and that additional research is needed. As a consequence, this study provides relevant constructs of WOM intention.

2.6. Influence of food image on tourist satisfaction

Ling et al. (2010) showed that the image of food directly affects tourist satisfaction. Lee et al. (2020) found that destination image has a direct effect on tourist satisfaction in Korea for both high and low street food neophobia groups. Their findings showed that experiential quality has the strongest effect on destination image and tourist satisfaction, whereas outcome quality has a significant influence on life satisfaction only for the high food neophobia group. An empirical study by Gani et al. (2017) discovered a significant, positive correlation between the image of food and tourist satisfaction. Yasami et al. (2021) conducted a survey of 411 Chinese visitors to Phuket, Thailand, and used the survey outcome to analyze cognitive food image, food satisfaction, and loyalty intention. The results confirmed that a positive relationship exists between the attributes of food image and tourist satisfaction with local food. Previous studies have confirmed the relationship between food image and tourist satisfaction in many tourist destinations (Gani et al., 2017; Lertputtarak, 2012; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Yasami et al., 2021); however, the component factors and their level of influence vary between studies. For example, Peštek and Činjarević (2014) explored the underlying dimensions of the local cuisine image by identifying the key cuisine attributes and found the "food quality and price" dimension to have the strongest influence on European tourists' satisfaction. Ab Karim et al. (2009) studied the Malaysian food image from the perspective of international tourists and found that tourist satisfaction with "quality and value of food" and "accessibility convenience" were of greater importance than "dining atmosphere" and "culinary tourism products." Yasami et al. (2021) explored the impact of destination food image on Chinese travelers' loyalty intention in Phuket and tourist satisfaction as the mediating effect on this relationship. They identified four dimensions: restaurant service, food safety and hygiene, variety and table manners, and food taste and popularity. The "food taste and popularity" dimension was the most significant contributing factor to the image of Thai food. Based on these findings, this study applied the four dimensions of local food image by Yasami et al. (2021) because of the similar context. Therefore, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H_{1a}: "Restaurant service" positively influences tourist satisfaction.

H_{2a}: "Food safety and health" positively influences tourist satisfaction.

H_{3a}: "Food taste and popularity" positively influences tourist satisfaction.

H_{4a}: "Variety and table manners" positively influences tourist satisfaction.

2.7. Influence of food image on WOM intention

Word-of-mouth is a useful method for travelers to collect information on the destination image of an area they have not explored. Many studies have found an influence of destination image on tourist satisfaction and positive behavioral intention (Hamidizadeh et al., 2016; Mai & Nguyen, 2017; Oshimi & Harada, 2016; Papadimitriou

et al., 2018; Shafiee et al., 2016). Ling et al. (2010) found that behavioral intention includes intention to revisit and positive WOM. The authors' study also revealed that image has a direct effect on tourist satisfaction and that tourist satisfaction with Malaysian food has a direct effect on behavioral intention. Chi et al. (2013) tested a theoretical model for determining the relationships among dimensions, and their findings revealed that food image influenced tourists' behavioral intentions through culinary quality. Similarly, Lertputtarak (2012) conducted a survey of 476 foreign visitors to Pattaya, Thailand, and found that the image of Thai food had a positive relationship with tourists' intentions to revisit. Lee et al. (2020) studied the impact of Korean street food quality on visitor experience, destination image, satisfaction, and WOM. Their results revealed a significant relationship between destination image and Korean WOM. It has been commonly mentioned in the literature that food image significantly influences WOM intention. Thus, the following relationships are hypothesized:

H_{1b}: "Restaurant service" positively influences WOM intention.

H_{2b}: "Food safety and health" positively influences WOM intention.

H_{3b}: "Food taste and popularity" positively influences WOM intention.

H_{4b}: "Variety and table manners" positively influences WOM intention.

2.8. Influence of tourist satisfaction on WOM intention

Much literature has assessed the relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase, revisit, and WOM behavioral intentions (Babin et al., 2005; Lai, 2020; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Ryu & Han, 2010; Ryu et al., 2008; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2012; Wahyuningsih et al., 2022; Yasami et al., 2021). Babin et al. (2005) stated that service quality and hedonic and utilitarian service values influence consumer satisfaction. Sulek and Hensley (2004) found that food, dining atmosphere, and fairness of the seating order are important predictors of satisfaction with the dining experience. Jalilvand et al. (2017) collected data from the top ten traditional restaurants in Tehran; their findings demonstrated that customer satisfaction affects trust and commitment as well as WOM. Additionally, local food satisfaction was shown to be directly related to loyalty intention, similar to the results of Chi et al. (2013). Many studies have used multidimensional construct analysis to analyze this issue within the scope of tourists. Most of the studies found that tourist satisfaction has a positive influence on WOM intention (Jalilvand et al., 2017; Lai, 2020; Mai & Bui, 2018; Setiawan, 2019). Despite the importance of tourist satisfaction with local food, perceptions of the impact of tourist satisfaction on WOM intention have not been deeply addressed, especially in many contexts. Based on that discussion, the following relationship is hypothesized:

H_5: Tourist satisfaction positively influences WOM intention.

2.9. Conceptual model
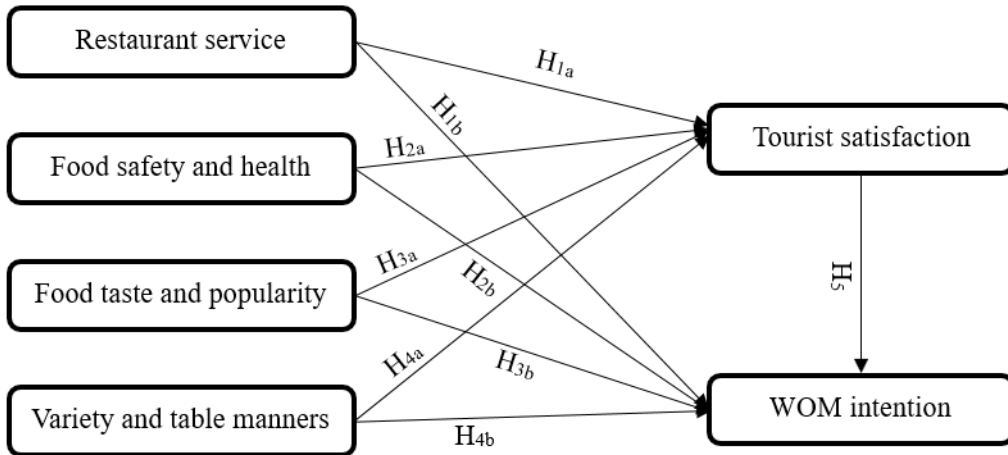
Figure 1. Research model

2.10. Measurement scales

This study adopted scales from previous studies by Gani et al. (2017), Yasami et al. (2021), and Lee et al. (2020) to measure the perception of local food. Four dimensions of local food image (restaurant service, food safety and health, food taste and popularity, and variety and table manners) were modified from Yasami et al. (2021). Tourist satisfaction items have been modified from Gani et al. (2017), and WOM intention items have been modified from Lee et al. (2020). To guarantee that items in the questionnaire had the same meaning as in the original English version, the questionnaire was first written in English, then translated into Vietnamese, and finally translated back into English (Wang et al., 2017). Thirty domestic visitors were pre-tested with the questionnaire to determine its accuracy and ease of understanding, and it was slightly changed on the basis of tourist feedback (Yasami et al., 2021). Accordingly, the measurement scales were also adjusted (Table 1). The final questionnaire consisted of 33 items to be completed using a five-level Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Table 1. Measurement scales

Code	Item	Source
Factor 1: Restaurant Service (RS)		Yasami et al. (2021)
RS1	Restaurants have a unique style of decoration and environment	
RS2	Restaurants have comfortable eating surroundings	
RS3	Restaurants offer value for money	
RS4	Services by food providers are good	
RS5	Food providers are friendly	
RS6	Restaurants are located in convenient places	
RS7	There are a variety of local specialties	

Table 1. Measurement scales (cont.)

Code	Item	Source
Factor 2: Food Safety and Health (FSH)		Yasami et al. (2021)
FSH1	Dalat food is hygienic	
FSH2	Dalat food is easily digestible	
FSH3	Dalat food is safe to consume	
FSH4	Dalat food is healthy	
FSH5	The herbs used in Dalat food are good for health	
FSH6	Ingredients used in Dalat food are fresh	
FSH7	The meal has many clean agricultural products grown in Dalat	
Factor 3: Food Taste and Popularity (FTP)		Yasami et al. (2021)
FTP1	Dalat food is a popular cuisine throughout my country	
FTP2	Dalat food is tasty	
FTP3	Dalat food is rich in flavors	
FTP4	Dalat food is hot and spicy	
FTP5	Dalat food is aromatic	
Factor 4: Variety and Table Manners (VTM)		Yasami et al. (2021)
VTM 1	Dalat cuisine has attractive eating habits and table manners	
VTM 2	Dalat cuisine offers a variety of food	
VTM 3	Dalat cuisine uses a variety of cooking methods	
Factor 5: Tourist satisfaction (TS)		Gani et al. (2017)
TS1	Dalat's local food contributes to the quality of my visiting experience	
TS2	Dalat's local food contributes to my eating pleasure	
TS3	Eating Dalat's local food adds to my visiting enjoyment	
TS4	The food experience in Dalat meets my expectations	
TS5	I experienced the culture of Dalat through its local food	
Factor 6: WOM intention (WOM)		Lee et al. (2020)
WOM1	I will say positive things about this local food to other people	
WOM2	I would highly recommend local food to my friends and relatives	
WOM3	If I could, I would recommend local food	

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection methods

A self-administered questionnaire was designed on the basis of the literature review to collect data on the image of local food in Dalat, tourist satisfaction, and WOM

intention. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 1) a demographic profile (gender, age, income, occupation, number of times tourists visit, monthly income, and average cost per meal); and 2) 33 scale items to evaluate food image, tourist satisfaction, and WOM intention. Respondents were vacationing domestic tourists who ate in restaurants in Dalat. Trained interviewers went to restaurants from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. After eating at a restaurant, domestic tourists were approached and invited to take part in an on-site survey. Regarding sample size, Hair et al. (2010) recommended that the sample size should be at least five times the number of variables for factor analysis. A sample size of 200 to 400 is normally accepted as a critical sample size (Lertputtarak, 2012). The data collection period was from February 2023 to April 2023. The sample was selected by using a convenience sampling approach. The total sample size was 327 respondents.

3.2. Data analysis method

SPSS 22 was used to display demographic characteristics and descriptive statistics of tourists' personal information. Next, Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficient needs to be greater than 0.7 (Wahyuningsih et al., 2022). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify factors to group the many observed variables into latent variables. AMOS 22 was used to examine the hypothetical paths. A structural equation model (SEM) was constructed in this study. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to determine whether the measurement items reflected the hypothesized latent constructs (Namkung & Jang, 2007). When the measures were validated, a SEM was used to test the validity of the proposed model and hypotheses. To test the goodness of fit of the model, we examined the chi-square (χ^2) statistic, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of the approximation (RMSEA) (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1995; Bentler, 1990). Average variance extracted (AVE) of all three constructs exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.5, and discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the AVE with the squared correlation between constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the effects of individual food attributes on tourist satisfaction and WOM intention.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sample profile

The results show that tourists between 18 and 25 years of age accounted for the highest percentage of those interested in local food, at 48.9%. The total sample consisted of more female (53.5%) than male (40.7%) respondents. By occupation, students were the largest group (23.5%), followed by government employees (19.3%), freelance workers (19%), businessmen (16.8%), employees (14.1%), and others (7.3%). Tourists making their first or second visit to Dalat were 27.5% and 25.7%, respectively. Tourists who have visited Dalat three or more times accounted for the highest percentage (27.8%). Personal monthly incomes between 6 and 10 million VND are common among the

respondents, accounting for 40.1%. The vast majority of tourists (68.5%) spent less than 1 million VND per meal in Dalat.

Table 2. Sample characteristics (n = 327)

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	133	40.7
Female	175	53.5
Others	19	5.8
Age		
< 18	19	5.8
18–25	160	48.9
26–35	89	27.2
36–50	49	15.0
> 50	10	3.1
No. of visits		
1	90	27.5
2	84	25.7
3	62	19.0
> 3	91	27.8
Occupation		
Student	77	23.5
Government employee	63	19.3
Employee	46	14.1
Businessman	55	16.8
Freelance worker	62	19.0
Others	24	7.3
Monthly income (million VND)		
< 6	98	30.0
6–10	131	40.1
10–20	76	23.2
> 20	22	6.7
Average cost per meal (VND)		
< 500,000	120	37
500,000–1,000,0000	104	31.5
1,000,000–2,000,000	120	21.3
> 2,000,000	104	10.2

4.2. Validity and reliability

The scales were evaluated using the CFA method with the critical model. The CFA report estimated the goodness-of-fit indices of the following measurement model: $\chi^2/df = 1.873$ less than 3, CFI = 0.926 greater than 0.9, GFI = 0.873 less than 0.9, TLI = 0.917 greater than 0.9, and RMSEA = 0.052 less than 0.08. The data are within the range of the recommended thresholds (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1995; Bentler, 1990). This confirms that the proposed model reasonably fits the data.

Table 3. Convergent validity and reliability

Items	Number of observed variables	AVE	CR	Loading
Restaurant service (RS)	7	0.650	0.862	0.749–0.808
Food safety and health (FSH)	7	0.530	0.872	0.647–0.719
Food taste and popularity (FTP)	5	0.570	0.854	0.679–0.735
Variety and table manners (VTM)	3	0.581	0.851	0.672–0.814
Tourist satisfaction (TS)	5	0.573	0.866	0.680–0.778
WOM intention (WOM)	3	0.503	0.839	0.688–0.707

Measurement model fit indexes: $\chi^2/df = 1.873$, CFI = 0.926, GFI = 0.873, TLI = 0.917, RMSEA = 0.052, PCLOSE = 0.305

Notes: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; df = degrees of freedom.

All factor loadings were above 0.5 and were significant at the alpha level of 0.001 (Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, the AVE of all constructs exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), which proves the sufficient convergent validity of the measurement model. According to Table 4, the square roots of the presented AVEs are greater than the correlations between the constructs. Comparison of AVE for each construct and squared correlations between the paired constructs were used to test for discriminant validity. The squared correlations between pairs of constructs were less than the AVEs, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Discriminant validity of the measurement model

	YD	SHL	YD
YD	0.763		
SHL	0.678	0.756	
FI	0.704	0.693	0.709

Notes: FI = food image; YD = WOM intention; SHL = food satisfaction.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

The overall fit indexes for the model were adequate (χ^2/df = 2.007 less than 3; CFI = 0.912 greater than 0.9; TLI = 0.902 greater than 0.9; GFI = 0.858 less than 0.9; and RMSEA = 0.056 less than 0.08). The results of testing the relationships between variables are shown in Table 5, along with the regression weight coefficients and the standardized regression weight coefficients. The results suggest a good fit of the model to the data.

Table 5. Estimated standardized coefficients and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path			Regression Weights					Standardized Regression Weight
				Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result	Estimate
H_{1a}	TS	<---	RS	0.166	0.059	2.821	0.005	Accepted	0.148
H_{1b}	WOM	<---	RS	0.241	0.07	3.431	***	Accepted	0.25
H_{2a}	TS	<---	FSH	0.634	0.059	10.751	***	Accepted	0.667
H_{2b}	WOM	<---	FSH	-0.202	0.082	-2.462	0.014	Accepted	-0.248
H_{3a}	TS	<---	FTP	0.253	0.06	4.188	***	Accepted	0.112
H_{3b}	WOM	<---	FTP	0.1	0.074	1.355	0.175	Rejected	0.109
H_{4a}	TS	<---	VTM	0.091	0.065	1.394	0.163	Rejected	0.088
H_{4b}	WOM	<---	VTM	-0.082	0.074	-1.1	0.271	Rejected	-0.093
H_5	WOM	<---	TS	0.468	0.1	4.68	***	Accepted	0.547

Notes: *** probability level is 0.000; Restaurant Service = RS; Food Safety and Health = FSH; Food Taste and Popularity = FTP; Variety and Table Manners = VTM; Tourist satisfaction = TS; WOM intention = WOM.

As presented in Table 5, the H_{1a}, H_{2a}, and H_{3a} paths are significant in the model (β = 0.148, $p < 0.05$), (β = 0.667, $p < 0.001$), and (β = 0.112, $p < 0.001$), respectively. Thus, the three independent variables of food image (RS, FSH, and FTP) are significantly correlated with the mediating variable of tourist satisfaction. Similarly, hypothesis H_{1b} paths in the model (β = 0.25, $p < 0.001$) and hypothesis H_{2b} paths (β = -0.248, $p < 0.05$) were also confirmed. Therefore, there is a positive relationship between restaurant service and WOM intention. However, the relationship between food safety and health and WOM intention is negative. Thus, the two independent variables of food image (RS and FSH) are supported by the significant role of WOM intention. The hypothesized relationship between tourist satisfaction and WOM intention (hypothesis H_5) is supported by the corresponding estimate (β = 0.547, $p < 0.001$). The results of hypotheses H_{3b}, H_{4a}, and H_{4b} yield model estimates (β = 0.109, $p > 0.05$), (β = 0.088, $p > 0.05$), and (β = -0.093, $p > 0.05$), respectively. However, all were rejected. This means that the two independent variables of food image (FTP and VTM) do not positively influence WOM intention, and the one independent variable of food image (VTM) does not affect tourist satisfaction. Thus, no significant relationships were found between the dimensions "food taste and

popularity," "variety and table manners," and WOM intention, and no meaningful relationship was found between "variety and table manners" and tourist satisfaction.
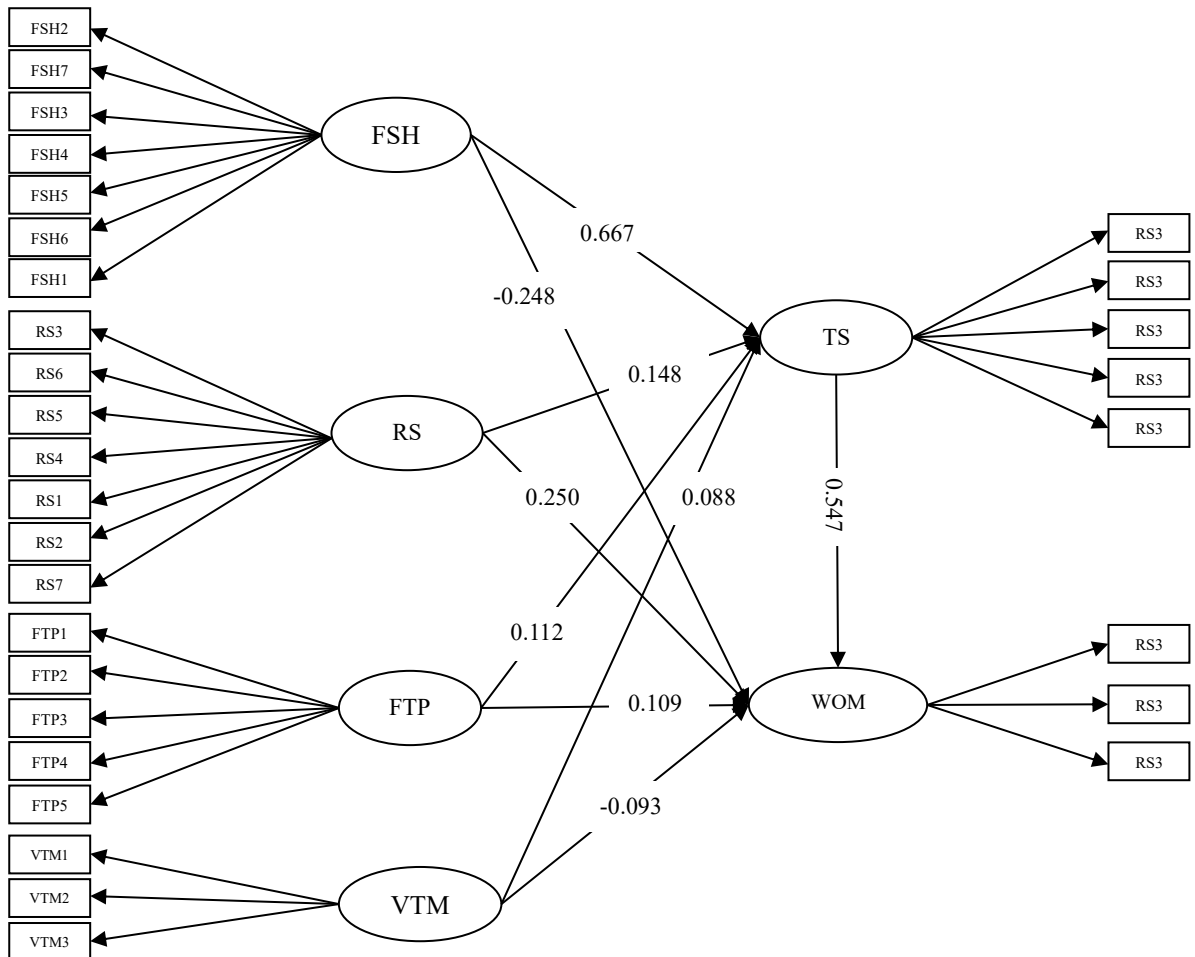
Figure 2. Structural equation model

5.   DISCUSSION

The results clearly show the significant effect of food image on tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. Attributes of food image such as restaurant service, food safety and health, and food taste and popularity significantly contribute to tourist satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the results of other empirical tests of the relationship between food image and tourist satisfaction (Gani et al., 2017; Lertputtarak, 2012; Ling et al., 2010; Seo & Yun, 2015; Yasami et al., 2021). However, the finding implies that there are relative differences in explaining tourist satisfaction. It was found that "food safety and health" is the most significant determinant of tourist satisfaction with local food, followed by "restaurant service" and "food taste and popularity." These results differ from previous research results (Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Yasami et al., 2021). For example, Peštek and Činjarević (2014) show that the most important determinant of tourist satisfaction is "food quality and price," whereas there is no significant relationship between "nutrition

and health benefits of food" and tourist satisfaction. Yasami et al. (2021) confirmed that the "food taste and popularity" dimension is the most important. There is no evidence that the "variety and table manners" dimension has a positive correlation with either tourist satisfaction or WOM intention. This result is consistent with Yasami et al. (2021) but contradicts the findings of many authors (Ab Karim et al., 2009; Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Seo & Yun, 2015). Regarding the R-squared analysis in regression, food image accounted for 59.6% of the variance in tourist satisfaction with local food. The total variance explained seems to be approximately consistent with previous studies by Ab Karim et al. (2009) and Peštek and Činjarević (2014), with proportions of 62% and 56.8% of variance in tourist satisfaction, respectively. In fact, most restaurants in Dalat have focused on listing prices, providing delicious and typical dishes, safe food, and professional, timely service. Many dishes have been introduced to Dalat, including popular dishes from other parts of Vietnam, such as chicken hotpot with E leaf from Phu Yen Province, and from countries such as India, Japan, Korea, and Thailand. These dishes came to Dalat, contributed to the city's diverse cuisine, and were also changed to suit local tastes. Dalat is known as an attractive "culinary paradise" destination and cheap service in recent years, which caters to the tourist market with average payment ability (Table 1). However, taste, food safety, and improvements in service quality are of more concern to local managers and food suppliers who wish to contribute meaningfully to tourist satisfaction.

This study found both positive and negative relationships between local food image and WOM intention. Domestic tourists are interested in two dimensions: "restaurant service" and "food safety and health" in relation to WOM intention. R-squared results show that the restaurant service factor explained 30.5% of the variance in WOM intention. Consequently, improving restaurant service quality is critical for enhancing WOM intention. There is no evidence that "food taste and popularity" or "variety and table manners" influence WOM intention. However, this result is not supported by the findings of Chi et al. (2013). They found that tourist awareness of food image had no direct or significant influence on behavioral intention. This difference in the studies can be explained by the tourist destination and the personal cognition of tourists. First, the rapid increase in the number of tourist arrivals has led to a rapid increase in the number of restaurants in Dalat. Apart from the diversity of local dishes, many dishes are neither safe nor healthy. The overload of tourist arrivals in the peak season also affects the quality of service and the cleanliness and safety of food. The image of unhealthy food negatively affects tourists' WOM intentions. Second, this study surveyed domestic tourists from many regions of Vietnam traveling to Dalat (more than 90%). Unsafe food is considered a daily story that is perceived by many people. Therefore, when traveling, tourists' fear of the risk of unsafe and unhealthy food outweighs the perspective of food service, taste, and popularity.

The study also demonstrated a significant relationship between visitor satisfaction and WOM intention. This result was found in most previous studies (Ali et al., 2020; Babin et al., 2005; Chi et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2020; Ling et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2017; Mai & Bui, 2018; Ryu & Han, 2010; Ryu et al., 2008; Tripathi, 2017).

However, the results of this study do not support Lai (2020), who claims that satisfaction with Michelin-rated food does not significantly influence WOM in Macau.

6.   CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study aimed to identify the influence of the image of local food on tourist satisfaction and WOM intention in Dalat and the moderating impact of tourist satisfaction on the relationship by providing a strong theoretical basis for studies in the tourism and hospitality fields. There is still a shortage of research to explain the validation of the multidimensional construct of food image (Leong et al., 2012; Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019; Yasami et al., 2021). The study applied the S-O-R theory to support the surveyed literature. Accordingly, this study developed and tested a theoretical framework for the relationships among the image of local food (stimulus), tourist satisfaction (organism), and WOM intention (response). The results primarily identified the significant influence of food image on tourist satisfaction, with "food safety and health" as having the most significant influence, followed by "restaurant service" and "food taste and popularity." In particular, this study identified the significant influence of "restaurant service" on both tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. In addition, this study explored the negative relationship between "food safety and health" and WOM intention. This indicates that "food safety and health" is one of the key factors of tourist satisfaction and WOM intention. Additionally, this study identified tourist satisfaction as a significant mediator in predicting WOM intention. This study sheds light on the desire of domestic tourists for local cuisine when traveling to Dalat.

Based on our findings, we suggest useful implications for managers of local food providers in the Dalat tourism and hospitality industry. Food establishment managers should encourage satisfied tourists to generate positive WOM intentions about the local food image in Dalat. Attributes of the food image identified should be given high importance by managers to promote the food image and the performance of the business. Restaurant managers can enhance the quality of their service by training staff, charging reasonable prices, and providing tasty, high-quality food. Moreover, managers can draw attention to tourists regarding healthy and safe food and how these things connect to greater satisfaction. Therefore, managers should look for reputable food suppliers and regularly check the process to make more nutritious food, deliver orders, and ensure the safety of visitors. Managers can also use social media platforms such as Facebook, blogs, Instagram, and YouTube to promote a positive image of local food in terms of safety and health, quality of service, food taste, and popularity as an important source of information to attract tourist arrivals. This suggests a greater interest in building tourist satisfaction and continued positive WOM. Based on these findings, there is a meaningful implication for local managers in developing strategies to satisfy tourists and increase WOM intention. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the efficiency of legal regulations and take effective measures to manage food facilities to increase WOM intention about local food.

Although the research results provide theoretical and practical contributions to the field, this study has limitations. First, because the current research model examined domestic tourists in Dalat, future studies should apply this model to test international

tourists to deeply understand the differences in perspective between the two tourist groups. Second, researchers could also extend the differences in tourists' personality characteristics (age, sex, profession, and income) with the dimensions of food image, tourist satisfaction, and WOM intention to gain insight into the differences between tourist groups. Third, it is possible to expand the research models by adding the moderating effects of more variables, which would be of interest in future research.

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