

DETERMINANTS OF TOURISTS' BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS TOWARD SOUTHEAST ASIAN SPECIALTY RESTAURANTS IN XINGLONG, HAINAN, CHINA

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Abstract

This study examines how perceptions of authenticity influence customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions toward Southeast Asian specialty restaurants in Xinglong, Hainan, China. A sequential mixed-methods approach was used, beginning with qualitative interviews with restaurant owners, chefs, overseas Chinese, and local residents to explore authenticity in food, environment, and service. Findings from the interviews informed a quantitative survey distributed to restaurant patrons, yielding 466 valid responses from four customer groups. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships among authenticity, perceived value, satisfaction, and recommendation intention. Results show that food authenticity has the strongest positive effect on perceived value and satisfaction, followed by service and environmental authenticity. Tourists and students respond more to environmental and service elements, while local residents and overseas Chinese emphasize traditional food flavor and preparation. Guided by theories of food culture and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, the study highlights how authenticity fosters satisfaction and word-of-mouth intention. These findings contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural dining experiences and provide practical insights for restaurant managers and policymakers aiming to enhance culinary authenticity and promote Xinglong's transition from sightseeing to culturally immersive tourism.

Keywords: Authenticity; Satisfaction; Behavioral intention; Southeast Asian diet.

Introduction

Transnational migrants play an important role in shaping the global cultural, social and economic landscape, with a particular focus on how food contributes to tourism marketing and sustainable development. Studies by Zhao, et al. (2023) and Patel and Kumar (2023) highlight the importance of local food culture, with factors like governmental promotion, business activities, and word-of-mouth influencing the formation of food symbols. Research also emphasizes the concept of "original authenticity perception," referencing the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) paradigm (Mehrabian, et al., 1974) and studies by Jang, et al. (2009, 2012), which show that authentic food and environment positively influence customer value and behavior. Existing research, however, lacks a detailed analysis of the differing degrees of this perception among customers. The text introduces the town of Xinglong in Hainan as a unique case study. This community is home to return overseas Chinese from 21 Southeast Asian countries, who, for political reasons, settled there in 1951. This unique migration history resulted in a complex cultural integration, particularly in the localization and symbolization of Southeast Asian cuisine. As a famous tourist destination, Xinglong's overseas Chinese population and specialized restaurants offer an ideal setting to investigate how the authenticity of Southeast Asian food is perceived, and how its branding and localization contribute to the local tourism economy and a new path to sustainable development. This

unique setting is a prime example of the phenomena described in studies by Liu, et al. (2023) and Zhang and Wang (2022) regarding how immigrant communities use culinary and cultural practices to attract tourists and stimulate economic activity.

Research Objectives (1) Case Study Analysis of Southeast Asian Restaurants. (2) Qualitative Exploration of Authenticity Perceptions. (3) Quantitative Analysis Using SEM. Research hypothesis based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, this study proposes 15 hypotheses, which include 9 direct effect hypotheses and 6 indirect effect hypotheses. Use the theory is Stimulus Organism Response (SOR), Theory of food culture originality, Cultural Geography Theory, Theory of local dietary symbols, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Theory and NVivo theory. Significance of the Study is Policy benefits, Operational benefits, Academic benefits.

Research Objectives

1. Case Study of Southeast Asian Restaurants in Xinglong.

Examine four selected restaurants (Nanyang Style Food and Beverage Restaurant, Nyonya Overseas Chinese Taste Hall, Aone Café, Huainanbao Restaurant). Identify their unique characteristics, cultural influences, and operational practices within Southeast Asian culinary traditions.

2. Qualitative Exploration of Authenticity Perceptions.

Conduct in-depth interviews with food producers to understand motivations, challenges, and strategies for maintaining cultural authenticity. Interview tourists to capture their experiences and perceptions of culinary authenticity. Develop a conceptual framework from qualitative findings to guide the quantitative study.

3. Quantitative Analysis of Authenticity and Its Effects.

Use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess how food authenticity, environmental authenticity, and service authenticity influence tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. Identify differences in authenticity perception among tourists and determine key influencing factors.

Research Methodology

1. Population.

- Sample Groups (Qualitative): Tourists (from Southeast Asian countries), Chefs (working in Southeast Asian restaurants), Restaurant operators/managers, Community residents (many are returned overseas Chinese or descendants)

- Sample Groups (Quantitative): Tourists, Local residents, Returned overseas Chines, Students (college-age)

2. Sample Collection.

- Sampling Method (Qualitative): Purposive Sampling: Participants selected based on their relevance to the topic and role in Southeast Asian food culture in Xinglong. 25 in-depth interviews were conducted between October 2021 and May 2024.

- Sampling Method (Quantitative): Stratified Sampling + Quota Control. Based on Cochran's formula, a total of 500 questionnaires were distributed. 466 valid responses were collected and used for analysis.

3. Interview Participants.

- Qualitative Data: Collection Method: In-depth interviews, guided by a structured interview outline. Conducted in October 2021 and June 2024. Supplemented by user-generated content from platforms like Dianping, Meituan, and TikTok. Instruments: Interview guide

based on themes: food authenticity, service, environment, satisfaction. Audio recordings and verbatim transcription.

- Quantitative Data: Survey Administration: Online and face-to-face questionnaires at restaurants, tourist spots, and local community centers. Stratified by subgroup to ensure representation. Sample Size Targets: Tourists: 384, Local residents: 383, Returned overseas Chinese: 357 And Students: 341,

4. Data Collection Process. Analytical Tools Used

- Qualitative Analysis Tools: Software: NVivo. Methods: Open and axial coding, Theme development, Word clouds, charts, graphs, and thematic maps, Cross-analysis between interview and online review data.

- Quantitative Analysis Tools: Software: SPSS, AMOS (for SEM), Statistical Methods: Descriptive statistics, Reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha), Factor analysis (KMO, validity), Correlation and regression analysis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for testing conceptual framework.

Research Results

The objective of this study was to explore the key factors influencing customer's recommendation intention toward Southeast Asian specialty restaurants in Xinglong, Hainan. Specifically, the study examined the effects of food authenticity, environment authenticity, and service authenticity on perceived value and customer satisfaction, which in turn impact customers' behavioral intention to recommend.

To achieve this, the study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. The initial qualitative phase involved five rounds of in-depth fieldwork in Xinglong. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with chefs (5), restaurant owners (10), local residents (10), and returned overseas Chinese (10), all of whom had dining experiences in local Southeast Asian restaurants. The participants (aged 18–65; 2 male, 3 female in each subset) provided insights into their motivations for visiting, sensory perceptions (e.g., taste and aroma), and definitions of authenticity. The interviews also addressed the impact of commercialization and adaptation of traditional flavors on perceived authenticity. Data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using NVivo, revealing key themes regarding how authenticity is interpreted and experienced in the Xinglong context.

The qualitative findings helped refine the theoretical model and construct measurement items for the quantitative phase. Subsequently, a structured questionnaire was developed and distributed, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to validate the proposed hypotheses. The results from 466 valid responses confirmed the robustness of the model: all three authenticity dimensions significantly influenced perceived value and customer satisfaction, which in turn had strong positive effects on recommendation intention. Furthermore, perceived value was found to mediate the relationships between authenticity factors and both satisfaction and behavioral intention.

By integrating qualitative insights with quantitative validation, the study provides a holistic understanding of the mechanisms through which perceived authenticity shapes customer experiences and recommendation behaviors in the context of gastronomic tourism. The findings not only enrich the theoretical discourse on service authenticity and consumer behavior but also offer actionable implications for restaurant managers and tourism policymakers in Hainan and similar destinations.

Discussion

The study's findings reveal that food authenticity, environmental authenticity, and service authenticity all have a significant impact on perceived value and customer satisfaction. These factors, in turn, influence a customer's recommendation intention.

- Food Authenticity has the strongest influence on perceived value ($\beta=0.516$) and customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.239$). This highlights its crucial role as a "sensory and symbolic anchor" for customers.

- Environmental Authenticity also significantly affects perceived value ($\beta=0.232$) and customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.218$). The study notes that an immersive environment, with traditional architecture and music, makes customers feel as though they've been "transported to Southeast Asia."

- Service Authenticity has a positive impact on perceived value ($\beta=0.142$) and customer satisfaction ($\beta=0.210$). Customers are particularly sensitive to a staff's demeanor, attire, and communication style that aligns with cultural norms.

- Perceived Value is a crucial mediator. The positive effects of authenticity on satisfaction and recommendation intention are largely channeled through the customer's perception that they are receiving good value for their money.

- Customer Satisfaction is a key driver of positive word-of-mouth. The study found a strong relationship between satisfaction and the likelihood of a customer recommending a restaurant ($\beta=0.394$).

Demographics and Implications

- Returned Overseas Chinese show the highest average recommendation intention (6.23 out of 7), likely due to a deeper cultural and emotional connection to the cuisine.

- The research provides a more holistic model for understanding how authenticity, value, and satisfaction intertwine to shape customer behavior in ethnic dining settings. It emphasizes the integrated role of all three dimensions of authenticity, pushing back against earlier studies that may have downplayed the importance of food authenticity or the mediating role of perceived value.

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