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SELECTIVE EATING AND ITS IMPACT ON CULINARY DESTINATION IMAGE: THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Food tourism has grown as an important component of Malaysia's tourist business, highlighting the country's rich cultural variety and robust culinary tradition. This study looks at how destination food image, which includes dining experiences, cuisine perceptions, and food-related tourist activities, influences foreign visitors' behavioural intentions to taste local cuisine in Kuala Lumpur. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and analysed using PLS-SEM, the findings show that food image attributes have a significant impact on food neophobia, whereas food neophilia positively predicts tourists' willingness to try unfamiliar local dishes. Interestingly, the study found no significant impact of social media platforms on food neophobia or consumption intentions, indicating that direct sensory and contextual signals may trump digital exposure in shaping food-related behaviours. The study also finds that food neophobia plays a mediating role in the association between eating image, cuisine image, and food-related tourist activities with behavioural goals. Although appealing culinary settings might pique curiosity, deeply ingrained tastes and cultural patterns sometimes limit food experimentation. This study contributes to destination marketing by urging tourism stakeholders to shift their attention away from digital advertising and toward creating immersive, culturally rich, and emotionally engaging dining experiences. Understanding the psychological hurdles and motivators associated with selective eating, including food neophobia, allows marketers to develop more successful tactics for promoting local cuisine and increasing the worldwide attractiveness of culinary locations.

Keywords: Dining image, cuisine image, tourism food activity, social media channels, behavior intention, food neophobia, local food, and Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a multicultural nation known as a "Food Paradise," has become a global hub for culinary tourism, attracting both local and international travelers seeking unique gastronomic experiences (Gopal & Bee Lian, 2025; Bütün & Önçel, 2025). The fusion of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines creates an unparalleled food destination, drawing visitors eager to explore its vibrant street food culture and traditional culinary delights (Aziz et al., 2025). The early 1970s saw increased acculturation and assimilation among these ethnicities, enriching Malaysia's culinary heritage with a diverse array of flavors (Sanip et al., 2024). Iconic dishes such as Nasi Lemak, Rendang, and Air Kelapa Muda (young coconut juice) from Malay cuisine; Chapattis, Puree, Teh Tarik (pulled tea), and Lassi from Indian cuisine; and Char Kway Teow, Chicken Rice, Chincau, and Leng Chi Kang from Chinese cuisine have transcended ethnic boundaries, becoming universally embraced as Malaysian culinary staples (Aziz et al., 2025). Out of many, Jalan Alor Food Street, located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Bukit Bintang neighborhood, stands as Malaysia's most renowned destination for food tourists. Known for its vibrant atmosphere, diverse culinary offerings, and affordable street food, it attracts both local and international visitors seeking an authentic Malaysian dining experience (Sanip et al., 2024). Another defining feature of Malaysia's culinary scene is the presence of open-air night markets, or *Pasar Malam*, and bustling hawker stalls. Despite the rise of modern shopping complexes, these traditional food hubs remain central to Malaysian food culture, offering a rich variety of local dishes and beverages. Hawker stalls, particularly popular among the Malaysian Chinese community, serve regional specialities alongside refreshing drinks.

The opportunity to witness firsthand the traditional cooking techniques used by vendors further enhances the appeal of these vibrant food destinations (Azman et al., 2025). Nevertheless, travellers' attitudes toward local cuisine are often influenced by varying degrees of food neophobia, the reluctance or hesitation to try unfamiliar dishes. This psychological barrier can affect behavioural intentions, including the willingness to explore local food, the likelihood of returning, and overall destination perception (Hashemi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the emergence of social media platforms has changed the

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way travellers engage with culinary tourism locations. Influential techniques for influencing attitudes, lowering food-related fears, and establishing social norms around culinary experiences include Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs. Social media is a crucial component of the decision-making process for food tourism as it gives visitors access to up-to-date information, allows them to share their own culinary experiences, and allows them to influence others (Najib et al., 2022; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2025). Despite various initiatives, the extent to which foreign tourists accept and engage with Malaysian food streets remains insufficiently documented. In particular, little is known about the extent of food neophobia among international visitors and their perceptions of Malaysia's vibrant street food scene and culinary culture (Sanip et al., 2024).

Understanding these factors is crucial, as food tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping a destination's appeal and economic sustainability. To bridge the gap, this study examines the relationship between food neophobia and behavioral intention in the context of Kuala Lumpur's food destination image, encompassing dining experiences, cuisine perception, and tourism-related food activities. Additionally, it examines the influence of social media channels in shaping travelers' perceptions, highlighting the digital sphere's growing role in influencing culinary tourism. By uncovering key determinants of tourist engagement, this study provides valuable insights into the elements that shape traveler experiences, decision-making processes, and the broader implications for Malaysia's positioning as a global food tourism hub.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

1. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory by Russell & Mehrabian (1974) explains how external stimuli shape internal psychological states, ultimately driving behavioral responses and interactions with the environment. This model highlights the crucial role of emotional states in influencing reactions to external factors (Chatzopoulou et al., 2022; Hashemi et al., 2023.). According to Russell & Mehrabian (1974), the organism acts as a key mediator in shaping individual responses to external stimuli. Applying the S-O-R theory as a foundational framework, this study examines how image dimensions and social media channels influence international tourists' intentions toward local cuisine. The theory effectively illustrates how environmental stimuli trigger emotional and psychological responses, leading to specific behavioural outcomes. Three key aspects of food imagery serve as core stimuli in this study, while social media platforms amplify their emotional and cognitive impact. Through visually appealing content and user-generated reviews, social media shapes travelers' perceptions and emotional responses, directly influencing their opinions on local cuisine (Russell, 1980; Hashemi et al., 2023; Adirestuty et al., 2025).

Food neophobia, an essential psychological factor, plays a moderating role in this relationship. The fear and perceived insecurity of trying unfamiliar local dishes can either encourage or deter tourists from engaging in culinary experiences, ultimately affecting their comfort levels and willingness to explore local food. Understanding this dynamic is critical, as it directly influences tourists' perceptions and decisions regarding food-related activities. Behavioural responses in this study are reflected in international tourists' intentions toward local cuisine, manifesting as either approach (actively engaging in food tourism) or avoidance (opting out due to neophobia or disinterest). The S-O-R framework effectively captures these tendencies, providing deeper insights into the interplay between stimuli (food imagery and social media content), organismic states (emotional reactions and food neophobia), and behavioural intentions. By integrating social media with food neophobia, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping tourists' engagement with local cuisine, reinforcing the S-O-R model's relevance in culinary tourism research.

2. Food Image Dimension and Food Neophobia

A destination's image is a multifaceted concept that includes elements like its physical attractions, culture, and food options, all affecting travellers' opinions and choices (Zhao et al., 2024; Kar et al., 2024). Dining image and food image are important subcomponents in this framework. While cuisine image represents the perceived authenticity, cultural significance, and attraction of local cuisines, dining image relates to visitors' opinions about the calibre, variety, and reputation of eating experiences at a place (Putri & Wijoyo, 2023). Previous research indicates that because culinary options are frequently seen as essential to the entire travel experience, a favourable location image greatly improves both eating and food images (Kaur & Kaur, 2024). Based on, Yeboah & Ashie (2024), travellers' can interact with local culinary customs through immersive experiences offered by tourism food activities including food festivals, cooking lessons, and food tours. These culinary tourism activities allow visitors to fully experience the cultural diversity of a place's cuisine, deepening their understanding of its history and customs. By strengthening their emotional bond with the place and fostering a favourable mental image, this deep participation not only improves their entire trip experience (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022; Long, 2024; Chen, 2025). Food neophobia, which is the hesitancy or fear of tasting new foods, is a psychological barrier that affects travellers' inclination to taste local cuisine, according to culinary research (Pliner & Hobden, 1992).

Different levels of food neophobia among tourists are caused by several reasons, such as personal dietary preferences, food safety concerns, and cultural unfamiliarity (Choe & Kim, 2024). Kılıç & Özdemir (2024) posit that including food-related personality characteristics in destination image-building tactics is crucial in addressing food neophobia.

The perception of a cuisine location influences travellers' trust, openness, and desire to try new dishes. Furthermore, a positive food destination image—characterized by authenticity, quality, and cultural significance can assist in lowering psychological barriers to new culinary experiences (Chang et al., 2024). While food neophobia has been extensively studied, a new study reveals that the basic processes of food rejection remain unknown. Furthermore, no research has looked explicitly at the association between location image and food neophobia among overseas tourists (Choe & Kim, 2024). Therefore, based on the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant relationship between the dining image and food neophobia

H2: There is a significant relationship between the cuisine image and food neophobia

H3: There is a significant relationship between tourism, food activity and food neophobia

2.3 Social Media Channel and Food Neophobia

Social media platforms now provide a wide range of opportunities for managing customer connections and communicating with customers, which has had a hitherto unheard-of impact (Jang et al., 2024). Social media is a vital tool for businesses that have direct consumer ties, like shops, to communicate with their clientele. Opportunities to reach customers have been made possible by the simplicity, speed, and globalisation of communication and information exchange. Social media has led to the emergence of new consumer communication strategies (Suid et al., 2024).

Food risk communicators have several options for storing, accessing, and reusing information because of social media and the digital world. The public now has new avenues to receive and share information thanks to social media applications including blogs, social networking sites, and online communities (Jang et al., 2024). The feeling of unfamiliarity is lessened when a destination's cuisine is effectively marketed through imagery, narrative, and promotions. Because they feel more prepared and willing to taste the dish, visitors who are familiar with the cuisine before their trip might reduce their phobia of it (Luong & Long, 2025). According to Costa et al. (2025), by building familiarity, trust, and interest in unfamiliar foods, positive portrayals of regional cuisine might lessen food neophobia. On the other hand, unfavorable evaluations or inaccurate information might increase hesitancy and heighten worries about food safety and cultural unfamiliarity (Jang et al., 2024). Therefore, depending on the type of shared material, social media may be both a facilitator and a hindrance in the fight against food neophobia. Although many studies have discussed food neophobia from a consumer perspective (Ritchey et al., 2011; Szlachciuk & Żakowska-Biemans, 2024; Estay et al., 2025; Chen, 2025), it has not been empirically studied from a social media perspective, leaving a gap in the literature therefore the following hypothesis is proposed.

H4: There is a significant relationship between social media channels and food neophobia

2.4 Food Neophobia and Behavioral Intention

Behavioural intention denotes an individual's readiness to engage in specific conduct, frequently acting as an indicator of actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024; Meeprom et al., 2025). Behavioural intention could be considered as the future desire and action of an individual to participate and consume or not use a specific product or service (Ajzen, 2002; Yang et al., 2025). Jokom et al. (2025) accentuate that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control all have an impact on behavioural intention in culinary tourism settings. According to Yang et al. (2025), tourists' plans to try new meals are influenced by their level of confidence in food safety, cultural relevance, and expected enjoyment. Its significance in influencing customer preferences and food choices is important for food makers and marketers, according to researchers Hashemi et al. (2023). Hashemi et al. (2023) deduce that food neophobia differs from person to person and can influence behavioural consequences, such as attitudes toward ethnic meals. Recent studies revealed that positive experiences with local cuisine increase travellers' behavioural intention to try new foods, but food neophobia reduces it (Luong & Long, 2025; Meeprom et al., 2025). Thi Tuyet et al. (2025) indicate that social impact, past experiences, and destination image significantly alter the relationship between food neophobia and behavioural intention. Despite existing studies, its impact on the intention to consume ethnic foods remains underexplored. Therefore, this study suggests that food neophobia can serve as a mediating variable to better understand the intentions of culinary tourists. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: There is a significant relationship between food neophobia and international tourist behavioural intention.

2.5 Food Destination Image, Food Neophobia, and Customer Behavior

Addressing food neophobia is essential for restaurateurs to increase patron happiness and loyalty, especially in environments that encourage unusual or different culinary experiences (Jokom et al., 2025). The association between dining image and client behavioural intention is significantly mediated by food neophobia. Customers' opinions and propensity to return are greatly influenced by the dining image, which consists of both material components like décor and menu options as well as immaterial components like service quality (Hashemi et al., 2023). Research indicates that food neophobia may operate as a mediator in the link between eating experiences and consumer pleasure, suggesting that its negative impacts might be lessened by a well-crafted positive dining image (Tarinc et al., 2023). Additionally, the association between consumer behavioural intention and culinary image is mediated by food neophobia as customer's propensity to try new foods can be significantly influenced by their opinions of particular food kinds, particularly local and ethnic cuisines.

This is known as cuisine image. Food neophobics, according to research, tend to be careful when making food selections, especially when they are exposed to new cuisines (Shenaan et al., 2021). Their whole eating experience may suffer as a result of this hesitancy, and they may be less inclined to suggest the food to others. Therefore, for restaurateurs and marketers looking to promote different culinary experiences, it is imperative that they comprehend the complexities of food neophobia. Customer happiness and engagement may be greatly increased by addressing neophobic tendencies (Clottey et al., 2025). The association between food-related tourist activities and consumer behavioural intention is also mediated by food neophobia. Food neophobia can severely restrict participation in food-related activities in the field of culinary tourism, where visitors are encouraged to sample regional cuisines and culinary traditions (Karaağaç & Bellikci-Koyu, 2023).

High food neophobia might make travellers reluctant to participate in culinary lessons or food tours that use strange products or meals, which can make them less satisfied with their trip overall (Clottey et al., 2025).

Tourists that have less food neophobia, on the other hand, are more likely to appreciate and suggest local cuisine, which improves the destination's reputation and encourages return visits (Karaağaç & Bellikci-Koyu, 2023).

Therefore, if tourism operators and restaurateurs want to create culinary experiences that appeal to a diverse variety of tourists, they must address food neophobia. With these notions, it is hypothesized that;

H6: Food neophobia mediates the relationship between dining image and international tourist behavioral intention.

H7: Food neophobia mediates the relationship between cuisine image and international tourist behavioral intention
H8: Food neophobia mediates the relationship between tourism food activity and international tourist behavioral intention.

2.6 Social Media Channels, Food Neophobia, and Customer Behaviour

Social media platforms are essential for food marketing since they feature a variety of frequently unique cuisines that might make some people feel neophobic (Jang et al., 2024). According to research, people who have a high level of food neophobia are less likely to interact with or be swayed by social media posts that include strange meals, which lowers their desire to try new foods or go to restaurants that are being marketed (Costa et al., 2025). For example, Chang et al., 2025 discovered that food neophobia limits the impact of social media endorsements by moderating the effect of subjective norms on intentions to consume ethnic cuisines. Additionally, Razzaq et al. (2025) found that even when novel alternatives are offered in enticing advertisements, food neophobia dramatically reduces purchase intentions.

This emphasizes the necessity of psychological barrier-addressing marketing techniques, such as highlighting familiar elements of new cuisines or introducing novel meals gradually. Businesses may engage reluctant customers, boost customer satisfaction, and improve behavioural intentions by easing neophobic worries, especially when it comes to social media-driven marketing (Zhang et al., 2025). Thus, it is conjectured that;

H9: Food neophobia mediates the relationship between social media channels and tourist behavioural intention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a quantitative approach through a cross-sectional time with a self-reported survey questionnaire. The sample and the unit of analysis were among foreign visitors who have been to Kuala Lumpur food streets. G power program was used to determine the minimal sample size required and to guarantee the study has adequate power (effect size = 0.15, alpha (a) = 0.05, number of predictors = 5, and power = 80%) (Faul et al., 2009).

A real minimum sample size of 92 is needed. The survey instrument is divided into seven sections. Section A elicits demographic information of the respondents and Section B includes measurements of food social image dimension. Section C deals with food neophobia, and section D looks at social media. Section D deals with food destination image and section E measures tourist behavioural intention. All items for independent variables, mediating, and dependent variables are adapted from Ab Karim & Chi (2010), Badu-Baiden et al. (2022), Javed et al., (2020), and Koay & Lee (2024). Minor modifications were made specifically tailored to the study's context. Respondents are obligated to articulate their viewpoints on a seven-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). A pilot study was conducted to verify the reliability and validity of the questionnaire items before its finalization.

The survey questionnaire was executed through self-administered in which the respondents were informed of the objectives of the research and the purpose of the survey before they participated in the study. They were also guaranteed that the information provided would be kept in strict confidentiality, and no individual respondent would be identifiable through the compilation of the data. In the end, the study effectively collected a total of 386 responses. Most were male, with 222 (57.5%) against 164 (42.5%) female respondents. Majority of respondents in the range age range between 18–40 years (40.2%), 41-50 years old (21.2%) and 51-60 years old (6 %). Almost half of the total respondents are from Asia (49.0%), and the remaining are from Europe, Australia, Africa, and America (51.0%). Finally, 191 respondents are married (49.5%) single (41.7%), and divorced or separated (8.8%). Table 1 shows demographic Profile of Respondents.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (386)

No	Items	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	222 (57.5%)	57.5%
		Female	164 (42.5%)	42.5%
2	Age	18–40 years	155	(40.2%
		31-40	126	32.6 %
		41-50	82	21.2 %
		51-60	21	6.0 %
3	Marital status	single	161	41.7 %
		Married	191	49.5 %
		Separated/Divorced/Widowed	34	8.8 %
4	Education	Certificate/Diploma	144	37.3 %
		Bachelor's Degree	206	53.4 %
		Master's Degree	11	2.8 %
		Doctorate Degree/Ph.D.	9	2.3 %
		Other	16	4.1 %
5	Nationality	Asia	189	49.0 %
		Europe	73	18.9 %
		Australia	51	13.2 %
		Africa	41	10.6 %
		America	32	8.3 %

This study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to forecast interactions between research variables (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Following Hair Jr et al. (2021) and Ramayah et al., (2016), the study framework was tested after assessing the measurement and structural models using SmartPLS 3.1.1. The measurement model examined

relationships between latent variables, while the structural model assessed the connections between exogenous and endogenous constructs. To ensure data integrity, the common method bias is addressed using Harman's single factor test and a full collinearity test. Exploratory factor analysis showed that a single factor explained only 35.438% of the variance, staying well below the 50% threshold. This confirms minimal bias impact. Additionally, regressing a dummy variable on all study variables yielded variance inflation factor values below 3.3, reinforcing the absence of multicollinearity concerns (Kock, 2015).

1. Measurement Model

The reflective measurement model was subjected to a thorough investigation that covered four crucial dimensions: internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The outcomes are shown in Table 1 together with the outer loading values, AVE scores, composite reliability, indicator reliability, and Cronbach Alpha values.

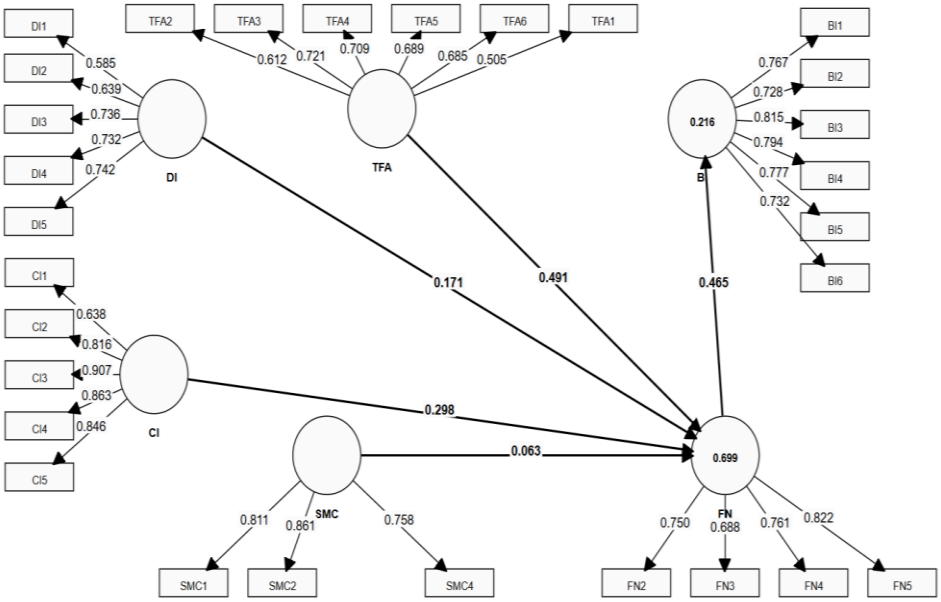

Figure 1. Measurement Model

All items loaded significantly acceptable (loadings ranged from 0.585 to 0.863) onto their respective factors, verifying the reliability of their indicators. The model showed sufficient convergent validity as assessed by the AVE values. The AVE values of Dining image (AVE=0.575), cuisine image (AVE=0.672), tourism food activity (AVE=0.533), food media channel (AVE=0.658), food neophobia (AVE=0.572) and behaviour intention (AVE=0.595) are well above the minimum required level of 0.50. Hence, the measurement model is deemed to possess discriminant validity. Figure 1 reports the measurement model, and Table 2 and Figure 1 report the factor loadings.

Table 2. Measurement Model (Note: FN 1 and SMC3 were deleted due to low main loading)

Construct	Items	Main Loading	AVE	CA	CR
Dining Image (DI)	DI1 DI2 D13 DI4 DI5	0.585 0.639 0.736 0.732 0.742	0.575	0.739	0.818
Cuisine Image (CI)	CI1 CI2 CI3 CI4 C15	0.638 0.816 0.907 0.863 0.863	0.672	0.880	0.910
Tourism Food Activity (TFA)	TFA2 TFA3 TFA4 TFA5 TFA6	0.612 0.721 0.709 0.689 0.685	0.533	0.741	0.819
Social media channel (SMC)	SMC1 SMC2 SMC4	0.811 0.861 0.758	0.658	0.740	0.852
Food Neophobia (FN	FN2 FN3 FN4 FN4	0.750 0688 0.761 0.882	0.572	0.749	0.842
Behaviour Intention (BI)	BI1 BI2	0.767 0.728	0.595	0.862	0.897

	BI3	0.815			
	BI4	0.794			
	BI5	0.777			
	BI6	0.732			

Table 3. Discriminant Validity using HTMT ratio (Note: Behavior Intention =BI, Cuisine Image =CI, Dining Image =DI, Food Neophobia = FN, Social Media Channel=SMC, Tourism Food Activity =TFA)

	CI	DI	FN	SMC	TFA	BI
BI						
CI	0.755					
DI	0.650	0.795				
FN	0.570	0.715	0.876			
SMC	0.671	0.718	0.489	0.696		
TFA	0.702	0.618	0.771	0.997	0.673	

To establish discriminant validity, the HTMT value is observed, and all constructions must be lower than 0.9. Based on the value (<0.90), the measurement model area is able to establish discriminant validity. Table 3 shows the value of HTMT for all constructs. In conclusion, the quality of the measurement model is reliable for further analysis.

Table 4. Path coefficients, T-statistics, and significance levels (Sig ** t-value > 1.96, (two-tailed)

Hypo	Path Analysis	Path Coefficient	Stdev	T-statistic	P-value	Result
H1:	Dining Image (DI) -> Food neophobia (FN)	0.298	0.041	7.342	0.000	Supported
H2:	Cuisine image (CI) -> food neophobia (FN)	0.171	0.055	3.111	0.002	Supported
H3:	Tourism Food Activity (TFA)-> food neophobia (FN)	0.491	0.061	8.116	0.000	Supported
H4:	Social Media Channel (SMC)-> food neophobia (FN)	0.063	0.035	1.794	0.073	Not Supported
H5:	Food neophobia (FN) ->Behavior intention (BI)	0.465	0.045	10.235	0.000	Supported

2. Structural Model Assessment

A path analysis was conducted which also evaluates the nomological validity, to assess the significance of hypothetical relationships within the inner model**.** The bootstrapping approach is used to derive path coefficients for relationships between latent variables. As a result, inferential statistics (t-values) are calculated using bootstrap standard error, the t-value of significance is 1.645 for one-tailed tests and 1.96 for two-tailed tests, and current statistical analysis necessitates presentation of confidence intervals with no 0 straddles between bias-corrected results. As the hypotheses were not formulated with directions, the critical value for two-tailed tests will be 1.96 at the 5% significance level. A route coefficient was considered significant if its t-value was above 1.96. Table 4 provides a comprehensive listing of the path coefficients, observed t-statistics, and their corresponding significance levels for each hypothesis path

Based on the statistical results, H1 produced a significant relationship between dining image (DI) and food neophobia (β: 0.298 t: 7.342, p=.000). This suggests that an individual's perception of a dining environment influences their willingness to try unfamiliar foods. A positive dining image may encourage openness, while a negative perception could reinforce reluctance toward novel culinary experiences. H2 is clearly supported when a significant relationship appeared in cuisine image (CI) between food neophobia (BI) (β=0.171 and t=3.111, p=.002). This clearly demonstrates that individuals' perceptions of cuisine, including its presentation, reputation, and cultural associations, impact their willingness to try unfamiliar foods.

A positive cuisine image may reduce food neophobia, while negative perceptions may reinforce avoidance. H3 produced a causal association between Tourism Food Activity (TFA) and food neophobia (FN) (β = 0.491 and t = 8.116, p = .000). This finding strengthens the notion that engaging in tourism-related food experiences influences an individual's willingness to try unfamiliar foods. High participation may reduce neophobia by increasing exposure, while low participation may reinforce reluctance toward novel culinary experiences. The result of H4 showed a significant relationship between social media channels (SMC) and food neophobia (FN) (β = 0.063) and t = 1.794, p = .073). This suggests that social media channels do not significantly influence food neophobia. This implies that online exposure to diverse foods may not be enough to change individuals' reluctance toward unfamiliar foods, highlighting the need for direct, experiential engagement in reducing neophobia. H5 revealed a causal relationship between food neophobia (FN) and Behavior intention (BI) (β = 0.465, t =10.235, p = .000). This finding indicates that food neophobia directly influences behavioral intention. Individuals with higher food neophobia are less likely to engage in novel culinary experiences, impacting their willingness to try new foods, participate in food tourism, or explore diverse dining options. The research model's predictive capabilities are assessed.

For endogenous construct, it is recommended to classify R2 values of 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 as weak, moderate, and strong, accordingly (Hair Jr et al., 2017). R^2 values for all endogenous constructions, including food neophobia (FN) and behaviour intention (BI), were calculated and analysed. The food neophobia (FN) R^2 value is 0.696 which is generally considered a strong effect size. While the behaviour intention (BI), R^2 value is 0.214, this value is generally considered a weak or low effect size, but it also can be an acceptable level for behavioural investigations (Hair et al., 2017).

3. Mediating Effect

The sixth, seventh, and eighth hypotheses examine whether food neophobia mediates the relationship between dining image (H6), cuisine image (H7), and tourism food activity (H8) with behavioural intention. The ninth hypothesis examines whether food neophobia mediates the relationship between social media channels (H9) and behavioural intention. The mediating variable (food neophobia) is introduced into these relationships to assess its role in influencing behavioural

intention. The bootstrapping technique is used in evaluating route coefficients, making it appropriate for this investigation due to the nonnormal distribution of the data (Hair et al., 2017). Mediation in Smart PLS is evaluated by including all components and pathways into a singular model simultaneously (Hair et al., 2017). Table 5 presents the findings of the indirect impacts of the proposed mediational relationships. H6; DI> FN> BI (t = 5.779, p = 0.000), H7; CI> FN> BI (t = 3.068, p = 0.002), and H8; TFA> FN> BI (t = 5.904, p = 0.000) were statistically significant and corroborated, thus mediation effect exists. However, H9; SMC > FN> BI (t=1.785, p=0.075) indicates that the mediation effect is non-existent. The findings indicate that food neophobia plays a significant mediating role in linking dining image, cuisine image, and tourism food activity to behavioral intention, highlighting its influence on consumer decisions. However, its mediation is not evident in the relationship between social media channels and behavioral intention, suggesting other factors drive this connection.

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing (Note: sig ** t-value > 1.96, (two-tailed). Behavior Intention =BI, Cuisine Image =CI, Dining Image =DI, Food Neophobia=FN, Social Media Channel=SMC, Tourism Food Activity =TFA.

Hypo	Path analysis	Path Coefficient	(STDEV)	t-Statistics	P values	Result
H6	DI> FN> BI	0.138	0.024	5.779	0.000	The mediation effect exists
H7	CI> FN> BI	0.080	0.026	3.068	0.002	The mediation effect exists
H8	TFA> FN> BI	0.229	0.039	5.904	0.000	The mediation effect exists
H9	SMC> FN> BI	0.185	0.042	1.785	0.075	Mediation effect non-exist

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationships between food neophobia social media platforms, destination food image, and consumer behavioral intentions. Specifically, the results indicate that food neophobia is positively and significantly influenced by the first dimension of the destination food image, namely the dining image. This suggests that tourists' perceptions of dining environments play a crucial role in shaping their willingness or reluctance to try unfamiliar foods. These findings align with Zhao et al. (2024); Putri & Wijoyo (2023); Kaur & Kaur (2024) that the way visitors perceive eating settings can directly impact their food-related hesitations or anxieties. However, an interesting exception was observed in the context of Kuala Lumpur's Street art district. Visitors who held a positive perception of the dining experience in this culturally vibrant setting did not exhibit the same levels of food neophobia. This suggests that in certain environments, particularly those that are artistically and culturally rich, the influence of dining image on food neophobia may be mitigated. The unique atmosphere, immersive cultural elements, and social engagement within such settings may create a sense of familiarity and excitement that encourages individuals to be more open to trying new foods.

The study's empirical data further revealed a significant association between cuisine image, tourism food activity, and food neophobia. These findings align with Hashemi et al. (2023); Kılıç & Ozdemir (2024); Badu-Baiden et al. (2022), and Long (2024), which suggests that visitors' food-related anxieties are shaped by their perceptions of a destination's cuisine and their level of engagement in culinary tourism activities. This supports the idea that travellers' attitudes toward local food, as well as their participation in food-related experiences such as street food tours, cooking classes, or traditional dining events, play a crucial role in determining their willingness to try unfamiliar dishes. However, despite the immersive and engaging nature of culinary tourism, deep-rooted cultural backgrounds and personal food preferences may still act as barriers to food exploration. The study found a positive correlation between cuisine image, tourism food activity, and food neophobia, indicating that while these factors contribute to shaping tourists' dining experiences, they do not necessarily reduce food-related hesitation. Even in dynamic and interactive culinary settings, travelers may remain reluctant to experiment with foreign foods due to ingrained dietary habits, sensory preferences, or unfamiliar cooking techniques.

This study however found no significant relationship between food neophobia and social media channels. This finding contradicts prior studies (Jang et al., 2024; Luong & Long, 2025), which suggested that social media plays a crucial role in shaping travelers' perceptions of food and reducing anxieties associated with trying unfamiliar cuisines. The lack of a significant relationship in this study raises several possible explanations**.** One potential reason could be the specific characteristics of the sample population, including demographic differences, travel experience levels, or cultural backgrounds, which may influence how individuals interact with social media content related to food. Another explanation may lie in the type of social media content consumed; while some travelers actively seek detailed food reviews, authentic user experiences, and influencer recommendations, others may be more passive consumers of online food-related content, limiting the impact of social media on their food-related decision-making. Additionally, individual differences in susceptibility to online influence may play a role, as some travelers may place greater trust in firsthand dining experiences and personal taste preferences rather than in online portrayals of food. An alternative perspective that underscores the complexity and diversity of food neophobia is that when travelers make food-related decisions, they may rely more on personal experiences, cultural familiarity, and sensory expectations than on social media representations. While digital platforms provide visual appeal and information, they may not always translate into actual behavioral changes in terms of food consumption. Travelers who exhibit food neophobia may prioritize their inherent preferences and comfort zones over online recommendations, leading to limited engagement with unfamiliar cuisines despite exposure to social media content.

This study further reinforces the role of food neophobia as a mediator in the relationships between dining image, cuisine image, and behavioral intentions. The findings align with previous research (Hashemi et al., 2023; Tarinc et al., 2023; Karaağaç & Bellikci-Koyu, 2023), highlighting the significant influence of food neophobia on how perceptions of dining settings and cuisine experiences translate into actual consumer behaviors. Essentially, while a strong dining and cuisine image may positively shape travelers' perceptions, food neophobia can act as a psychological barrier that limits their willingness to engage in new culinary experiences, thereby influencing their ultimate food choices and behaviors.

Similarly, the study validated the mediating role of food neophobia in the relationship between food-related tourist activities and behavioral intentions, supporting previous findings (Shenaan et al., 2021; Badu-Baiden et al., 2022; Long, 2024). This suggests that while participating in food tourism activities such as food markets, or local dining experiences can enhance visitors' exposure to different cuisines, the presence of food neophobia may moderate the extent to which these activities translate into active consumption or deeper culinary engagement. Travelers who exhibit high levels of food neophobia may still hesitate to fully immerse themselves in local food cultures despite being in an engaging culinary environment.

However, contrary to previous studies (Razzaq et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025; Costa et al., 2025), this study found that social media channels (SMC) did not significantly influence behavioral intentions through food neophobia. While social media plays an essential role in facilitating discussions, sharing visual content, and shaping overall food-related perceptions, this study suggests that it does not directly impact travelers' food phobias in a way that ultimately affects their behavioral intentions. This could indicate that while social media increases awareness and exposure to diverse food experiences, individuals with strong food neophobia may still rely more on personal preferences, cultural familiarity, and firsthand dining experiences rather than online representations when making food consumption decisions. The lack of significance in this pathway highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of food neophobia. While digital platforms contribute to global culinary discourse and may influence perceptions of food, they do not necessarily override deeply ingrained personal attitudes, sensory preferences, and psychological barriers associated with trying unfamiliar foods. This finding emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing food neophobia in tourism marketing strategies. Beyond leveraging social media for food promotion, tourism stakeholders should consider incorporating interactive and experiential elements such as guided food tours, storytelling-driven culinary experiences, and social dining initiatives that encourage travelers to step out of their comfort zones more gradually and engagingly. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of understanding how food neophobia mediates key factors that shape tourists' food-related behaviors. Addressing these challenges through well-designed food tourism experiences can help foster a more inclusive, enjoyable, and immersive culinary environment, thereby enhancing visitor satisfaction and broadening the appeal of local gastronomy in global tourism markets.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for tourism stakeholders, including destination marketers, restaurateurs, and hospitality professionals**.** The strong influence of dining image and cuisine image on food neophobia suggests that destinations should prioritize enhancing their food-related environments to create inviting and culturally immersive dining experiences. By investing in aesthetically appealing restaurant settings, ensuring high service quality, and integrating local cultural elements into dining spaces, tourism businesses can help mitigate food neophobia and encourage tourists to try new foods. Culinary tourism activities shape food-related behaviors. Destination managers and tour operators should design engaging food experiences such as street food tours, cooking classes, and interactive dining events that allow visitors to develop a deeper connection with local cuisine. However, recognizing that food neophobia remains a barrier, these activities should incorporate elements of familiarity, such as offering modified versions of local dishes or providing explanations about ingredients and cooking methods to ease tourists into unfamiliar flavors. The limited impact of social media on reducing food neophobia suggests that while digital platforms are useful for raising awareness, they may not be sufficient to change food-related behaviors. Instead of solely relying on social media marketing, tourism businesses should complement online promotions with experiential and trust-building strategies, such as testimonials from past visitors, food sampling opportunities, and social dining initiatives that facilitate peer influence. Addressing food neophobia requires a gradual and immersive approach. Destination marketers should integrate storytelling-driven food experiences, highlight the cultural significance of local dishes, and create safe and guided environments where hesitant travelers feel comfortable experimenting with new foods. These strategies will enhance visitor satisfaction, broaden the appeal of culinary tourism, and contribute to a more inclusive and engaging gastronomic landscape.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of food neophobia by reinforcing its role as a mediator between dining image, cuisine image, and behavioral intentions in food tourism. The findings extend prior research by demonstrating that while positive perceptions of dining environments and local cuisine can enhance tourists' engagement, food neophobia remains a psychological barrier that limits culinary exploration. Furthermore, the study challenges the widely accepted notion that social media significantly reduces food neophobia, suggesting that individual preferences and cultural familiarity play a stronger role in shaping food-related decisions. This highlights the need for future academic research to explore the contextual factors that moderate social media's influence on food behavior. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of integrating sensory, cultural, and psychological dimensions into food tourism research, advocating for a multidisciplinary approach that combines Consumption Value Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory with tourism and hospitality studies to better address food-related anxieties among travelers.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the use of a self-reported and self-administered survey may introduce biases such as social desirability or inaccuracies in participants' responses. Thus, future studies could use experimental or observational methods for validation. Second, it did not account for personal dietary restrictions, religious beliefs, or ethical considerations, which may also shape food choices. Variations in culinary exploration across generations, first-time vs. repeat visitors and different travel motivations were not examined. Furthermore, this study made no distinction between different social media platforms or types of material, which may all affect consumer behavior in different ways. Future research should look into platform-specific effects and the role of emerging technologies like AI-driven marketing strategies, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) experiences, and sustainability-focused gastronomic tourism initiatives to gain a better understanding of food-related decision-making in tourism marketing.

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