

ความเป็นไทยในการนำเสนออาหาร: การศึกษามุมมองของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวต่างชาติ

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Thai-ness in Food Presentation: A study of International Tourists' Perspectives

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้เป็นการสำรวจความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาหารและวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งอาหารเป็นสิ่งสะท้อนวัฒนธรรมและในขณะเดียวกันวัฒนธรรมก็มีอิทธิพลในการผลิตอาหาร รวมไปถึงการนำเสนออาหาร ดังนั้น การศึกษานี้มุ่งเน้นที่มุมมองของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวต่างชาติต้ององค์ประกอบความเป็นไทยในการนำเสนออาหาร ผ่านการสำรวจลักษณะสำคัญต่าง ๆ ได้แก่ คุณภาพที่รู้สึกได้ (ความสดของอาหาร รสชาติของอาหาร ความสะอาดของอาหารที่ผู้บริโภครับรู้ได้) ความแท้จริง คุณค่าเพิ่มที่รับรู้ได้ ความสวยงาม การยินดีจ่ายในราคาพิเศษและความพึงพอใจในภาพรวม โดยใช้วิธีการประเมินความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างคู่ที่เป็นวิธีการทดสอบเปรียบเทียบคู่เพื่อระบุตัวอย่างอาหารผ่านการรับรู้ที่สูงกว่าในคุณสมบัติต่าง ๆ ที่ได้รับรู้ได้ โดยประเมินอาหารไทยที่มีความแตกต่างในการนำเสนอในสองรูปแบบ คือ อาหารไทยที่มีองค์ประกอบของความเป็นไทยและอาหารไทยที่ไม่มีองค์ประกอบของความเป็นไทยในการตกแต่งอาหาร ทั้งนี้ผลการศึกษาพบว่าการผสมผสานองค์ประกอบของความเป็นไทยในการนำเสนออาหารไทยมีส่วนสำคัญในการสร้างความรู้สึกที่ดีในทุกคุณสมบัติที่ทดสอบได้อย่างมีนัยสำคัญ อีกทั้งยังเปิดเผยว่านักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติยินดีจ่ายในราคาที่สูงขึ้นสำหรับอาหารที่ผสมผสานองค์ประกอบทางวัฒนธรรม อย่างไรก็ตาม การศึกษานี้ได้สะท้อนความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาหารและวัฒนธรรมอย่างชัดเจน เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นถึงผลกระทบเชิงบวกของอิทธิพลทางวัฒนธรรม เช่น ความเป็นไทยต่อการรับรู้เกี่ยวกับอาหารและพฤติกรรมของนักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติ ซึ่งในท้ายบทความวิจัยฉบับนี้มีการกล่าวถึงประโยชน์ที่ได้รับและข้อจำกัดของการวิจัยนี้

Abstract

The study explored the intricate relationship between food and culture, where food serves as a reflection of culture while culture shapes food production and presentation. This investigation focused on the perceptions of international tourists on Thai-ness elements on food presentation, examining key attributes: perceived quality (encompassing freshness, taste, and hygiene), perceived authenticity, perceived value-added, perceived food aesthetics, willingness to pay a premium, and overall satisfaction. To conduct this examination, a sensory evaluation method, the paired comparison test, was employed to determine which of two food samples exhibited superior sensory attributes. The study employed Thai cuisine, featuring two distinct presentations— one imbued with Thai cultural elements (Thai-ness), and the other without such influence (non-Thai-ness). The findings revealed that the incorporation of Thai cultural elements significantly enhanced perceptions of all tested attributes. Moreover, it unveiled that international tourists have greater willingness to pay a premium for culturally enriched food presentations. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between food and culture, demonstrating the positive impact of cultural elements, such as Thai-ness, on food perception and international tourist's behavior. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's implications and limitations, offering insights into the broader significance of this research.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the uniqueness of Asian-ness identity has gained global recognition across numerous dimensions, especially in the hospitality sector (Baldwin, 2017). Asian-ness characteristics have been observed to permeate in various aspects of Asian society, encompassing behaviour, way of life, attitude, mindset, social constructions, and business operations, or even extending to other contexts (Fakfare et al., 2019). Within the Asian hospitality sector, the Asian-ness approach has been integrated throughout organisations, influencing decoration, staff uniforms, service design, food, and the cultivation of employees' attitudes (Wan & Chon, 2010).

Food is widely recognised as one of the most profound and influential ways to immerse people in a culture, as it has always been integral part of every culture and addresses a basic human need (Risteski & Korunovski, 2016). Several pieces of research have emphasised that food plays an essential role in tourism, and there is a growing interest in the development of gastronomic tourism or related touristic products (Boonpienpon & Wongwiattana, 2017). In this regard, food can be a highly desirable component of the tourism supply and can contribute to diverse tourism offerings in specific locations. Tourists often seek to experience the local culture of their destination, and one effective way to achieve this is by sampling local or traditional cuisine.

Thai cuisine serves as a captivating cultural attraction for tourists exploring the country, and its widespread popularity transcends borders for various compelling reasons, including its health benefits, exquisite flavors, and visually appealing presentation. Thai culinary traditions mirror the country's rich and diverse culture, meticulously crafted to cater to a wide range of palates by harmonizing a symphony of flavors, textures, colors, and aesthetics. This culinary prowess has propelled Thai cuisine to global acclaim, earning it a well-deserved spot among the world's most popular foods. In 2021, CNNGo's ranking of the "World's 50 best foods" featured numerous Thai dishes, with Mussaman curry taking the top spot. Tom Yum Koong secured the eighth position, while Som Tam, or Papaya salad, claimed the forty-sixth spot (CNNGo staff, 2021).

As aforementioned, the reputation of Thai cuisine extends beyond just its taste and health benefits; it also encompasses its appearances and presentations, which are heavily influenced by Thai culture or Thai-ness. However, the roles and significance of culture, particularly Thai-ness, in food presentation remain relatively unexplored, particularly from the perspective of international tourists. Previous research has predominantly focused on the importance of food in tourism (Horng & Tsai, 2010), the influence of culture on food production (Ignatov & Smith, 2006), and tourists' perceptions of traditional foods (Prapasawasdi et al., 2018). Consequently, there is limited understanding of the specific impact of Thai cultural elements on food presentation, particularly as perceived by international tourists.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate and shed light on the significance of integrating Thai-ness elements, a subculture within the context of Asian-ness, into food presentation. Furthermore, it aims to understand how food presentation influences the perception and judgment of food, particularly from the perspective of international tourists. This research places particular emphasis on international tourists' perceptions of various aspects, including food quality (freshness, taste, hygiene), authenticity, aesthetics, value-added, willingness to pay a premium price, and overall satisfaction. These assessments are made in the context of incorporating Thai-ness elements into food presentation. In this study, Thai cuisine is employed as a case study, featuring two distinct presentations. The research methodology utilises the paired comparison test to comprehensively explore these dimensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Asian-ness and Thai-ness

Chon (2019) defined the term “Asian-ness” or “Asia-ness” in his book named “Hospitality in Asia, A New Paradigm” as unique, distinctive, or specific characteristics peculiar to Asia and Asian people and society. These unique characteristics have been dominantly associated with socio-culture values and history. Furthermore, Chin et al. (2016) depicted Asian-ness traits as the following attributes: sincerity, love, forgiveness, balance, keen attention to detail, and kindness. From a global perspective, the unique characteristics of Asian-ness have been found in board aspects intrinsically and extrinsically underlying Asians' manner, behaviour, mindset, and way of life. These characteristics would differentiate Asian from others. With the review of previous studies, numerous scholars described the Asian-ness characteristics as the following traits: respectful expression and detail orientation, a strong sense of kindness and giving (Sucher et al. (2013), a smiling face, humility and genuine and polite behaviour in verbal and non-verbal cues (Wan & Chon, 2010), kindness, tolerance, and attention to details (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2014), and courtesy and humble (Mohsin, 2016).

In Thailand, the term “Thai-ness” is prevalently displayed in Thai people and society through various domains. It is recognised as the national identity (Kongpolphrom, 2018). However, it is found to hardly explain “Thai-ness” or in the Thai language called “Kwam Pen Thai”. Numerous articles and studies described the characteristics of Thai-ness in the different aspects as follows:

Characteristics of Thai people: confrontation avoidance, expressing oneself quietly and communicating indirectly, attentive and considerate, kind and helpful, tolerant-restrained, polite and humble, equanimity and cautious, social relation, collectivism (Facts and Details, 2014).

Religion and belief: Buddhism is the state religion, and approximately 95% of Thailand abides by Buddhist principles. Thais’ beliefs mainly include the concept of Karma (the consequence of one’s deeds), merit and sin, an afterlife, heaven and hell. This influences Thais’ way of life and people’s characteristics, especially in giving, sharing, calmness and kindness (Podhisita, 1998).

Arts: It is mainly characterised and recognised by the subtlety of design and forms. Thai arts are found in various forms: paintings, sculpture, music, performance, costume, handcraft, carving, weaving, etc. (Lim, n.d.). They are handmade products and are created to be utilised in Thais’ daily life to solve problems in livelihood. They can be considered as a reflection of the Thai people’s way of life (Royalthaiart.com, 2019)

Way of life: Thai people's lives have been mainly tied with their religion, Buddhism, from birth to death. Buddhism and its principles are bonded into their lives. Thai people continually participate in making-merit activities such as offering food to the monks and going to the temple during religious-related public holidays (Tiranasar, 2002).

All these elements are interconnected and finally shape the characteristics of Thai-ness. Therefore, it could be aggregated that the attributes of Thai-ness are underlying blended from its culture, belief, traditions, and religion and influences their lives significantly. These elements are hidden and reflected through everything they do and behave (Livingasean, 2018). In addition, Thai-ness is found to be dominant in paying attention to small details and having hand-making skills (Sucher et al., 2013). It can be observed in little things in their lives, such as the flower garlands or folded lotus used for paying worship of the Buddha, magnificent paintings of the lord Buddha’s story on the walls of monasteries, or beautifully carved

vegetables served with dishes. All of these aspects would make the country stand out and yearn for the tourists to explore the unique experience.

2.2 Transference of Asian-ness and Thai-ness to Food

According to Carlsson-Kanyama and Lindén (2001), food is one of the most critical criteria for defining cultural identity. It is consistent with Civitello (2011), who stressed that identity and religion are deeply permeated into food. In this regard, food can be used as an indicator to differentiate people from different groups, religions, or cultures through its taste, ingredients, presentations, and characteristics (Sibal, 2018). Food not only satisfies the basic human need as fuel to survive, but it can also be one of the tourism components to attract people to visit places. In addition, culture influences food in various dimensions, such as cooking culture, eating habits, food presentation, etc. (Sibal, 2018).

Furthermore, food and culture were found to have a close relationship in representing each other; food reflects culture while culture influences food production (Watanasin, 2012; Reddy & van Dam, 2020). Numerous scholars previously revealed that the demonstration of local cultural elements on food and the physical environment around where food is served would promote the sense of authenticity of that place (Ellis et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). Moreover, a study conducted by Balogh et al. (2016) revealed that consumers were willing to pay a premium price for traditional food, perceiving it as having added value.

A comprehensive review of the existing studies revealed that the concept of Asian-ness has been incorporated into diverse dimensions of society. Food is no exception. Asian-ness in food has been found in various aspects, starting from its flavour and ingredients. For instance, the spicy flavours of Sichuan cuisine, the delicate but balanced sour and bitter flavours of Japanese food, and the bold and intensely use of spices in Indian food, until presentations representing each national identity of the Asian countries (Baldwin, 2017).

In Thailand, food is well representing the uniqueness of the culture or the true spirit of Thailand (TAT, 2019). Thai food is found to have the perfect combination of flavours, textures, colours, and presentation. It might be derived from Thai-ness characteristics: keenness on small details, balance, and exquisite. Moreover, Thai food is well known for its flavours and ingredients, mainly herbs, spices, and fresh ingredients (Watanasin, 2012). Thai dishes are not only well-known in their taste and nutritional values but also a sight to behold from their decoration of graceful fruit and carved vegetable. It could be concluded that besides its savour, food presentation reflects Thai-ness's characteristics.

2.3 Culture in Food Aesthetics and Presentations

Prior research relevant to food aesthetics narrated the importance of aesthetics of food influencing the customers' satisfaction and experiential value in the dining experience (Bekar & Sürücü, 2017). According to Lindstrom (2005), aesthetics are described as objects that appeal to the senses of taste, smell, touch, hearing, and sight. In addition, various scholars have highlighted that aesthetic value is primarily associated with the beauty that can be felt by the senses (Townsend, 1997). Previous studies measuring aesthetic value often utilised multiple statements and domains, primarily related to decoration and product appearance, as measurement items to assess product aesthetics (Bekar & Sürücü, 2017).




In the food and beverage provision sector, the aesthetics of food are widely employed as a business strategy to differentiate food offerings from others that provide similar or comparable dishes. Enhancing the aesthetic appeal of food and service design can attract greater attention from customers (Murdoch & Miele, 2018). Numerous studies have emphasised the significance of food presentation in attracting consumers to a particular restaurant. These food presentations encompass tableware, plates, and side dishes adorned with vegetables or fruits. The specific elements of

food presentation can vary across cultures. Many studies have demonstrated that aesthetically presented food enhances the dining experience, contributing to diners' health and overall multisensory eating experience (Spence et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2022).

Thai food has been recognised worldwide because of its palatable taste and healthy benefits. In addition, the values of Thai food are found in three critical angles, and it has been reflected in nutrition, culture, and medicine. These aspects become the DNA of Thai food based on global perception, including the aesthetics of its presentations (TAT, 2019). Therefore, Thai food's aesthetic attributes, apart from the food itself, can be visibly developed by including Thai-ness elements in its presentation, such as tableware, craved fruits and vegetables, local Thai wisdom, etc. Table 1 presents examples of Thai-ness features included in Thai cuisine promoting the aesthetics.

Table 1

Examples of Thai-ness Elements in Food Presentations.

Item	Tableware	Local Thai Wisdom (Wicker)	Craved fruits and vegetables
Examples			
	Source: Royalthaiart.com,2019	Source: Pinterest.com, 2022	Source: Supancity.com, 2021

2.4 Food quality

Food quality has become one of the essential components of the consumers' dining experience and is a crucial requirement to meet all consumers' expectations and needs (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Soderlund and Rosengren (2008) found that food quality and fresh ingredients are among the most significant factors underlying the preference for food choice. Different scholars employ diverse and different attributes to indicate food quality. In this regard, Murdoch and Miele (2013) stressed that the quality attributes of the food were found in both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. Intrinsic qualities are rooted in the food's material composition, edibility, taste, and appearance, while extrinsic qualities are shaped by the judgments and evaluations imposed by human actors. In practice, the quality of a food product arises from the interplay between these two dimensions. This interaction can lead to significant variations in quality, as different individuals and food cultures offer diverse evaluations and judgments.

The review of prior studies reveals that scholars have defined food quality characteristics, which are presented in the table below:

Table 2*Food Quality Attributes*

Author(s)	Attributes of food quality
Adongo et al. (2015)	Food presentation, Serving size, and Menu design
Tsai & Wang (2017)	Texture, Food safety, Portion size, Taste, Presentation, Color, Temperature, and Dietary acceptability
Gnanapala (2015).	Taste, Food freshness, Temperature, Nutritional value, and Menu Variety

In food and beverage provision outlets, food quality has been considered as the most critical determinant of customer satisfaction (Suhartanto et al., 2019). It could consequently develop the satisfaction of the consumers and influence their future behavioural intentions (Rozekhi et al., 2016; Yuksel, 2001). The consumers, who were satisfied, would show their high intention to revisit the restaurant in the future (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Thus, it can be said that food quality is one of the underlying factors determining customer satisfaction and behavioural intention (Altintzoglou et al., 2016).

Based on the prior research, five dimensions indicating the food quality were included; food nutrition, food variety, the smell of food, deliciousness, and food freshness (Rozekhi et al., 2016; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Yuksel, 2001). Moreover, Michel et al. (2014) further revealed that food presentation is one of the culinary techniques incorporated into food service to appeal to the consumers' attention and advocate the perception of the food quality.

Therefore, in the context of this study, the roles of Thai-ness in food presentation were assessed through the international tourists' perceptions. This assessment includes perceived food quality (perceived freshness, food taste, perceived hygiene), perceived authenticity, perceived value-added, perceived food aesthetics, willingness to pay a premium price, and overall satisfaction. Therefore, the hypotheses were proposed as follows:

H1: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of perceived quality (perceived freshness, food taste, perceived hygiene).

H2: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of perceived authenticity.

H3: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of perceived value-added.

H4: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of perceived food aesthetics.

H5: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of willingness to pay a premium price.

H6: There is a significant difference between food presentation with non-Thai-ness elements and food presentation with Thai-ness elements in the international tourists' perceptions of overall satisfaction.

3. Methodology

The study approaches quantitative research by implementing an experimental and quantitative technique. The sensory evaluation method is employed to measure the perception of the participants to stimuli. Mihafu et al. (2020)

stressed that sensory evaluation methods provide the answers to questions about product quality which is normally used in product development and production. The outcomes derived from conducting the sensory evaluation are significant in determining the consumers' acceptability and perceptions towards the products. It is a very useful tool for making effective decision in product development. Sensory evaluation methods consist of various types, such as discriminative tests, paired comparison tests, triangular tests, descriptive tests, preference ranking, hedonic rating scale, and consumer acceptance tests, among others (Mihafu et al., 2020). In this study, paired comparison test is used to identify which sample from two different samples is perceived higher in the specified sensory attributes (Yang & Ng, 2017). This approach is widely recognised as one of the most commonly used tests for assessing attribute differences and is easily comprehensible to research participants (McBride et al., 1984). Thus, a food tasting session was conducted with 100 participants who were international travellers travelling in Phuket. Moreover, the participants, who were recruited in this study, were required to meet the following criteria:

1. The participants must have stayed in Phuket for at least two nights.
2. The participants must be 18 years old and above.
3. The participants must have had Thai food consumption experience during their stay in Phuket.

It is to ensure that all the participants have some knowledge or experience on the topic of study.



Two samples of food in two different presentations (see Table 3) were presented to participants, allowing them to make observations and subsequently taste them. A questionnaire was used as a research instrument to assess the participants' perceptions. Ten attributes, derived from the literature review, were included in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate their perception of these attributes, including perceived quality (freshness, taste, hygiene), authenticity, value-added, food aesthetics, willingness to pay a premium, and overall satisfaction, using a 7-point Likert Scale [1: *Being not at all* – 7: *Being extremely*].



Food Samples

The food samples were utilised to assess the international tourists' perceptions. Four samples were used in this study (two types of Thai food are multiplied with two different presentations: Thai-ness and non-Thai-ness elements included).

Table 3

Food Samples in this study

Sample No.	Non-Thai-ness elements included	Thai-ness elements included (tableware, craved fruits and vegetables, and Thai wisdom)
Sample 1		

Sample No.	Non-Thai-ness elements included	Thai-ness elements included (tableware, craved fruits and vegetables, and Thai wisdom)
Sample 2		

4. Data Analysis

The IBM SPSS program was employed to analyse the data in this study. The objectives of the study were achieved through data analysis. Therefore, to illustrate the roles of incorporating Thai-ness into food presentation, a Paired Samples t-test was employed to determine whether there is any significant difference in the international tourists' perceptions between the food with non-Thai-ness elements included and the food with Thai-ness elements included. Moreover, to identify the difference between Asians' and non-Asians' perceptions, this study adopted a T-test.

5. Results

Table 4

Participants' Profile

	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage
Gender		
Female	39	39%
Male	61	61%
Age		
20 and below	13	13%
21-30	74	74%
31-40	8	8%
41-50	4	4%
51-60	1	1%
Nationality		
Mainland Chinese	20	20%
Japanese	10	10%
German	21	21%
British	14	14%
Austrian	20	20%
Russian	8	8%
Other European	7	7%

	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage
Education		
Undergraduate	47	47%
Bachelor	44	44%
Master or higher	9	9%
Occupation		
Student	43	43%
Lecturer	10	10%
Officer	32	32%
Self-employed	8	8%
Others	7	7%
Monthly income (USD)		
1,000 USD or Less	59	59%
1,001-2,000 USD	23	23%
2,001-3,000 USD	12	12%
3,001-4,000 USD	2	2%
Higher 4,001 USD	4	4%

The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study were analysed and are presented in Table 4. Among the participants, 61% were male, and 39% were female. The majority of participants fell into the age group of 21-30 years (74%), followed by those aged 20 years old and below (13%), 31-40 years old (8%), 41-50 years old (4%), and 51-60 years old (1%).

In terms of nationality, the largest proportion of participants were German (21%), followed closely by Mainland Chinese (20%) and Austrian (20%). Other nationalities included British (14%), Japanese (10%), Russian (8%), and individuals from other European nationalities (7%).

Regarding educational qualifications, 47% of participants were undergraduate students, 44% held a bachelor's degree, and 9% had a master's degree or higher. Occupationally, 43% were students, 10% were university lecturers, 32% were employed in various officer roles, 8% were self-employed, and 7% were engaged in other occupations.

In terms of monthly income, the majority of participants (59%) reported earning \$1,000 or less per month, followed by 23% who earned between \$1,001 and \$2,000 per month, 12% earning between \$2,001 and \$3,000 per month, 2% earning between \$3,001 and \$4,000 per month, and 4% earning more than \$4,001 per month.

Table 5

Results of Pair t-test to identify mean differences in perceptions of food from non-Thai-ness elements and Thai-ness elements included in its presentation.

Item	Non-Thai-ness elements	Thai-ness elements	Difference	Paired t-value	p-value
Perceived Quality	4.50	6.30	-1.80	-19.31	.000*
Perceived Authenticity	5.15	6.40	-1.25	-11.07	.000*
Perceived Value-added	4.50	6.00	-1.50	-14.57	.000*

Item	Non-Thai-ness elements	Thai-ness elements	Difference	Paired t-value	p-value
Perceived food Aesthetic	4.75	6.60	-1.85	-22.79	.000*
Willingness to pay a premium price	3.75	5.75	-2.00	-21.58	.000*
Overall satisfaction	4.75	6.10	-1.35	-16.63	.000*

Note: * $p < .001$

Table 5 shows the results of conducting paired t-tests to identify mean differences in perceptions of food between non-Thai-ness elements and Thai-ness elements included in its presentation. Regarding the international tourists' perceptions of food between non-Thai-ness elements and Thai-ness element included, significance at the 0.001 level was found in all measurement aspects, including perceived quality (perceived freshness, food taste, perceived hygiene), perceived authenticity, perceived value-added, perceived food aesthetic, willingness to pay a premium price, and overall satisfaction. By incorporating the Thai-ness elements into the food presentation, the international tourists' perceptions showed higher mean scores in all measurement aspects compared to food without incorporating Thai-ness elements. Therefore, all hypothesise H1-H6 in this study are supported.

Table 6

Results of the t-test to identify differences in perceptions of food presentation included Thai-ness elements from Asians' and Non-Asians' perspectives.

Item	Asian (N=30)	Non-Asian (N=70)	t-value	p-value
Perceived Quality	6.67	6.14	4.32	.000**
Perceived Authenticity	6.17	6.50	-2.34	.021*
Perceived Value-added	6.17	5.93	1.36	0.18
Perceived Food Aesthetic	6.17	6.79	-9.99	.000**
Willingness to pay a premium price	6.17	5.57	3.68	.000**
Overall satisfaction	6.00	6.14	-1.76	.082

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Asian includes Mainland Chinese and Japanese.

Non-Asian includes German, British, Austrian, Russian, and other European.

Table 6 illustrates that there was no significant difference at the 0.05 level in perceived value-added and overall satisfaction. However, significant differences were found at the 0.05 and 0.001 significant levels in perceived quality, perceived authenticity, perceived food aesthetic, and willingness to pay a premium price, respectively. Concerning the perception of food quality, value-added, and willing to pay a premium price, Asians showed a higher mean score than non-Asians, but for the perceived authenticity and food aesthetic, non-Asians showed a greater mean score than Asians.

Table 7

Comparison of Tourist Perceptions Across Nationalities for Food with and without Thai-ness Elements

Nationality Item	Mainland Chinese (N=30)			Japanese (N=10)			German (N=21)			British (N=14)			Austrian (N=20)			Russian (N=8)			Other European (N=7)		
	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.	Mean 1	Mean 2	Mean df.
Perceived Quality	5.0	6.5	1.5	3.5	7.0	3.5	4.29	5.81	1.52	4.5	6.0	1.5	4.5	6.25	1.75	4.63	6.25	1.62	5.0	7.0	2.0
Perceived Authenticity	5.5	5.75	0.25	3.5	7.0	3.5	4.55	6.74	2.19	5.86	7.0	1.14	5.5	5.75	0.25	5.5	6.88	1.38	5.5	6.5	2.0
Perceived Value-added	5.0	5.75	0.75	4.5	7.0	2.5	3.79	6.69	2.9	5.07	5.79	0.72	4.25	5.5	1.25	4.75	5.63	0.88	4.5	5.5	1.0
Perceived Food Aesthetic	5.0	6.25	1.25	4.0	6.0	2.0	4.52	7.0	2.48	5.86	6.79	0.93	4.0	6.5	2.5	5.38	6.75	1.37	5.0	7.0	2.0
Willingness to pay a premium price	4.75	5.75	1.0	3.0	7.0	4.0	2.55	5.26	2.71	4.43	6.43	2.0	3.75	5.0	1.25	4.38	6.38	2.0	3.5	5.5	2.0
Overall satisfaction	5.25	5.75	0.5	5.0	6.5	2.5	4.07	6.48	2.41	5.07	6.0	0.93	4.25	6.0	1.75	5.0	6.0	2.0	5.5	6.0	1.5

Note: Mean1 = Mean score of the international tourist' s perception towards food without Thai-ness element, Mean 2 = Mean score of the international tourist' s perception towards food with Thai-ness element, Mean df. = Mean difference.

However, when examining individual nationalities, Table 7 illustrates the variations in mean scores among different nationalities concerning the tested attributes in this study. Notably, Japanese tourists exhibited significant differences in mean scores across three attributes: perceived quality, perceived authenticity, and willingness to pay a premium price. Specifically, they rated these attributes considerably higher when Thai-ness elements were incorporated into the food.

Regarding perceived value-added, Germans demonstrated the most favorable perception when Thai-ness elements were integrated, as evidenced by the highest mean score difference of 2.9 compared to other nationalities.

Austrian tourists, on the other hand, had the highest perception of food aesthetics among all nationalities, with a mean score difference of 2.5, indicating their appreciation for the visual appeal of dishes with Thai-ness elements.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Thai-ness elements in food presentation positively influenced overall satisfaction among international tourists, particularly Japanese and Germans, as indicated by mean score differences of 2.5 and 2.41, respectively.

Table 8

Willingness to pay a premium price

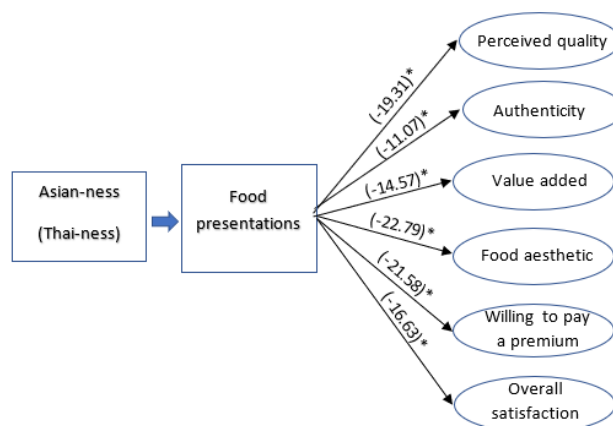
Sample	Average willingness to pay a price	Difference	Percentage of difference
Sample 1			
Non-Thai-ness element included	3.85 USD	2 USD	51.95%
Thai-ness element included	5.85 USD		
Sample 2			
Non-Thai-ness element included	2.60 USD	2.5 USD	96.15%
Thai-ness element included	5.10 USD		
The average price that international tourists are willing to pay more (in percentage)			74.05%

Table 8 illustrates international tourists' willingness to pay a premium price. During the food tasting session, participants were asked to estimate the price they would be willing to pay for each food sample based on their perceptions. The results indicate that participants were willing to pay an average of 3.85 USD for food with non-Thai-ness elements included in sample 1 and 2.60 USD in sample 2.

However, when Thai-ness elements were incorporated into the food presentation, participants showed a greater intention to pay a higher price. For sample 1, which included Thai-ness elements, participants were willing to pay an average of 5.85 USD, representing a 51.95% increase compared to non-Thai-ness food. In sample 2, the willingness to pay increased to 5.10 USD, a substantial 96.15% increase over the non-Thai-ness counterpart.

These results demonstrate that both Asian and non-Asian participants were willing to pay approximately 50-70% more for the same food when it incorporated Thai cultural elements into its presentation. These results corroborate the data presented in Table 5, affirming the respondents' willingness to pay a premium price for such culturally enriched food items.

Figure 1 Significance of Thai-ness on food presentation toward the international tourists' perceptions. Note:



* $p < .001$

Furthermore, the study explored the participants' perceptions as expressed in the additional comment section of the survey. The analysis revealed several frequently mentioned terms, which can serve as indicators of their perceptions regarding food presentations that incorporate Thai-ness elements.

Figure 2 International tourists' perceptions toward food presentation incorporated Thai-ness elements.



6. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented, Thai-ness is recognised as a valuable mechanism for distinguishing products and services from others. The incorporation of Thai-ness elements, or national identity, into products and services can leverage positive perceptions. In this study, Thai food featuring Thai-ness elements was used to investigate the influence of Thai-ness on food presentation from the perspective of international tourists. The study assessed various aspects of international tourists' perceptions, including perceived quality (freshness, food taste, perceived hygiene), perceived authenticity, perceived value-added, perceived food aesthetics, willingness to pay a premium price, and overall satisfaction.

The findings indicate that Thai-ness in food presentation enhances international tourists' willingness to pay a premium price and contributes to a stronger perception of food quality. The results reveal that food incorporating Thai-ness elements received higher mean scores in willingness to pay a premium price and perceived quality (freshness, taste, and hygiene). This aligns with the prior studies done by numerous scholars, which elaborated on the characteristic of food quality. Those scholars stated that food quality should include the taste of food, food hygiene and safety, and food freshness (Gnanapala, 2015; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Moreover, the results of the study are also consistent with the findings of Michel et al. (2014) which highlighted that food presentation is one of the culinary techniques incorporated into food service to appeal to the consumers' attention and advocate the perception of the food quality.

Moreover, it has been established that food plays a pivotal role in exposing travelers to new cultures. However, the inclusion of cultural elements in food presentation can significantly enhance the sense of authenticity. As evidenced by Ellis et al. (2018) and Zhang et al. (2019), showcasing local cultural elements in both the food and the surrounding physical environment can bolster the authenticity of a particular place.

Furthermore, presenting food with cultural elements can lead consumers to perceive value-added, resulting in a willingness to pay a premium price. This aligns with Balogh et al.'s (2016) study, which emphasised that consumers were willing to pay more for traditional food due to the perceived value it offered.

Surprisingly, there were significant differences in perceptions of perceived food quality, authenticity, aesthetics, and willingness to pay between Asians and non-Asians. Asians demonstrated a notably higher perception of food quality and willingness to pay for the food samples. This phenomenon can be attributed to cultural familiarity. Previous studies have highlighted that cultural familiarity significantly influences consumption behaviors and food choices (Jeong & Lee,

2021). The results of this study align with prior research conducted by Wong et al. (2020) and Torrico et al. (2019), emphasizing that individuals tend to rate food more favorably when they are familiar with it, leading to a higher willingness to pay a premium price because the value of the products is fully recognized. However, it's worth noting that, in this study, Asians perceived lower authenticity and aesthetics compared to non-Asians. This difference could be attributed to the cultural patterns that prevail in their familiar environment at home. They may perceive less novelty or impression compared to non-Asians, as supported by the findings of Kirillova and Lehto (2015). Their research highlighted that international tourists tend to compare the aesthetics of objects and places with what they experience in their home environment.

Implications

The results of this study present the implications in two dimensions, theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, the results contribute to the enrichment and enhancement of existing literature on this subject, further solidifying the concept of Asian-ness as a new wave of the Asian Paradigm in the Hospitality sector, as articulated by Chon (2019). This underscores the significance of integrating Asian-ness elements into products and services, ultimately leading to the enhancement of their value and uniqueness. The results would attest that Asian-ness, particularly Thai-ness as a focal point of this study, is not only the unique characteristic of Thai people or nationalistic pride, but Thai-ness would also become a new mechanism to distinguish and advocate the value of hospitality products and services in Thailand. From the practical point of view, it should not be neglected that tourists are not only travelling to visit attractions but also exposing the culture at the destination simultaneously. Incorporating cultural elements into the offerings of a destination can significantly enhance the competitiveness of providers in the market. This approach effectively conveys cultural aspects through products and services to international tourists, resulting in an enhanced perception of food quality, authenticity, aesthetics, and value-added. As a result, it fosters more favorable perceptions and increases international tourists' willingness to pay a premium. The study's findings affirm that integrating Thai-ness into food presentation can indeed cultivate a heightened sense of food quality, authenticity, aesthetics, and value-added, thereby promoting more positive perceptions and a greater willingness among international tourists to pay a premium.

Research limitations and future research

This study, like others, has identified some limitations, leaving room for future research to investigate further. Firstly, the number of participants in this study was relatively small, so it may not be able to generalise the entire perception. Increasing the number of participants would identify some other significant aspects and robust the study results. Secondly, Thai-ness is not only one sub-culture under Asian-ness; therefore, it sheds light on a further extension to other contexts such as Chinese, Indonesian, or others. Lastly, the roles of Asian-ness in the places where the food is served are limited and underexplored. It would allow researchers to further investigate Asian-ness's roles in other dimensions or contexts.

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