THE ROLE OF NASI AMBENG IN GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: EXAMINING BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract. Gastronomic tourism plays an important role in preserving cultural heritage, with traditional food acting as an essential component of a destination's identity and traditions. However, existing studies mainly describe Nasi Ambeng's heritage and preservation, leaving limited understanding of young domestic tourists' behavioural intentions to travel specifically to experience Nasi Ambeng as a gastronomic tourism attraction. Guided by the conceptual framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study develops a predictor model to evaluate how food knowledge, cultural identity, and social media exposure shape the behavioural intentions of university students, who represent a key segment of young domestic tourists, towards Nasi Ambeng as a Malaysian gastronomic tourism attraction. Using a quantitative research approach, data were gathered from 365 university students, employing purposive sampling to ensure all participants satisfied the study's predefined inclusion criteria. The findings revealed that food knowledge and social media exposure have significant positive effects on young domestic tourists' behavioural intentions, with social media exposure showing the strongest influence. In contrast, cultural identity was insignificant, suggesting that cultural attachment may not necessarily translate into the intention to engage in gastronomic tourism within a relatively homogeneous domestic context. Therefore, these findings provide useful insights for tourism authorities, destination marketers, and culinary stakeholders in developing appropriate strategies and policies that can strengthen the role of traditional food as a sustainable gastronomic tourism attraction.
Keywords: *gastronomic tourism, university students, Nasi Ambeng, social media, food knowledge, cultural identity*

Introduction

Global trends in culinary tourism have brought an important change in destination marketing, where food is seen not only as an essential need but as a crucial part of culture when travelling (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016). In Malaysia, this culinary appeal is reflected in Nasi Ambeng, one of the most favoured Malaysian heritage cuisines that hails from the cuisine tradition of Javanese immigrants. Served on a large communal tray (talam), Nasi Ambeng holds a strong symbolic representation of unity, identity, cooperation (gotong-royong), and blessings among members of the community, making it a perfect representative of authentic heritage food experiences (Munauwar et al., 2025; Saaidin and Azrein, 2025). From the viewpoint of tourism research, Lim et al. (2015) highlighted that young domestic tourists, particularly young adults and university students, represent a very active and economically relevant element of the domestic tourism market due to their high mobility, spending power, and flexible travel behaviours that greatly contribute to domestic tourism development. Moreover, their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for domestic travel, together with their enthusiasm for local cuisine, make young adults an important group for

understanding behavioural intentions towards heritage dishes (Yeap et al., 2020). According to Munauwar et al. (2025), as a newly developed group of local customers, young adults can act as promoters of cultural sustainability by transforming ancestral food traditions such as Nasi Ambeng into new food trends through their travel and local consumption behaviour, which also supports the preservation of heritage food (Selamat et al., 2025).

Although deeply rooted within culture, traditional heritage food confronts significant challenges in remaining relevant in modern society. Rapid urbanisation, modernisation, and shifting lifestyle preferences among Gen Z travellers have weakened the traditional transmission of culinary practices, putting heritage foods at risk of losing cultural relevance (Mohd Fisol et al., 2026). While recent studies have begun to examine Nasi Ambeng, they have mostly focused on descriptive aspects, such as its Javanese historical roots, traditional recipes, and general preservation challenges (Saaidin and Azrein, 2025; Suleiman et al., 2023). Despite these contributions, the predictors of young domestic tourists' travel specifically to experience Nasi Ambeng as a gastronomic tourism attraction should be studied. To bridge this gap, this study develops a predictor model guided by the conceptual framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Using TPB as a guiding foundation, the study focuses on three key variables: food knowledge as perceived behavioural control, cultural identity as a personal attitudinal factor, and social media exposure as a subjective norm. These variables are examined to determine their relationships with young domestic tourists' behavioural intentions to travel to experience the Nasi Ambeng. Therefore, this study focuses specifically on university students at the Universiti Teknologi MARA Pulau Pinang campus as a representative subgroup of young domestic travellers, contributing empirical evidence to support the cultural sustainability and tourism potential of this Malaysian heritage food.

Literature review

Behavioural intention in gastronomic tourism

In gastronomic tourism research, behavioural intention refers to an individual's conscious willingness and cognitive readiness, with destination-specific food choices serving as a primary driver of travel and consumption actions (Sutiadiningsih et al., 2023; Ajzen, 1991). For university students, a highly mobile and flexible segment of the domestic market, behavioural intention drives destination selection. At the same time, experiential heritage cuisines can offer unique cultural learning, memorable sensory discoveries, and deeper local engagement. Nevertheless, previous studies reveal mixed evidence regarding whether general culinary engagement translates into active travel intentions. Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2016) suggest that memorable gastronomic quality and experiences directly predict customer satisfaction, revisit intentions, and long-term loyalty. Conversely, Buenaño-Allauca et al. (2026) and Sutiadiningsih et al. (2023), particularly in the context of emerging domestic cultural destinations, indicate that overall engagement with local food does not automatically result in targeted behavioural intentions to travel specifically for traditional heritage cuisine. This inconsistency may be explained by Ajzen (1991), who suggests that general satisfaction with an experience differs from specific behavioural intentions, which are shaped by a combination of personal attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In a relatively under-researched domestic setting, where most culinary studies focus on

international tourists or descriptive findings about food consumption, behavioural intention may therefore be better predicted by examining specific cognitive and social factors, such as local food knowledge, cultural identity and digital exposure, rather than general descriptions of the value of the experience.

Food knowledge

The cognitive factor that influences how individuals engage with, understand, and appreciate traditional cuisine is their food knowledge. It refers to an individual's awareness of food authenticity, ingredients, cooking methods, and the cultural value of local dishes (Mak et al., 2012). In Malaysia, Md. Sharif et al. (2018) examine food knowledge from an ethnographic household perspective, emphasising that hands-on traditional knowledge transfer within families is vital to prevent young people from being deskilled in traditional culinary practices. Conversely, Stone et al. (2021) examine knowledge through an institutional tourism perspective, showing that young travellers actively seek regional culinary information before travelling to familiarise themselves with local attractions. Bridging these views, Munauwar et al. (2025) demonstrate that in the modern digital era, structured heritage knowledge among young adults significantly relates to their intentions to support and preserve heritage cuisines. This conceptual variation shows how cognitive food knowledge relates to local young travellers' intentions to seek out localised communal delicacies, such as Javanese-influenced Nasi Ambeng, as dedicated gastronomic travel motivators within their own borders.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity rests on a shared network of traditions, beliefs, and practices, with traditional food serving as a strong manifestation of heritage, continuity, and cultural identity (Putra et al., 2023). For young domestic tourists, cultural identity shapes how heritage foods are perceived, accepted, and valued, while authentic food experiences can strengthen cultural connections and satisfy desires for cultural immersion and escapism (Ishak et al., 2025; Selamat et al., 2025). However, previous studies reveal mixed evidence regarding whether cultural attachment translates into travel intentions. Putra et al. (2023), Selamat et al. (2025), and Ishak et al. (2025) suggest that authentic local food experiences strengthen cultural connections and travel decisions, whereas Suleiman et al. (2023) and Munauwar et al. (2025), particularly in the context of Javanese-influenced foods such as Nasi Ambeng, indicate that emotional attachment to heritage preservation does not necessarily lead to active travel intentions among young domestic consumers. This discrepancy may be explained by Jeong and Lee (2021), who suggest that cultural identity becomes a stronger motivator when consumers encounter unfamiliar or cross-cultural food environments. In a relatively homogeneous domestic context, where young university students may already share common cultural values and familiarity with Nasi Ambeng, cultural identity may therefore be less influential than contemporary lifestyle preferences and social media trends.

Social media exposure

Studies suggest that social media has created new opportunities for consumers to discover and engage with local culinary heritage. Within this digital landscape, engagement with online culinary media is closely associated with broader lifestyle patterns, contemporary dining choices, and the spread of electronic word-of-mouth

(Ishak et al., 2025; Latip et al., 2024; Aguirre, 2019). Qin et al. (2025) further refine this perspective, showing that digital exposure is positively associated with favourable perceptions of traditional cuisine, while interactive platforms align with increased culinary curiosity and stronger intentions to explore localised food cultures. However, some culinary and tourism literature presents a clear tension regarding whether this virtual engagement successfully translates into physical travel and sustainable consumption decisions. For example, Suleiman et al. (2023) found that although social media can increase public curiosity and awareness of traditional dishes, digital popularity alone does not necessarily lead to actual physical consumption or long-term cultural preservation among modern youth. This suggests that the effect of social media may depend not only on the information presented but also on how users interact with and respond to digital content. In a highly digitised domestic environment, where university students increasingly rely on peer reviews, social media recommendations, and viral food content when making lifestyle and travel decisions, social media exposure may therefore function as a contemporary subjective norm that shapes perceptions and intentions to engage in gastronomic tourism.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) Model

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides a comprehensive understanding of how internal cognitive factors and external social influences interact in shaping young domestic tourists' intention to engage in gastronomic tourism. It helps explain university students' behavioural intentions based on the belief that behaviour is determined by intention, which is shaped by three factors: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (Sutiadiningsih et al., 2023). Building on these principles, this study uses the traditional constructs of TPB to guide its conceptual framework by mapping food knowledge, cultural identity, and social media exposure onto the theory's fundamental constructs in the context of young domestic tourists' decision-making to engage in gastronomic tourism. Food knowledge is operationalised as a domain-specific cognitive factor related to perceived behavioural control, as greater knowledge may enhance internal self-efficacy and reduce uncertainty when seeking localised dining experiences. In this context, greater knowledge of the ingredients and heritage value of Nasi Ambeng may increase an individual's confidence in seeking out and experiencing the dish (Munauwar et al., 2025; Md. Sharif et al., 2018). Similarly, cultural identity is positioned as an attitudinal factor, as a strong emotional and personal connection to Malaysian food culture may contribute to a more positive evaluation of consuming Nasi Ambeng (Latip et al., 2024; Jeong and Lee, 2021). In contrast, social media exposure represents a source of subjective norm, as continuous exposure to destination-related content, food vlogs, and online reviews can shape perceptions of peer attitudes and create social influence among young and tech-savvy travellers (Qin et al., 2025; Aguirre, 2019).

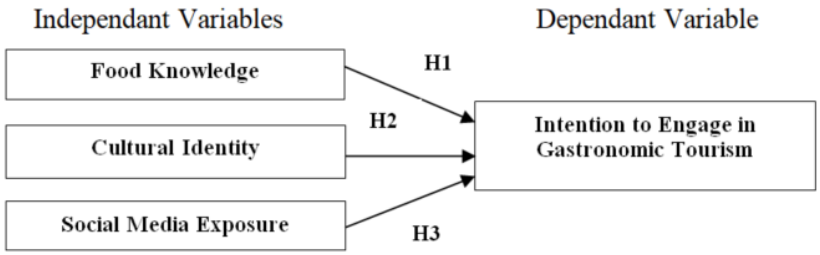


Figure 1. *Research Framework*
Source: Ajzen (1991).

Materials and Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional, survey-based quantitative and descriptive research design to examine the relationships among the study variables. The quantitative approach involved systematically measuring and operationalising the study constructs and statistically analysing relationships between the variables (Saaidin and Azrein, 2025). Data were collected at a single point in time through a structured survey, allowing the study to assess the associations and predictive patterns among the variables. The findings therefore reflect the observed relationships within the study context. To obtain meaningful insights from a relevant and accessible subgroup, non-probability purposive sampling was employed to select students from various faculties at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Permatang Pauh. This sampling technique targeted the defined study population of young domestic tourist university students, ensuring that selected respondents met the study's specific requirements. As noted by Rahmat et al. (2021), this approach ensured that only participants who met the predetermined inclusion criteria were selected. To ensure sample relevance, participants were screened against four mandatory eligibility criteria through screening questions presented at the beginning of the questionnaire. Respondents were required to be currently enrolled at a university, aged between 18 and 30 years, have undertaken domestic travel within the past 12 months, and possess some level of familiarity with gastronomic tourism. From the total population of 4,962 students, a minimum sample size of 357 respondents was required, as determined using the sample size table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). At the end of data collection, only fully completed submissions were retained, resulting in a final dataset of 365 responses with no missing data.

All measurement items in this research were adapted from existing literature, with appropriate modifications made to fit the specific context of Malaysian heritage cuisine (Nasi Ambeng) and domestic gastronomy tourism. Data were gathered through a self-administered questionnaire structured into five sections, in which every item was assessed using a six-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The six-point Likert scale was selected to eliminate neutral response bias and encourage active evaluation. *Table 1* presents an overview of the questionnaire sections, number of items, and literature sources used to develop the questionnaire.

Table 1. *Overview of questionnaire development.*

Questionnaire Sections	No. of items	Sources
Section A: Food Knowledge	6	Saaidin and Azrein (2025)
Section B: Cultural Identity	5	-
Section C: Social Media Exposure	6	Aguirre (2019)
Section D: Intention to Engage in Gastronomic Tourism	6	-
Section E: Demographic Profiles	5	-

Before data collection, a panel of three academic experts in culinary arts and hospitality management conducted content and face validation to ensure the adapted items were clear, conceptually distinct, and relevant. Following validation, a pilot study involving 30 university students was conducted to assess the questionnaire's readability and technical functionality. After the pilot study, data collection was carried out over a six-week recruitment period using an online survey administered through Google Forms. The survey link and QR code were distributed through university-sanctioned student communication channels, including WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels. Following data collection, only fully completed submissions were retained, resulting in a final dataset of 365 responses with no missing data. To analyse the collected data, IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30) was employed. First, frequency and descriptive statistics were performed to summarise the respondents' demographic profiles and study variables. Subsequently, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine how cultural identity, food knowledge, and social media exposure significantly influence Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Permatang Pauh students' intentions to engage in gastronomic tourism.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics of the respondents

At the end of data collection, a total of 365 responses were gathered, and gender, age, education level, faculty, and Nasi Ambeng consumption frequency were analysed using descriptive statistics. *Table 2* provides a thorough analysis of these traits. The study sample (N = 365) was mainly female students (58.4%), compared with males, who represented only 41.6%. Most students were aged 18 to 25, representing 87.7% of respondents. Regarding educational background, more than half of the respondents were diploma students (52.3%), and 51.0% were enrolled in the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management. In comparison, 49.0% of the remaining respondents were enrolled in various engineering faculties. In terms of traditional food experience, 190 respondents reported prior consumption of Nasi Ambeng, with 52.1% stating that they had consumed it between one and five times in the past 12 months.

Table 2. *Demographic profiles of respondents (n = 365).*

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	213	58.4
Male	152	41.6
Age		
18 - 21 years old	174	47.7
22 - 25 years old	146	40.0
26 - 30 years old	45	12.3
Education Level		
Diploma	191	52.3
Bachelor's Degree	142	38.9

Master's Degree	26	7.1
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	6	1.6
Faculty		
Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management	186	51.0
Faculty of Civil Engineering	44	12.1
Faculty of Electrical Engineering	62	17.0
Faculty of Mechanical Engineering	52	14.2
Faculty of Chemical Engineering	21	5.8
Nasi Ambeng Consumption Frequency (Past 12 Months)		
Never	79	21.6
1 - 5 times	190	52.1
6 - 10 times	59	16.2
More than 10 times	37	10.1

Reliability coefficient

Internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's alpha (α), with values above 0.60 regarded as good and reliable (Hair et al., 2003). The reliability analysis results are presented in *Table 3*. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs ranged from 0.697 to 0.803, exceeding the minimum acceptable value of 0.60 (Daud et al., 2018). Cultural identity recorded the highest reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.803$), indicating high internal consistency. Meanwhile, 6 items representing gastronomic tourism intentions and food knowledge recorded good reliability coefficients of $\alpha = 0.780$ and $\alpha = 0.752$, respectively. In contrast, social media exposure recorded the lowest coefficient but remained within the acceptable range with $\alpha = 0.697$. Overall, these results indicate that all constructs achieved acceptable to high levels of reliability, confirming the consistency of the measurement scales used in this study.

***Table 3**. Reliability coefficients for each section of the questionnaires.*

Questionnaire	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Section A: Food Knowledge	6	0.752	Good
Section B: Cultural Identity	5	0.803	Good
Section C: Social Media Exposure	6	0.697	Acceptable
Section D: Intention to Engage in Gastronomic Tourism	6	0.780	Good

Multiple regression analysis

Model summary

Table 4 presents the model summary statistics, including the multiple correlation coefficient (R), coefficient of determination (R^2), adjusted R^2, and the standard error of the estimate. The results showed a multiple correlation coefficient (R) of 0.581, indicating a moderately strong linear relationship between the predictors and gastronomic tourism intention. This suggests that higher levels of the independent variables are generally associated with higher levels of gastronomic tourism intentions. Meanwhile, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.338$) indicates that the independent variables in the model explain 33.8% of the variation in gastronomic tourism intention. Moreover, the adjusted R^2 of 0.332 further indicates that the model remained stable after accounting for the number of predictors and explained approximately 33.2% of the variance in the population. Finally, the standard error of the estimate was 0.43468, indicating a relatively low estimation error.

***Table 4**. Coefficient values of the model.*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.581[a]	0.338	0.332	0.43468

ANOVA test result

The significance of the regression model was determined using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). ANOVA tests the null hypothesis that the independent variables do not predict the dependent variable. The output from this test is provided (*Table 5*). The ANOVA results indicated that the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 361) = 61.372$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that food knowledge, cultural identity, and social media exposure collectively and significantly predict gastronomic tourism intention.

***Table 5**. ANOVA test result.*

Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	34.788	3	11.596	61.372
Residual	68.209	361	0.189	-
Total	102.997	364	-	-

Coefficient of the multiple linear regression analysis

To assess the individual effect of all the independent variables in estimating the intention of young domestic tourists to engage in gastronomic tourism, both unstandardized B and standardised Beta (β) regression coefficients, together with their t-statistics and significance values, were studied. *Table 6* presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis examining the effects of food knowledge, cultural identity, and social media exposure on the dependent variable. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.279 to 1.543, all below the recommended threshold of 5. These results indicate that multicollinearity did not pose a significant issue in the regression model, as the predictor variables were sufficiently independent. The findings indicated that food knowledge has a significant positive influence on intention to engage in gastronomic tourism ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that food knowledge is a significant predictor of gastronomic tourism intention. This suggests that university students with strong food knowledge tend to show stronger intentions to engage in gastronomic tourism. In addition, individuals with a better understanding of Nasi Ambeng are more likely to recognise its history, cultural significance, and unique traditions. Consequently, greater knowledge may encourage them to perceive Nasi Ambeng as more than just a meal but as a meaningful cultural experience worth exploring through tourism. This finding is consistent with Munauwar et al. (2025), who suggested that greater knowledge of heritage foods enhances individuals' appreciation and awareness, leading to stronger behavioural intentions towards traditional culinary heritage. Furthermore, consumers are often information-oriented and tend to research products and destinations before making decisions.

***Table 6**. Multiple linear regression analysis.*

Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p-value)	VIF
(Constant)	1.551	0.270	–	5.742	<0.001	–
Food Knowledge	0.142	0.037	0.186	3.835	<0.001	1.279
Cultural Identity	0.034	0.051	0.032	0.663	0.508	1.307
Social Media Exposure	0.489	0.057	0.454	8.541	<0.001	1.543

In contrast, the findings indicate insufficient statistical evidence to conclude that cultural identity significantly influences young domestic tourists' intention to engage in gastronomic tourism. Although the standardised beta coefficient was positive (β =

0.032), the relationship was not statistically significant ($p = 0.508$), as the p-value exceeded the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, cultural identity was not a significant predictor of gastronomic tourism intention among the respondents. One possible explanation is that, although the respondents came from different states and backgrounds, they were all university students at UiTM Permatang Pauh and therefore shared a relatively similar institutional and social environment. This homogeneity may have contributed to similar views and perceptions of Malaysian culture, resulting in limited variation in cultural identity scores. Consequently, the restricted variability may have reduced the ability of cultural identity to explain differences in respondents' intention to engage in gastronomic tourism. This may help explain why the present finding differs from Jeong and Lee (2021), who found that familiarity with food products varies across cultures and can influence food perception and acceptance. As a Javanese-influenced culinary heritage, Nasi Ambeng is associated with distinctive practices such as talam dining and gotong-royong, whereas the survey measured general Malaysian cultural identity. This broader measure may not have captured respondents' identification with the specific cultural traditions embedded in Nasi Ambeng. This finding also suggests that young domestic tourists may appreciate their cultural heritage without necessarily translating that appreciation into a willingness to travel for gastronomic experiences.

On the other hand, social media exposure has a significant positive influence on the behavioural intentions of young domestic tourists towards gastronomic tourism related to Nasi Ambeng ($\beta = 0.454$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that social media exposure is a statistically significant predictor of behavioural intention. Among the three independent variables, social media exposure recorded the highest standardised beta coefficient, indicating that it exerts the strongest influence on young domestic tourists' intention to engage in gastronomic tourism. This is because young adults, especially university students, spend considerable time on social media platforms where food content, including images, videos, and reviews, is widely shared. Continuous exposure to such content may allow young tourists to discover and evaluate culinary experiences before experiencing them firsthand. Positive feedback from online discussions or online word-of-mouth reviews may also encourage potential tourists to include culinary experiences in their travel plans. This finding is consistent with Latip et al. (2024), who emphasised that social media not only serves as a source of information but also portrays culinary heritage destinations by transforming traditional local food into appealing lifestyle experiences. Greater social media exposure has positioned Nasi Ambeng not merely as a traditional regional food but as a visually appealing and contemporary culinary attraction. Furthermore, viral food reviews, videos, and visual representations of heritage food experiences may strengthen interest and encourage young domestic tourists to seek authentic gastronomic experiences.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the success of gastronomic tourism depends on young domestic tourists. Therefore, behavioural intentions among young adults are primarily influenced by social media exposure and food knowledge rather than cultural identity, supporting the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behaviour in this context. Nonetheless, the non-significance of cultural attachment is likely explained by limited

sample variation, as students in the same university environment may share similar cultural perceptions. Practically, this study offers a strategic framework for decision-makers in the tourism, heritage, and culinary entrepreneurship sectors by creating high-quality visual content via digital platforms, leveraging digital technology for destination framing, and incorporating digital food journalism and analytics into the hospitality curriculum. Theoretically, this study challenges the assumption that cultural identity automatically translates into domestic gastronomic tourism intentions, suggesting that its influence is context-dependent. In a relatively homogeneous domestic environment, where young consumers are already familiar with the culture and heritage food, cultural identity may provide limited novelty or differentiation to motivate travel. Instead, contemporary lifestyle preferences and social media influences may play a more prominent role in shaping gastronomic tourism intentions. Finally, because the non-probability purposive sample was restricted to a single university, future research should employ stratified sampling across regions with established Javanese communities to capture greater variation in cultural identity and examine its influence on domestic travel intentions towards heritage foods. Mixed-method approaches could further explore how cultural familiarity, heritage food experiences, and evolving lifestyle preferences shape tourists' intentions to travel for heritage food experiences.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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