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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Structural Equation Modeling on Factors Related to the Brand Loyalty of Diners to Certified Thai Restaurants in the United States

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Abstract: The study examines a set of factors for their influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai Restaurants in the United States. Specifically, the study investigates the hypothesized direct or indirect influences of image, service quality, customer expectations, sensory perception, and customer satisfaction on brand loyalty. A total of 620 diners who had eaten at least once in certified Thai restaurants in the United States were interviewed using a self-accomplished questionnaire. Results confirm almost all of the hypothesized influences of the structural equation model variables on loyalty. Customer satisfaction is the factor having the strongest influence on loyalty, followed by customer expectations, service quality, image, and sensory perception in that order. Overall, the variances in loyalty, customer satisfaction, and sensory perception are well-explained by the variables included in the model, but there are nuances in which to appreciate these key findings. Data are useful for Thailand as it continues to deepen its offshore strategies to further cement the competitiveness of Thai Select and Thai Select Premium restaurants in the United States.

Keywords: Thai restaurants, Thai Select and Thai Select Premium restaurants, Thai food, brand loyalty, tourism, structural equation model

Thailand is a very attractive global tourism brand. As a consequence, Thailand has transformed itself into one of the world's major tourist destinations—in 2017, it ranked 10th globally (Marukatat, 2018). Thai food, which has been cited for its unique taste, exquisiteness, and health benefits, is at the heart of the country's untiring efforts of boosting the number of its visitors, which is currently running into tens of millions and estimated to further increase in 2019 and beyond. In addition to sustaining the growth of its foreign tourist arrivals, the national government seeks to solidify the status of Thailand as the Kitchen of the World, which

means the country performs the role as a provider of quality Thai food to wherever diners are located in the world. The overarching goal is not just to provide quality cuisine to diners but to make Thai food a top and a default choice for them, both of which have implications for the long-term prospects of the nation's food and tourism industries (McKercher, Okumus & Okumus, 2008; Sunanta, 2005).

Over the decades, restaurants have been a very critical partner of Thailand in exclusively promoting, marketing, and selling Thai food throughout the world. In the United States (U.S.), a major tourism

partner, there is an overwhelming number of Thai restaurants, and the pool continues to grow as a result of the burgeoning popularity of Thai food, as well as the surge in the number of Thai immigrants. Bao (2017, p. 192) reported that in 2016, there were between 5,000 and 6,000 Thai restaurants located across all the 50 U.S. states. Their sheer preponderance already underscores the high-level marketability of Thai food, either because of the broadening population of diners who have developed a taste for such a cuisine, the continuing patronage of diners who have established loyalty to the brand or because of both factors. Indeed, Thai restaurants are well established as a crowd-drawer.

For several years now, Thailand has had a strategy of vigorously promoting its authentic Thai cuisine worldwide towards fulfilling its Kitchen of the World goal. Specifically, it has effectively steered the direction in which its Thai food is provided to diners throughout the world by granting restaurants a certification that their Thai cuisine is authentic. A restaurant is certified as a Thai Select Premium restaurant if it has an authenticity score of 85% or higher, traditional Thai decorations, outstanding services, and premium quality ingredients. On the other hand, a restaurant is certified as a Thai Select restaurant if it has an authenticity score between 75% and 84% and offers a fine dining experience (see https://www.thaitradeusa.com/home/?page_id=12158). Table 1 shows that 491 Thai restaurants in the US have been certified under this scheme. These certified restaurants, which are considered a cut above the rest among the thousands of Thai restaurants in the U.S., are presumed to be homogeneous and with comparable quality food standards, and over the years, they have been a very strong crowd drawer. As part of its ongoing efforts to further sustain its promotion, marketing, and sales of certified Thai cuisine in the U.S., Thailand needs to know about the brand loyalty of diners to this special category of Thai restaurants. Brand loyalty is the only tool to survive in a severe competition (Ahmed, Rizwan, Ahmad, & Haq, 2014), and empirical evidence on the topic can be used to plan, make, and carry out strategic decisions. This study discusses the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. in relation to image, service quality, customer expectations, sensory perception, and customer satisfaction. Loyalty to Thailand tourism has been examined in previous studies (e.g., Wongsawat &

Deebhijarn, 2019; Puris & Sudaporn, 2017) but not within the context of U.S.-based Thai restaurants.

Table 1

Number of Thai Select Premium and Thai Select Restaurants in the U.S.

State / City	Thai Select Premium	Thai Select	Total
Los Angeles	27	137	164
New York	3	112	115
Miami	53	81	134
Chicago	0	78	78
Total	83	408	491

Framework and Hypotheses

Restaurants are an enclosed physical environment where diners—assisted by a server—sit down, select, eat, and pay for menu-based food choices. If properly integrated, executed, and orchestrated, along with a well-defined vision and strategies, restaurants can offer diners with a unique cultural experience. If the said experience is designed such that it becomes associated with the Thai cuisine—given the surrounding decors, the visual and visceral presentation of the variety of food laid down on the table, and the costumes and mannerisms of the restaurant staff around, all of which are decidedly Thai—the diners are bound to form a particular liking of the said experience that could subsequently lead to forming a brand loyalty to Thai restaurants.

Brand loyalty, defined as the customer's unconditional commitment to and a strong relationship with the brand and unlikely to be affected under normal circumstances (Khan & Mahmood, 2012, p. 33), does not just emerge out of nowhere. Brand loyalty, which reflects having a deep commitment to patronizing or repurchasing products or services that would satisfy the buyers (Oliver, 1999), has attitudinal, cognitive, and experiential foundations. Studies revealed that brand loyalty occurs as a result of the confluence of key factors. For this study, the key factors examined in the purview of brand loyalty towards certified U.S.-based Thai restaurants include image, service

quality, customer expectations, sensory perception, and customer satisfaction. These factors are well established for their robust associations with brand loyalty in the published literature (e.g., Harris & Goode, 2004) but have not been thoroughly investigated in the context offered in this report.

Image refers to a holistic view of a person's beliefs, thoughts, and impressions (Kotler, 2000), and in relation to a brand, it is how a diner thinks and his or her impression of the brand. Image—whether in relation to a product or service, the brand itself, and institution—is an important resource in food tourism because the array of views, information, and emotions held by the diners effectively foregrounds their decisions and behaviors. Research suggests that image is strongly related to brand loyalty to restaurants (not necessarily Thai restaurants; Jin, Lee, & Huffman, 2012). Broadly speaking, the more positive the image that diners hold of a restaurant, the stronger their loyalty to the said establishment; conversely, negative image discourages repeat visit and patronage of and subsequently loyalty to a brand. It is hypothesized that image has a direct influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 1a**) and that image has an indirect influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the US (**Hypothesis 1b**).

As a process, service is a critical foundation on which to form and sustain loyalty to a particular brand. With fierce competition, restaurants nowadays are not anymore asked whether they provide service but whether they provide high-quality service, an industry-wide aspect that customers commonly evaluate after receiving the service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Service quality has various dimensions ranging from tangibility to responsiveness to empathy; this implies that, to create the desired impact, the brand must be carefully and rigorously designed and executed. Studies strongly indicate that where there is service quality, there is also impact (Chow, Lau, Lo, Shac, & Yun, 2007). In this respect, service quality has a direct influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 2a**) and that service quality has an indirect influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 2b**).

Although customer expectations—defined as standards with which subsequent experiences are compared (Bebko, 2000)—have some established direct linkage with customer loyalty (Mostaghimi,

Akhlagh, & Danesh, 2017), the said expectations are examined in the present study only for their indirect influence on brand loyalty. The published literature has an overwhelming set of empirical support for the relationship of customer expectations with sensory perception and customer satisfaction rather than with brand loyalty. The literature particularly suggests that having expectations predisposes diners to develop an elevated level of sensory perception, for instance with reference to the food, service, and physical environment offered by restaurants. As well, the literature indicates that diners who have customer expectations tend to have an elevated level of sensitivity to aspects commonly associated with brand satisfaction such as price, place, and people. In this regard, the higher the customer expectations, which in this case could be true to relatively high-end certified Thai restaurants in the U.S, that are fulfilled by a brand, the more heightened the sensory perception and customer satisfaction would be. Customer expectations have been reported for their positive relationship with sensory perception in general (Williams, 2007) and with customer satisfaction (Ali, Leifu, Rafiq, & Hasan, 2015). Through sensory perception and customer satisfaction, customer expectations could impact brand loyalty. In this context, customer expectations are hypothesized as having an indirect influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 3**).

As it offers diners a direct experience revolving around the uniqueness of the food, service, and physical environment of restaurants, which are positively pronounced in the case of the certified and well-monitored Thai restaurants, sensory perception should understandably lead to brand loyalty. There have been research (Oduguwa, 2015) and practical attempts at providing an ultimate dining experience as an effort towards developing loyalty to a brand. For example in 2019, the Thai government had treated Chinese tourists in Thailand to gastronomic delights (e.g., served with mango and rice) to entice more Chinese mainlanders to visit or revisit Thailand. Seemingly, in cultivating brand loyalty, nothing beats the strategy of immersing foreign tourists into an amazing dining experience in which foreign tourists get to see, hear, touch, feel, and remember—in simultaneous fashion—the gastronomic delights and ambiance offered to them. It is, thus, posited here that sensory perception has a direct influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified

Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 4a**) and indirect influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 4b**).

Finally, on account of its support in the empirical literature, customer satisfaction is regarded in the present study for its positive relationship to brand loyalty (i.e., certified Thai restaurants). As satisfaction stems from having a positive experience related to a restaurant, it would form in diners' views and attitudes that are likely to influence their future decisions and behaviors (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Petrick & Backman, 2002), including brand loyalty. As indicators of their brand loyalty, diners would repurchase the same food and would make repeat visits to a restaurant. Moreover, diners with an elevated level of satisfaction from their purchased food would be inclined to recommend the same or related food to other diners; this, too, constitutes an indicator of brand loyalty (Chi & Qu, 2008). Generally, highly-satisfied diners are predisposed to share their memorable dining experience with other people. The domino effect of customer satisfaction vis-à-vis certified restaurants is immense. It is hypothesized that customer satisfaction has a direct influence on the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. (**Hypothesis 5**).

Methods

The evidence presented in this report was obtained from questionnaire interviews with 620 diners who had eaten at least on occasion at any U.S.-based Thai restaurants certified as Thai Select or Thai Select Premium restaurants. Of the 620 respondents, 33% were diners from certified Thai restaurants in Los Angeles, 27% were diners from counterpart restaurants in Miami, whereas 24% and 16% were diners recruited from parallel restaurants in New York and Chicago, respectively.

All the study variables were measured employing Likert scales. Based on reliability tests, the scales were found to have a high level of internal consistency: brand loyalty (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient: 0.94), image (0.85), service quality (0.95), customer expectations (0.96), sensory perception (0.96), and customer satisfaction (0.97). Brand loyalty was measured with respect to attitudes, behavior, and service. Image was measured according to product or service image, brand image, and institutional image.

Service quality and customer expectations were each measured based on five aspects—tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Sensory perception was measured using indicators related to food, service, and physical environment, whereas customer satisfaction was measured in relation to seven aspects (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, people, employee, and process). The SPSS 22.0 and LISREL 9.2 were used in performing confirmatory, causal, and structural equation analyses.

Results

Of the 620 respondents, 57.1% were female and 42.9% were male. Respondents were aged 30–50 years. Of every 10 of them, six were married and four were single or reported to have no partner at survey time. Respondents had varying racial or ethnic identities, educational attainment, and occupations. Their average monthly income was US\$2,800. About a third of 620 respondents (32.9%) reported consuming Thai food once a week, followed by 37.9% of respondents who reported consuming the same food 2–3 times a month, whereas the rest (29.2%) were consuming at lesser frequencies each month. When queried, respondents were generally divided into those spending about US\$20.00 (44.4%) and those spending more than US\$20.00 (48.7%) for a meal at Thai restaurants.

Table 2 shows the results of the correlation performed on the variables included in the model. Almost all variables, except in the case of sensory perception and loyalty, are all statistically, significantly, and positively related to each other. These findings suggest that as the level of one variable increases (e.g., service quality), the level of another variable (e.g., brand loyalty) likewise increases. Sensory perception—in relation to the food, service, and the physical environment of restaurants—only has a tenuous link with brand loyalty because if it acts all on its own and alone, sensory perception has no subjective foundation on which the three-pronged stimuli at the restaurants could be meaningfully viewed and interpreted. However, in tandem with other variables in the model, such as customer expectations where diners are equipped with a pre-conceived subjective platform, sensory perception could have a statistically significant association with brand loyalty.

Table 3 reveals the results of the consistency check in the overall structural equation model. These results suggest that the fit indices rates fall under the acceptable threshold thereby indicating that the hypothesized model is a good fit to the observed data.

The analyses of the direct and indirect influence of image, service quality, customer expectations, sensory perception, and customer satisfaction on the loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants located in the U.S. are presented in Table 4 and Figure 1. Almost all of the hypotheses proposed in this report are confirmed for the statistically significant relationships between and among the focal variables. First, image

was observed to bear both a direct influence (0.20, $p < 0.05$; Hypothesis 1a) and an indirect influence (0.370, $p < 0.05$; Hypothesis 1b) on loyalty. Second, service quality has a direct influence (0.310, $p < 0.05$; Hypothesis 2a) and an indirect influence (0.370, $p < 0.05$; Hypothesis 2b) on loyalty. Third, customer expectations are confirmed as having an indirect influence on loyalty (0.765, $p < 0.01$; Hypothesis 3). Fourth, sensory perception was found almost without any direct influence on loyalty (Hypothesis 4a), but data underscore its indirect influence on the outcome variable (0.230, $p < 0.05$; Hypothesis 4b). Fifth, customer satisfaction has a direct influence on loyalty (0.920, $p < 0.01$; Hypothesis 5).

Table 2

Correlations of Variables Included in the Model

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Image	1	0.46**	0.23*	0.14*	0.39*	0.20*
Service Quality		1	0.25*	0.65**	0.14*	0.31*
Customer Expectations			1	0.45**	0.65**	0.29*
Sensory Perception				1	0.77**	0.05
Customer Satisfaction					1	0.92**
Loyalty						1

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Model

Indices	Value	Acceptance Area	Acceptability
Chi-Square fit (p-value)	1.00	Less better	+
CMIN/DF (Minimum Discrepancy)	1.06	<5.0	+
Goodness of Fit Index	0.99	>0.9	+
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index	0.99	>0.9	+
Incremental Fit Index	0.99	>0.9	+
Tucker Lewis Index	0.99	>0.9	+
Comparative Fit Index	0.98	>0.9	+
Root Mean Square Residual	0.026	<0.05	+
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	0.018	<0.05	+

Table 4*SEM Standard Coefficients of Influence*

Variables	Loyalty			Customer Satisfaction			Sensory Perception	
	Total effects	Indirect effects	Direct effects	Total effects	Indirect effects	Direct effects	Total effects	Direct effects
Image	0.570**	0.370*	0.200*	0.370*	0.370*	–	0.140	0.140
Service Quality	0.680**	0.370*	0.310*	0.830*	0.690*	0.140	0.650*	0.650*
Customer Expectations	0.765**	0.765**	–	0.790**	0.14	0.650*	0.450*	0.450*
Sensory Perception	0.280*	0.230*	0.050	0.770*	–	0.770*	–	–
Customer Satisfaction	0.920**	–	0.920**	–	–	–	–	–

$X^2(\text{Chi-Square}) = 480.85$, $df = 245$, $p\text{-value} = 1.000$, $GFI = 0.99$, $AGFI = 0.99$, $IFI = 0.99$, $TLI = 0.99$

Structural Equation	Loyalty	Customer Satisfaction	Sensory Perception
R ² (Coefficient of determination)	0.622	0.795	0.660

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

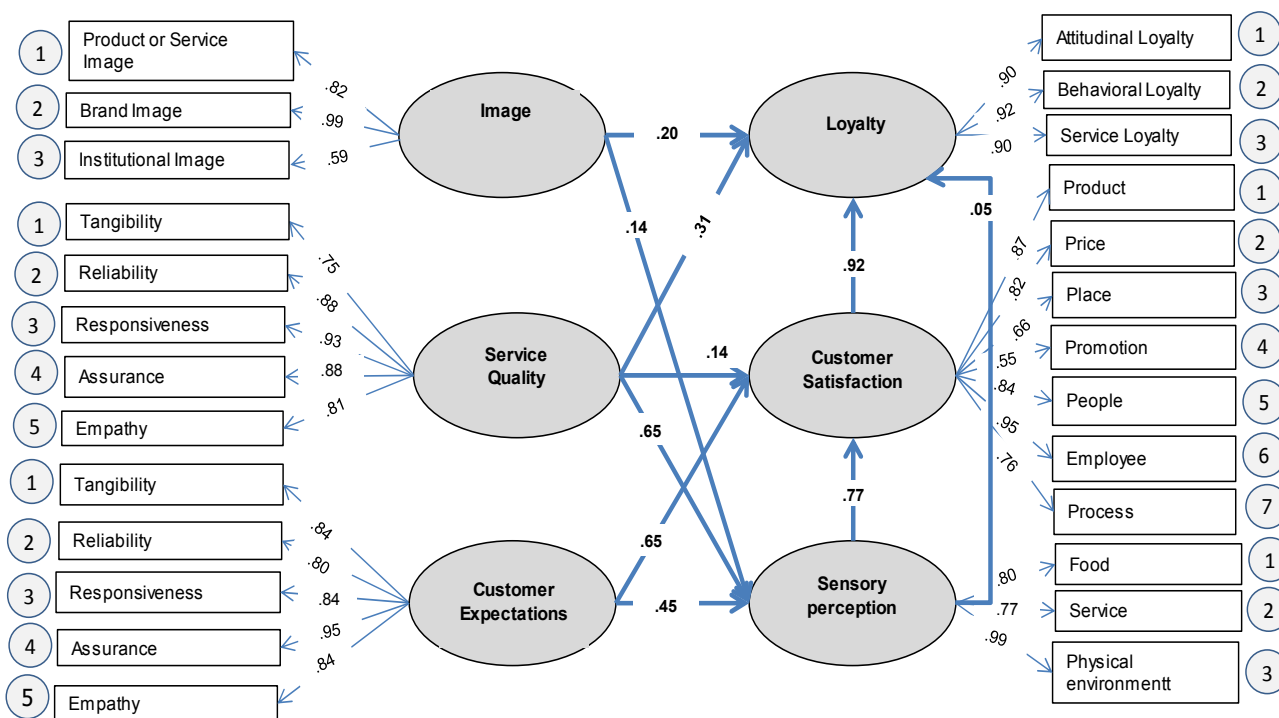


Figure 1. The structural equation model of factors influencing the brand loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants based in the United States.

Overall, customer satisfaction is the strongest and, thus, the overarching factor insofar as the loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. is concerned. Customer expectations, service quality, image, and sensory perception, in that order, also have robust influence; however, as Table 4 and Figure 1 indicate, much of the effects of these second-tier factors on loyalty is indirect, implying that they wield their influence in tandem with one or more variables. For example, image influences loyalty mainly through customer satisfaction, whereas service quality and customer expectations independently exert their influence on loyalty through both sensory perception and customer expectations. The coefficient of determination (R^2) suggests that 62.2% of the variance in loyalty, 79.5% of the variance in customer satisfaction, and 66.0% of the variance in sensory perception can be explained by the variables included in the model.

Discussion

Using structural equation modeling, the present study examined the direct and indirect effects of five variables, namely, image, service quality, customer expectations, sensory perception and customer satisfaction, on the loyalty of diners to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. As a special category of food sources, these restaurants provide quality Thai food products (Puris & Sudaporn, 2017), including employing quality processes and strategies to deliver only the best food to diners. Given this, along with the fact that the number of Thai restaurants established in the foreign markets has been burgeoning—an indicator that the product is indeed in demand and competitive—brand loyalty to the said Thai establishments should already be a foregone conclusion. The question, thus, has less to do with whether U.S. diners have brand loyalty to quality-tiered Thai restaurants, but more to do with identifying the exact drivers of such brand loyalty. Data are useful especially for sustaining the competitive advantage of Thailand's food products in the global market.

Among the factors examined in the present research, customer satisfaction constitutes as the top driver of brand loyalty of diners to U.S.-based certified Thai restaurants. Specifically, the study attributes the presence of brand loyalty to the direct independent effects of customer satisfaction in 9 of

every 10 instances. This finding is hardly surprising. Systematic investigations have similarly reported a statistically significant association between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Susanty & Kenny, 2015; Wongsawat & Deebhijarn, 2019). In layperson's terms, one becomes loyal to a restaurant if such a restaurant makes one satisfied, and therefore happy, about the food he or she is given and eats, including being satisfied and joyful with the various operational aspects that a restaurant carries out (e.g., price, place, promotion, employee) in order to make the served food and the overall dining experience special. Although some reservation has been cast on the strength of the customer satisfaction-customer loyalty nexus, other studies (e.g., Nobar & Rostamzadeh, 2018), as well as the present research, are reiterating the independent role of customer satisfaction as the cornerstone of brand loyalty.

The study further revealed in the structural equation model the significant influences of other factors—customer expectations, service quality, image, and sensory perception in that order—on brand loyalty. Although these four factors vary in their overall methodological focus (i.e., in the response types they required from research participants), their topic domains, in whole or in part, are congruent (e.g., domains in service quality and domains in customer expectations) and thus overlapping. Overall, these factors are material because they effectively connect consumers' views and experiences with food products, processes, and provision. On account of prevailing theoretical and conceptual arguments (Jin et al., 2012; Chow et al., 2007; Mostaghimi et al., 2017; Oduguwa, 2015), the factors should each influence brand loyalty with sheer force. However, this study found that the influence of these factors (i.e., image, service quality, and sensory perception), albeit present, is at best indirect. More importantly, the said influence is most commonly manifested via customer satisfaction. In this respect, customer satisfaction is the point of convergence through which the mentioned factors affected brand loyalty. In fact, the model factors combining image, service quality, customer expectations, and sensory perception accounted for 79.5% of the variance in customer satisfaction. At the heart of the variance in customer satisfaction are the direct effects of sensory perception and customer expectations, as well as the indirect effects

of image and service quality, via sensory perception, on customer satisfaction.

As mentioned, the singular direct effects of customer satisfaction are very strong, implying that the loyalty of diners is most likely to be cultivated on account of the said factor alone. Cultivating brand loyalty utilizing customer satisfaction in tandem with the other four variables, namely, customer expectations, service quality, image, and sensory perception, similarly offers a parallel promise, as this five-factor model was found to have explained a sizeable variance (62.2%) in the diners' brand loyalty to certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. In contrast to the independent effects of consumer satisfaction (92.0%), the entire model's effects are considerably lower, suggesting that 40% of the explanations to brand loyalty, based on how the concept is hypothesized in the current study, are largely unknown.

Could the unknown gap be due to the dampening combined effects that the other variables (e.g., service quality) have on consumer satisfaction? Although Thai food is an excellent global brand, the competition from other restaurants, including from non-certified Thai restaurants, has only become fiercer and fiercer each day, which means establishments must necessarily stage a very aggressive promotion and marketing strategy in their effort to further develop and sell their respective brands. Could the unknown knowledge gap be due to the rising expectations from consumers, whether about the certified Thai restaurants or about other restaurants in the market, as these expectations are continuously induced by the relentless advertising campaigns in their midst; or could it be that the image of these certified Thai establishments is being muddled by other competing images widely available in the market? More crucially, could the unknown gap be attributed to factors other than the five included in the model? Most critically, could these unknown factors within the grasp and actions of Thai restaurants and Thailand as a whole, or do these unknown factors come from the efforts of external groups or competitors that are entirely independent from the efforts of Thailand?

The foregoing questions are a definite agenda for future research but, for proper action, these are at best a cautionary guide for Thailand as it aims to globalize its food products further. In general, Thailand might want to make its restaurant-based food products in the U.S. more competitive, either by simply satisfying its diners across a number of indicators or by further developing

the world view of diners so that such view favors Thai food products provided at U.S.-based restaurants. Both trajectories nonetheless require Thailand to ponder on whether it can fulfill these on the basis of its ethnocentric viewpoint of what the global diners want, or on the basis of the viewpoint of others of what the global diners want. As widely known, Thailand's tourism industry is facing challenges from emerging tourism destinations (e.g., Vietnam) and groups (e.g., Indian restaurants) that have learned so much from Thailand's sterling performance in global tourism but are now precisely executing the lessons and insights they have gained as a result. Indeed, the global food tourism has already entered a very challenging phase in which multiple players are ferociously competing with one another towards gaining the loyalty of the ever-expanding and already discriminating and pampered population of global diners.

On the whole, the present study has successfully revealed the antecedents of the loyalty of diners to the certified Thai restaurants in the U.S. Caution should be exercised, however, in definitively accepting the study findings presented in this report as these were drawn from a non-random sample and a modest sample size of diners. The findings would gain much more strength if these were derived from a large representative sample of certified Thai restaurant diners, and that this sample is even compared and contrasted against their non-certified and non-Thai counterparts. At best, the study findings are empirical points on which to trigger the discourse, and eventually the courses of action, towards sustaining the competitive edge of Thai food on the global stage.

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Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the institution.

Conflict of interest

None.

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