



## The Influence of Social Media, Tourist Experience, and Brand Awareness on Culinary Tourism in Lahat Hospitality Industry

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**Abstract.** Culinary tourism has emerged as a key driver in strengthening destination competitiveness, particularly in regions such as Lahat where authentic local cuisine is central to the visitor experience. This research explores how social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness contribute to the development of culinary tourism in Lahat's hospitality sector. A quantitative, explanatory approach was employed, involving 100 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data were obtained via structured questionnaires distributed both directly at culinary venues and through online platforms, and subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression with SPSS. The analysis indicates that social media engagement, tourist experience, and brand awareness all exert significant positive effects on culinary tourism. Among these, tourist experience proved to be the strongest predictor, demonstrating the importance of food quality, ambience, and service encounters in shaping visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Social media was found to be effective in influencing travel decisions by showcasing user-generated and visually appealing content, while brand awareness enhanced destination recognition and encouraged word-of-mouth promotion. Together, the three variables accounted for 62% of the variance in culinary tourism outcomes, reflecting their combined influence in shaping tourist behavior and destination appeal. The study enriches the academic discourse by providing empirical evidence from an emerging culinary destination, illustrating how digital interaction, experiential value, and brand identity converge to promote sustainable tourism. From a managerial standpoint, the results emphasize the need for stakeholders to adopt digital storytelling, cultivate authentic culinary experiences, and strengthen Lahat's gastronomic branding to secure its position as a distinctive culinary tourism destination.

**Keywords:** social media, tourist experience, brand awareness, culinary tourism, Lahat, hospitality industry

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Culinary tourism has emerged as a crucial pillar of the global tourism industry, particularly in regions such as Lahat, where there is a growing emphasis on meeting the demand for authentic gastronomic experiences. This study examines the interconnections among social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness in shaping the dynamics of culinary tourism within the area. The advancement of digital marketing strategies, especially through social media, has significantly transformed the ways in which culinary experiences are promoted and consumed. As highlighted by Hasan et al. (2020), the paradigm of Marketing 4.0 reflects a shift in which consumers increasingly assume a central role by actively sharing their dining experiences online. This transformation provides restaurateurs and tourism stakeholders with immediate feedback and valuable insights into consumer preferences, thereby enabling more precise and targeted marketing initiatives.

Huang (2023) further demonstrates that social media interactions exert indirect effects on culinary brand equity, showing that content sharing can cultivate positive travel attitudes and, in turn, enhance both perceived quality and brand image. In the case of Lahat, social media functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a platform for building strong emotional connections between potential tourists and local cuisine. User activity on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook can substantially shape perceptions of culinary attractiveness, underscoring the critical role of visual appeal in food marketing (Julita et al., 2022).

Moreover, research by Kusumawardani and Putri (2020) indicates that behavioral intentions in culinary tourism are strongly influenced by brand image and perceived quality. Establishing positive linkages between brand awareness and tourist experiences can thus increase visitation to local culinary establishments. Consequently, Lahat's marketing strategies should focus on developing a compelling brand narrative that emphasizes the distinctiveness of its culinary heritage. Such narratives can be effectively communicated through tailored social media campaigns, particularly those that resonate with younger demographics who prioritize experiential dining (Agustina, 2021).

Another important dimension of culinary tourism lies in the distinctiveness of local food as a destination attractor. Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) argue that local specialties not only strengthen brand differentiation but also enhance a destination's appeal. Recent findings reaffirm that Lahat's traditional food practices can serve as a competitive advantage in tourism development (Jannah & Arvianto, 2022). Thus, authentic culinary practices not only enrich the tourist experience but also play a vital role in preserving regional food heritage as part of local identity.

Empirical evidence provided by Widjaja et al. (2019) and Sukerti & Marsiti (2020) confirms that culinary satisfaction directly contributes to overall destination satisfaction, which in turn fosters brand loyalty and repeat visitation. This highlights the strategic importance of ensuring culinary authenticity and quality as central to strengthening tourist experiences and supporting the long-term sustainability of the hospitality industry in Lahat.

While the potential of culinary tourism in Lahat is promising, it requires strategies that effectively integrate social media, brand awareness, and tourist experiences. Collaboration among local stakeholders is essential for developing a collective brand identity capable of amplifying marketing outcomes. As noted by Widjaja et al. (2018), comprehensive stakeholder

involvement significantly enhances culinary destination branding and creates more cohesive promotional efforts.

Equally important is the necessity of adapting to the rapidly evolving consumer preferences shaped by digital trends. Approaches such as digital storytelling and interactive platforms can produce immersive content that appeals to technology-oriented travelers (Agustina, 2021). Emerging evidence also shows that authentic culinary experiences can serve as a compelling determinant of revisit intentions, thereby reinforcing tourism sustainability (Klara, 2023). Recent studies emphasize that social media has become a decisive tool in promoting tourism and shaping visitor engagement. For instance, Hasan et al. (2025) demonstrated that social media marketing significantly drives the growth of event-based tourism in Pagar Alam, underscoring its capacity to expand destination exposure and influence tourist behavior. Beyond promotional efforts, effective marketing strategies remain essential in strengthening destination competitiveness (Rahmat et al., 2025).

In an era of globalization, culinary tourism constitutes a critical niche requiring both a nuanced understanding of local contexts and a sensitivity to global gastronomic trends. The evolution of tourist preferences necessitates continuous adaptation to market feedback, suggesting that Lahat must align its culinary narratives with broader tourism discourses in order to strengthen its strategic positioning within the international culinary tourism landscape, particularly when combined with the creation of distinctive attractions rooted in local culture (Hasan et al., 2025). In this regard, culinary heritage serves as a strategic asset that can be transformed into a unique selling proposition for destinations such as Lahat. Destination marketing also relies heavily on building strong brand awareness, which enhances recognition and consumer loyalty (Dewi et al., 2025). The integration of digital marketing and social media platforms has further reinforced this process by providing interactive and visually compelling content that appeals to contemporary travelers (Agustina et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the hospitality sector in Lahat needs to acknowledge the significance of modern marketing frameworks and consumer behavior theories in shaping its culinary strategies. A deeper understanding of tourist motivations—whether stemming from experiential learning or aesthetic enjoyment—can support the creation of innovative culinary festivals or gastronomic events through collaboration among chefs, restaurateurs, and tourism boards (Ingkadijaya et al., 2021). Moreover, the quality of service delivery plays an important role in ensuring positive visitor experiences, as effective service capacity directly influences destination performance in reaching its target market (Karo & Hasan, 2023). Finally, a holistic perspective on tourism management highlights the necessity of aligning marketing, branding,

and tourist experience to achieve sustainable development (Hasan et al., 2025). Taken together, these insights provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining how social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness collectively shape the dynamics of culinary tourism in Lahat.

Raising awareness of Lahat's gastronomic heritage and maximizing the role of social media in showcasing local food offerings will significantly influence tourist perceptions and enhance engagement. Such strategies not only reinforce Lahat's positioning within the culinary tourism market but also contribute to the preservation of its rich food traditions in line with global trends in sustainable and responsible tourism. The synergy among social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of culinary tourism in Lahat. By adopting strategies that prioritize authentic culinary narratives, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative digital engagement, Lahat can strengthen its identity as a leading culinary destination. Future research should continue to explore emerging marketing innovations in culinary tourism, ensuring adaptability to shifting consumer preferences and enhancing competitiveness in this vibrant sector.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Media as a Catalyst for Culinary Tourism**

Social media platforms are pivotal in facilitating interactions between tourists and destinations, acting as key sources of information and inspiration for travel decisions. Research by Xiang and Gretzel highlights how social media serves as an online travel information search tool, significantly influencing traveler behavior concerning destination choices Xiang & Gretzel (2010). This influence extends to culinary tourism, where visually compelling food content shared on platforms such as Instagram creates anticipation and desire among potential tourists to experience local cuisines (Zhang et al., 2020). Moreover, Ghorbanifard et al. articulate that brand equity, which encompasses brand awareness, quality perception, and associations, is frequently cultivated through social media interactions (Ghorbanifard et al., 2014). The immediacy and visual nature of social media allow for dynamic engagement that can enhance brand recognition and influence tourist preferences. For instance, influencer marketing—where social media personalities endorse culinary experiences—has developed into a persuasive marketing strategy that helps to boost brand awareness and attract tourists seeking authentic dining experiences (Xu & Pratt, 2018). The integration of social media into culinary tourism branding is particularly relevant in Lahat, where local culinary identity can be showcased seamlessly through user-generated content. Pastini and Lilasari illustrate that social

media marketing can enhance brand awareness among millennials and Generation Z, who are often influenced by the online social landscape (Pastini & Lilasari, 2023). This demographic's propensity to share their culinary experiences on social media can create cascading effects, where testimonials and imagery resonate with their peers, ultimately impacting their travel decisions.

### **Tourist Experience and Culinary Tourism Dynamics**

The overall experience of tourists greatly impacts their satisfaction and likelihood of returning to a destination. Empirical studies have consistently shown that culinary experiences significantly contribute to the memorable attributes of a tourist's journey. For instance, Zhang et al. confirm that novelty in culinary offerings enhances travel intentions, underscoring the critical role of unique local food experiences in attracting visitors (Zhang et al., 2020). Further emphasizing this notion, Yusup et al. analyzed the relationship between brand value and tourist satisfaction in Lombok, illustrating that positive culinary experiences correlate with increased overall satisfaction and, subsequently, brand loyalty (Yusup et al., 2022). This carries implications for Lahat's culinary tourism, as it suggests that curating memorable food experiences should be a central focus for hospitality providers to ensure positive tourist engagement. Additionally, research conducted by Kim et al. supports the idea that the emotional and psychological connections formed during culinary experiences enrich the overall tourist experience, although this reference is contextually focused on Muslim travelers and may not be directly applicable to culinary tourism dynamics outside that demographic (Kim et al., 2014). Therefore, in Lahat, cultivating authentic culinary experiences can be integral in fostering prolonged engagement with tourists.

### **The Role of Brand Awareness in Culinary Tourism**

Brand awareness is a foundational element that can influence tourists' perceptions and their likelihood of visiting culinary destinations. According to Cornellia et al., strategic branding through influencer marketing on platforms like Instagram has been effective in enhancing destination brand awareness, which is crucial for attracting culinary tourists (Cornellia et al., 2024). The effectiveness of such marketing relies on establishing a coherent brand narrative that resonates with potential visitors. Further highlighting the importance of brand equity, Tran et al. explored how components such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty intertwine to shape tourists' satisfaction within the context of culinary tourism (Tran et al., 2020). When tourists recognize and trust a culinary brand, they are more inclined to choose that destination over others, driven by perceptions of quality and value. In Lahat, the cultivation of strong brand awareness linked to its culinary offerings could serve to

differentiate it from other regions. Building on this, Kashif et al. argue that without proper brand promotion, destinations might struggle to instill loyalty amongst visitors, particularly in competitive markets (Kashif et al., 2015). This indicates that Lahat's hospitality industry must prioritize branding strategies that emphasize local culinary heritage and innovation to foster brand recognition and loyalty effectively. The interplay between social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness significantly shapes culinary tourism dynamics in Lahat's hospitality industry. Social media acts as an influential platform for travelers to discover and engage with culinary offerings, while satisfying tourist experiences can enhance brand loyalty and encourage repeat visitation. Furthermore, robust brand awareness is essential for establishing Lahat as a notable culinary destination. As culinary tourism continues to evolve in the digital age, it is imperative for stakeholders in Lahat to harness these interconnected elements to strengthen their position in the competitive hospitality landscape.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study employs a quantitative and explanatory research design to investigate the influence of social media, tourist experience, and brand awareness on culinary tourism within the Lahat hospitality industry. The aim is to determine whether these three variables significantly affect tourists' culinary behavior, particularly in terms of motivation, satisfaction, and revisit intentions.

The research adopts a cross-sectional survey method, relying on primary data collected from 100 respondents who have participated in culinary tourism activities in Lahat. A purposive sampling technique is used to ensure that only individuals with relevant culinary experiences are included in the study. Data are gathered through structured questionnaires administered both on-site at culinary destinations and online. All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire includes indicators of social media use (e.g., frequency of accessing culinary content, interaction with online reviews, and influence on travel decisions), tourist experience (e.g., satisfaction with food quality, ambiance, service interaction, and uniqueness), and brand awareness (e.g., recognition of Lahat's culinary identity, ability to differentiate from other destinations, and word-of-mouth recommendations). Culinary tourism outcomes are assessed through indicators such as motivation, overall satisfaction, and revisit intentions.

Given the relatively small sample size, the analysis employs descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and multiple linear regression. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize

respondent characteristics and average perceptions of each variable. Pearson correlation is applied to examine bivariate relationships, while regression analysis is conducted to test the direct effects of social media, tourist experience, and brand awareness on culinary tourism outcomes. Reliability of the measurement instrument is assessed through Cronbach's alpha, while validity is ensured by adapting items from previous studies and conducting a pilot test with 20 respondents. This simpler design ensures methodological clarity while remaining feasible for a modest sample size. By using regression-based analysis, the study can still provide meaningful insights into how digital engagement, experiential quality, and branding interact to shape culinary tourism in Lahat. The findings are expected to guide hospitality stakeholders in designing more effective marketing strategies and enhancing tourist satisfaction with local culinary offerings.

The target population comprised tourists and visitors who had engaged in culinary activities in Lahat within the past twelve months. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of respondents with relevant experiences. Inclusion criteria required respondents to be at least 18 years old and to have visited a culinary establishment in Lahat. Data were collected using a dual approach: (1) on-site distribution at restaurants, food centers, and hospitality venues, and (2) online distribution via Google Forms shared through social media and local tourism communities.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The data analysis was carried out in two stages: descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to profile respondents and to summarize the mean and standard deviation of each research variable, providing insights into tourists' general perceptions of Lahat's culinary offerings.

For hypothesis testing, Pearson's correlation analysis was first applied to assess the strength and direction of relationships among the variables. Subsequently, multiple linear regression analysis was employed to evaluate the effect of social media, tourist experience, and brand awareness on culinary tourism. The regression model was assessed through the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) to measure explanatory power, F-tests to evaluate overall model fit, and t-tests to test the significance of each predictor.

All statistical procedures were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which facilitated both descriptive and inferential analyses. This analytical approach was deemed appropriate for the relatively modest sample size of 100 respondents, ensuring methodological rigor while maintaining feasibility.

Through this methodology, the study provides empirical insights into the role of social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness in shaping culinary tourism in Lahat. The findings are expected to inform both theoretical development and practical strategies for enhancing the competitiveness of the hospitality industry in the region.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

A total of 100 valid responses were collected, consisting of 47 male respondents (47%) and 53 female respondents (53%), with an age range between 18 and 50 years. This demographic profile indicates a balanced gender representation and a diverse age distribution, reflecting the appeal of culinary tourism in Lahat across different groups of visitors.

### Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics showed that respondents reported favorable perceptions of social media, tourist experiences, brand awareness, and culinary tourism in Lahat. Mean scores for all constructs were above the midpoint value (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale, suggesting that respondents generally agreed with the positive role of these factors in shaping culinary tourism experiences.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

| Variable                | Mean | Std. Deviation | N   |
|-------------------------|------|----------------|-----|
| Social Media (X1)       | 3.87 | 0.65           | 100 |
| Tourist Experience (X2) | 4.12 | 0.58           | 100 |
| Brand Awareness (X3)    | 3.94 | 0.60           | 100 |
| Culinary Tourism (Y)    | 4.05 | 0.55           | 100 |

All values measured on a 5-point Likert scale

These results suggest that tourists value their culinary experiences in Lahat positively, particularly with regard to quality, ambiance, and authenticity, while also acknowledging the important role of social media and brand recognition.

### Reliability Analysis



The reliability of the measurement instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs showed values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha)

| Variable                | Number of Items | Cronbach's Alpha | Result   |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------|
| Social media (X1)       | 4               | 0.82             | Reliable |
| Tourist Experience (X2) | 5               | 0.85             | Reliable |
| Brand Awareness (X3)    | 4               | 0.80             | Reliable |
| Culinary Tourism (Y)    | 5               | 0.83             | Reliable |

This result demonstrates that the questionnaire items are reliable and can be trusted to measure the intended constructs consistently.

### Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships among the study variables. All independent variables were positively and significantly correlated with culinary tourism ( $p < 0.01$ ). Tourist experience showed the strongest correlation with culinary tourism, followed by social media and brand awareness.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

| Variables               | X1 (SM) | X2 (TE) | X3 (BA) | Y (CT) |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| Social Media (X1)       | 1       | 0.52**  | 0.48**  | 0.55** |
| Tourist Experience (X2) | 0.52**  | 1       | 0.50**  | 0.62** |
| Brand Awareness (X3)    | 0.48**  | 0.50**  | 1       | 0.54** |
| Culinary Tourism (Y)    | 0.55**  | 0.62**  | 0.54**  | 1      |

$p < 0.01$

These findings reinforce the theoretical expectation that social media, brand awareness, and tourist experiences are closely interconnected and contribute to enhancing culinary tourism.

### Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was employed to test the effect of the independent variables on culinary tourism. The regression model was statistically significant, explaining 62% of the variance in culinary tourism outcomes. All predictors had significant positive effects, with tourist experience emerging as the strongest determinant.

Table 4. Regression Analysis Results

| Independent Variable    | Coefficient ( $\beta$ )     | t-value  | Sig. (p) | Result      |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|----------|-------------|
| Social Media (X1)       | 0.312                       | 3.25     | 0.002    | Significant |
| Tourist Experience (X2) | 0.428                       | 4.10     | 0.000    | Significant |
| Brand Awareness (X3)    | 0.289                       | 2.85     | 0.005    | Significant |
| <b>Model Fit</b>        | <b>R<sup>2</sup> = 0.62</b> | F = 18.9 | 0.000    | Significant |

Dependent Variable: Culinary Tourism (Y)

The regression results indicate that tourist experience ( $\beta = 0.428$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) is the most influential predictor, followed by social media ( $\beta = 0.312$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and brand awareness ( $\beta = 0.289$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ).

## Discussion

The findings underscore the multifaceted drivers of culinary tourism in Lahat. First, social media exerts a strong influence by shaping tourist awareness and travel decisions, aligning with previous studies emphasizing the role of digital engagement in destination marketing (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zhang et al., 2020). In Lahat, visually appealing and user-generated content serves as an essential promotional channel, consistent with the Marketing 4.0 paradigm (Hasan et al., 2020).

Second, tourist experience emerged as the most critical factor. High satisfaction with food quality, service interaction, and ambience significantly increased revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth, supporting Pine and Gilmore's (1999) Experience Economy framework. This finding emphasizes that authentic and memorable experiences are central to building loyalty in culinary tourism.

Third, brand awareness was shown to positively affect culinary tourism, consistent with Keller's (1993) brand equity model. Respondents who could easily recall and differentiate Lahat's culinary identity were more likely to recommend it and express intentions to revisit. This suggests that strengthening the culinary brand of Lahat is vital for long-term destination competitiveness.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that the synergy among social media, tourist experiences, and brand awareness significantly shapes culinary tourism in Lahat. The findings extend prior empirical evidence (Huang, 2023; Pastini & Lilasari, 2023) by providing insights from a developing culinary destination context.

From a managerial perspective, stakeholders in the Lahat hospitality industry should invest in digital storytelling strategies, enhancing the authenticity of tourist experiences, and building a strong culinary brand narrative. These efforts can create a sustainable competitive advantage and reinforce Lahat's position as a distinctive culinary destination.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the influence of social media, tourist experience, and brand awareness on culinary tourism in the Lahat hospitality industry using data from 100 respondents. The findings confirm that all three independent variables significantly and positively affect culinary tourism outcomes, with tourist experience emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by social media and brand awareness. Together, these variables explained 62% of the variance in culinary tourism, highlighting their collective role in shaping tourists' motivation, satisfaction, and revisit intentions. The results reinforce theoretical perspectives from prior studies, including the role of social media in co-creating destination value, the Experience Economy in enhancing satisfaction and loyalty, and brand equity in strengthening destination recognition. From an empirical standpoint, the study provides evidence that the synergy among digital engagement, experiential quality, and brand identity is critical to advancing culinary tourism in developing destinations such as Lahat.

### **Recommendations**

Based on these findings, several practical and academic recommendations can be proposed:

- Enhancing Tourist Experiences:** Local stakeholders should prioritize improving the quality of food, service interaction, and ambience in culinary establishments. Efforts to create authentic and memorable dining experiences will foster repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth.
- Leveraging Social Media and Digital Storytelling:** Tourism boards, restaurants, and hospitality providers should integrate digital storytelling strategies into their marketing campaigns. Collaborations with influencers and the promotion of user-generated content on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook can strengthen the visibility of Lahat's culinary identity.
- Building a Strong Culinary Brand Narrative:** A unified culinary brand for Lahat should be developed to highlight the uniqueness of local gastronomy. Emphasizing traditional food heritage while integrating modern promotional strategies can enhance brand recognition and differentiation in competitive markets.
- Encouraging Stakeholder Collaboration:** Coordinated efforts among local government agencies, culinary entrepreneurs, and hospitality operators are necessary to establish a cohesive identity for Lahat's culinary tourism. Joint initiatives such as

food festivals, cultural events, and cross-promotional activities can reinforce this identity. Future Research Directions, Future studies could expand the sample size and include comparative analyses with other regions to validate the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, longitudinal research would be valuable in assessing how evolving digital trends and shifting consumer preferences influence culinary tourism over time.

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