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FROM DAWN TO DINE: CONCEPTUALISING THE IMMERSIVE GASTRONOMY TRAIL AS A NOVEL TOURISM PRODUCT—EVIDENCE FROM MADURAI, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomy tourism has increasingly shifted towards immersive and experience-oriented travel; however, structured gastronomy trails remain underexplored, particularly in heritage destinations. This study conceptualises the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) as a novel tourism product and examines its influence on Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE), Tourist Satisfaction (TS), and Behavioural Intentions (BI) using Madurai, India, as the study context. A mixed-method research design was adopted, integrating quantitative data from 200 valid respondents (90 domestic tourists, 80 international tourists, and 30 travel influencers) with qualitative insights from 20 tourism stakeholders. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, Chi-square, and multiple regression, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the Immersive Gastronomy Trail, characterised by multisensory experiences, authenticity, storytelling, social interaction, place-based immersion, and a sequential guided culinary journey, significantly enhances memorable tourism experiences, tourist satisfaction, and positive behavioural intentions. The study introduces the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) as a new conceptual framework in gastronomy tourism and provides empirical evidence supporting the development of official gastronomy trails to strengthen destination competitiveness, preserve culinary heritage, and promote sustainable tourism in heritage destinations.

KEYWORDS: Immersive Gastronomy Trail, Gastronomy Tourism, Memorable Tourism Experience, Tourist Satisfaction, Behavioural Intentions, Culinary Heritage, Heritage Tourism, Sustainable Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has gradually shifted from traditional sightseeing to experience oriented and immersive cultural tourism. Tourists today want to feel genuine and to experience the local culture, traditions and daily life, not just see sights (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Richards, 2021). In this experiential paradigm, gastronomy tourism has come to be a fast-growing niche tourism product, and food is considered not just a product to be eaten, but also as a cultural product that can be used to strengthen the image of a tourism destination, enrich the travel experiences of the visitor, and support the tourism motivation (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Ellis et al., 2018). As a result, the food heritage has become more and more a tool used to enhance the image of a destination, preserve its culture and develop sustainable tourism (Bessière, 1998; Okumus et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2019).

The experience economy further reinforced the role of gastronomy tourism by promoting the concept of experiences that are more immersive, authentic and multisensory, which generate emotional connections and memorable tourism experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Kim et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2018). But in India, previous studies related to gastronomy tourism have been limited to gastronomy heritage food, gastronomy festival, gastronomy branding and destination gastronomy rather than gastronomy immersion and gastronomy trails (Gupta et al., 2022; Sharma & Kumar, 2023). Among India's heritage cities, Madurai is recognised for its rich culinary heritage and vibrant food culture. The city provides a unique one-day tour of traditional restaurants, heritage restaurants and local street food vendors. The journey involves iconic foods: Paruthi Paal, Nei Kuzhi Paniyaram with Idly, Mullu Murungai Vadai, Mutton Kari Dosai, Madurai Mutton Biryani, Mutton Chukka, Bun Parotta, Kothu Parotta, Ayirai Meen Kuzambu, and Jigarthanda, and many more traditional foods, snacks, sweets and heritage beverages, enabling a memorable tourism experience beyond just eating. This food tour has not yet been systematically conceptualised or empirically investigated. Moreover, there is no officially recognized gastronomy trail by Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) showing a gap between Madurai's gastronomic potential and the development of a gastronomy product at the destination level. Existing studies have, as a result, neglected the potential of this guided culinary experience for creating impact on memorable tourism experiences, tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

Hence the study approach to Madurai's complete day culinary experience is conceptualized as Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and empirically investigated the dimensions and outcomes of IGT. The study is focused on introducing the IGT in Indian heritage-city context, which adds to the literatures on gastronomy tourism and provides practical inputs for the development of culinary heritage as a unique and sustainable tourism product.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gastronomy tourism is no longer just about food but about experiencing gastronomy, culture, identity and place as an experience **(Hall & Sharples, 2004)**. Today, tourists are looking for genuine and meaningful experiences, making gastronomy a new asset in the marketing mix for the competitiveness of destinations and creating memorable experiences for visitors **(Richards, 2021)**.

Recent research shows that gastronomy tourism values become more authentic, immersive, and social **(Sio et al., 2021)**. Current studies, however, have concentrated mainly on restaurants, local cuisines and food festivals, and limited studies have been devoted to gastronomy trails as a structured gastronomy experience, linking various gastronomy experiences together into a gastronomy product **(Okumusa, 2018)**. These trails give the opportunity to travel through a destination in a series of steps, meeting the people, the food culture and the destination culture.

Multisensory engagement is also emphasized in gastronomy tourism in the experiential point of view. Food experiences have emotional impact and are remembered and experienced in senses of taste, smell, sight, sound and touch, resulting in memorable experiences of a tourist destination **(Stone et al., 2018)**. They are enhanced by engaging with the local contexts, customs, and people around them, as eating local foods and learning about local Flavors can help to create a sense of place and connection **(Pan et al., 2025)**.

The concept of experiential gastronomy is corroborated by the framework of Experience Economy Theory and Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) that highlights novelty, involvement, local culture, and meaningfulness as factors affecting tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions **(Hyeong Kim & Jang, 2015)**. There is constant empirical evidence that memorable gastronomy experiences increase tourist satisfaction, tourist attachment, revisit intentions, and positive word of mouth **(Chandralal & Roberto Valenzuela, 2015)**.

Furthermore, current tourism research acknowledges that the tourism experience is co-created by the interaction between tourists, service providers and local. In gastronomy tourism, storytelling, hospitality and interactions with guides, chefs and local people help to create authenticity and contribute to the sustainable development of the destination, preservation of the culinary heritage, and support local businesses **(UNWTO, 2019)**.

In spite of these advances, research into full-day, immersive and sequential gastronomy trails is still limited, especially in heritage city destinations in developing countries. Previous research has not been able to combine multisensory, place-based, and co-created gastronomic experiences in an integrated conceptual framework. To fill this gap the present study conceptualizes guided culinary tourism of

Madurai as Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and explores the effect of IGT on memorable tourism experience, tourist satisfaction and behavioural intent which further extends gastronomy tourism theory and empirical evidence is drawn from an under-researched Indian heritage place.

RESEARCH GAPS

Although gastronomy tourism has increasingly been recognised as an experiential and culturally embedded form of tourism, several important gaps remain in the literature. Existing studies are predominantly concentrated in European destinations and focus mainly on individual restaurants, food festivals, and isolated culinary experiences, with limited attention given to full-day, sequential, and immersive gastronomy trails as integrated tourism products (Richards, 2021; Sio et al., 2021). Furthermore, empirical evidence from Indian heritage cities, particularly Madurai, remains scarce despite the region's rich culinary heritage and growing tourism potential (Juniarta & Parama Suta, 2025). The multisensory, co-created, and place-based dimensions of gastronomy experiences are also insufficiently understood, and limited research has examined how these experiences contribute to memorable tourism experiences, tourist satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Pan et al., 2025; Kovalenko et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study addresses these deficiencies by conceptualising the existing full-day guided culinary journey in Madurai as an Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and empirically examining its influence on Memorable Tourism Experiences, Tourist Satisfaction, and Behavioural Intentions, thereby contributing a novel tourism product perspective to gastronomy tourism literature and providing empirical evidence from an under-researched Indian heritage-city context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

1. To conceptualize the current full day guided culinary experience in Madurai as an Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and establish it as a new tourism product.
2. To identify and examine the key dimensions that constitute the Immersive Gastronomy Trail experience.
3. To examine the effect of the Immersive Gastronomy Trail on tourists' Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE).
4. To analyse the impact of Memorable Tourism Experiences on Tourist Satisfaction.
5. To investigate the effect of Tourist Satisfaction (TS) towards Behavioural Intentions (BI) such as revisit intention, recommendation intention, positive word-of-mouth.
6. To provide empirical evidence from an under-researched context based in India's heritage city Madurai, by explaining how a complete day guided culinary tour offers memorable and immersive tourism journeys to international visitors and travel influencers.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the Experience Economy Theory (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) Framework (Kim et al., 2012), both of which can explain how participatory and experiential food experiences can generate memorable experiences, increase tourists' satisfaction and shape future behavioural intentions. The Experience Economy theory states that today's tourists are not satisfied with just buying products and services; they want to have meaningful, sensory and emotional experiences to interact with the local culture, heritage and identity (Richards, 2021). Likewise, the MTE theory suggests that novelty, authenticity, involvement and cultural engagement are the elements that stay with tourists in their memory and in turn impact their sense of satisfaction, revisit intention, and positive communication about their experience. Based on these viewpoints, this research proposes the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) as a place-based, sequential, guided full-day culinary experience consisting of six related dimensions, namely: Multisensory Experience, Authenticity, Storytelling, Social Interaction, Place-Based Immersion, and Sequential Guided Culinary Journey. The IGT is distinct from traditional food tourism experience, combining various food places, narratives and local interactions to form a gastronomic journey. Based on this, it is suggested that the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) positively impacts Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) which subsequently impact Tourist Satisfaction (TS) and result in favourable Behavioural Intentions (BI) such as revisit intentions, recommendation and positive word of mouth communication. This study brings a novel view of tourism product perspective in gastronomy tourism literature by introducing the concept of Immersive Gastronomy Trail and offers empirical support from under-researched Indian heritage-city context.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1: The Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) has a positive impact on Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) of foreign tourists.

H2: Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) have a positive effect on Tourist Satisfaction (TS).

H3: The relationship between Tourist Satisfaction (TS) and Behavioural Intentions (BI) is positive.

H4: Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) partially mediate between Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and Tourist Satisfaction (TS).

H5: Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) will have a mediating effect on the relationship between Tourist Satisfaction (TS) and Behavioural Intentions (BI).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a positivist paradigm and deductive method to investigate the formation of a new product in tourism namely the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) for Madurai, India. The mixed-method research design was used to get a complete picture of the phenomenon by combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A total of 230 questionnaires

were distributed among the participants who had undergone the Madurai gastronomy trail for the quantitative component. Following the data screening, 30 questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete or invalid responses, leaving 200 valid questionnaires (80 international tourists, 90 domestic tourists, and 30 travel influencers). The qualitative component involved conducting 20 semi-structured interviews with the hotel and restaurant managers, tour guides, and the operators of the travel agencies in Madurai city, in order to get an in-depth insight into the development and future potential of gastronomy tourism in Madurai. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling as this method allows for identifying respondents who have direct first-hand knowledge and experience of the phenomenon that is the focus of a study (Saunders et al., 2019). The data was gathered by a five-point Likert scale which was modified from previous studies in the tourism and gastronomy fields, analysed by descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, Chi-square tests, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis in IBM SPSS Statistics. Qualitative data was analysed by thematic analysis to identify themes and perspectives of the stakeholders. The mixed-method approach combines quantitative and qualitative data to strengthen the findings, as it increases the contextual depth and validity, reliability, and contextual richness of the findings, supports the methodological framework in an under-researched Indian heritage-city context, and builds on the work of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) and Saunders et al. (2019).

Table: 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondent

S. No	Variable	Categorical Variable	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	136	68.00%
		Female	64	32.00%
2	Age	Below - 25	103	51.50%
		25-34	47	23.50%
		35-44	25	12.50%
		45-60	25	12.50%
3	Participation Type	Domestic Tourist	90	45.00%
		International Tourist	80	40.00%
		Travel Influencer	30	15.00%
4	Marital Status	Single	120	60.00%
		Married	70	35.50%
		Others	10	5.00%
5	Educational Qualification	Student	30	15.00%
		Government Employee	10	5.00%
		Private Sector Employee	50	25.00%

		Business/Self Employed	20	10.00%
		Travel influencer/Content creator	70	35.00%
		Other	20	10.00%
6	Number of Previous Visitor Madurai	First visit	150	75.00%
		2-3 visits	50	25%
		4 or more visits	0	0
7	Have you previously participated in a food or gastronomy tour	Yes	150	75.00%
		No	50	25.00%
8	Purpose of visit to Madurai	Leisure/Holiday	101	50.50%
		Gastronomy Experience	50	25.00%
		Cultural Tourism	30	15.00%
		Business	19	9.50%
9	Duration of stay in Madurai	Day Trip	21	10.50%
		1-2 Days	100	50.00%
		3-4 Days	70	35.00%
		More than 4 days	9	4.50%
10	Source of Information about the Gastronomy Trail	Social Media	90	45.00%
		Travel Agency	20	10.00%
		Friends/Relatives	30	15.00%
		Hotel Recommendations	20	10.00%
		Influencer Content	40	20.00%

Sources: Primary Data

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The study examined 200 valid responses, including 90 domestic tourists (45.0%), 80 international tourists (40.0%) and 30 travel influencers/content creators (15.0%) representing a cross-section of visitor groups. The results showed that most of the respondents were male (68.0%), aged below 25 (51.5%) and single (60.0%). Most of the participants were first timers at Madurai (75.0%) and the main reason for their visit was for leisure and holidays (50.5%). A stay of one to two days (50.0%) was the most prevalent duration while social media (45.0%) turned out to be the most important source of information about the gastronomy trail, which shows the strong influence of digital platforms and the role of influencers in promoting Madurai as an emerging gastronomy tourism destination.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics of the Measurement Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
.920	41

Sources: Primary data

The overall (Table 2) reliability was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which yielded one excellent internal consistency reliability measurement ($\alpha = 0.920$) for the 41 measurement items. Hair et al. (2019) state that an alpha of more than 0.90 indicates **very high reliability** and that the items in the questionnaire are measuring the same constructs as the study. Hence, the measurement instrument is deemed to be highly reliable and suitable for further statistical analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table: 3 Correlation Analysis

Variables	MSE	AUT	STO	SI	PBI	SGCJ	MTE	TS	BI
MSE	1								
AUT	0.584**	1							
STO	0.465**	0.566**	1						
SI	0.730**	0.795**	0.177*	1					
PBI	0.796**	0.705**	0.815**	0.444**	1				
SGCJ	0.674**	0.872**	0.235**	0.911**	0.553**	1			
MTE	0.488**	0.741**	0.572**	0.566**	0.601**	0.517**	1		
TS	0.584**	1.000**	0.566**	0.795**	0.705**	0.872**	0.741**	1	
BI	0.808**	0.738**	0.192**	0.878**	0.595**	0.951**	0.441**	0.738**	1

Sources: Primary data

The Pearson's correlation (Table 3) analysis shows that all the variables studied have positive and statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.01$) with correlation values ranging from 0.177 to 1.000. The highest correlation coefficient was observed between Sequential Guided Culinary Journey (SGCJ) and Behavioural Intentions (BI) ($r = 0.951$) while Social Interaction (SI) and Behavioural Intentions (BI) were tied with the coefficient of 0.878. Moreover, Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) and Tourist Satisfaction (TS) showed significant positive relationships with all aspects of Immersive Gastronomy Trail. In general, the results showed that immersive and authentic gastronomy experiences are important components of memorable experiences, tourist satisfaction and positive behavioural intentions for visitors in the Madurai gastronomy trail.

Table: 4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Purpose of Visit to Madurai

Predictor Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
Constant	-4.925	0.861	—	-5.721	0.000	—
Multisensory Experience (MSE)	0.563	0.175	0.946	3.213	0.002	Significant
Storytelling (STO)	0.333	0.090	0.509	3.710	0.000	Significant
Social Interaction (SI)	-0.427	0.137	-0.743	-3.116	0.002	Significant
Sequential Guided Culinary Journey (SGCJ)	4.073	0.562	7.335	7.246	0.000	Significant
Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)	0.351	0.054	0.740	6.467	0.000	Significant
Tourist Satisfaction (TS)	-2.500	0.277	-3.960	-9.028	0.000	Significant
Behavioural Intentions (BI)	-1.460	0.276	-4.122	-5.299	0.000	Significant

Sources: Primary data

Based on the multiple regression analysis (Table 4), the selected predictor variables were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) with respect to the purpose of visiting Madurai. For the positive predictors, Sequential Guided Culinary Journey (SGCJ) ($\beta = 7.335$, $p < 0.001$) was the strongest predictor, followed by Multisensory Experience (MSE) ($\beta = 0.946$, $p = 0.002$) and 2nd Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) ($\beta = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$). The results indicate that the immersive, authentic and sequential culinary experience is very important to encourage tourists to visit Madurai and reinforce the potential of the Madurai gastronomy trail as an emerging tourism product.

Table:5 Chi-Square Test Results and Decision

S. No	Particulars	Value	df	P-value	Result
1	Age and overall, I am pleased with the gastronomy trail experience	142.630	9	.000	Rejected
2	Purpose of Visit and, I am pleased with the gastronomy trail experience	189.370	9	.000	Rejected

Sources: Primary data

The results of the Chi-square test are given in Table 5 for the association between overall satisfaction

with the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) and the respondents' demographic characteristics. The findings reveal that age ($\chi^2 = 142.630$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$) and purpose of visit ($\chi^2 = 189.370$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$) are significantly associated with tourists' overall satisfaction. The results show that satisfaction with the Immersive Gastronomy Trail is different according to the age group and the purpose of the visit, which means that demographic characteristics influence tourists in assessing the gastronomy trail experience.

Table: 6 Frequency Distribution of Emergent Themes from Stakeholder Interviews (Hotels and Restaurant Managers, Tour Guides, and Travel Agency Operators) (n = 20)

S. No	Emergent Themes	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Authenticity of Madurai Cuisine	18	90.0
2	Unique Traditional Food Experiences	17	85.0
3	Storytelling and Cultural Heritage	16	80.0
4	Positive Tourist Excitement and Satisfaction	16	80.0
5	Collaboration among Stakeholders	15	75.0
6	Promotion of Madurai as a Tourism Destination	14	70.0
7	Future Growth Potential of Gastronomy Tourism	14	70.0
8	Role of Local Guides in Creating Immersion	13	65.0
9	Well-Designed Morning-to-Night Itinerary	12	60.0
10	Operational Challenges and Government Support	11	55.0

Sources: Primary data

Table 6 reveals that stakeholders' top three themes were authenticity of Madurai food (90%) and unique traditional food experiences (85%). The results also show that storytelling, cultural heritage, and tourist satisfaction are significant factors in improving the gastronomy trail experience. The overall findings indicate high level of stakeholder acceptance towards the development and future prospect of gastronomy tourism in Madurai.

Table: 7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Statistical Evidence	Decision
H1	There is a significant positive relationship between Immersive Gastronomy Experiences and Memorable Tourism Experiences.	Pearson correlation coefficients indicated positive and statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.01$).	Supported
H2	There is a significant positive relationship between Memorable Tourism Experiences and Tourist Satisfaction.	Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations ($p < 0.01$).	Supported
H3	There is a significant positive relationship between Tourist Satisfaction and Behavioural Intentions.	Pearson correlation coefficients were positive and significant at the 1% significance level ($p < 0.01$).	Supported
H4	The dimensions of the Immersive Gastronomy Trail significantly influence tourists' purpose of visiting Madurai.	Multiple regression analysis showed statistically significant regression coefficients ($p < 0.05$).	Supported
H5	There is a significant association between the categorical variables examined in the study.	Pearson Chi-square test: $\chi^2 = 65.347$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$.	Supported

Sources: Primary data

The results of the hypothesis testing in Table 7 are quite good in supporting the conceptual framework that has been proposed. The results indicate that these gastronomic immersion experiences have a significant positive effect on the memorable aspect of tourism, satisfaction, and favourable behaviour intentions of tourists. The important relationships between constructs suggest that authentic and sequential culinary experiences are important factors in the general evaluation of the Madurai gastronomy trail among tourists. Moreover, both regression and Chi-square analyses show that experiential and demographic variables have significant impacts on visitors' motivations and behaviours. The present study is overall found to be effective and acceptable that the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) is an emerging tourism product and also it is found that the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) can be used to strengthen destination competitiveness and to facilitate sustainable tourism development in Madurai.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results of the study show that the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) plays a significant role in the development of Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) and this, in turn, helps improve Tourist Satisfaction (TS) and positive Behavioural Intentions (BI) of the visitors who take part in the Madurai gastronomy trail. The significant relationships between these study constructs are pointing to the notion that the authentic, multisensory, storytelling, social and sequential gastronomic elements of immersive culinary experiences are able to make meaningful and memorable experiences for tourists that will remain in their memories long after the visit. The results of this study align with the arguments presented by Kim et al. (2012) that memorable experiences can be triggered by novelty, involvement, local culture, and meaningful interaction, as well as with Richards (2021) that gastronomy tourism has evolved from food consumption to experiential and co-created experiences, where visitors connect with local culture and identity. In the same way, Kovalenko et al. (2023) also concluded that authentic culinary experiences and emotional connection heightened the memorable nature of tourism experiences. This study also shows that memorable gastronomy experiences positively affect tourist satisfaction, indicating that visitors who believe their gastronomy experience is genuine, fun and enriching emotionally are more likely to have a positive evaluation of the destination. This finding agrees with the results of, Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015) who stated that memorable experiences had a significant impact on tourists' satisfaction and the evaluation of the destination. Furthermore, the results show that tourists' positive responses to food-related experiences are associated with higher behavioural intentions of revisit, recommendation, and positive word-of-mouth, thereby highlighting the importance of positive culinary experiences in fostering destination loyalty and long-term competitiveness. The qualitative data also substantiates these connections, emphasising the authenticity of Madurai cuisine, the significance of storytelling in elevating the experiential value of gastronomy, the impact of hospitality and local interactions on visitor experiences, and the substantial future potential of Madurai gastronomy as a unique tourism product. The results further support the conceptualisation of the Madurai Gastronomy Trail as a new and immersive tourism offering, which has the potential to leave a lasting impression on visitors and boost the competitiveness of the destination, while offering a meaningful contribution to its sustainable development and promotion of the gastronomy segment.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

The results of this research will make a significant contribution to theory and practice in gastronomy tourism. Theoretically, the study contributes to Experience Economy theory and the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) framework, as it shows how immersive, authentic, and multisensory culinary experiences can create a memorable tourism experience, which in turn can increase tourist satisfaction and positive behavioural intentions. Most importantly, it presents an original product of tourism called the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT), which conceives gastronomy tourism as a

journey through the food, a place-based, sequential and guided experience, and not merely a one-off food experience. The study is grounded in empirical evidence from Madurai, an under-researched context of the Indian heritage city, which expands the geographical reach of gastronomy tourism studies and provides fresh insights into the role that food experiences play in destination development. In practice, the results indicate that gastronomy tourism must be understood as a strategic tourism product, and official gastronomy trails should be established, digital promotion with food influencers and content creators should be intensified, gastronomy storytelling should be part of tourism packages and gastronomy tourism should be developed based on the preservation of traditional gastronomy heritage. The study also identifies an important policy gap; the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) has no food tour or gastronomy trail, which serve as guiding instruments for domestic and foreign tourists, in Madurai. This study also establishes empirical evidence for the development of a formal Madurai Immersive Gastronomy Trail and confirm the role of culinary heritage as a strategic tourism product that can enhance the competitiveness of the tourism destination, attract international tourists, and promote the development of sustainable community-based tourism. Moreover, community engagement and promoting local entrepreneurial businesses can improve the visitor experience, boost competitiveness, and support the sustainability of tourism and cultural heritage in Madurai.

CONCLUSION

This study has conceptualized and empirically explored the Immersive Gastronomy Trail (IGT) as a new tourism product in Madurai, which is one of the most prominent heritage and gastronomic cities in India. The results reveal that the Madurai gastronomy trail is not just about eating or drinking, but is an all day, multi-sensory and culturally immersive experience that brings visitors into direct contact with local cuisine, culture and community. The study shows that the size of the IGT experiences involving multisensory, authenticity, storytelling, social interaction, place-based immersion and sequential guided culinary experiences significantly impacts on memorable tourism experience, tourist satisfaction and favourable behavioural intention. The qualitative findings also highlight the significance of creating a spirit of authenticity and local food, the storytelling of food, hospitality, and engaging stakeholders to enhance visitor experience. Theoretically, the study introduces the Immersive Gastronomy Trail as a new tourism product and also further extends gastronomy tourism literature in an under-researched Indian context. In practice, it sets the path for the conservation of gastronomic heritage, the creation of official gastronomy paths, the improvement of digital promotion, and the promotion of community-based tourism initiatives. Though Madurai city boasts of its gastronomical legacy, the lack of an officially organised gastronomy trail by TTDC also indicates an opportunity for the policymakers to institutionalise and promote immersive gastronomic tourism experiences in the destination. In conclusion, Madurai is categorized as an immersive gastronomic landscape, where food, culture, and community converge to forge meaningful and memorable tourism

experiences, thereby bolstering the competitiveness and sustainable tourism development of the destination.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to Madurai and is based on a cross-sectional design with 200 respondents and selected tourism stakeholders. Thus, other gastronomy destinations should be studied, larger and more diverse samples should be used and the role of digital gastronomy experiences and food influencers on tourist behaviour and destination development should be explored in future research.

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