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# Remembrance of travels past: creating memorable halal food experiences among non-muslim Chinese tourists

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## ABSTRACT

Using stimulus-organism-response theory, this study develops and tests a model of memorable halal food experiences. The model proposes that learning about halal food culture, conviviality, food experience intensification, and experiential satisfaction are important antecedents of a memorable halal food experience, and that destination food image and purchase intention are its major outcomes. Data were collected from 497 non-Muslim Chinese tourists who had partaken in a halal food experience during a trip taking place within the six months preceding data collection (January – June 2023). Data were collected using a questionnaire distributed via WeChat. Numerous statistical techniques were employed to test the proposed relationships, including structural equation modeling. All nine hypotheses were supported. Learning about halal food culture, conviviality, food experience intensification, and experiential satisfaction were found to have positive effects on the memorability of halal food experiences. A positive relationship was also supported between memorable halal food experiences, destination food image, and purchase intention.

## KEYWORDS

Memorable halal food experiences; food experience intensification; experiential satisfaction; destination food image; memorable food tourism experience

## Introduction

Any tourism industry element that Islamic law permits Muslims to use or engage with is called halal tourism (Wardi et al., 2018). Halal tourism focuses on fulfilling the needs of Muslim tourists (Henderson, 2016) and one important feature of this type of tourism is the availability of permissible foods for Muslim tourists (i.e., halal food). For food to be considered halal, animals must have been slaughtered according to the zibah ritual (Mohsin et al., 2020), and it must not contain anything that is deemed unlawful under Islamic law (Secinaro & Calandra, 2020). To Muslim tourists, halal food is also considered to be clean, hygienic, and of good quality (Alzeera et al., 2018; Billah et al., 2020) because it is

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popularly associated with high standards, such as dietary health benefits, environmental sustainability, high quality (Olya & Al-Ansi, 2018), human welfare, and social justice (Zainalabidin et al., 2011). Demand for halal food is consequently growing amongst non-Muslims (Secinaro & Calandra, 2020). Many halal eateries today attract significant numbers of non-Muslim guests who are seeking exotic cuisine with high hygiene and safety standards (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). Non-Muslim tourists are among those who contribute to this growth (Rahman et al., 2020), especially when they pursue a health-conscious lifestyle and are socially aware of other cultures and societies.

Recent studies on halal food have mainly focused on service providers (Jia & Chaozhi, 2021). As a result, tourists' halal food experiences have remained relatively unexplored, although studies have been conducted amongst Muslim tourists (Akhtar et al., 2020). In addition, tourist food consumption – in this context, halal food – at a destination can make an experience memorable (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013), and the food experiences in which people engage during travel are more memorable than those had at home (Stone et al., 2022). However, relatively little is known about the interplay between features of halal food experiences and the process by which memories related to those experiences are formed (Sthapit, Björk, & Piramanayagam, 2023, 2023), which is the focus of this study. To date, only two studies have explored non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences. The first, by Sthapit, Björk, and Piramanayagam (2023), was a qualitative study in which a multidimensional framework was proposed for memorable halal food experiences comprising taste, spending time with family and friends, novelty, quality and safety, hospitality, ambience (setting/servicescape), and experiencing others' cultures through food. The second, by Sthapit, Björk, Piramanayagam, et al. (2023), suggested that novelty seeking, authenticity, experience co-creation, substantive staging of the servicescape, togetherness, and sensory appeal influence memorable halal food experiences.

The production and consumption of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) have become central themes in tourism research (J. Chen et al., 2023). According to J. H. Kim et al. (2012, p. 13), an MTE is a “tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred.” Offering memorable experiences through marketing halal food is one means of maintaining competitive advantage (Sthapit, Björk, & Piramanayagam, 2023, 2023). MTEs are increasingly strong motivators of tourist demand (Hosany et al., 2022) and generate many benefits for both the tourist and tourism provider. With regard to the latter, studies have identified a positive relationship between tourists' MTEs and revisit intentions (Tešin et al., 2023), propensity to recommend the experience to others (H. Chen & Rahman, 2018), place attachment (Hosany et al., 2022), hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Vada et al., 2019), and destination sustainability (Wei et al., 2019). However, empirical studies investigating the antecedents of MTEs have found

considerable variation in terms of the number, type, and specification of the variables concerned depending on the context of the study (H. Zhang et al., 2018) and corresponding population demographics (Sthapit et al., 2019). The process by which MTEs are formed is thus believed to be highly dependent upon context (Ye et al., 2021).

This study aims to test a new model for memorable halal food experiences, drawing on stimulus-organism-response theory (S-O-R) as its theoretical foundation. The model includes four main antecedents (learning about halal food culture, conviviality, experience intensification, and experiential satisfaction) and two outcome variables (destination food image and purchase intention). The novelty of the proposed model is that it proceeds from a contextual understanding of how halal tourism is consumed and reproduced and uses this to build an empirical model of MTEs by testing various alternative antecedents and outcomes. There is thus an important difference in the focus of the present study and that of previous research. Previous studies have examined conventional outcome variables, such as behavioral intention, for example, willingness to revisit, and word-of-mouth intention (Hosany et al., 2022). This study incorporates alternative dimensions into the MTE construct to try to enhance its complexity and depth. By assessing the links between MTEs, destination food image, purchase intention (Hosany et al., 2022), and the post-trip impacts of MTEs (Jepson et al., 2019), this study investigates possible outcome variables that past studies have not, namely, destination food image and purchase intention. The data for this study were collected from non-Muslim Chinese tourists aged 18 years and above who had partaken in a halal food experience during a recent trip. This assessment thus contributes to the existing pool of studies that integrate knowledge from emerging markets into marketing theory and practice.

## **Theoretical foundations**

### ***Stimuli-organism-response theory***

This study uses S-O-R theory as a theoretical foundation to link the antecedents and outcomes of memorable halal food experiences. S-O-R theory was proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and describes how environmental stimuli affect an individual's cognitive and affective reactions, which, in turn, induce response behaviors. In other words, the S-O-R theory assumes that it is the stimuli (S) in an environment that lead to changes in individuals' internal or organismic states (O), which, in turn, drive a behavioral response (R). In other words, the S-O-R theory explains how consumers perceive contextual stimuli and how they react and respond to such stimuli (Mehrabian &

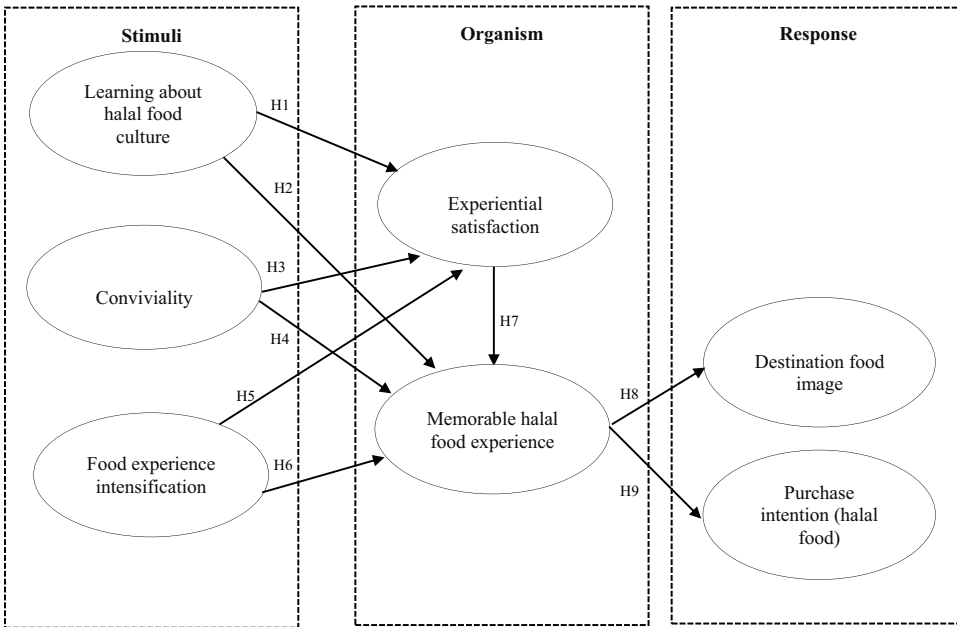
Russell, 1974). According to S-O-R theory, certain stimuli trigger a response (i.e., a behavior) based on an internal evaluation of the organism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In S-O-R theory, stimuli refer to external factors influencing an individual's internal state (Song et al., 2021). Various stimuli have been identified in the existing tourism and hospitality research, including atmospherics and ambience (Kucukergin et al., 2020). In this study, learning about halal food culture, conviviality, and experience intensification are considered the stimuli received during a halal food experience.

The organism that serves as the mediating component in S-O-R theory comprises an individual's emotional and cognitive states (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The organism in this respect can be thought of as the sum of the internal processes and structures that intervene between external stimuli and the organism's subsequent actions and responses. The organism represents the internal process through which consumers convert stimuli into perceptions, emotions, or experiences (M. Li et al., 2012). In the original model, the main focus was on the organism's emotional and cognitive states (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Additional S-O-R constructs have since been used, including food-consumption emotions, experiential value (Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023), and overall satisfaction (G. Chen et al., 2022). In this study, experiential satisfaction and the memorability of a halal food experience represent the organismic components of the S-O-R framework.

Response (or consequence) is conceptualized as consumers' final outcomes and decisions, which were originally referred to as consumers' approach or avoidance behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In other words, responses are the decisions made by individuals because of the effects of stimuli on their emotional and cognitive states (Sherman et al., 1997). Some tourism studies have used revisit intention (Rodrigues et al., 2023) for this purpose while others have used word-of-mouth intention (G. Chen et al., 2022). This study uses destination food image and purchase intention as the response constructs.

The justification for using S-O-R theory in this study is that this framework is gaining attention as a way of explaining how various antecedents to MTEs trigger different behaviors (S. Wang et al., 2022). Indeed, it is considered both revolutionary and vital for understanding and modeling consumer behavior (Laato et al., 2020). S-O-R theory has been applied in hospitality and tourism to explain tourists' and guests' behavioral responses, such as liminal tourism experiences (H. Zhang & Xu, 2019) and word-of-mouth intentions (G. Chen et al., 2022). In this study, the output variables of interest are destination food image and purchase intention. Thus, this study expands S-O-R theory in tourism by applying the S-O-R framework to additional tourism constructs (Figure 1).

The following sub-section discusses the relevant literature and states the hypotheses relating to the aims of the study.



**Figure 1.** The conceptual model.

### ***Learning about halal food culture***

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) suggest that the consumption of experiences could have consequences such as fun, enjoyment, feelings of pleasure, and learning. Consumer demand for experiences that incorporate learning is increasing rapidly (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Dias & Dias, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2023; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Within tourism, learning may be formal or informal, conscious or unconscious. Travel is often portrayed as an inherent part of personal development: an experience that can be deep and meaningful and change the way tourists think and act once they have returned home (Minnaert, 2016). The desire to learn affects not only destination choice but also what tourists do while staying at their chosen destination (Douglas et al., 2023; Poria et al., 2004). Learning appears to be one of the main motivations in the food tourism research literature (Ellis et al., 2018; Getz & Carlsen, 2008). Food consumption at the tourism destination relates to epistemic value-seeking or knowledge gain, specifically an enhancement of intellectual capital through food tasting (Badu-Baiden & Kim, 2022). Learning about food culture – that is, dining etiquette, service style, specialty ingredients, and preparation methods (Khoshkam et al., 2023) – affects tourists' satisfaction levels (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Seongseop et al., 2022) and plays a significant role in creating memories (Adongo et al., 2015; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013; Sthapit, 2019; Stone et al., 2022). S-O-R theory

suggests that certain stimuli, also referred to as external factors, trigger a response based on the internal evaluation of the organism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Learning plays a vital role in shaping tourists' cognitive processes by providing them with information, in this context, information about halal food culture gained during culinary experiences. Based on this notion, we suggest that as a response to a stimulus in the form of learning about halal food culture, tourists are more likely to experience satisfaction and have a more memorable halal food experience. The following hypotheses are thus proposed:

**H1:** Learning about halal food culture positively influences non-Muslim tourists' experiential satisfaction with their halal food experiences.

**H2:** Learning about halal food culture positively influences the memorability of non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences.

### **Conviviality**

Food experiences during travel are regarded as opportunities to (re)produce and maintain social relations (Y. G. Kim & Eves, 2012; B. Lin et al., 2023). According to the joy of conviviality theory, food conviviality – the practice of sharing a meal with other people – makes food experiences more enjoyable (Rozin, 1990). Conviviality enhances food pleasure, unifies social groups, and reinforces cultural identities (Phull et al., 2015). In addition, conviviality has the potential to strengthen not only the social relationships between individuals but also the cohesion of the group (C. Wang et al., 2021). Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2014) and Stone et al. (2018) found that social interaction tends to be an important element of memorable food tourism experiences.

The conviviality of sharing a meal is contextual, varying among individuals and cultures. Attitudes toward shared meals are influenced by local social norms and food cultures (Burrows et al., 2019). Conviviality has been shown to exert a positive influence on consumer experiences (Munoz et al., 2018; Zafari et al., 2015) and is considered a component of dining-out experiences (Plaza et al., 2022). According to Batat et al. (2019), eating meals with others positively contributes to consumer satisfaction and is an antecedent of memorable food experiences (Badu-Baiden & Kim, 2022; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2013; Mynttinen et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2019). According to S-O-R theory, conviviality stimulates cognitive and affective responses from tourists through shared meals (the organisms). The following hypotheses are thus proposed:

**H3:** Conviviality positively influences non-Muslim tourists' experiential satisfaction with their halal food experiences.

**H4:** Conviviality positively influences the memorability of non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences.

### ***Food experience intensification***

Tourists tend to intensify their experiences and attempt to make them more tangible by taking photos and purchasing souvenirs (Dong & Siu, 2013; Nawijn, 2011). Photographic visualization of one's travel experience has become an essential part of an increasingly digitized society (Konijn et al., 2016) and is widely considered to be an essential activity among tourists (L. H. Chen et al., 2021). Photography makes experiences more enjoyable (Diehl et al., 2016) and increases tourists' levels of happiness (Gillet et al., 2016). Photographs are considered to be tools that can psychologically create and reinforce tourists' memories of their experiences (Lee et al., 2023; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; X. Zhang et al., 2021). According to Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris (2022), experience intensification – for example, taking pictures and buying souvenirs – serves to prolong the memories of experiences for tourists. Social networking sites (SNSs) have become popular tools that allow for the on-site intensification and memorialization of travel experiences by facilitating the posting of photos and online messaging (Chen et al., 2023).

Food souvenirs are also components of intensification. Buying food souvenirs can prolong the memories of tourists' food experiences (L. Lin, 2017; L. Lin & Mao, 2015; Sthapit, 2017; Stone et al., 2022). In the context of food experiences, purchasing food souvenirs (L. Lin, 2017; Suhartanto et al., 2018) and taking and sharing pictures of food experiences on SNSs (S. Wang et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2019) are critical drivers of tourist satisfaction and can help to embed such experiences as positive memories (C. Li et al., 2023). Food souvenirs and the sharing of food experiences through SNSs can help tourists recall experiences after returning home from a trip (J. Chen et al., 2023). S-O-R theory suggests that tourists' responses are mediated by their internal cognitive and affective processes. Experience intensification can serve as a stimulus that captures the attention of tourists and influences their cognitive and affective responses to halal food experiences. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

**H5:** Food experience intensification positively influences non-Muslim tourists' experiential satisfaction with their halal food experiences.

**H6:** Food experience intensification positively influences the memorability of non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences.

### ***Experiential satisfaction***

Positive food experiences during travel can build visitor satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2017). Satisfaction is defined as the consequence of a post-purchase experience that equals or exceeds pre-purchase expectations (Vega-Vázquez et al., 2017). Tourist satisfaction is, therefore, a subjective post-consumption evaluation of the service and experience encountered while traveling (H. J. Su et al., 2011). Conversely, when the experience fails to meet or exceed the level of expectation, the tourist will be dissatisfied and left with a feeling of displeasure (Reisinger & Turner, 2003).

Experiential satisfaction focuses on consumers' overall evaluation of their experiences after consumption and reflects the overall satisfaction with services associated with a transaction. Customers compare their experiences with their prior expectations, which results in confirmation or disconfirmation (Kao et al., 2008). The emotional responses resulting from confirmation or disconfirmation form the basis of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Bigné et al., 2005). In the context of food experience, Sthapit et al. (2019) and Stone et al. (2018) suggest a positive relationship between satisfaction and experience memorability. Experiential satisfaction represents the organismic component of the S-O-R framework. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H7:** Experiential satisfaction positively influences the memorability of non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences.

### ***Memorable halal food experiences and destination (halal) food image***

MTE is regarded as an attitude construct involving tourists' positive memories after they engage in a tourism activity (J. H. Kim et al., 2012). Tourists are reliant on their memories of an experience (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017). In this study, a memorable halal food experience refers to an experience that is positive, remembered, and later recalled in vivid detail. As such, it represents the organismic component of the S-O-R framework. Some studies have identified a positive relationship between MTE and destination image (J. H. Kim, 2018; Zhou et al., 2023); in the context of this study, the latter is analogous to destination food image.

Destination food image is defined as tourists' perceptions of local foods and gastronomic products in a particular destination (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Enhancing food image could lead to higher consumption intentions among tourists. Several countries have developed unique food images (Seo et al., 2017).

Some studies have identified a positive relationship between MTEs and purchase intention (Di-Clemente et al., 2020). Purchase intention refers to the belief that consumers' future attitudes can be translated into behavior (Bergkvist et al., 2016) and can also represent consumers' perceptual reactions toward products or services (Dodds et al., 1991). Thus, based on S-O-R theory, tourists' responses are mediated by their internal cognitive and affective processes. Destination food image and purchase intention represent the responses to the processes inherent to the organism, in this context, experiential satisfaction and memorable halal food experiences. The following hypotheses are thus proposed:

**H8:** A memorable halal food experience positively influences non-Muslim tourists' images of halal food at the destination.

**H9:** A memorable halal food experience positively influences non-Muslim tourists' purchase intentions of halal food.

## Methods

### *Data collection methods and instrumentation*

This study employed a cross-sectional, structured, self-administered web survey design. Data were gathered using purposive sampling among Chinese travelers. The target sample was non-Muslim tourists aged 18 years and above who had had a halal food experience during a trip within the six months preceding data collection (January – June 2023). The justifications for these specific criteria are that only two studies have to date explored non-Muslim tourists' halal food experiences (Sthapit, Björk, & Piramanayagam, 2023, 2023) and that memory distortion tends to intensify over time, resulting in false memory (Park & Santos, 2017).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections and comprised a total of 25 items. The first section contained questions about demographic variables and travel characteristics. (For detail of the measures used in the first section, please refer to Table 1). The second section consisted of the measurement items for the eight constructs in the hypothesized model, with all items scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We deliberately chose a 5-point scale for the following reasons: there is

**Table 1.** Profiles of respondents.

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Age	18–25	127	30.8
	26–35	131	31.7
	36–45	94	22.8
	46–55	51	12.3
	>56	10	2.4
Gender	Male	193	46.7
	Female	220	53.3
Nationality	Chinese	392	94.9
	Non-Chinese	21	5.1
Marital status	national		
	Single	206	49.9
	Engaged	58	14.0
	Married	134	32.4
Did you experience halal food during your most recent travels in the province where you live or in another province?	Divorced	15	3.6
	Province where I normally live	278	67.3
Had you visited the destination before?	Other provinces	135	32.7
	Yes	106	25.7
When did you have the halal food experience?	No	307	74.3
	January 2023	101	24.5
	February 2023	87	21.1
	March 2023	67	16.2
	April 2023	72	17.4
	May 2023	52	12.6
	June 2023	34	8.2
Where did you experience halal food during this trip?	Restaurant	211	51.1
	Street stall	164	39.7
	Food shop	31	7.5
	Other	7	1.7
Had you visited this halal food place before?	Yes	97	23.5
	No	316	76.5
With whom did you have the halal food experience	oneself	71	17.2
	With family	188	45.5
	With friends	154	37.3
How many people were in your travel party?	1–5	189	45.8
	6–10	127	30.8
	11–15	97	23.4
	>16	0	0
How many halal food experiences have you had in the past six months (January–June 2023)?	1–3	177	42.9
	4–6	120	29.1
	7–10	116	28.0
	>10	0	0

no significant difference in the statistical indicators of data collected with the 5-point scale and those of other scaling systems (Dawes, 2008); however, scaling up to 9- or even 11-point systems would not yield added value regarding the information obtained and would have strained the abstraction capabilities of our respondents (Krosnick & Presser, 2009); 5-point rating scales are less confusing and increase response rates (Bouranta et al., 2009); and the 5-point Likert scale is the most commonly used scale (Kusmaryono et al., 2022). (For detail of the measures used in section two, please refer to Table 2). In addition, the questions linked to participants' age, gender, nationality, and marital status are shown in Table 1. As all questions were originally developed in English and translated into Mandarin, back-to-back translation was applied to ensure precision and consistency (Brislin, 1970).

**Table 2.** Construct reliability and validity.

	Factor loadings	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
Learning about halal food culture ( LHFC ) (Oh et al., 2007)		0.863	0.865	0.616
LHFC1: During my recent halal food experience, I learned a lot about halal food culture.	0.741			
LHFC2: My recent halal food experience stimulated my curiosity to learn new things.	0.756			
LHFC3: My recent halal food experience was a real learning experience.	0.798			
LHFC4: My recent halal food experience has made me more knowledgeable.	0.840			
Conviviality ( CV ) (Badu-Baiden & Kim, 2022)		0.790	0.790	0.557
CV1: Sharing halal food with family members, friends or significant others helped me to enjoy the recent halal food experience with them.	0.763			
CV2: Sharing halal food with family members, friends or significant others helped me to build strong bonds with them.	0.711			
CV3: Sharing halal food with family members, friends or significant others helped me to socialize with them.	0.764			
Experience intensification ( EI ) (Dong & Siu, 2013)		0.801	0.800	0.572
EI1: I purchased food souvenirs during my recent halal food experience.	0.709			
EI2: I took memorable pictures during my recent halal food experience.	0.750			
EI3: Pictures help me recall my recent halal food experience.	0.807			
Experiential satisfaction ( ES ) (Wu et al., 2018)		0.840	0.842	0.639
ES1: My recent halal food experience was beyond my expectations.	0.752			
ES2: I really liked my visit to the halal food restaurant.	0.849			
ES3: It was worthwhile visiting the halal food restaurant.	0.795			
Memorable halal food experience ( MHFE ) (Oh et al., 2007)		0.833	0.821	0.606
MHFE1: I have wonderful memories of the recent halal food experience.	0.817			
MHFE2: I will not forget my recent halal food experience.	0.796			
MHFE3: I will remember my recent halal food experience.	0.718			
Destination food image ( DFI ) (Tzeng et al., 2023)		0.893	0.894	0.627
DFI1: The quality of the halal food at this destination is good.	0.786			
DFI2: The halal food served at this destination conveys prestige.	0.771			
DFI3: The halal food served at this destination is hygienic.	0.829			
DFI4: The halal food served at this destination is suitable to give as gifts.	0.788			
DFI5: The halal food served at this destination is popular.	0.785			
Purchase intention ( PI ) (Tseng & Wang, 2023)		0.875	0.875	0.637
PI1: I will buy halal food.	0.781			
PI2: I desire to buy halal food.	0.768			
PI3: I am likely to buy halal food.	0.817			
PI4: I plan to purchase halal food.	0.826			

Before the main survey, a pretest was carried out with five hospitality and tourism professors in China in July 2023 to confirm the validity of the measures and assess the questions' relevance, phrasing, clarity, and flow. After the comments were reviewed, a small number of minor changes was made to several questions for reasons such as grammar and sentence structure. A link to the online survey was disseminated through WeChat, the most popular and extensively used SNN in China (Shan et al., 2020), which offers various functionalities, including messaging, social media, and payment services. An invitation to participate, along with a brief description of the research, was posted in different WeChat groups and served as the method for recruiting participants.

WeChat groups are one of the features of this platform: WeChat users join and create different types of groups based on different types of relationships and encounter different types of people in such groups (Zhu et al., 2022). People may join a WeChat group with only family members, or they may join a different WeChat group for business reasons, study reasons, etc. Individuals who were interested could click on a link to the survey. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty in the brief description of the questionnaire. They provided their consent before participating in the study. In addition, institutional review board approval was obtained prior to the study commencing to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and in compliance with established guidelines.

To ensure that the data were collected from the target sample, a series of filtering questions were asked, including the following: “Are you over 18 years old?,” “Are you a Chinese national?,” “Have you had a halal food experience during a recent trip in the past six months (January to June 2023)?,” and “What is your religion?” Those who responded negatively to any of the questions or said they were Muslims were redirected straight to the end of the survey. Each respondent who passed the filter questions and completed the questionnaire was rewarded with a monetary compensation of 5–10 RMB, with amounts randomly determined within this range and distributed through WeChat’s “red envelopes” facility. To help assure the quality of the responses, respondents were also informed before the completion of the survey that their responses would be checked and that any indication of irrelevant or random responses would result in the withdrawal of compensation. Furthermore, all responses were thoroughly screened for carelessness (such as flatline responses), and all such responses were discarded.

### **Data analysis**

Data collection was conducted from July 24 to August 10, 2023. A total of 497 responses was received, of which 84 were deemed invalid and excluded from the analysis, representing an exclusion rate of 16.9%. Responses that either gave the same rating for all items or contradictory responses to similar items were considered invalid and deleted. The final sample consisted of 413 valid responses. The sample size was based on the rule of thumb that 10 observations per indicator are adequate for structural equation modeling (J. F. Hair et al., 2006; Nunnally, 1970). In this study, 25 indicators  $\times$  10 times = 250. The 413 valid responses amply meet this requirement. The data were analyzed with covariance based-structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) through AMOS 25.0. SEM is progressively a technique of select for concept and theory development in the social sciences (J. F. Hair et al., 2014). Scholars have confirmed

that the CB-SEM technique is useful to perform data analysis and validate theories (Dash & Paul, 2021). Since this study aimed to validate a theory, CB-SEM was preferred to any other approach. Before the structural equation modeling (SEM) evaluation, confirmatory factor analysis was performed, and the values for discriminant validity and convergent validity were also estimated. Finally, SEM analysis was used to perform hypothesis testing, and the model was also evaluated using a number of fitness indices.

## Results

### *Profile of the respondents*

The survey results show that most respondents were young, with 30.8% aged 18–25, 31.7% aged 26–35, 22.8% aged 36–45, and 14.7% aged 46 and above. Women accounted for 53.3% of the sample. Almost all the respondents (94.9%), were Chinese citizens. Regarding marital status, the proportion of single people was the highest (49.9%), followed by married (32.4%), engaged (14%), and divorced (3.6%). Of the respondents, 67.3% reported that the travel destination in which they had most recently experienced halal food was in the province in which they usually live, while 74.3% were first-time visitors to the destination. The highest proportion (24.5%), traveled and experienced halal food in January 2023, coinciding with the Chinese New Year holiday. When asked, “Where did you have the halal food experience,” 51.1% answered they had done so in restaurants, 39.7% had eaten halal food as street food, and 45.5% had experienced it with their families. In terms of group size, 45.8% had experienced halal food on their most recent trip with 1–5 people. The largest share of respondents (42.9%) indicated that they had experienced halal food between one and three times in the past six months. Detailed respondent demographics are shown in [Table 1](#).

### *Measurement model test*

AMOS was used to test the reliability and validity of the focus structure. According to the results shown in [Table 2](#), the load of each factor of the study variables ranged from 0.709 to 0.849, all exceeding the threshold value of 0.6 (J. Hair et al., 2010). The average value extracted (AVE) of each construct was greater than 0.5, confirming convergent validity. For the evaluation of internal consistency and reliability, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructions. The values of all constructions were above the threshold of 0.7 (J. F. Hair et al., 2021), indicating that the questionnaire had very high levels of internal consistency and reliability.

The discriminant validity of all constructs was assessed according to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. As shown in [Table 3](#), since the square

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity.

Constructs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	( 7 )
( 1 ) LHFC	0.785						
( 2 ) CV	0.143**	0.746					
( 3 ) EI	0.261**	0.142**	0.756				
( 4 ) ES	0.341**	0.316**	0.268**	0.799			
( 5 ) MHFE	0.347**	0.279**	0.349**	0.340**	0.778		
( 6 ) DFI	0.297**	0.343**	0.253**	0.419**	0.440**	0.792	
( 7 ) PI	0.332**	0.321**	0.309**	0.441**	0.396**	0.282**	0.798

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

root of the AVE for each potential construct was higher than the corresponding inter-construct correlation coefficient, it could be concluded that the discriminant validity of all constructs was acceptable. In addition, we tested the fit of the model by validated factor analysis to achieve sufficient structural validity ( $X^2/df = 1.255$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.025$ ,  $CFI = 0.987$ ,  $IFI = 0.987$ ). It was therefore deemed appropriate to proceed to test the hypothesized associations between constructs.

### **Common method bias**

This study used self-reported survey measures, which could lead to common method bias (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). Two different methods were used to test for this possibility. First, the Harman single factor test was applied to the collected data. The unrotated exploratory factor analysis structure extracted seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the maximum factor variance explanation rate was 30.789%. As this was less than 40%, it was concluded that no serious common method bias was present in the data. Second, a procedure was performed that compared the chi-square and degrees of freedom differences between the one-factor model (model 1) and the multifactorial model (model 2) (Chaudhuri & Ligas, 2009). The difference between the chi-square and degrees of freedom in model 1 ( $\chi^2 = 2857.516$ ,  $df = 275$ ) and model 2 ( $\chi^2 = 318.643$ ,  $df = 254$ ) was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 2538.873$ ,  $\Delta df = 21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that there was no serious common method bias in this study.

### **Structural model test**

After confirming the reliability and validity of the constructs, the structural equation model was calculated and analyzed. First, a model fitness test was performed, with the results showing that the model had a good fit ( $X^2/df = 1.635$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.054$ ,  $CFI = 0.967$ ,  $IFI = 0.967$ ). Second, the path coefficient reflects the evaluation of the relationship between structures in a structured model. A non-parametric bootstrap technique with 5,000 repeated samples was used to estimate the path coefficients.

**Table 4.** Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis relationship	SD	t-values	p-values	Result
H1: LHFC → ES	0.277	4.746	***	Supported
H2: LHFC → MHFE	0.224	4.006	***	Supported
H3: CV → ES	0.298	5.084	***	Supported
H4: CV → MHFE	0.233	4.092	***	Supported
H5: EI → ES	0.193	3.246	0.001	Supported
H6: EI → MHFE	0.287	4.940	***	Supported
H7: ES → MHFE	0.205	3.354	***	Supported
H8: MHFE → DFI	0.558	9.697	***	Supported
H9: MHFE → PI	0.522	8.995	***	Supported

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

The results of the hypothesis tests are shown in Table 4. All nine hypotheses were supported. The effects of learning about halal food culture (LHFC) on the variables experiential satisfaction (ES) ( $\beta = 0.277$ ,  $t = 4.746$ ) and memorability of halal food experience (MHFE) ( $\beta = 0.224$ ,  $t = 4.006$ ) were significant at the 0.001 level, supporting H1 and H2. H3 and H4 were supported, as the effect of conviviality (CV) on ES ( $\beta = 0.298$ ,  $t = 5.084$ ) and MHFE ( $\beta = 0.233$ ,  $t = 4.092$ ) was significant at the 0.001 level. H5 and H6 were also supported, as experience intensification (EI) was found to have a significant positive effect on ES ( $\beta = 0.193$ ,  $t = 3.246$ ) and MHFE ( $\beta = 0.287$ ,  $t = 4.940$ ) at the 0.001 level. In addition, the results showed that ES had a significant positive effect on MHFE ( $\beta = 0.205$ ,  $t = 3.354$ ) at the level of 0.001, supporting H7. Lastly, MHFE had a significant positive effect on both destination food image (DFI) ( $\beta = 0.558$ ,  $t = 9.697$ ) and purchase intention (PI) ( $\beta = 0.522$ ,  $t = 8.995$ ) at the level of 0.001, supporting H8 and H9.

## Discussion and conclusions

Guided by S-O-R theory, the aim of this study was to propose and test an integrative theoretical model of memorable halal food experiences. The empirical results support all nine hypotheses. The study departs from the conventional MTE scale proposed by J. H. Kim et al. (2012) by incorporating alternative factors that may impact the memorability of halal food experiences.

First, learning about halal food culture was found to positively affect experiential satisfaction and the memorability of halal food experiences, supporting H1 and H2. This finding corresponds with studies suggesting that learning about food culture affects tourist satisfaction (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Seongseop et al., 2022) and plays a significant role in creating memories (Adongo et al., 2015; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). A potential explanation for the positive relationship between learning about halal food culture, experiential satisfaction, and memorable halal food experiences is that food consumption at the tourism destination constitutes an enhancement of intellectual

capital (Badu-Baiden & Kim, 2022). This finding suggests that a higher level of active learning is correlated with a higher level of experiential satisfaction and a more memorable halal food experience for non-Muslim Chinese tourists.

Second, conviviality was found to have a positive impact on experiential satisfaction (H3) and memorability in halal food experiences (H4). This finding corresponds to past findings indicating that sharing meals contributes positively to consumer satisfaction and serves as an antecedent of a memorable food experience (Badu-Baiden & Kim, 2022; Stone et al., 2018). One of the reasons for the positive relationship between conviviality, experiential satisfaction, and a memorable halal food experience is that conviviality enhances food pleasure, unifies social groups, and reinforces cultural identities (Phull et al., 2015), in this context, non-Muslim Chinese tourists. These shared culinary experiences strengthen social relationships between individuals and the cohesion within a group of diners (C. Wang et al., 2021).

Third, as proposed in H5 and H6, food experience intensification is a positive and statistically significant factor affecting non-Muslim Chinese tourists' experiential satisfaction and the memorability of a halal food experience. This finding supports studies indicating that tourists who intensify their halal food experiences by taking pictures and buying food souvenirs are likely to have higher levels of experiential satisfaction (Suhartanto et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019) and recall their experiences more vividly (J. Chen et al., 2023). Potential explanations for this are that nearly all Chinese leisure travelers (94%) take photos of food on at least half of their trips (Stone et al., 2020) and food souvenirs allow tourists to take a little piece of history back home; that is, they bring back memories from time spent in the destination and treasured experiences gained from the trip (L. Lin & Mao, 2015).

Fourth, experiential satisfaction was found to be a predictor of a memorable food experience, indicating that experiential satisfaction has a direct and positive impact on the memorability of non-Muslim Chinese tourists' halal food experiences. This finding supports H7 and corroborates studies indicating a positive relationship between satisfaction and memorable experiences (Sthapit et al., 2018). A tourist is satisfied if the outcome of a comparison between their expectations and experiences is a feeling of pleasure – specifically, a positive, memorable feeling – after leaving a destination (H. J. Su et al., 2011).

The study also confirms the relationship between the memorability of a halal food experience and destination food image. This finding further underscores the insights from studies indicating that MTEs contribute to favorable destination food image (e.g., J. H. Kim, 2018). In addition, a positive association between the memorability of a halal food experience and purchase intention was confirmed by our results, thus supporting H9.

Hence, when tourists have memorable halal food experiences, they are more likely to buy halal food in the future. This result is consistent with studies that have identified a positive relationship between MTE and future purchase intention (Di-Clemente et al., 2020).

### ***Theoretical implications***

This study offers three main contributions to the extant literature. First, it responds to demands from the tourism management literature for studies that identify and confirm other antecedents of tourists' MTEs (Stone et al., 2022) according to the specific contexts of those experiences. Contrary to studies that have replicated Y. G. Kim and Eves (2012) seven original MTE dimensions in new settings (Sthapit et al., 2019), therefore, the proposed dimensions were limited in application to food tourism (Stone et al., 2018). Different factors may be relevant determinants in different food-tourism settings. Extending beyond Y. G. Kim and Eves (2012) study, this study introduces and tests new factors as determinants of MTEs, specifically in the context of halal food. These factors are learning about halal food culture, conviviality, food experience intensification, and experiential satisfaction. The findings also contribute to a recent study by Sthapit, Björk, Piramanayagam, et al. (2023) that proposed a framework of memorable halal food experience among non-Muslim tourists comprising novelty seeking, authenticity, experience co-creation, substantive staging of the servicecape, togetherness, and sensory appeal. The findings further suggest that these factors are associated with experiential satisfaction and memorability in halal food experiences, supporting H1–H7. In addition, given the lack of studies related to the halal food experiences of non-Muslim tourists and corresponding lack of consensus about the specific factors that characterize a memorable halal food experience, this study provides greater clarity and increases our understanding of the phenomenon. The results of this study can therefore guide future research directions and new discourses.

Second, the findings contribute to the literature on halal tourism and, in particular, the halal food experiences of non-Muslim tourists. The findings indicate that memorable halal experiences transcend experiential satisfaction and lead to enhanced memorability, destination food image, and purchase intention. Beyond examining the various antecedents of memorable halal food experiences, this study identified such experiences as significant predictors of destination food image and purchase intention, thus advancing the field's collective understanding of the outcomes related to memorable halal food experiences.

Third, previous studies have examined MTEs through a positive psychology lens, drawing from theories such as savoring, the theory of planned behavior, and script theory as well as the fields of environmental psychology, sociology,

organizational management, and psychology (Hosany et al., 2022). This study, which used S-O-R theory, complements the literature by identifying both the determinants and outcomes of memorable food experiences. The results echo the theoretical underpinnings of S-O-R theory by demonstrating that environmental stimuli – in this context, learning about halal food culture, conviviality, and food experience intensification – influence an individual's cognitive and affective reactions (experiential satisfaction and memorability of the halal food experience), and in turn, these reactions cause response behaviors (destination food image and purchase intention). In other words, the findings revealed the predictive ability to interpret tourist behavior, suggesting that learning about halal food culture, conviviality, and food experience intensification (external stimuli) determined tourists' experiential satisfaction and memorable halal food experiences (organism) and that these reactions further affected their destination food image and purchase intentions. This research likely has implications beyond non-Muslim tourists' behavior, for example, in other environments in which tourists are introduced to new scenarios. Learning about food, conviviality, and food experience intensification can likely be found when people are exploring unique or novel foods while traveling. Thus, it is believed the findings offer new insights into S-O-R theory advancement in the context of tourist behavior.

Overall, this study offers a noteworthy contribution in its emphasis on the role of memorability in conjunction with the identified antecedents in cultivating destination food image and purchase intention after a halal food experience. The results demonstrate that applying S-O-R theory generates a holistic understanding of the underlying mechanisms involved in the formation of memorable halal experiences. The results also provide a better understanding of memorable halal experiences and thus identify the actionable and observable managerial recommendations presented below.

### ***Managerial implications***

This study identifies ways in which food service providers may more effectively facilitate memorable halal food experiences. Providers should consider how to incorporate learning about halal food culture and facilitate conviviality and food experience intensification. First, the staff at halal food restaurants could contribute to tourists' learning by actively interacting with non-Muslim customers. For example, staff at such restaurants could provide information about different dishes, explaining the cooking methods and telling stories about the origins of halal food specialties offered. These actions would enhance guests' learning about halal food culture and help capture and maintain the interest of non-Muslim customers, making their halal food experiences more satisfying and memorable.

Second, non-Muslim customers should be encouraged to share halal food specialties with family and friends during their halal food consumption while at restaurants. Food sharing may provide opportunities for non-Muslim tourists to enhance experience engagement and strengthen bonds, further contributing to the memorability of their food experiences.

Third, taking pictures and videos may be a significant way for non-Muslim customers to interact with staff in halal food service settings, facilitating experiential satisfaction and memorable halal food experiences. Thus, attempts to discourage photography seem misguided. Halal food service managers should encourage customers to intensify their halal food experiences by taking pictures and videos, sharing them on SNSs, and buying food souvenirs. Such tactics will help non-Muslim customers in on-site amplification and creating memories of their halal food experiences. Halal food service providers should also create photogenic spaces to encourage customers to post pictures and videos on SNSs as well as sell a variety of halal food souvenirs, which might strengthen experiential satisfaction and memorability.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future studies***

This research is subject to numerous limitations. First, it was limited to four antecedents and two outcomes of memorable food experiences. Examinations of more antecedents and outcomes would further enhance our understanding and contribute to the findings of the present study by providing evidence of other antecedents and outcomes that have an impact on memorable halal food experiences. Possible candidates include social interaction (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015), social bonding (Sthapit, 2017), service quality, and ambience (J. H. Kim, 2014). Since food-related memories are known to contribute to individuals' place attachment (Tsai, 2016), future studies could examine whether memorable halal food experiences affect non-Muslim tourists' place attachment. Second, the data for this study were collected after the respondents had returned from their trips through convenience sampling. The study therefore relied on participants being able to recall memories from within the previous six months. Future studies could collect data from tourists on site or immediately after their visit. In addition, the data were collected through the WeChat groups feature on the WeChat social media platform in China. Although WeChat groups encompass a variety of demographics, their users tend to be relatively young. Future research could employ other data collection methods to enhance the generalizability of the research conclusions. Third, the study adopted a web-based survey questionnaire, the potential biases of which are well documented. Adopting a wider array of data collection methods could help overcome this limitation. Fourth, future comparative studies of first-time and repeat domestic and international tourists could

yield meaningful insights to add to those gained through the present study. Fifth, as pointed out by Yu et al. (2023), the interaction between the length of questions/options and the screen size can create confusion and may introduce systematic bias. While the survey platform used in this study is designed to be responsive and compatible with various screen sizes, no specific test for the readability of the questionnaires across different devices was undertaken. This could affect the responses and introduce bias. Future research should consider conducting thorough testing of the survey interface on different devices to ensure optimal readability and minimize any potential bias. Lastly, the respondents were Chinese non-Muslim tourists. This cultural context and the associated cultural sensitivities linked to halal food consumption in China may have affected their experiences.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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