

Article

Sustainable Gastronomy as a Driver of Senior Travelers' Experience, Perceived Value, and Behavioral Outcomes

Hyosun Jung ^{1,*}  and Hye Hyun Yoon ² 

¹ Center for Converging Humanities, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02447, Republic of Korea

² Department of Culinary Arts and Foodservice Management, College of Hotel & Tourism Management, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02447, Republic of Korea; hhyun@khu.ac.kr

* Correspondence: chefcook@khu.ac.kr; Tel.: +82-2-961-2321

Abstract

The global population is rapidly aging, positioning seniors as one of the most influential consumer segments in the contemporary tourism market. As culinary tourism increasingly represents a value-laden and culturally embedded form of experience, understanding how senior tourists perceive and react to such experiences has become essential. This study investigates the structural relationships among seniors' culinary tourism experiences, perceived value, positive emotions, and behavioral intentions, while also examining the moderating effect of gender. A structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis based on survey data from senior tourists revealed that the proposed model exhibited a satisfactory fit, with most hypothesized relationships supported. Seniors' culinary experiences significantly enhanced perceived value, which in turn positively influenced both positive emotions and behavioral intentions. Positive emotions also had a significant effect on behavioral intentions. However, the moderating role of gender was not statistically significant, suggesting minimal gender-based differences in seniors' cognitive and affective evaluations.

Keywords: senior tourism; culinary experience; perceived value; positive emotion; behavioral intention; gender



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1. Introduction

As global tourism increasingly embraces sustainability as a core priority, gastronomy tourism is also undergoing a significant shift toward environmentally and socially responsible practices [1]. This transition is particularly relevant in the context of senior tourists, whose travel behaviors are rapidly becoming a key driver of the tourism market due to global population aging [2]. Seniors are increasingly recognized as an essential consumer segment that offers substantial growth potential for new employment and business opportunities; thus, this market should not be overlooked [3]. Due to these demographic changes, the number of older adults participating in tourism and leisure activities has been steadily increasing [4]. Consequently, the senior market has emerged as one of the most dynamic segments in the tourism industry. Particularly, culinary tourism has gained attention as a high value-added form of experience that connects visitors to local culture and identity, thereby enhancing seniors' travel satisfaction and destination loyalty. Senior tourists not only possess sufficient time and economic resources but also exhibit strong interests in health and well-being [5]; therefore, they tend to be sensitive to the sensory pleasures, emotional meanings, and social values derived from food experiences [6]. Seniors, as

experienced travelers, have both the curiosity and the freedom to explore new cuisines and cultures, and previous studies have shown that older travelers often enjoy local food without reluctance and are open to exploring foreign cultures [7].

Despite this, few studies have systematically examined how seniors' culinary experiences influence their behavioral intentions through psychological mechanisms such as perceived value and positive emotions. Recent research on culinary tourism has expanded beyond the "taste experience" to encompass emotional, cultural, and social dimensions that shape tourists' overall experience [8]. Hospitality literature has consistently reported that perceived value is a stronger predictor of revisit intention than satisfaction or quality [9–11], suggesting that the utility derived from an experience serves as a critical gateway linking overall evaluation and behavioral intention. Moreover, emotion research emphasizes that positive emotions—such as joy, excitement, and delight—operate more immediately and instinctively than cognitive judgments, playing a decisive role in shaping satisfaction and behavioral responses [12,13]. In summary, the integrated emotional–cognitive mechanism connecting experience, perceived value, positive emotion, and behavioral intention has been supported in various contexts. However, few studies have empirically tested this pathway in the context of seniors' culinary experiences. Although recent works have examined the functional, symbolic, social, and emotional dimensions of culinary experiences and their effects on destination image and loyalty, research remains limited in addressing heterogeneity across age groups—particularly regarding seniors' emotionally oriented goals and relational value pursuits.

Furthermore, seniors cannot be understood solely in terms of age; gender is believed to play a critical role in shaping their travel attitudes and interpretations of tourism experiences [14,15]. Previous studies have consistently indicated that males tend to prioritize cognitive and functional value assessments, whereas females place greater emphasis on emotional satisfaction [16,17]. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical research that systematically investigates the moderating effect of gender among senior travelers.

Accordingly, this study pursues the following objectives. First, it empirically examines an integrated structural model in which seniors' culinary experiences influence behavioral intentions (revisit and recommendation) through perceived value and positive emotions. Second, it introduces gender as a moderating variable, comparing the path coefficients between male and female seniors through a multi-group structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to identify how the links among culinary experience and perceived value differ by gender.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Model

2.1. Relationship Between Culinary Experience and Perceived Value

Culinary experiences refer to the holistic sensory, emotional, cultural, and social interactions tourists experience with food during their travels [18,19]. From a macro perspective, culinary experience can be understood as a process of experiencing local culture, traditions, and lifestyles that go beyond the simple act of eating [20]. However, this study was limited to experiences related to eating food at tourist destinations. These culinary experiences are a core element of tourism, enhancing the attractiveness of a destination and directly impacting overall satisfaction [21,22]. In particular, Kim and Eves [23] reported that local food experiences significantly influence tourists' emotional bonds and behavioral loyalty (e.g., revisit intentions and recommendation intentions). Furthermore, Cohen and Avieli [24] argued that culinary experiences during tourism not only provide gustatory pleasure but also carry symbolic meanings such as novelty, authenticity, and strengthened self-identity, acting as emotional stimuli that deepen the enjoyment of travel. Lin and Mao [25] suggested that culinary experiences elicit positive

emotions, and that these emotional responses mediate tourists' overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Perceived value is defined as a consumer's subjective evaluation of the benefits they receive from a product or service versus the cost they pay [26]. In the hospitality industry, it has been expanded to encompass not only functional value but also emotional, social, and epistemic values [27,28]. In the context of culinary tourism, perceived value particularly derives from the quality, authenticity, and cultural significance of local food [29]. Suhartanto et al. [30] also found that the more valuable tourists perceive a culinary experience, the higher their satisfaction, revisit intention, and recommendation intention. Hosany and Gilbert [13] emphasized that perceived value mediates the relationship between experiential elements and emotional responses, leading to positive experiential evaluations that lead to emotional fulfillment and behavioral loyalty. Furthermore, Chen & Huang [31] reported that higher perceived food taste and authenticity strengthened tourists' emotional satisfaction and destination attachment. Research on culinary experiences and perceived value, such as Kim et al. [19] and Bjork and Kauppinen-Räsänen [32], emphasized that culinary experiences are key antecedents of tourists' perceived value. Ryu and Jang [33] found that rich and memorable culinary experiences enhance perceived value by satisfying tourists' needs for authenticity, sensory enjoyment, and cultural immersion. Cankül et al. [34] also suggested that culinary experiences support the local culture, which is highly attractive to tourists, and in this context, culinary experiences positively influence perceived value. Furthermore, culinary experiences enhance social and cognitive value by providing opportunities for self-expression, learning, and social interaction [35]. Therefore, tourists who have meaningful and positive culinary experiences tend to evaluate their overall trips as more valuable and exhibit increased destination loyalty and revisit intentions [29,30]. Ultimately, it was determined that culinary experiences simultaneously stimulate tourists' cognitive evaluations and emotional responses, thereby acting as a factor that increases perceived value, and this serves as an important theoretical basis for explaining tourist behavior (revisit, recommendation, etc.). Based on these prior research results, the following hypothesis is established:

Hypothesis 1. *Seniors' culinary experience positively influences perceived value.*

2.2. Relationship Between Perceived Value, Positive Emotion, and Behavioral Intention

Positive emotion refers to an emotional state, such as pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, excitement, gratitude, and pride, that an individual feels through a specific experience or stimulus [36,37]. It is a concept contrasted with negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, disappointment, etc.) and is considered a core emotional response in evaluating the quality of consumption or service experiences. In the tourism context, positive emotion includes emotional responses such as joy, pleasure, excitement, satisfaction, and awe that tourists feel during a travel experience, and these emotions significantly influence the overall evaluation of the tourism experience and subsequent behavioral intention [13,38]. In the tourism and service context, perceived value is a consumer's cognitive evaluation of the psychological rewards they receive from an experience. This evaluation serves as a key factor in triggering emotional responses [12,36]. Specifically, the more valuable a tourist perceives a food or tourism experience, the more positive emotions such as satisfaction, enjoyment, gratitude, and happiness are enhanced [13,29]. Williams and Soutar [39] found that value perception in tourism contexts increases emotional satisfaction, and Lv et al. [40] demonstrated a close relationship between perceived value and positive emotions. Seniors, in particular, tend to prioritize emotional rewards and semantic value over price or efficiency, based on their rich life experiences [41]. They value emotions such as nostalgia, nostalgia, comfort, and pride that they experience through food experiences, and this emotional satisfaction leads

to positive evaluations of tourism experiences [31]. Therefore, the higher the value seniors perceive in food or tourism experiences, the more likely it is that those experiences will evoke strong positive emotions.

Hypothesis 2. *Seniors' perceived value positively influences positive emotion.*

Behavioral intention refers to a tourist's propensity to repeat a specific experience or recommend it to others [42]. Previous research has identified perceived value as a key antecedent of satisfaction and loyalty, which has been shown to directly influence revisit and recommendation intentions [43]. Sánchez et al. [35] said that higher perceived value of a tourism product strengthened consumers' intentions to repurchase and revisit. Suhartanto et al. [30] examined the causal relationship between experience quality, perceived value, and behavioral intention. In a study of food tourism, Kim and Eves [23] reported that higher perceived value of local food increased tourists' intentions to revisit and spread word-of-mouth. Chen and Chen [9] argued that perceived value is a stronger predictor of revisit intention than satisfaction or quality, emphasizing that it has a positive effect on tourists' behavioral intentions. Similarly, Bajs [10] found that tourists' perceived value increases their future behavioral intentions, and Qian and Li [11] also confirmed that tourists' behavioral intentions are influenced by perceived value. In particular, seniors prioritize emotional value, relational meaning, and trust over economic factors, and they tend to repeat positively evaluated experiences [44]. In other words, the higher the perceived value of a food experience, the greater their satisfaction and attachment to it, which in turn leads to revisit and recommendation behavior. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be established.

Hypothesis 3. *Seniors' perceived value positively influences behavioral intention.*

2.3. Relationship Between Perceived Value, and Behavioral Intention

Emotion is an immediate and instinctive response rather than a cognitive judgment; therefore, it serves as a key factor that determines tourists' overall satisfaction and subsequent behavioral responses [12]. In particular, positive emotions have been suggested as a key psychological mechanism that strengthens tourists' behavioral intentions—i.e., intentions to perform future actions, such as revisiting or recommending a destination. Tourists who experience positive emotions feel a desire to repeat the experience [45] and are more likely to actively recommend it to others [46]. This is significant because emotional satisfaction acts as a mediator between attitude and intention, fostering behavioral loyalty. Zhou and Wang [47] reported that immersive tourism experiences evoke positive emotions, which in turn significantly influence tourists' behavioral intentions. Suban [48] also found that tourists' positive emotions positively influence their intentions to revisit, mediated by their destination image and satisfaction. Furthermore, the influence of emotions is even more pronounced among senior tourists [49]. Older adults tend to prioritize emotional value and emotional satisfaction through their life experiences [50] and repeatedly pursue experiences that elicit positive emotions [51]. Sie and Pegg [52] demonstrated that when tourism experiences are “meaningful,” positive emotions are strengthened, which in turn positively influences behavioral intentions. Therefore, positive emotions generated through culinary or cultural experiences are likely to lead to repeat visits or recommendation behaviors among senior tourists. In this context, the hypothesis that seniors' positive emotions will positively influence their behavioral intentions is consistent with existing research findings. That is, higher emotional satisfaction leads tourists to form more favorable attitudes toward the experience, which in turn leads to repeat visits and recommendation behavior [38].

Hypothesis 4. *Seniors' positive emotion positively influences behavioral intention.*

2.4. Moderating Effects of Senior's Gender

In tourism behavior research, gender is recognized as a key socio-psychological variable that differentiates individuals' cognitive and emotional responses. Numerous studies have reported that perceived value differs between male and female tourists even when they share similar experiences [16,53,54]. According to the Theory of Consumption Values proposed by Sheth et al. [55], consumers evaluate products or services by comprehensively considering functional, social, and emotional values. In consumption contexts, female consumers tend to emphasize emotional and social values, whereas male consumers place greater importance on functional value and efficiency [27]. Such gender differences are also expected to appear in tourism experiences. Yuksel and Yuksel [54] found that female tourists are more influenced by emotional satisfaction, whereas male tourists form behavioral intentions primarily based on cognitive value assessments. Lehto et al. [56] reported that memorable tourism experiences exert a stronger effect on behavioral intention among female tourists, while Kim and Kim [16] demonstrated that, in culinary tourism, emotional satisfaction is more significant for females, whereas cognitive value plays a more critical role for males. Furthermore, Zhong and Moon [57] suggested that gender differences in dietary needs and considerations lead to distinct food consumption patterns. Zhu et al. [17] found that the perceived functional, social, epistemic, and conditional values of food experiences have a stronger impact on destination image for male tourists than for female tourists. In contrast, female consumers are generally more committed to healthy eating habits, which may reduce the relative influence of food experiences compared to males [58]. Such gender differences persist among senior tourists. Female seniors tend to emphasize social relationships and emotional enrichment, seeking emotional meaning through travel [59], whereas male seniors focus more on efficiency and rationality, relying primarily on cognitive evaluations such as perceived value and satisfaction [60]. Therefore, in the context of culinary tourism among senior travelers, male seniors are likely to perceive a stronger influence of culinary experience on perceived value, which can be explained by the moderating role of gender (Figure 1).

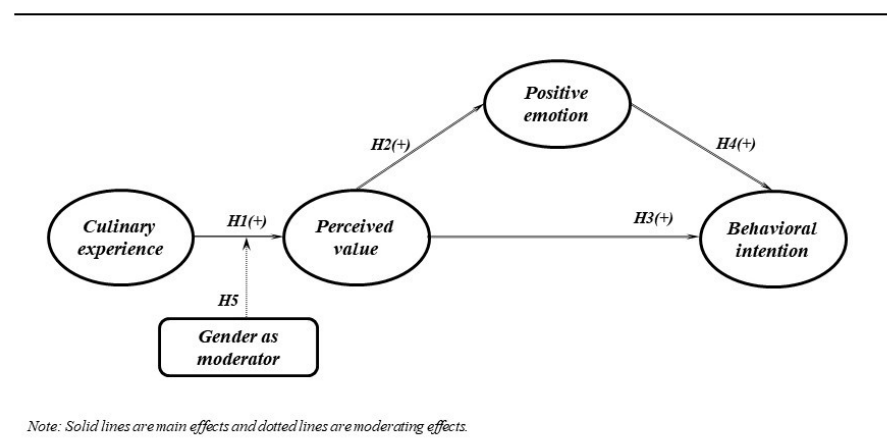


Figure 1. Research model.

Hypothesis 5. *Senior's gender moderates the effects of culinary experience on perceived value.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

This study was based on an online survey. The response period was from 1 to 20 March 2025. The target population was 350 elderly people aged 60 or older living in Seoul who had traveled domestically or internationally in the past six months. This age group was selected based on the standard retirement age in Korea. The online survey was conducted only with consent. Respondents completed the questionnaire distributed by the researcher. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and they were informed that their responses would be anonymous. They were informed that their data would be used only for this study and would be kept confidential. To encourage participation, those who completed the survey received a USD 5 gift certificate. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, of which 279 (79.7%) were used in the final analysis. 37.9% were male and 62.1% were female. The majority of participants held a college degree (59.2%) or higher.

3.2. Instrument Development

The survey questionnaire in this study was divided into five sections. The Section 1 evaluated senior's culinary experience using five items adapted from Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen [21], and Martin et al. [61]. Sub-items included items such as "This food experience allowed me to interact with local people" and "This food experience was special and memorable to me." The Section 2 measured perceived value using four items taken from Sweeney and Soutar [27], and Chen and Chen [9]. Measurement items included items such as, "This food experience created meaningful memories for me," and "Overall, this food experience was highly satisfying." The Section 3 measured positive emotions with four items, based on Hosany and Gilbert [62], and Kim and Ritchie [29], including items such as "I felt joyful and happy during the food experience." and "I was impressed because the food tasted better than I expected." The Section 4 measured behavioral intention, using concepts including intention to recommend and intention to revisit. Based on research in Kim et al. [63], this five-item scale included items such as "I am willing to experience this food again on my future trips.", and "I would recommend this food and destination to my friends and family." The Section 5 measured demographic information, including gender, age, and education level. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire items for this study were prepared as follows. The researcher, whose native language is Korean in both language and culture, translated the English questionnaire developed by Brislin [64] and Adler [65] into Korean using a back-translation method. The back-translation process was as follows: (1) One author translated all questionnaire items into Korean. (2) A second author reviewed the translation and corrected any ambiguous expressions to identify potential translation errors. (3) An English specialist translated the Korean sentences back into English, and a third author checked for any conceptual differences between the original items and the original.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 21.0) and AMOS (Version 22.0). A frequency analysis of the demographic characteristics of the respondents was conducted, and the two-step approach proposed (by Anderson and Gerbing [66]) was applied to the data analysis. The validity and reliability of the measurement items were verified through confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analysis. In addition, the moderating effect was analyzed through structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis. Prior to all analyses, Harmon's test using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to check for

the presence of common method bias (CMB). The test results showed that the explanatory power of one factor (31.2%) did not exceed half of the total explanatory power (68.7%).

4. Results

4.1. Validity and Reliability Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on 18 items (Table 1), resulting in four factors: culinary experience, perceived value, positive emotion, and behavioral intention. The analysis results showed that the final model had an excellent fit ($\chi^2 = 354.181$; $df = 129$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.746$; GFI = 0.869; NFI = 0.909; TLI = 0.946; CFI = 0.951; IFI = 0.951; RMSEA = 0.053). The CCR and Cronbach's alpha were both higher than 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) was higher than 0.6, indicating a desirable level. As mentioned in Table 2, the square of the correlation coefficient was less than the AVE value, confirming its validity [67,68].

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability analysis.

Construct	Standardized Estimate	t-Value	AVE	CCR Cronbach's Alpha
Culinary experience			0.674	0.900
CE ₁	0.778	fixed		0.910
CE ₂	0.897	16.682 ***		
CE ₃	0.908	16.924 ***		
CE ₄	0.803	14.502 ***		
CE ₅	0.705	12.377 ***		
Perceived value			0.660	0.782
PV ₁	0.810	fixed		0.884
PV ₂	0.798	14.503 ***		
PV ₃	0.856	15.766 ***		
PV ₄	0.786	14.220 ***		
Positive emotion			0.692	0.885
PE ₁	0.872	fixed		0.898
PE ₂	0.854	18.523 ***		
PE ₃	0.871	19.153 ***		
PE ₄	0.724	14.190 ***		
Behavioral intention			0.695	0.881
BI ₁	0.840	fixed		0.918
BI ₂	0.837	17.036 ***		
BI ₃	0.878	18.391 ***		
BI ₄	0.852	17.543 ***		
BI ₅	0.760	14.727 ***		

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted; CCR = composite construct reliability; Standardized estimate = β -value; $\chi^2 = 354.181$ ($df = 129$) $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.746$; Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.869; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.909; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.928; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.939; Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.940; RMSEA = 0.079; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Correlation analysis and discriminant validity analysis.

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Culinary experience	1	0.093	0.426	0.195
2. Perceived value	0.306 **	1	0.277	0.186
3. Positive emotion	0.653 **	0.527 **	1	0.259
4. Behavioral intention	0.442 **	0.432 **	0.509 **	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *Italic type are presented in squared correlation.*

4.2. SEM

The hypothesis was tested using SEM. Table 3 presents the analysis results. The χ^2 statistic indicated an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 464.171$; $df = 131$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.543$; $GFI = 0.844$; $NFI = 0.880$; $CFI = 0.910$; $TLI = 0.895$; $RMSEA = 0.096$). Hypothesis 1, which stated that seniors' culinary experience positively influences perceived value, was supported ($\beta = 0.381$; $t = 5.591$; $p < 0.001$). This result was consistent with previous research showing that perceived value is enhanced through positive gastronomic experiences [19,32,33]. Furthermore, perceived value induced positive emotions ($\beta = 0.624$; $t = 9.710$; $p < 0.001$) and increased behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.396$; $t = 5.099$; $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypotheses 2 and 3. This is consistent with the results of previous studies that found that the more valuable the experience in food or tourism, the stronger the positive emotions [29,39,40] and the stronger the intention to revisit or recommend [10,11,44]. Furthermore, seniors' positive emotions positively influenced behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.242$; $t = 3.132$; $p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 4. This is consistent with previous research that found that tourists' positive emotions induce positive behavioral intentions [47,48], and that this relationship is stronger among older tourists [49]. Before analyzing the moderating effect of Hypothesis 5, we confirmed measurement invariance for gender as the moderator variable used in this study. Therefore, we tested the moderating effect of gender in the organic causal relationship among culinary experience, perceived value, positive emotions, and behavioral intention through multigroup analysis (Table 4). The two models were compared for each path using the χ^2 difference, considering degrees of freedom (both unrestricted and constrained). The analysis results showed that the senior's gender did not have a significant moderating effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was rejected. This result is partially consistent with previous studies that found that cognitive value is more important in gastronomic tourism for men [16,17].

Table 3. Structural estimates model.

Hypothesized Path (Stated as Alternative Hypothesis)	Standardized Coefficients	t-Value	Results
H1(+) Culinary experience → Perceived value	0.381	5.591 ***	Supported
H2(+) Perceived value → Positive emotion	0.624	9.710 ***	Supported
H3(+) Perceived value → Behavioral intention	0.396	5.099 ***	Supported
H4(+) Positive emotion → Behavioral intention	0.242	3.132 **	Supported
Goodness-of-fit statistics	$\chi^2_{(131)} = 464.171$ ($p < 0.001$) $\chi^2/df = 3.543$ $GFI = 0.844$ $NFI = 0.880$ $CFI = 0.910$ $TLI = 0.895$ $RMSEA = 0.096$		

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4. Moderating effects of senior's gender.

	Male (N = 106)		Female (N = 172)		Unconstrained Model Chi-Square (df = 262)	Constrained Model Chi-Square (df = 263)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df = 1)
	Standardized Coefficients	t-Value	Standardized Coefficients	t-Value			
H5a(+) Culinary experience → Perceived value	0.546	5.148 ***	0.253	2.923 **	618.247	620.494	
H5b(+) Perceived value → Positive emotion	0.670	6.926 ***	0.593	6.979 ***		618.293	

Table 4. Cont.

	Male (N = 106)		Female (N = 172)		Unconstrained Model Chi-Square (df = 262)	Constrained Model Chi-Square (df = 263)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df = 1)
	Standardized Coefficients	t-Value	Standardized Coefficients	t-Value			
H5c(+) Perceived value → Behavioral intention	0.393	3.045 **	0.398	4.082 ***	618.247	618.252	
H5d(+) Positive emotion → Behavioral intention	0.228	1.774 ns	0.246	2.633 *		618.273	

Note: $\chi^2/df = 2.360$; GFI = 0.809; NFI = 0.848; CFI = 0.905; RMSEA = 0.070; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$, ns Not significant.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the structural relationships between seniors' culinary tourism experiences and their perceived value, positive emotions, and behavioral intentions, and to examine the moderating effects of gender. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis revealed that the proposed model exhibited a good overall fit, with most hypotheses supported. Specifically, seniors' culinary experiences significantly positively influenced perceived value, and perceived value positively influenced both positive emotions and behavioral intentions. Furthermore, positive emotions significantly enhanced behavioral intentions. However, the moderating effect of gender was not statistically significant, suggesting that differences in cognitive and affective evaluations between men and women were minimal. These results suggest that senior tourists' culinary experiences go beyond simple food consumption and lead to psychological value recognition and emotional satisfaction, which in turn foster behavioral intentions such as revisiting or recommending the destination.

5.2. Implications

First, this study expands the theoretical scope of tourism behavior research by presenting a structural model that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors into the culinary tourism experience of seniors. While previous culinary tourism research has primarily focused on younger generations or general tourists, this study reflects seniors' accumulated life experiences and value judgment systems, empirically elucidating the process by which culinary experiences influence behavioral intentions through perceived value and positive emotions. This demonstrates that senior tourists interpret tourism experiences through a value-centered cognition based on their accumulated life experiences and beliefs, rather than through mere sensory stimulation [69]. Second, the results demonstrate that perceived value is a more crucial factor among seniors than in other generations. This is because seniors, having accumulated diverse social and cultural experiences over time, perceive consumption and travel not simply as pleasure but as acts that reaffirm the meaning of life [70]. Therefore, while younger generations are more responsive to immediate emotional stimuli or novelty-oriented experiences, seniors value the intrinsic value and sustained meaning of experiences [52]. This may be because younger individuals tend to be more sensitive to sensory pleasure and immediate happiness, whereas, with increasing age, people place greater emphasis on self-realization and a sense of life meaning [71]. Consequently, younger tourists are more inclined to seek novelty and adventure, while older adults tend to value rest, health, and restorative experiences during travel [72]. These characteristics suggest that senior tourism behavior can be interpreted as a meaning economy or value-driven tourism, moving beyond the emotional commitment stage of the Experience Economy Theory [73]. Third, the finding that perceived value was the primary

mediator between positive emotions and behavioral intentions demonstrates the applicability of Oliver's [36] Affective Loyalty Theory to the context of senior tourism. In other words, seniors form emotions and satisfaction through internal interpretations rather than external stimuli, and in this process, perceived value is believed to play a key mediating role in driving emotional commitment. This provides a theoretical basis for explaining senior tourists' consumption behavior not simply as a function of functional utility, but as a function of value-based evaluation. Fourth, the lack of a significant moderating effect was found by gender, suggesting that although eating habits themselves show significant differences by gender, gender differences in food-related behaviors are believed to be determined by social factors [74]. Although there was no significant difference, men appeared to place greater importance on cognitive values in culinary tourism than women, likely due to a greater emphasis on efficiency and rationality than women. This suggests that men have long been raised within norms that emphasize achievement, problem-solving, and rational judgment, and thus, even in their later years, they more frequently utilize cognitive and rational evaluation frameworks such as value-for-performance, fulfillment of expectations, and efficient travel [60]. Consequently, future research on senior tourism should develop new theoretical segmentation models that go beyond simple demographic segmentation and focus on value orientations and motivations for a meaningful life.

The practical implications of this study are as follows. First, this study suggests to tourism practitioners and policymakers the need for a value-centered gastronomy tourism strategy for the senior market. Senior tourists place greater emphasis on symbolic values such as psychological satisfaction, reaffirmation of identity, and social interaction than on functional values such as taste and price [75]. Therefore, tourism destinations and restaurants should develop experiential content that enhances cultural storytelling and emotional interaction, rather than simply focusing on the quality of the food itself. For example, it would be effective to tell stories about the origins of local traditional foods, participate in cooking programs that allow senior tourists to participate directly in the cooking process, and develop tourism in a form that can be combined with experiential farms, such as farm-to-table experiences [76]. Second, senior tourists' perceived value was found to be a key factor in strengthening positive emotions and behavioral intentions. This suggests that, for senior tourists, how they felt is a more powerful influence than what they ate. This means that competitive advantage in senior-focused gastronomy tourism should be built not simply on offering diverse menus, but on curating emotionally rich, meaningful, and memorable dining experiences. Operators targeting senior tourists can increase satisfaction and behavioral intentions by creating environments that evoke comfort, nostalgia, authenticity, and connection—factors that are highly valued by older adults [77]. In the context of sustainable gastronomy, designing experiences that foster emotional resonance—such as highlighting local producers, heritage foodways, or environmentally responsible practices—can further elevate perceived value for senior travelers while simultaneously supporting destination sustainability goals. Third, from a tourism policy perspective, the results of this study provide a basis for aging-friendly tourism policies. Culinary tourism among seniors goes beyond mere consumption and can contribute to local economic revitalization and social inclusion. Therefore, local governments and tourism organizations can build a sustainable tourism ecosystem by developing well-aging culinary tourism programs that leverage local culinary resources and creating participatory service jobs for local seniors.

5.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, because this study surveyed tourist from a single region, the generalizability of the findings is inherently limited. Regional characteristics may influence how seniors evaluate food experiences and form perceived value.

Therefore, future research should broaden sampling to encompass multiple regions with different culinary traditions and tourism infrastructures. Cross-national or cross-cultural comparative studies would also be valuable, as senior tourists' motivations and emotional responses may vary significantly across cultural contexts, levels of environmental awareness, and societal norms regarding aging and travel. Second, while this study limited gender to a moderating variable, future research should consider various individual differences, such as age subgroups (early and late elderly), health status, income level, and social participation. Third, the cross-sectional design used in this study restricts the ability to capture how seniors' gastronomic experiences and emotional responses evolve over time. Because affective evaluations and behavioral intentions may fluctuate depending on situational factors, seasonal tourism contexts, or changes in health and mobility, a single time-point measurement cannot fully uncover the dynamic nature of these relationships. Future research should employ longitudinal approaches to observe temporal changes in seniors' perceptions or follow their travel experiences across multiple stages of the tourism journey (before–after). Experimental or quasi-experimental designs may also help establish clearer causal pathways, particularly in validating whether specific gastronomic stimuli (e.g., sustainable food practices, sensory cues, storytelling) directly generate emotional responses and behavioral intentions. Fourth, the inability to specifically distinguish between subdimensions of the gastronomic experience (e.g., aesthetic experience, learning experience, social interaction, etc.) remains a limitation. Future research should more precisely analyze the relationships between subdivided experiential factors and emotional responses.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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