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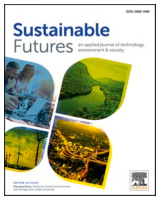

Tourists' local food consumption: Travel experience, responsible tourism, or both?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the factors influencing tourists' local food consumption by focusing on the effectiveness of message appeals and the role of cultural and ethical considerations. An online experimental study assessed the impact of different marketing messages on tourists' attitudes and intentions toward local food consumption. Additionally, an online survey examined the interplay between cultural and ethical factors in shaping tourists' behaviors and decisions regarding local food. The findings indicated that integrating ethical considerations enhances the effectiveness of marketing messages and strengthens the influence of cultural factors on tourists' consumption behaviors. The paper discusses the implications for responsible tourism, emphasizing the need for tourism promotion strategies to integrate local food experiences with both cultural and ethical values to encourage more sustainable travel choices.

1. Introduction

Local food has consistently been a crucial element in shaping tourists' experiences of a travel destination. The cultural nuances of local food and its significant impact on the local community make it an attractive and popular choice among tourists [24,42]. The consumption of local food cuisines embodies the essence of local culture and traditions, offering a diverse array of choices in terms of environment, knowledge, perceived value, authenticity, and quality [1,87]. Furthermore, it fosters destination image and economy [13,72]. Beyond this, tourists' consumption of local food provides economic benefits for the local community and the sustainability of local businesses in the food and hospitality industries [61]. Supporting local food businesses and producers can contribute to the long-term sustainability of these industries at the destination [69]. Local food consumption also contributes to the tourists' perception of a destination and influences their future intention to visit [65,67].

The definition of local food is a multifaceted and evolving concept that lacks a single and widely accepted definition [73]. Some definitions have traditionally centred on geographical proximity, emphasising factors such as production location, ingredient sourcing within a specific region, and regionally branded [44]. However, the complexities of food trade within the global economy have challenged these conventional boundaries [39], and therefore, the interpretation of what being "local" could be specific to individual consumers [50]. In today's interconnected world, "local food" provided at tourism destinations may not always be locally produced and grown; a more pertinent definition may instead consider local food as a concept rooted in customers' perceptions and cultural engagement and it serves a symbol of a place that fosters a sense of cultural connection and authenticity [72]. This expanded perspective complements the traditional definition, which is primarily centred on geographical proximity, and suggests that the symbolic and cultural significance of local food at destinations extends to include the traditions it embodies, the stories it carries, the culinary methods employed, and the cultural engagement it offers. As this study primarily focused on the factors driving tourists' local food consumption, we adopted the broader and conceptual definition of local food at tourism destinations based on tourists' perceptions. This approach is considered more appropriate for capturing the authentic essence of local food as a part of the travel experience.

Prior studies examined key driving forces of tourists' local food consumption, including cultural and food experience and place attachment [44,57,65,75]. While local food consumption is widely promoted as a responsible travel behavior due to its potential benefits to local

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communities [87], the role of moral and social responsibility in shaping tourists' decisions, particularly in the context of local food, remains underexplored. Recent studies have highlighted the growing interest in responsible consumption and sustainability in tourism, particularly regarding environmental behaviors [64,85]. For instance, Xiong et al. [85] examined how environmental emotions drive responsible consumption behavior. Similarly, Delgado et al. [19] focused on food waste in the tourism sector, emphasizing the need for responsible consumption trends, while Kubičková et al. [49] investigated the influence of motivators on responsible consumption in tourism and that further supporting the need to address ethical consumption factors. Despite these emerging insights, the specific impact of ethical considerations on local food consumption has not been comprehensively studied. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how ethical considerations interact with other factors like cultural experiences and social values. Addressing this gap is not only timely but crucial for tourism authorities and businesses aiming to foster unique food experiences and enhance overall tourist satisfaction. A comprehensive examination of moral and social factors influencing local food consumption can offer valuable insights into tourists' decision-making processes, thus improving the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at promoting local food. Moreover, such insights could contribute to supporting the economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability of local communities.

This study aims to examine the key factors explaining tourists' local food consumption. The objectives are (a) to investigate the effectiveness of marketing messages in encouraging tourists' local food consumption; (b) to examine the role of cultural engagement, moral norms, and ascribed responsibility in tourists' local food consumption; and (c) to discuss the managerial implications on developing effective strategies to promote local food consumption.

The remainder of this paper is structured into sections. Firstly, the theoretical background and proposed research model will be summarised. Following this, the methodology adopted in this research, including the research design and data collection, will be described in detail. The subsequent sections will focus on the findings and discuss the results. The paper will then conclude with a holistic analysis of the theoretical and managerial implications of the research. Finally, the limitations of the study will be outlined, and conclusions will be drawn based on the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Message appeals to encourage local food consumption

Promoting local food tourism is multifaceted and can be benefited by employing effective communication approaches to enhance its effectiveness in attracting travellers [71]. Utilising appropriate message appeals can enhance the effectiveness of marketing campaigns by shaping tourists' perceptions and encouraging desired behaviours [2,26]. First, local food consumption at destinations is often regarded as a form of cultural engagement that provides tourists with the opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture through food consumption (e.g., [5]). Activities like food tours, cooking classes, and dining experiences can foster a deeper connection between tourists and the destination's culinary traditions [60]. Considering the travel experiences offered through local food consumption, promoting it as a cultural engagement could be an effective message appeal. Second, drawing from the classical *norm activation model* [70], moral and ethical considerations are important factors in motivating prosocial and sustainable behaviours among tourists (e.g., [14,31]). In the recycling studies by Chan and Bishop [10], it was demonstrated that moral norm has the potential to replace attitudinal factors in influencing pro-environmental behaviours. Nowadays, tourists are increasingly aware of their impacts on the environment and local communities [40]. Thus, by emphasising the ethical considerations of selecting local food at destinations, tourism businesses can effectively shape tourists' attitudes and intentions toward responsible consumption. Lastly, as evidenced in a recent study by Kronrod et al. [48], creating a well-rounded message that emphasises various facets of pro-environmental behaviours can effectively enhance the perceived informativeness as well as the intentions to engage in sustainable actions. As discussed above, tourists' local food consumption is potentially driven by multiple motivations. Targeting a single motive alone, such as cultural engagement or ethical considerations, may be insufficient to produce significant changes in behaviour [74]. Consequently, it becomes imperative to craft an all-rounded message appeal that encompasses these diverse motivations. By using this approach, the perceived informativeness can be enhanced and thereby increasing the persuasiveness for shaping behavioural changes. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. (H1): A combined message with both cultural and moral elements is more effective than a cultural message and an ethical message in influencing (a) attitude towards local food tourism; (b) visit intention for local food; (c) moral norm towards local food tourism; (d) ascribed responsibility related to local food tourism.

2.2. Local food consumption as a travel experience

According to the *cultural capital theory* [9], local food offered to tourists commonly serves as both objectified (e.g., the food itself) and embodied cultural capital (e.g., culinary skills) at the destinations for enhancing the value of tourists' travel experiences as well as enriching their cultural immersion [25,86]. A destination's cultural assets and resources play an essential role in attracting tourists and enriching the travel experience [3]. Following the local food taxonomy developed by Eriksen [22] and motivational forces in the local food consumption model by Kim et al. [45], we identified four key constructs of tourists' local food consumption experience, including cultural experience, emotional benefit, interpersonal relation and health concern. In the context of local food tourism, cultural experience and emotional benefits align with Eriksen [22]'s classification of geographic proximity that connection enables tourists to immerse themselves in local culinary traditions and gain positive emotions; interpersonal relations are associated with relational proximity, reflecting the interpersonal bonds fostered, while health concerns are linked to the values proximity, emphasising the advantages derived from consuming local food.

2.2.1. Cultural experience

Tourism should not be considered solely as a hedonic activity. Instead, tourists are always learning, consciously or unconsciously, through their experience of a destination. Through various activities at a destination, one acquires first-hand novel experiences that enable one to learn and gain a new understand of the local culture of a destination [17,44]. In particular, this could be achieved through consuming local food as the food itself is embedded in the local culture (such as the historical context of why the food is prepared in such a way or the local tradition which creates the food). Meanwhile, local food is an element that constitutes the local culture [4,35,56]. In addition to the biological intake, tourists benefit themselves through the learning and adaptation process while consuming local food [55]. While confirming that tourists' attitude towards local food positively affects the destination's image, Choe and Kim [13] attempted to explain how cultural experience and the destination's image are related. Since tourists could benefit from the cultural experience through consuming local food, this study, therefore, further investigates how the cultural experience could affect tourists' attitude towards local food and hypothesises that:

H2. Cultural experience positively affects attitude towards local food.

2.2.2. Emotional benefit

Tourists do not simply evaluate hospitality and tourism products by the products' utility but also assess how these products could improve

their emotions [27,28,38,51,62]. Tourists often expect to benefit emotionally from consuming the local food at a destination [7,41,79]. By consuming local food, one could experience happiness, pleasure and excitement [13]. Tourists' emotions play a vital role in fostering memorable experiences, which are crucial for the overall tourism experience [77]. Creating a memorable hospitality experience is critical to gaining a competitive advantage within the industry [75]. The positive emotion induced by consuming local food could affect their attitude towards local food. For example, Ha and Jang [28] have found that the positive emotions experienced by tourists could increase their intention to revisit the local restaurant. Therefore, this study hypothesises that:

H3. Emotional benefits positively affect attitude towards local food.

2.2.3. Interpersonal relation

Eating is an activity that offers an opportunity for social engagement that allows individuals to come together, connect with family and friends, and enhance their travel experience. Tourists often enjoy socialising and cherishing family togetherness during their trips; communication and interaction with others are often considered desirable elements of the travel experience [45]. When one is accompanied while travelling, one can socialise with these companions while eating. Tourists travelling with their families, as Wang [80] suggested, regard the trip as a means to strengthen familial bonding. Eating with other people creates conviviality between them and satisfies one's need to engage with other people [76]. To some tourists, the social utility of eating local food together could even outweigh the food quality itself [81]. Even if one is travelling alone, one can achieve a sense of "togetherness" by interacting with the local people who are either providing the service or receiving the service [17,44]. In their study involving a food festival, Williams et al. [82] suggested a critical dimension of such an event is to foster the producer-consumer interaction by enabling an exchange between the two parties. Therefore, the interpersonal relations brought about or being improved through consuming local food might increase the value of the food among tourists, leading to the following hypothesis:

H4. Interpersonal relation positively affects attitude towards local food.

2.2.4. Health concern

Some tourists' objective in travelling is not just to relax or enjoy but also improve their health [15]. For instance, various destinations have been developing attractions emphasising the healing effect of spas, hot springs or seawater therapy, which would appeal to tourists intending to improve their physical well-being after travelling [12]. Similarly, tourists could be concerned about how healthy the local food is regarded to health, out of five other factors, as very or extremely important when it comes to eating during travelling. Kim and Eves [44] have subsequently confirmed that perceiving local food as fresh, nutritious, and healthy could motivate tourists' local food consumption as they believe that could promote their health. Hence, this study hypothesises the following:

H5. Health concerns positively affect attitudes towards local food.

2.2.5. Attitude towards local food and intention to visit

Attitude towards local food has been found to be a significant predictor of intention to visit in the context of food tourism. Previous studies have found that attitudes towards local food influence tourists' intentions or desires to visit a destination (e.g., [11,13]). For instance, Choe and Kim [13] found that attitude towards local food positively influenced tourists' intention to visit a destination for food tourism. Similarly, Chang et al. [11] found that positive attitudes towards local food were associated with higher desire to visit a destination. Ryu and Han [68] also found a positive relationship between attitude and intention to experience food. Overall, while the relationship between attitude towards local food and intention to visit appears to be generally positive, as proposed in attitudinal models, therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. Attitude towards local food positively affects intention to visit

2.3. Local food consumption as responsible tourism

Moral norm is a measure predicting prosocial intentions based on the *norm activation model* [70], which Parker et al. [63] referred it as the personal rules internalised in oneself to evaluate whether something to be done is morally right or wrong. Previous studies from food or tourism literature have employed moral norms to predict intention. Shin and Hancer [71] have confirmed that local food purchase intention was positively and significantly affected by people's moral norms. Later, Han et al. [32] also discovered that intention for pro-environmental behaviours among tourists, such as sustainable consumption, is positively and significantly affected by tourists' moral norms. A more recent study by Wu et al. [83] also confirmed that tourists' moral norms positively and significantly affect their pro-environmental behaviors requiring less effort. One of the latest studies by Balıkçıoğlu Dedeoğlu et al. [6] also hypothesised that tourists know consuming local food is more sustainable might have their intention to consume local food positively affected. Hence, the following hypotheses were developed:

H7a. Moral norm positively affects visit intention for local food.

H7b. Moral norm moderates the relationship between attitude towards local food and visit intention for local food.

2.4. Ascribed responsibility

According to De Groot and Steg [18], ascribed responsibility is the feelings of being responsible for the negative impact provoked in oneself as a result of one not having acted pro-socially. It is often regarded as the moderator of how moral norms are activated, particularly in activating moral norms related to pro-environmental behaviors [32]. A rationale for tourists to consume local food is that it helps protect the environment [71]. Consuming local food is also more sustainable as it facilitates the continuity of local food production, thus preserving the local food culture and the local landscape associated with the food production process [8,72]. Having understood this, one might feel responsible for jeopardising the sustainability of the local food business and culture if one did not consume local food at the destination. Since such feelings could affect tourists' intention to visit a destination, this study proposes following hypotheses:

H8a. Ascribed responsibility positively affects visit intention for local food.

H8b. Ascribed responsibility moderates the relationship between attitude towards local food and visit intention for local food.

The theoretical framework of this study is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Overview of research design

This research consists of two complementary studies aimed at understanding the role of cultural and ethical factors in shaping tourists' local food consumption behaviors. Study 1 employs an experimental approach to assess the effectiveness of different message appeals (cultural, ethical, and combined) in influencing tourists' attitudes and intentions toward local food consumption. Study 2 builds upon these findings by exploring the underlying mechanisms driving tourists' attitudes and behavioral intentions. Using a survey-based approach, Study 2 examines the relationships between tourists' local food consumption experiences, moral and ethical considerations, and behavioral intentions. While Study 1 focuses on the immediate impact of persuasive

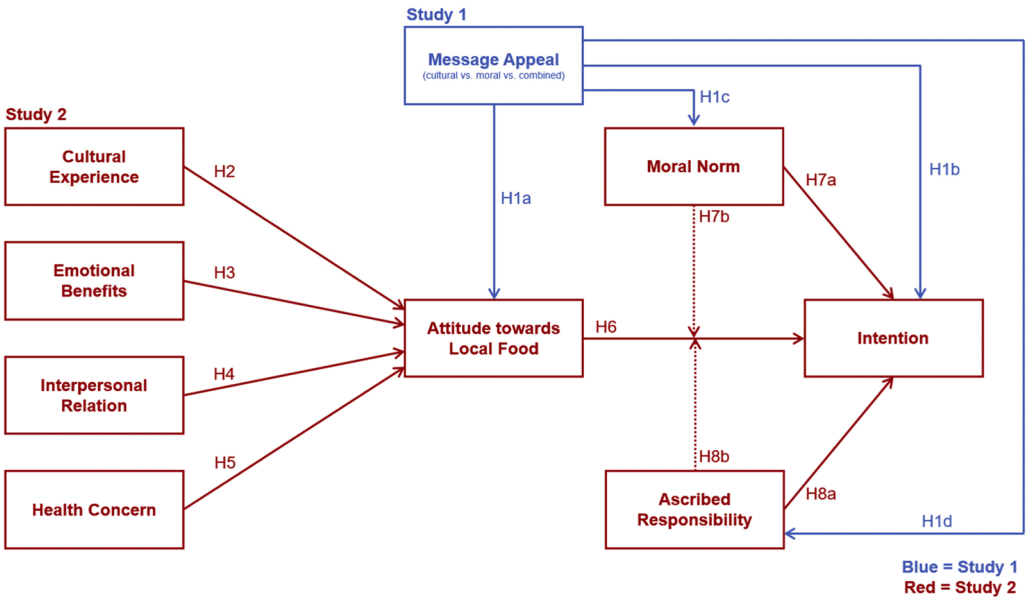

Fig. 1. The research model.

messaging, Study 2 broadens the perspective by assessing how intrinsic factors influence tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Together, these two studies offer a holistic understanding of how both external influences (marketing messages) and internal drivers (cultural and ethical considerations) shape local food consumption in the tourism context. The details of each study are outlined in the following sections.

3.1. Data collection

Participants of both Study 1 and 2 were recruited online by a Chinese research agency. Their panel covers over 300 million Chinese consumers and is widely representative of the population. The decision to focus on Chinese tourists is informed by the country's status as one of the top nations in both outbound [46] and inbound tourism [78]. To be eligible for this study, the respondents should have had international travel experience over the past three years, taking into consideration the period that has taken the international travel restrictions over the COVID-19 pandemic. The minimum sample size required for each study was estimated using G*Power 3.1 software [23]. For Study 1, involving three experimental groups, using a significance level of 5 % level, under a power of 95 % and an estimated medium effect size of 0.25, at least 251 respondents should be recruited. Regarding Study 2, the minimum sample required for this study is 166, given the 5 % significance level of the hypothesis test, a medium effect size of 0.15, and 9 paths in the research model. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' institution.

3.2. Measures

The measurement items for the constructs were adapted from the previous literature (Appendix 1). These items are measured on a 1–7 scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree); the survey was translated into Chinese and validated using a back-translation approach [20]. A pre-test was conducted, and some wording refinements were made to enhance the clarity of the questionnaire items. In Study 2, questions related to the local food consumption experience, i.e. cultural experiences, emotional benefits, interpersonal relations, health concerns, and attitudes towards local food, are framed in reference to the respondents' most recent international travel destination. For instance, respondents are asked to assess statements such as 'Local food at [destination] is good…' The choice of destination aligns with the one they reported visiting in the initial section of the questionnaire. This approach enables Study 2 respondents to provide a more precise and accurate evaluation of their local food consumption experience.

3.3. Data analysis

One-way ANOVA would be performed to confirm the difference among the respondents in different experimental groups of Study 1 regarding their responses to the manipulation questions and perception towards the three types of message appeal. To examine the path relationship in Study 2, we utilised partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its distinct advantages, which include its suitability for studies with a large number of constructs, its ability to operate without strict assumptions about normal data distribution, and its appropriateness for identifying key exogenous constructs in a research model [29].

4. Study 1

4.1. Design, participants, materials and procedures

Study 1 aimed to examine the impact of different message appeals on tourists' attitudes towards local food, visit intentions, moral norms, and ascribed responsibility regarding local food consumption. A between-subjects experimental design (cultural message vs. ethical message vs. combined message) was employed. The three message stimuli (see Appendix 2) were initially developed by the research team, reviewed by two tourism marketing researchers for appropriateness and accuracy, and pre-tested with ten respondents to ensure clarity.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three message conditions. Each participant was first presented with a brief introduction explaining that the study aimed to understand tourism-related perceptions. They were then shown one of the three messages and asked to read it carefully. After viewing the assigned message, participants completed an online survey measuring their attitudes toward local food, visit intentions, moral norms, and ascribed responsibility (Appendix 1). The questionnaire also included manipulation check items to assess whether the messages were perceived as intended, as well as demographic questions. The use of text-based stimuli in experimental designs is consistent with prior research examining message framing and tourists' decision-making (e.g., [36,37,54,84]). This approach enables

researchers to systematically manipulate content while maintaining control over extraneous variables that may otherwise influence participant responses. To minimize external influences, all participants completed the study in a controlled online survey environment, and no additional information about local food was provided beyond the assigned message. A total of 627 Chinese participants were recruited through a market research agency, with each condition receiving between 206 and 214 respondents. The demographic profile of participants is presented in Table 1.

4.2. Results

One-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the success of the manipulations. As presented in Table 2, respondents exposed to either the cultural message or combined message rated significantly higher than those in the ethical message condition concerning the extent to which the message emphasised cultural experience. Similarly, respondents exposed to a moral message or combined message rated the message as emphasising an ethical act compared to those in the cultural-message condition. Lastly, respondents in the combined-message condition rated significantly higher than the other two groups regarding whether the message covered both cultural and ethical aspects. Overall, the manipulations were successful.

To test the differential effects of the three messages, a one-way ANOVA analysis was performed (Table 3). Regarding attitudes towards local food consumption, the results showed that either a cultural message ($M_{cultural}$ = 5.9842) or a combined message ($M_{combined}$ = 5.9662) performed better than an ethical message ($M_{ethical}$ = 5.7138). Similarly, the cultural message ($M_{cultural}$ = 5.8463) and the combined message ($M_{combined}$ = 5.9050) elicited stronger intentions to visit a destination for local food compared to the ethical message ($M_{ethical}$ = 5.6573). Although the F-test did not indicate a significant group difference for moral norm, the LSD comparison showed that a combined message ($M_{combined}$ = 5.2705) was more effective in enhancing the moral norm than an ethical message ($M_{ethical}$ = 5.0549). Finally, ethical message ($M_{ethical}$ = 4.8452) and combined message ($M_{combined}$ = 4.8873) are equally effective than cultural message ($M_{cultural}$ = 4.4773) in enhancing tourists' ascribed responsibility during their travel.

4.3. Study 1 discussion

The results of Study 1 make a valuable contribution to the tourism literature by advancing our understanding of effective message appeals that promote local food consumption among tourists.

Table 1
Respondents' Profile (Study 1).

Attributes	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	263	41.9
	Female	364	58.1
Age	≤ 25	113	18.0
	26–30	187	29.8
	31–40	278	44.3
	41–50	39	6.2
	> 50	10	1.6
Education Level	Secondary or below	94	15.0
	Degree	491	78.3
	Master's Degree or above	42	6.7
Monthly Income (in RMB)	≤ 50,00	98	15.6
	5000–10,000	255	40.7
	10,000–20,000	180	28.7
	20,000–30,000	57	9.1
	30,000–50,000	26	4.1
	>50,000	11	1.8
International Travel Frequency	1 to 2 times	141	22.5
	3 to 4 times	322	51.3
	Five times or more	134	26.2

Table 2
Manipulation Checks (Study 1).

Manipulation Checks	Condition	Mean	*F*	*Sig.*
The message promotes local food consumption as _____.				
a cultural experience	cultural message	6.34	2854.321	<0.001
	ethical message	2.80		
	combined message	6.23		
an ethical act to help local businesses	cultural message	2.16	2337.137	<0.001
	ethical message	5.71		
	combined message	6.11		
both a cultural experience and an ethical act to help local businesses	cultural message	2.17	2671.374	<0.001
	ethical message	2.72		
	combined message	6.09		

Local food consumption in tourism is often perceived as an avenue for immersing in authentic local culture, thereby enhancing the overall travel experience for tourists. Nevertheless, it is equally important to consider the ethical considerations among the tourists when they patronise local providers. Although a cultural message works effectively for attitude and visit intentions, the findings indicated that a combined message, which encompasses both the experiential and ethical benefits of local food consumption, emerges as the most effective approach across all the variables, i.e. for shaping attitudes, enhancing intentions, moral norms, and ascribed responsibility. This could be attributed to the perception that local food consumption is still primarily seen as a travel experience, despite the growing awareness of responsible tourism [5,72]. Therefore, placing excessive emphasis on the ethical aspects of local food consumption may not be the most effective approach to attracting customers. Furthermore, Kronrod et al. [48] suggested the importance of perceived informativeness of the message that encourages pro-environmental behaviours. Therefore, tourism businesses need to combine both cultural and ethical aspects in their marketing messages for a successful campaign in encouraging local food consumption.

5. Study 2

5.1. Design, participants, materials and procedures

To further understand how ethical and moral considerations influence tourists' local food consumption, Study 2 primarily aimed to examine the path relationships among key variables in the proposed research model through an online survey. While ethical considerations are a central focus, this study also explores how they interact with cultural, health, social, and emotional factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' decision-making on local food consumption. Study 2 examines their influence in conjunction with cultural experiences and other established factors, providing insights into whether ethical motivations enhance or alter existing determinants of local food consumption. This approach reflects a well-established practice in behavioral and tourism research, where new theoretical constructs (e.g., ethical or pro-environmental motivations) are integrated into existing models to assess their added value or interaction with established predictors [21,53,59]

The survey questionnaire consists of three sections. The first section covers the international travel experience of the respondents, the second section includes measurement items for the constructs in the research model (Appendix 1), and the third section contains questions about the demographic background of the respondents.

Study 2 collected data from a nationwide panel of Chinese consumers

Table 3
Impact of message appeals.

Variable	Condition	N	Mean	F	*p*	LSD comparison
Attitude	Cultural Message	206	5.9842	10.889	<0.001	*p*(cultural, ethical) = 0.000
	Ethical Message	214	5.7138			*p*(ethical, combined) = 0.000
	Combined Message	207	5.9662			
Visit Intention	Cultural Message	206	5.8463	4.985	0.007	*p*(cultural, ethical) = 0.022
	Ethical Message	214	5.6573			*p*(ethical, combined) = 0.003
	Combined Message	207	5.9050			
Moral Norm	Cultural Message	206	5.1456	2.338	0.097	*p*(ethical, combined) = 0.032
	Ethical Message	214	5.0549			
	Combined Message	207	5.2705			
Ascribed Responsibility	Cultural Message	206	4.4773	5.349	0.005	*p*(cultural, ethical) = 0.007
	Ethical Message	214	4.8458			*p*(cultural, combined) = 0.003
	Combined Message	207	4.8873			

recruited through the same marketing agency in Study 1. There were 420 valid responses collected, the respondent profiles are presented in Table 4. The top international travel destinations that the respondents visited most recently are Japan (18.1 %), Thailand (15.5 %), the United States (15.6 %), South Korea (8.9 %) and Canada (6.0 %)

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Common method variance

Given that self-reported data were collected from a single source, it is possible that common method bias (CMB) may have led to inflated relationships between the constructs in the research model. Harman's single-factor test was performed to test whether this study has common method biases [16,66]. Eight factors emerged, and the highest one accounted for 26.81 % of the variance (lower than the 50 % threshold), indicating no problematic CMV was found.

5.2.2. Measurement model

The reliability and validity of the reflective measurement model were evaluated [30] (Table 5). Except for two indicators of cultural experience and health concern having outer loading of 0.657 and 0.680, respectively, the reflective indicator loadings of all measurement items of latent variables in the research model exceeded 0.708. These indicators were not removed because deleting these items did not increase the internal consistency reliability of the constructs. The results also showed that all constructs' Cronbach's alpha were between 0.556 and 0.905. Although the values were not high, Cronbach's alpha may underestimate the construct reliability and therefore, composite reliability is a more reliable measure [30,33]. All constructs' composite reliability exceeded 0.70, which confirmed the internal consistency and reliability of this study. Moreover, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of all constructs was greater than the 0.5 threshold, confirming the convergent validity of the measurement model. Furthermore, discriminant validity using the Heterotrait and Monotrait (HTMT) ratio [34]. Table 6 shows that the values of the HTMT ratio for all constructs were less than the recommended threshold of 0.90, and thus, the discriminant validity was confirmed.

Table 4
Respondent Profile (Study 2).

Attributes	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	189,	45.0 %
	Female	231	55.0 %
Age	≤ 25	31,	7.4 %
	26–30	145,	34.5 %
	31–40	219,	52.1 %
	41–50	19	4.5 %
	> 51	6	1.4 %
Education Level	Secondary or below	5	1.2 %
	Degree	37,7	89.8 %
	Master's Degree or above	38	9.1 %
Monthly Income (in RMB)	≤ 50,00	16,	3.8 %
	5000–1000,0	122,	29.1 %
	10,000–2000,0	179,	42.6 %
	20,000–3000,0	65	15.5 %
	30,000–50,000	2,6	6.2 %
	>50,000	12	2.7 %
International Travel Frequency	Once in several years	86,	20.5 %
	Once per year	216,	51.4 %
	Several times per year	118	28.1 %

5.2.3. Path analysis

The path analysis is presented in Table 7. The model of this study explained 44.2 % of variance (R^2) in attitude towards local food and 35.7 % (R^2) of variance in intention to travel for local food. All indicators' VIF values were below 3.3, there were no critical collinearity issues among the constructs [47]. Except for H8a, all the hypotheses proposed were supported. Cultural experience, emotional benefit, interpersonal relation, and health concern positively influenced tourists' attitude towards local food. Attitude and moral norms, but not ascribed responsibility, positively influenced the intention to travel. Unexpectedly, ascribed responsibility had a significant but negative relationship with visit intention.

The interaction effect of moral norm and attitude negatively influenced intention to travel. The simple slope analysis (Fig. 2) showed that when the moral norm is strong, attitude becomes less important in influencing the intention to travel. Furthermore, ascribed responsibility positively moderated the relationship between attitude and intention; the simple slope analysis (Fig. 3) showed that tourists' ascribed responsibility strengthened the impact of attitude on intention to travel.

5.3. Study 2 discussion

Study 2 identified several antecedent variables, including cultural experience, emotional benefits, interpersonal relationship, and health concern, which positively affect tourists' attitudes towards local food. We also find that moral norm has a positive effect on tourists' intentions to visit a destination. However, ascribed responsibility has an unexpected negative effect that might imply tourists may feel a sense of obligation or responsibility to consume local food rather than a genuine desire or preference. This sense of obligation or responsibility may arise from social norms or pressure from others [52]. In such cases, individuals may feel that they are sacrificing their personal preferences to fulfil this obligation, leading to a more negative visit intention for local food.

Additionally, this study reveals that the effect of attitude towards local food on intention to visit a destination is unique across all individuals. We found that moral norm has a negative moderating effect on this relationship, which suggests that for individuals who place a high value on morality and ethical considerations, the effect of a positive attitude towards local food on their intention to visit the destination is weakened. This could be due to their perception that consuming local food is not only a personal decision but also a moral one, which may

Table 5
Reliability and validity of constructs (Study 2).

Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Cultural Experience (CE)	CE1	0.726	0.556	0.77	0.528
	CE2	0.657			
	CE3	0.791			
Emotional Benefit (EB)	EB1	0.773	0.571	0.778	0.538
	EB2	0.712			
	EB3	0.715			
Interpersonal Relation (IR)	IR1	0.717	0.567	0.776	0.536
	IR2	0.703			
	IR3	0.774			
Health Concern (HC)	HC1	0.755	0.727	0.829	0.549
	HC2	0.771			
	HC3	0.753			
	HC4	0.680			
Attitude towards Local Food (ATT)	ATT1	0.780	0.637	0.805	0.58
	ATT2	0.734			
	ATT3	0.769			
Intention to Travel for Local Food (INT)	INT1	0.815	0.721	0.843	0.641
	INT2	0.795			
	INT3	0.790			
Moral Norm (MN)	MN1	0.728	0.811	0.875	0.638
	MN2	0.832			
	MN3	0.799			
	MN4	0.832			
Ascribed Responsibility (AR)	AR1	0.872	0.905	0.939	0.837
	AR2	0.932			
	AR3	0.940			

Table 6
HTMT ratios (Study 2).

	CE	EB	IR	HC	ATT	INT	MN
Cultural Experience (CE)							
Emotional Benefit (EB)	0.815						
Interpersonal Relation (IR)	0.762	0.868					
Health Concern (HC)	0.606	0.737	0.578				
Attitude towards Local Food (ATT)	0.741	0.881	0.791	0.783			
Intention to Travel for Local Food (INT)	0.485	0.697	0.656	0.582	0.786		
Moral Norm (MN)	0.399	0.334	0.267	0.548	0.394	0.412	
Ascribed Responsibility (AR)	0.188	0.155	0.116	0.434	0.293	0.218	0.841

Table 7
PLS-SEM path analysis.

Path		Path Coefficients	*t*	*p*	Supported
H2	CE → ATT	0.123	2.149	0.032	Yes
H3	EB → ATT	0.216	3.962	0.000	Yes
H4	IR → ATT	0.253	4.300	0.000	Yes
H5	HC → ATT	0.185	4.105	0.000	Yes
H6	ATT → INT	0.456	8.907	0.000	Yes
H7a	MN → INT	0.216	3.236	0.001	Yes
H7b	MN x ATT → INT	−0.204	2.745	0.006	Yes
H8a	AR → INT	−0.129	2.145	0.032	Yes
H8b	AR x ATT→ INT	0.174	2.846	0.004	Yes

Note: Cultural Experience (CE); Emotional Benefit (EB); Interpersonal Relation (IR); Health Concern (HC); Attitude towards Local Food (ATT); Intention to Travel for Local Food (INT); Moral Norm (MN); Ascribed Responsibility (AR).

make them more cautious in their travel decision-making process [83]. On the other hand, we also found that ascribed responsibility positively moderates the relationship between attitude towards local food and intention to visit the destination. This suggests that individuals who feel responsible for supporting the local community and economy are more likely to act on their positive attitude towards local food and visit the destination. They may view consuming local food as a way to contribute to the sustainability of the local community, and therefore, be more motivated to visit the destination [8,58].

6. General discussion

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study builds upon previous research findings and contributes to the understanding of the factors that influence tourists' attitudes towards local food and their intentions to visit a destination for local food (e.g., [13,28,43,75]). Study 1 demonstrates the effectiveness of employing messages combining both the cultural and ethical aspects of local food tourism. The findings enrich the existing literature that tourists primarily perceive local food consumption as a part of the travel experience despite the increased awareness of sustainable and responsible tourism. Furthermore, incorporating information about cultural engagement and ethical considerations can potentially enhance the informativeness of the marketing messages [48], thereby more effectively shape tourists' attitudes and behaviours.

Additionally, this research identifies several antecedent variables, including cultural experience, emotional benefits, interpersonal relationship, and health concern, which positively affect tourists' attitudes towards local food. The inclusion of moral norms and ascribed responsibility as variables in the model provides a more comprehensive understanding of the role of ethical considerations on local food consumption by tourists. Specifically, moral norm weakens the importance of attitudes and ascribed responsibility strengthens the relationship between attitudes and intentions. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of acknowledging diversity among food-related tourists, emphasising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be suitable. In

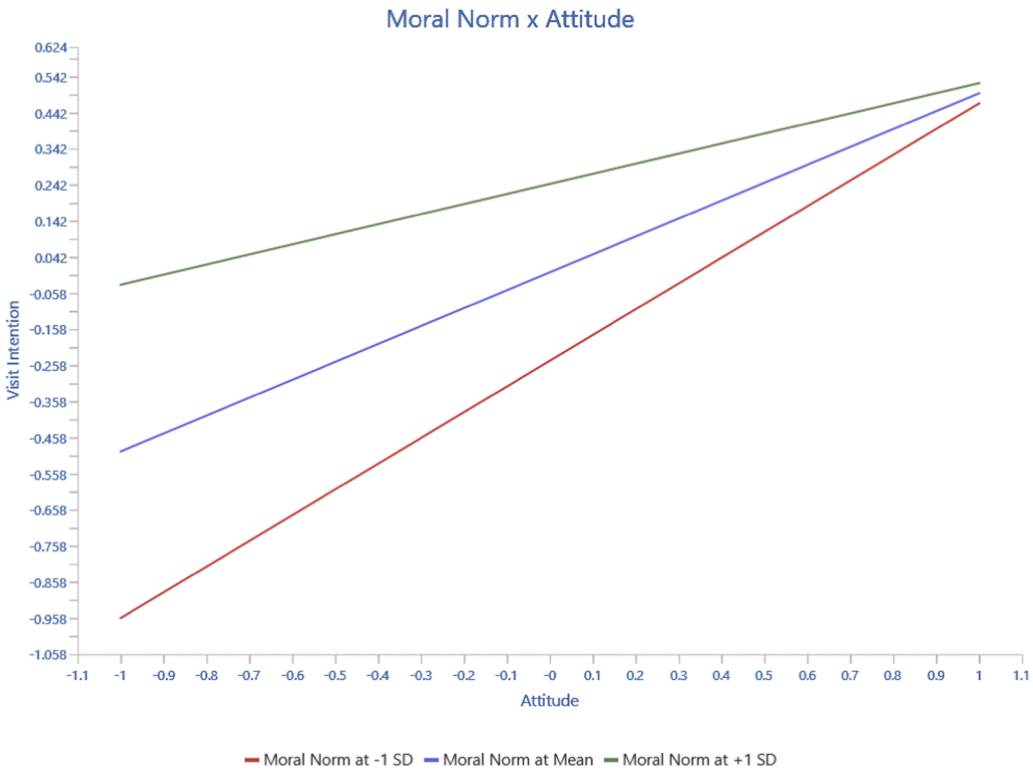

Fig. 2. The interaction effect of moral norms and attitude on travel intention.

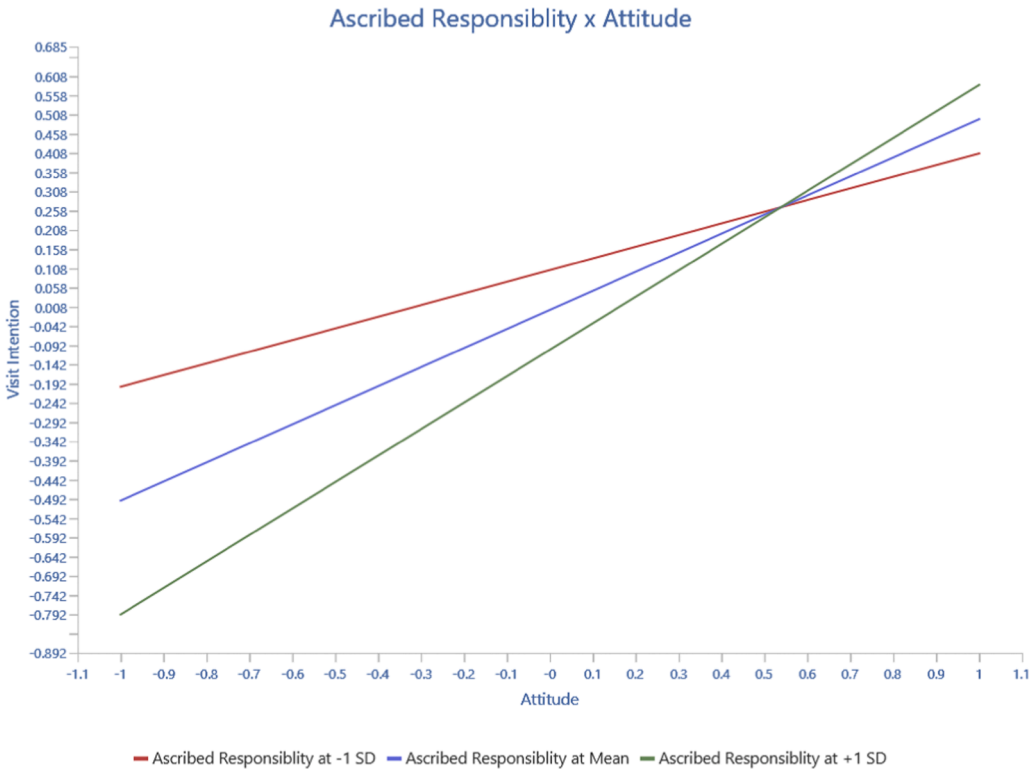

Fig. 3. The interaction effect of ascribed responsibility and attitude on travel intention.

sum, this research provides a more holistic, context-aware comprehension of the determinants influencing tourists' attitudes towards local food and their intentions to visit a destination.

This research offers valuable insights into understanding food-related tourists and their responses to various message appeals. Moreover, this study enhances our understanding of the various forces motivating tourists' choices by uncovering the inter-relationships between travel experiences, ethical considerations, attitudes, and

behavioural intentions related to local food consumption. Ultimately, these findings contribute to identifying the key factors that underlie the successful promotion of local food consumption.

6.2. Managerial implications

The research findings have important implications for managers and practitioners in the tourism and hospitality industry. One of the key implications is that practitioners can use various tactics to promote local food consumption among tourists. Firstly, they can emphasise the cultural aspect of tasting local food, enhancing tourists' attitudes towards local food. Secondly, promoting local food as fresh, nutritious and healthy can encourage tourists to choose local food over other options. Thirdly, practitioners can highlight the social aspect of local food consumption, as tourists can interact with local people when consuming local food. Lastly, the authenticity of the local food experience can be emphasised to attract tourists. It is also important to consider how the tourists may perceive the informativeness of the promotional messages.

In promoting local food, the study recommends that practitioners employ an all-rounded message that covers different aspects or benefits of local food consumption. Marketers should also carefully consider that different customers may have various degrees of moral norms and ascribed responsibilities. For individuals with a high level of moral norm, cultural engagement with local food may be less importance, and messages supplemented with ascribed responsibility are likely to be more effective in enhancing the appeal of local food and conveying a more well-rounded message. By emphasising these, practitioners can encourage tourists to choose local food options and contribute to the local economy. Overall, the research findings can be valuable for practitioners in promoting local food and enhancing tourists' experiences, ultimately contributing to the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry.

6.3. Study limitations

Our study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, our study employs a cross-sectional design, which limits our ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research should consider using longitudinal designs to overcome this limitation. Second, our study focused solely on Chinese tourists, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other ethnic or cultural groups. Given that food consumption behaviors and attitudes toward local food may vary significantly across different cultures, future research should explore how cultural factors influence local food consumption among tourists from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cross-cultural implications of ethical considerations and local food consumption. Third, actual eating behaviour was not measured, and future research should aim to include this variable in the research model. Fourth, our study relied solely on self-reported data from tourists, which may be subject to social desirability or memory recall bias. In future research, alternative data collection methods, such as observation or physiological measures, could provide more objective measures of tourists' actual behaviours and attitudes towards local food. Finally, while our study used written message stimuli, future research could enhance external validity by employing materials such as social media content, posters, or video advertisements to better reflect how tourists encounter and respond to promotional messages in real-world settings.

7. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the antecedents of tourists' attitudes towards local food, and the important role of attitudes, moral norms, and ascribed responsibility in shaping tourists' intentions to visit a destination and consume local food. The findings suggested that messages combining different benefits or aspects of local food consumption are more effective than message appeal emphasising a single motive. The path analysis indicated that attitudes towards local food and moral norms positively influence the intention to visit a destination. The study also found that moral norms negatively moderate the relationship between attitude towards local food and intention to visit a destination, while ascribed responsibility positively moderates the relationship.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on local food tourism by filling a gap in our understanding of how moral norm and ascribed responsibility impact tourists' attitudes and intentions towards local food, providing insights for practitioners and researchers in the field. This study also provides important managerial implications. Practitioners can use these findings to promote local food as a cultural experience that is fresh, nutritious, healthy, and provides an authentic experience for tourists. They should also put more emphasis on norms and ascribed responsibility in their promotion activities.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Calvin Wan: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Daisy Lee:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tai Ming Wut:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rajlakshmi Banerjee:** Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1. Measurement items.

Constructs	Measurement Items	Sources
Cultural Experience (CE)	CE1 Experiencing local food at [destination] helps me see how other people live.	[13,43,
	CE2 Experiencing local food at [destination] gives me an opportunity to increase my knowledge about different cultures.	44]
	CE3 Tasting local food at [destination] in an original place is an authentic experience.	
Emotional Benefit (EB)	EB1 Tasting local food at [destination] on holiday helps me to relax.	
	EB2 Tasting local food at [destination] makes me feel exhilarated.	
	EB3 Tasting local food at [destination] build a good memory for me.	

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(*continued*)

Constructs	Measurement Items	Sources
Interpersonal Relation (IR)	IR1 Having local food at [destination] increases friendship or kinship.	
	IR2 Tasting local food at [destination] enables me to have an enjoyable time with friends and/or family.	
	IR3 Tasting local food in its traditional setting at [destination] is a special experience.	
Health Concern (HC)	HC1 Local food at [destination] is nutritious.	
	HC2 Tasting local food at [destination] keeps me healthy.	
	HC3 Local food at [destination] is hygienic.	
	HC4 Local food at [destination] is safe.	
Attitude towards Local Food (ATT)	ATTD1 Local food at [destination] is good.	[13,43,
	ATTD2 Local food at [destination] is pleasant.	44]
	ATTD3 Local food at [destination] is favourable.	
Intention to Travel for Local Food (INT)	INT1 I would like to visit a destination to explore diverse local foods in near future.	
	INT2 I would like to travel for food tourism in near future.	
	INT3 I would like to travel to enjoy local food in the near future.	
Moral Norm (MN)	MN1 I feel that it is important to purchase from local businesses while travelling.	[32,71,
	MN2 I feel an obligation to purchase local food to help local businesses while travelling.	83]
	MN3 My personal values encourage me to purchase local food while travelling.	
	MN4 Purchase local food is a morally responsible behaviour while traveling because of my own values/principles.	
Ascribed Responsibility (AR)	AR1 I believe that every traveller is responsible for supporting the local community at the destination.	
	AR2 I feel that all travellers are jointly responsible for supporting the small businesses in the destination to thrive.	
	AR3 Every traveller must take responsibility to spend for helping the local shops during their trips.	

Note: In Study 2, the questions related to the local food consumption experience are framed by using the most recent international travel destination that the respondents visited, for example 'Local food at [destination] is good…', the destination is where a respondent visited most recently as reported in the first section of the questionnaire.

Appendix 2. Experimental materials for Study 1.

Message Appeal	Messages used in Study 1
Cultural Message	**International Food Tourism – Embrace the Multicultural Experience of Authentic Cuisine!** Embark on a global culinary journey and taste authentic cuisine from various countries. Satisfy your taste buds with a variety of cuisine from around the world, each dish telling the story of the region's unique culinary heritage. Explore a food and cultural journey! **国际美食旅游——体验地道美食的多元文化** 踏上全球美食之旅, 品尝各国的地道美食.用世界各地多样美食满足您的味蕾, 每一道菜都讲述着当地的独特的烹饪传承.探索一场美食文化之旅
Ethical Message	**International Food Tourism – Support local communities!** Embark on a global culinary journey and support local businesses in each country. Every dish is part of an ethical food journey, and every bite helps local shops. Make a meaningful impact in your local community and small businesses! **国际美食旅游——支持当地社区** 踏上全球美食之旅, 支持各国的当地企业.每一道美食都是道德美食之旅的一部分, 每一口都能帮助当地商店.为当地社区和小企业贡献一份意义非凡的影响
Combined Message	International Food Tourism – Taste the Culture, Support Local! Embark on a global culinary journey, taste authentic cuisine, and support local businesses! Each delicious dish not only tells the story of the region's unique culinary heritage, but also helps local shops. Explore food culture and the ethical beauty of supporting local small businesses! **国际美食旅游—— 品尝文化, 支持当地** 踏上全球美食之旅, 品尝地道美食, 支持当地企业每一道菜美食不但讲述着当地的独特的烹饪传承, 也能帮助当地商店.探索美食文化, 支持当地小企业的道德之美

Note: Study 1 used the Chinese version of the three messages and the above English version is for illustrative purposes.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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