

UDC 338.48-6:641.43:316.644(540)  
Original Scientific Paper  
<https://doi.org/10.62598/JVA.12.1.1.23>



Received: April 29, 2026  
Accepted for publishing: June 16, 2026

# COASTAL GASTRONOMY AND DESTINATION IMAGE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL SCALING ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS ABOUT A TROPICAL SEAFOOD HUB IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** *The study aims to analyse the perceptions of international tourists on coastal gastronomy and its influence in the destination image of Kerala, India. The study adopted a descriptive research design using a structured questionnaire having semantic differential scale with bipolar attributes. Data was collected from international travellers from three coastal destinations in Kerala using convenience sampling. The data was analysed using Multidimensional scaling (MDS) technique. MDS develops a 2D perceptual map of the destination image attributes. The data has an excellent goodness-of-fit value. The results reveals that Kerala is strongly perceived as Authentic, Traditional, and Heritage rich destination with an emerging luxury and international appeal. However, there is a perceptual gap exists between “sustainability” and “authenticity”. The study contributes to destination image and gastronomy tourism literature by applying Multidimensional scaling, an advanced data analysing technique to understand the underlying image of a destination*

**Keywords:** *Destination Image, Tourist Perception, Gastronomy, Multidimensional Scaling, Seafood*

## 1. Introduction

Destination image refers to the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals hold about a travel destination (Crompton 1979). A favorable destination image can attract tourists, entice repeat visits, and stimulate positive word-of-mouth recommendations, while an unfavorable image may deter potential visitors and result in decreased tourist traffic (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004). In an increasingly competitive tourism sector, destinations strive to create a distinctive image and enhance their competitiveness and visibility by showcasing their unique features and attractions. Nowadays, many destinations actively utilize local foods and culinary heritage as a strategic promotional tool to influence tourists' destination choice and to strengthen the destination image.

In contemporary tourism, various forms of food-based tourism such as “culinary tourism”, “gastronomy tourism”, “gastro-tourism”, “wine tourism”, “food tourism”, and “gourmet tourism” have emerged (Hall & Sharples, 2003). While ‘culinary tourism’ and ‘food tourism’ both explore tourists’ food-related desires and activities, they differ in their emphasis. Culinary tourism centers on the cultural knowledge gained through food experiences, whereas food tourism prioritizes the physical interaction with local cuisines. Gastronomic tourism, in contrast, takes a broader perspective, considering food’s place within the host culture’s overall lifestyle and traditions (Ellis et al., 2018).

Coastal gastronomy is one of the various forms of gastronomy tourism. In coastal destinations, seafood reflects the local culture, culinary heritage and tourism experiences. Coastal food tourism integrates seafood-based gastronomy with natural attractions like the sea, sand, and coastal landscapes; often without seasonal limitations (Andersson et al., 2017). Consequently, coastal gastronomy can enrich tourists’ travel experience and contribute to the development of destination image.

Kerala, renowned as “God’s Own Country” is a state located in the southwestern region of India. It is situated between the Arabian sea to the west and the Western Ghats mountain range to the east. Approximately 22.99 million tourists visited Kerala during 2024-25 (Kerala tourist statistics, 2024). Kerala is a prominent coastal destination. It has nearly 590 km of coastline along with innumerable lagoons and lakes. This geographical advantage gives Kerala access to abundant seafood resources. There are nearly 222 coastal villages in Kerala supporting over 8 lakh people in fisheries and allied sectors. Kerala accounts for 13% of India’s national marine production (Kerala Fisheries Department, n.d.). Seafood is deeply rooted in the culture, economy, nutrition and tourism of Kerala (Davis, 2024). Kerala has a lot of traditional seafood dishes like Fish Curry, Karimeen Pollichathu (pearl spot fish steamed in banana leaf), Fish Mappas, Prawn and Squid Roast, Meen Peera, and stuffed Mussels. Modernized seafood dishes like Prawn Chilli Fry, Grilled Seer fish, and Prawn Mango Curry are also available here. From local eateries to fine-dining restaurants, seafood is prepared with great culinary appeal. In this context, Kerala provides an appropriate setting for studying the relationship between coastal gastronomy and destination image.

Multidimensional scaling (MDS) is “a family of models and methods for representing stimuli or other objects as points in multidimensional space based on proximity (e.g., similarity or dissimilarity) data and relying on the principle that distances (usually, but not necessarily, Euclidean) in that space are related via a simple (usually linear or monotonic) function of the proximities” (Carroll et al., 2005). Unlike a simple mean score, MDS shows the relative positioning of the attributes, allowing researchers to see which traits define the destination’s “core identity” versus its “niche” or “weak” perceptions. Employing this advanced analytical technique will generate a perceptual map of underlying attributes in a multidimensional space.

Despite the growing importance of gastronomy in destination image formation, existing research has primarily focused on general food tourism experiences, and tourist behaviour. Comparatively less attention has been given to coastal gastronomy, how tourists perceive coastal gastronomy, and its influence on the destination image of coastal tourism regions. Moreover, only limited number of studies have used Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) to explore the perceptual structure of gastronomy attributes of destinations. Based on literature review and the identified research gap, the following research question are addressed:

1. How do international tourists perceive Kerala’s coastal gastronomy?
2. What perceptual relationship exists among Kerala’s coastal gastronomy attributes?
3. How do these attributes influence destination image of Kerala?

The present study aims to assess the international tourists’ perceptions on coastal gastronomy of Kerala using semantic differential scale attributes. The study further aims to use Multidimensional scaling

(MDS) to construct a perceptual map to visualize the underlying relationship between these attributes. Additionally, it aims to analyse how these perceptual attributes shape the overall destination image of Kerala as a coastal gastronomy tourism destination.

### 1.1. Relevance of the study

In the current global tourism scenario, where gastronomy increasingly influences destination choices and travel experiences, understanding its role in destination image formation has become important for tourism development and destination marketing. This study contributes to the growing body of gastronomy tourism literature. The findings may assist tourism policymakers, and destination marketers to strengthen destination branding and to promote sustainable coastal destination development in future.

## 2. Review of literature

Destination image is shaped by various cultural, social, tangible, and intangible attributes that influence tourists’ perceptions of destinations, among which food has emerged as a particularly important experiential component (Martín & Bosque, 2008). Food plays a significant role in attracting tourists and contributes to the development of a destination’s image as a gastronomic tourism destination (Karim, 2006). Traditionally, gastronomy is defined as the art or science associated with fine eating (Santich, 2004). However, gastronomy extends beyond mere consumption and is increasingly recognised as a vehicle for regional, local, and sustainable development (Mohanty et al., 2020), as well as an influential factor in destination choice (Visković & Komac, 2021; Tikkanen, 2007). With the increasing importance of gastronomy in choosing a travel destination and its impact on regional tourism, it is crucial to strategically manage the images associated with gastronomy to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of a place (Onat, 2023).

In coastal destinations, marine food experiences form a central component of gastronomy tourism by providing authentic cultural encounters through freshly caught seafood, traditional cooking practices, and the coastal environment (Khakzad, 2018). Empirical studies conducted across Asian coastal destinations, including South Korea, Pramuka Island, and Malvan, India, demonstrate that positive perceptions of authentic marine food experiences significantly influence destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intentions (An & Choi, 2025; Fauziah & Aryanto, 2012; Bhandare & Shetty, 2022). The relevance of these findings is particularly evident in Kerala, where the ecological setting comprising the sea, lagoons, backwaters, and rivers provides abundant aquatic resources, making fish an essential and inseparable component of local food culture (Davis, 2024).

Figure 1. Co-occurrence analysis

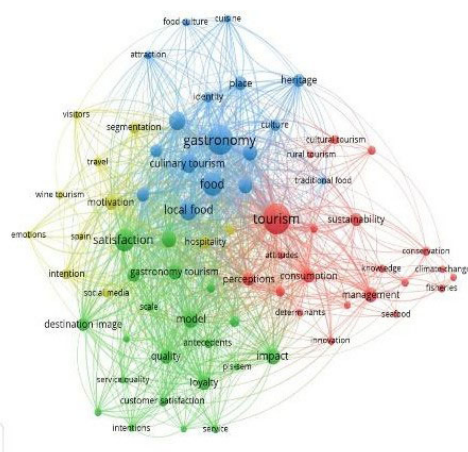
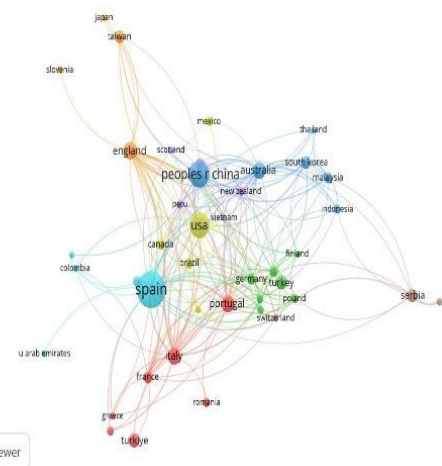


Figure 2. Co-authorship analysis



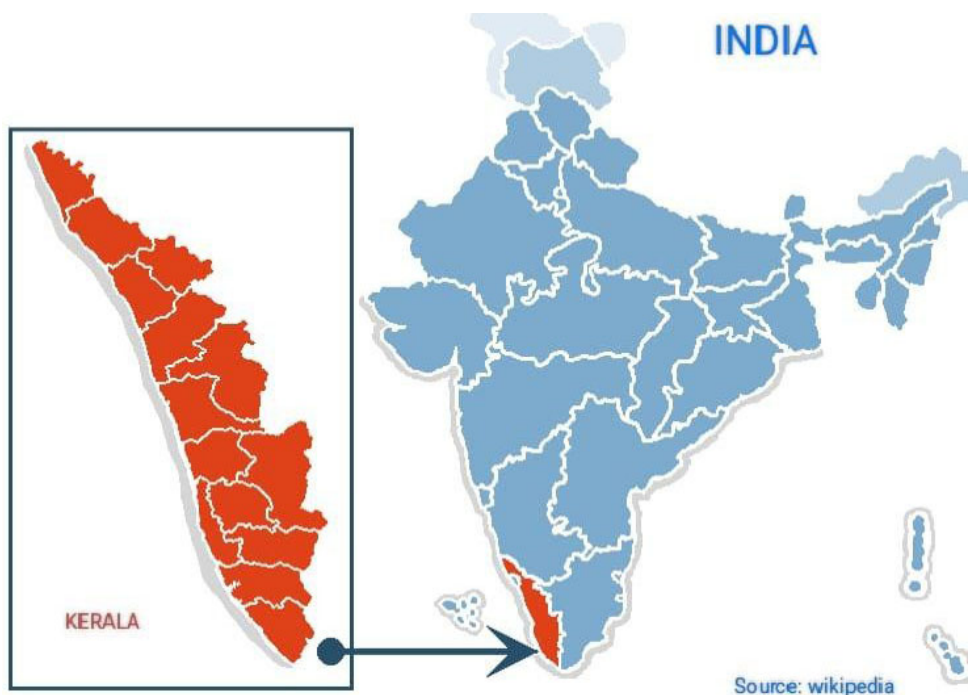
For further research understanding, a bibliometric analysis of Web of Science-indexed publications was conducted using VOSviewer. The keyword co-occurrence network in Figure.1 reveals that gastronomy tourism research is primarily concentrated around well-established themes such as gastronomy, tourism, destination image, satisfaction, loyalty, culinary tourism, sustainability, and local food. In contrast, seafood-related concepts, fisheries, coastal food experiences, and marine gastronomy appear as less prominent and less interconnected research themes, indicating limited scholarly attention. Furthermore, the country co-authorship network demonstrates that gastronomy tourism research is dominated by contributions from countries such as Spain, the United States, China, Italy, and Portugal, with comparatively fewer contributions focusing on coastal food systems and marine-based culinary experiences.

Although, Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) has been applied in tourism research, particularly in destination image and destination positioning studies (Pike, 2002; Marcussen, 2014), its application in gastronomy tourism remains limited. Furthermore, systematic reviews indicate that gastronomy tourism–destination image studies are largely descriptive and rarely employ advanced perceptual mapping techniques (Sio et al., 2021). Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how tourists organise and evaluate seafood-related attributes and how these perceptions contribute to destination image formation in coastal destinations. Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by investigating how coastal gastronomy contributes to the formation of Kerala’s destination image through Multidimensional Scaling (MDS).

### 3. Materials and methods

The study adopted a descriptive research design to examine the international tourist’s perceptions of coastal gastronomy and its influence on destination image. The study was conducted in Kerala, a well-known tourist destination in India (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Map of Kerala, India**



Three coastal destinations in Kerala namely, Kochi, Alappuzha and Kollam were selected for the study. These destinations are well known for their rich coastal and marine resources, vibrant fishing communities, and distinctive seafood-based culinary traditions.

Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire administered to international tourists visiting the selected coastal destinations. The questionnaire was developed based on an extensive review of the literature on destination image, gastronomy tourism, and coastal tourism. Relevant studies on destination image measurement and food-related tourism experiences were examined to identify attributes commonly associated with gastronomic destinations. Based on these insights, the measurement items were adapted to the context of Kerala's coastal gastronomy. The semantic differential scale items were selected to capture tourists' perceptions of key destination image dimensions, including authenticity, tradition, heritage, sustainability, cultural depth, global appeal, and luxury. The final instrument was designed to reflect both the cognitive and affective aspects of destination image associated with coastal gastronomic experiences.

The study used convenience sampling, where respondents were selected on accessibility and willingness to participate. The questionnaire used in this study consists of semantic differential scale with a bipolar adjectives pair to measure tourist's perceptions of coastal gastronomy and destination image of Kerala. The semantic differential scale attributes were selected based on a review of destination image and gastronomy tourism literature. Previous studies have identified dimensions such as authenticity, tradition, heritage, cultural richness, modernization, sustainability, and quality perceptions as important determinants of destination image formation. Accordingly, bipolar adjective pairs such as Authentic–Commercial, Traditional–Modern, Heritage–Innovation, Local/Rural–Global/International, Simple/Basic–Luxurious/Elite, Sustainable–Industrialized, and Culturally Deep–Superficial were incorporated into the instrument. These attributes were considered particularly relevant to the context of Kerala's coastal gastronomy, where seafood experiences are closely linked with cultural heritage, local identity, tourism development, and emerging premium culinary offerings. Respondents rated each attribute on a 5-point scale. These attributes were designed to capture both cognitive and affective components of the destination image. Secondary data were collected from journals, articles, government databases and websites.

The number of foreign tourists visited Kerala in the year 2024-25 is 0.74 million; the sample size for the study is estimated from this population size. By keeping margin of error as 10%, confidence level as 95% and 50% response distribution.

The formula used is as follows:

$$x = Z(c/100)^2 r(100-r)$$

$$N\hat{n} = \frac{1}{\binom{N-1}{x}} E +$$

$$E = \text{Sqrt} \left[ \frac{(N-n)x}{n(N-1)} \right]$$

The sample size thus estimated was found to be 97 respondents. Considering the rejection rate, the researcher had collected 130 responses and finally 110 eligible responses were used for the study.

The study has used Multidimensional scaling (MDS) which is a form of analysis which permits the relationships among a set of elements to be represented as interelement distances in spaces (Fenton & Pearce 1988). It is a powerful “dimension reduction” and visualization technique used to uncover the hidden structure in data. Since the study is exploratory in nature and uses Multidimensional Scaling to examine perceptual relationships among gastronomy attributes rather than to generalize

causal relationships to the entire tourist population, the achieved valid sample of 110 respondents was considered adequate for the purpose of the analysis.

### 3.1. Methodological limitation

The use of convenience sample, limit the statistical generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study's small sample size and geographic scope may limit its ability to accurately represent seafood as a strategic tool for Kerala's destination image formation.

## 4. Result and Discussion

The respondent demographics are shown in Table 1. The nationality profile of respondent shows that the majority of tourists are from the United States (32.7%) and United Kingdom (26.4%), followed by Switzerland (10%) and France (8.2%). A smaller proportion represents other countries such as Germany, Russia, Sweden, and Malaysia. The sample consists of 57.3% male and 42.7% female respondents, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution with slight male dominance. The study found that significant proportion of tourists are above 60 years (38.2%), followed by the respondents belonging to the age group 26-40 years (36.4%). A majority (77%) of the visitors are first-time visitors, while only 33% are repeat visitors.

**Table 1: Frequency of Demographic information of the Respondents.**

	Frequency	percentage
<b>Nationality</b>		
American	36	32.7
Austrian	2	1.8
British	29	26.4
Emirati	4	3.6
Finnish	3	2.7
French	9	8.2
German	5	4.5
Japanese	1	.9
Malaysian	2	1.8
Russian	5	4.5
Swedish	3	2.7
Swiss	11	10.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	63	57.3
Female	47	42.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age Group</b>		
< 25	7	6.4
26- 40	40	36.4
41-60	21	19.1

Above 60	42	38.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Is This Your First Visit to Kerala?</b>		
Yes	77	70.0
No	33	30.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

The demographic information shows that Kerala Primarily attracts Western International tourists suggesting a notable visibility and preference for Kerala as a travel destination in American and European tourism market. The age distribution shows a notable presence of old -aged (above 60 years), with relatively lower representation of younger tourists below the age of 25 years (6.4%). The analysis of visit frequency suggests that while Kerala is more effective in attracting new visitors, the proportion of repeat visitation remains comparatively lower, indicating the need for strengthening tourist’s loyalty.

**Table 2: Goodness of Fit (Model Validity)**

Measure	Value	Interpretation
Stress-I	0.04518	Excellent. Values < 0.05 indicate a near-perfect fit between the data and the map.
D.A.F.	0.99796	99.8% Variance Explained. This shows that almost all the information in your survey is
Tucker’s Coeff.	0.99898	Extremely High. A value near 1.0 confirms high reliability in the coordinates

Source: Primary data

In Table 2, the validity of the Multidimensional Scaling model is assessed using goodness of fit measures. The goodness of fit statistics shows that the data can be excellently represented in two-dimension. Stress-I represents the “residual” or the error left over after the software tries to flatten the data into two dimensions. The Stress-I was found to be 0.04518 which is below the threshold value of 0.05, indicating an excellent fit between the original proximity data and the two-dimensional perceptual map. The Dispersion Accounted for (D.A.F) value of 0.99796 indicates that 99.8% of the information in the survey is captured in this 2D map. Additionally, extremely high Tucker’s Coeff. Value of 0.99898 which is near 1.0 confirms the high reliability in the coordinates.

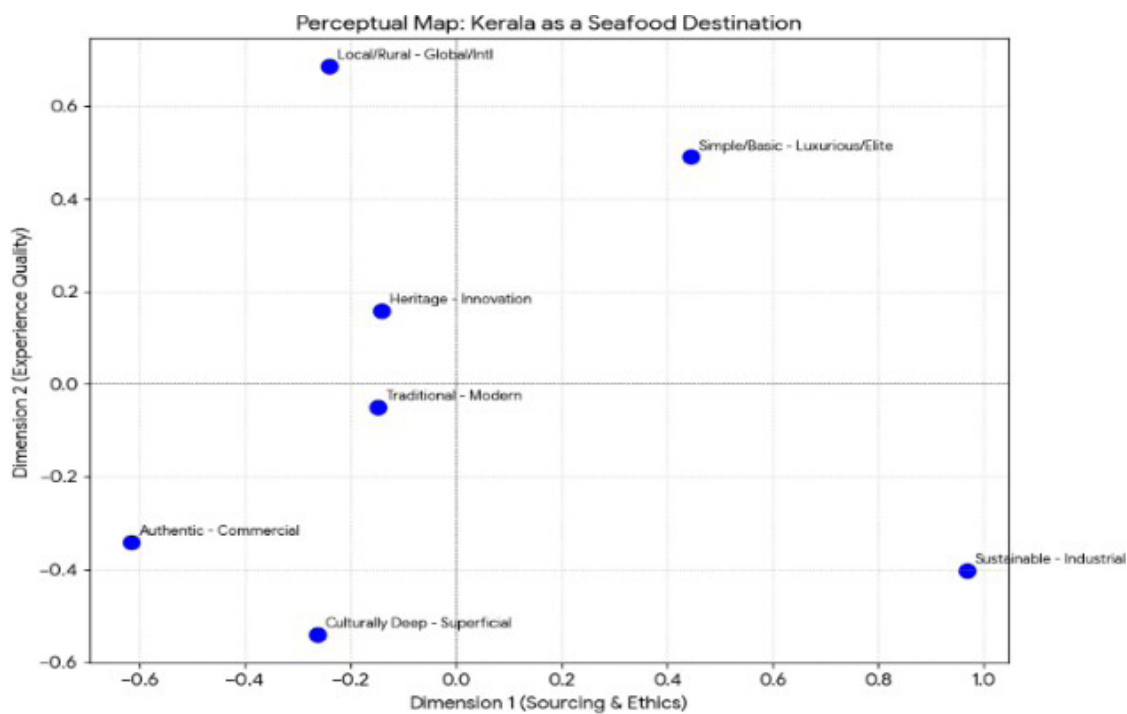
In Table 3, the co-ordinates of attributes used for analysing the tourist perception are given. These co-ordinates help to locate the attributes in the 2D map.

Attribute Pair (Left - Right)	Dimension 1 (X)	Dimension 2 (Y)
Authentic - Commercial	-0.616	-0.341
Traditional - Modern	-0.149	-0.050
Heritage - Innovation	-0.143	0.158
Local/Rural - Global/Intl	-0.241	0.686
Simple/Basic - Luxurious/Elite	0.444	0.490
Sustainable - Industrialized	0.968	-0.403
Culturally Deep - Superficial	-0.264	-0.541

Source: Primary data

The perceptual map in Figure 2, visualize the spatial distribution of attributes in two dimensions represented by the X-axis and Y-axis. Attributes positioned closer together indicates the greater perceptual similarity, whereas those located farther apart indicates greater perceptual differentiation. The relative positioning of attributes reveals the underlying perceptions of international tourist regarding Kerala’s coastal gastronomy.

**Figure 4. Perceptual map**



In Figure 4., Dimension 1, Sourcing and Ethics Dimension in the horizontal axis, is dominated by the spatial tension between “Authentic/Commercialization” (-0.616) on the negative side and “Sustainability/Industrialization” (+0.968) on the positive side. Attributes such as “Authentic”, “Traditional”, “Heritage” and “culturally deep” are located on the negative sides of the axis and positioned relatively close to one another, suggesting that these characteristics primarily forms

perceived gastronomy image of Kerala. In contrast, “sustainability” shifts heavily far to the positive side of the axis. This may indicate that respondents conceptually distinguished sustainability related attributes from destination’s traditional and culture-oriented image.

Dimension 2, the Sophistication & Quality Dimension in the vertical axis, contrasts the Global/Luxurious Appeal (+0.686) against Superficial/Commercial Perceptions (-0.541). Attributes such as “International/Global” and “Luxurious/Elite” are highly positive on this axis. This spatial proximity indicates that respondents categorize these attributes together, demonstrating that destination’s fine dining operations and high-end resorts, has successfully established a premium culinary experience in tourists’ mindset. The negative coordinate for “Superficial” and “Commercial” suggests that respondents perceive these characteristics as distinct from the internationally appealing gastronomic experiences. However, the separation of these attributes from the Authenticity-related cluster indicates that tourists perceive authenticity and premium positioning as a distinct aspect of destination image. The perceptual map reveals that respondents primarily associate Kerala’s seafood gastronomy with authentic, culturally rich, and traditional experience. This finding is consistent with destination image and gastronomy tourism literature, which highlights the importance of cultural authenticity and local food heritage in shaping gastronomic destination image (Frochot, 2003; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Furthermore, the spatial proximity between the commercialization and superficiality indicates the concerns regarding the commodification of cultural seafood experiences. At the same time, the spatial arrangement suggests that respondents do not strongly associate luxury or globally appealing culinary experience with the traditional seafood image rather they constitute separate dimensions of destination image. Similarly, the spatial separation of “sustainability” from authenticity and luxury related clusters indicates that international tourists perceive sustainability as an independent evaluative dimension. The respondents do not appear to view it as an intrinsic component of Kerala’s gastronomic identity. This perceptual differentiation suggests that environmental responsibility, cultural authenticity, and premium tourism experiences have yet to be fully integrated within the destination’s overall image.

An alternative interpretation of the findings is that international tourists may perceive authenticity, sustainability, and luxury as distinct rather than complementary aspects of coastal gastronomy. While contemporary tourism literature increasingly promotes sustainable gastronomy as part of authentic destination experiences, the present findings suggest that tourists do not automatically associate environmental responsibility with cultural authenticity.

Similarly, the separation between traditional seafood experiences and luxury-oriented culinary offerings indicates that premium tourism products have not yet been fully integrated into Kerala’s gastronomic identity. This observation contributes to ongoing debates in destination image research regarding whether destinations should maintain heritage-based authenticity or pursue modernization and premium positioning strategies. The findings suggest that Kerala’s destination image currently reflects a coexistence of these dimensions rather than a fully integrated gastronomic brand identity.

The observed separation between authenticity, sustainability, and luxury dimensions has important theoretical implications for destination image formation. Destination image theory suggests that tourists organize destination attributes into cognitive structures that influence overall destination evaluations (Beerli & Martín, 2004). The findings indicate that international tourists perceive authenticity, sustainability, and luxury as distinct evaluative dimensions rather than as mutually reinforcing attributes. This supports the view that destination images are multidimensional and may contain attributes that coexist without being strongly integrated. From a gastronomy tourism perspective, the findings also reflect the long-standing tension between authenticity and commercialization. While authentic food experiences derive value from local culture, heritage, and tradition, luxury-oriented

tourism products often emphasize exclusivity and premium service. Similarly, sustainability, although increasingly promoted in tourism discourse, may not yet be perceived by tourists as an inherent component of gastronomic authenticity. The results therefore suggest that destinations such as Kerala face the challenge of integrating sustainability initiatives and premium culinary experiences into their traditional seafood identity without diluting the authenticity that currently constitutes their core destination image.

## 5. Conclusion

The study investigated the influence of coastal gastronomy on Kerala's destination image by analysing international tourists' perceptions on its coastal gastronomy attributes. The findings demonstrate that authenticity, tradition, and heritage form the core image of Kerala's seafood gastronomy. The study further reveals a perceptual separation between traditional, luxury, and sustainability attributes, suggesting that these dimensions are not strongly integrated within the Kerala's traditional gastronomic identity. From managerial perspective, stakeholders should utilise this authenticity and cultural heritage while strategically integrating sustainability and premium culinary offerings into coastal gastronomy experiences. Such integration may strengthen Kerala's coastal gastronomy and thereby improve the overall destination image of Kerala.

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