

Article

Social Media Gratifications and Gastronomy Destination Choice: The Mediating Role of Pre-Visit Destination Impression

Seung Ho Youn ^{1,*} and Chenyu Fang ²¹ College of Sustainability and Tourism, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Beppu 874-8577, Japan² Graduate School, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Beppu 874-8577, Japan; fangchy722@gmail.com

* Correspondence: shyoun@apu.ac.jp

Abstract

In this study, we use gratifications (U&G) theory to explore how social media shapes Millennials' gastronomic destination choices. Rather than treating social media influence as uniform, we identify three key gratifications obtained from gastronomy-related content: experiential–inspirational, utilitarian decision-making, and information search and assurance. The study investigates how these gratifications directly and indirectly affect destination choice through pre-visit destination impressions. Data were collected from 418 Chinese Millennials. Validity of measurements was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and reliability tests, with hypotheses tested using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4. Findings indicate that pre-visit destination impression significantly predicts destination choice and mediates the influence of all three gratifications. Experiential–inspirational gratification has the greatest overall impact; experiential–inspirational and information search and assurance gratifications operate through both directly and indirectly, while utilitarian decision-making gratification operates primarily through pre-visit impressions. By integrating U&G theory with pre-visit impressions, this study offers a novel pathway-specific explanation of social media's role in gastronomic destination choice, suggesting that different gratifications activate distinct psychological mechanisms rather than a uniform process. It also advances destination-choice research by highlighting pre-visit impression as a rapid evaluative mechanism linking digital gratification and behavioral decision.

Keywords: uses and gratifications theory; gastronomy tourism; pre-visit impression; destination choice; social media; Millennials



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1. Introduction

Food early evolved from simply meeting basic human survival needs to becoming a central reflection of social and cultural identity (Steel & Zinn, 2016). In tourism, food plays a multifaceted role: it serves as a destination marketing tool (Wang, 2015), acts as a primary travel motivator (Wondirad & Verheye, 2023), enriches overall travel experiences (Mak et al., 2012), functions as a cultural marker (Guan & Jones, 2015), and helps revitalize local communities (Jain & Mitra, 2024). Consequently, gastronomy shapes tourist perceptions and choices, elevating food experiences from “routine” meals to central trip attractions (Quan & Wang, 2004; Wondirad & Verheye, 2023).

The use of social media has fundamentally altered this decision-making process. The proliferation of gastronomy-related content across platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Flickr provides travelers with inspiration, practical planning insights, and entertainment

(Barbe et al., 2019; Bhagat et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2013). Industry reports and academic literature highlight food as a primary attractor for younger generations, who frequently explore international culinary destinations after encountering information about food (Instagram, 2021; Liu et al., 2013). Beyond raising awareness in this way social media supports final travel decisions by providing visual information that reduces perceived risk, with its overall influence depending on an individual's level of involvement and destination familiarity (Paul et al., 2019; Tešin et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2020).

Millennials are particularly susceptible to these digital influences. Characterized by traits shaped by technological advancement, globalization, and economic growth, this demographic—now comprising young professionals and parents—has substantial purchasing power (Dabija et al., 2018; Defontes, 2024; Valentine & Powers, 2013). As tourists, Millennials seek authentic, memorable experiences. One of those experience clusters is their significant spend on food while traveling (Expedia Group Media Solutions + Skift, 2019; S. S. Kim et al., 2021). Described as swift decision-makers who value immediate gratification and rely heavily on social networks for information (Viswanathan & Jain, 2013), their behavior challenges traditional, linear destination-choice models (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Given the evolution of travel decision-making (McCabe et al., 2016), a revised explanatory framework is necessary to account for the intuitive, emotion-driven food choices influenced by cue-rich visual media.

Despite extensive research on food tourism and digital travel behavior, important theoretical and empirical gaps remain. Existing studies largely examine social media use and food tourism as separate streams of information (Liu et al., 2013; Wachyuni et al., 2022; Wang, 2015), offering limited explanation of the psychological processes connecting social media engagement to destination choice. Specifically, little is known about how media-derived gratifications shape tourists' pre-visit impressions and subsequent decisions. Based on Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which considers audiences as active, goal-driven individuals (Chavez et al., 2020), this study integrates social media gratifications, pre-visit destination impressions, and gastronomic destination choice into a conceptual framework. It examines how various gratifications from gastronomy-related social media content influence Millennials' destination choices both directly and indirectly through pre-visit destination impressions.

In addressing this research question, this study makes four key contributions to the literature. First, it extends gastronomy tourism research by moving beyond general social media usage to show how distinct digital gratifications shape pre-visit impressions and destination choices. Second, it refines destination decision-making models by unifying social media gratification, rapid impression formation, and final selection into a single explanatory framework. Third, it identifies underlying mediating mechanisms by providing empirical evidence that pre-visit impressions operate as gratification-specific mediators rather than uniform intermediaries. Finally, it informs industry practice by offering actionable guidance for destination marketers and stakeholders on the strategic combination of experiential, credible, and utilitarian content that will influence Millennial travel decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Uses and Gratifications Theory and Destination Choice

U&G theory, established in the 1940s, explores why audiences engage with social media and how media content satisfies their social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). The theoretical framework relies on three core elements: active users; deliberate media choice and resulting outcomes. The theory views individuals as active agents who select specific media to fulfill distinct needs through a competitive evaluation of available content sources. In modern digital environments, U&G theory remains highly

salient because interactive and personalized platforms encourage audiences to actively choose, curate, and create content, leading to more goal-directed consumption. As Sundar and Limperos (2013) emphasize, media gratification is dynamic and evolves alongside advances in media technology and shifts in the contexts that users experience.

Tourism and hospitality scholars have increasingly adopted U&G theory to systematically explain the benefits travelers seek from social media platforms (Chavez et al., 2020). Early research established that traveler engagement with social media is driven by diverse gratifications, including entertainment, information seeking, convenience, and social interaction (Table 1). Beyond basic usage, social media serves as a pivotal arena where travelers encounter, interpret, and evaluate destination cues, with the extent of this influence contingent upon user involvement, destination familiarity, and trip characteristics (Liu et al., 2013; Tham et al., 2020). As a result, active engagement with social networking sites directly shapes travel plans, establishing a behavioral link between platform use and destination choice (Tešin et al., 2022). However, the existing literature often treats social media influence as merely “usage” or “involvement,” without specifying how destination choices develop in practice. U&G theory clarifies this gap by conceptualizing media engagement as a goal-driven process where specific gratification outcomes directly inform cognitive evaluations and behavioral decisions (Ruggiero, 2000).

Table 1. Gratification Types.

Author	Context	Gratification	Main Findings
Chavez et al. (2020)	Spanish tourists	Entertainment, Expressive information sharing, Social enhancement	Relationships between gratification, social media and consumer stickiness, intention to share UGS, and eWOM review adoption
Choi et al. (2016)	Hotel industry social media marketing	Information, Convenience, Self-expression, Entertainment, Social Interaction	Information, convenience, self-expression affect user satisfaction
Liu et al. (2013)	Food photography for travel planning	Information, Entertainment, Social interaction, Personal identity	Gratifications influence culinary destinations
Moon and An (2022)	Use of smartphones	Information, Convenience, Social interaction, Entertainment	Gratifications significantly affect tourist attitudes and satisfaction
Rizal et al. (2025)	TikTok users’ travel behavior in Malaysia	Information seeking, Emotional connection, Self-identity, Validation, Peer interaction, Leisure inspiration	Gratifications influence destination choice, trip planning, and travel experience
Sundar and Limperos (2013)	Media research	Modality (Realism, Coolness, Novelty, Being there), Agency (Agency-enhancement, Community building, Bandwagon, Filtering/Tailoring, Ownership), Interactivity (Interaction, Activity, Responsiveness, Dynamic control), Navigability (Browsing/Variety-seeking, Scaffolds/Navigation aids, Play/Fun)	Propose new gratifications for new media

Source: The Authors.

Gastronomy tourism offers an ideal context for applying U&G theory, as gastronomy-related content combines several distinct forms of gratification that are closely tied to destination choice. Unlike general tourism attributes, culinary experiences are highly sensory and emotionally evocative, making them especially capable of stimulating desire,

imagination, and anticipated pleasure (S. S. Kim et al., 2021). However, gastronomy is also difficult to fully evaluate prior to travel because taste, atmosphere, and service cannot be directly experienced through online content alone (Quan & Wang, 2004; Mak et al., 2012). Consequently, travelers rely on social media for both inspiration and practical decision support and reassurance via reviews, comments, and peer-generated visuals (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Pop et al., 2022; Moon & An, 2022). To elucidate this process, this study uses U&G theory to examine how Millennials' interactions with social media content featuring gastronomy cues shape their destination choices across three distinct gratification dimensions: experiential-inspirational, utilitarian decision support, and information search and reassurance.

2.1.1. Experiential–Inspirational Gratification

Experiential–inspirational gratification refers to the emotional and experiential rewards users obtain when engaging with gastronomy-related content on social media. From a U&G perspective, individuals actively select media that satisfy their needs for enjoyment, inspiration, and experiential stimulation (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In the context of gastronomy tourism, highly visual user-generated content, such as food photographs and short videos, provides vivid sensory cues that stimulate imagination and encourage users to mentally experience destinations before travelling. Previous studies have shown that food photography shared through social media enhances enjoyment, stimulates novelty seeking, and encourages users to consider destinations offering unique culinary experiences (Liu et al., 2013). This influence is particularly salient for Millennials, who rely heavily on digital media to search for culinary information and whose local culinary purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by social media during the pre-travel stage (Wachyuni et al., 2022). Consequently, experiential–inspirational gratification derived from social media is expected to strengthen Millennials' preference for gastronomic destinations. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Experiential–inspirational gratification obtained from social media use positively influences the choice of gastronomy-related destinations.*

2.1.2. Utilitarian Decision Gratification

Utilitarian decision gratification refers to the practical benefits users obtain from social media when it enables them to make travel decisions more efficiently and with less effort. From a U&G perspective, individuals actively select media to satisfy functional needs, such as acquiring useful information to facilitate decision-making (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In gastronomy tourism, social media content provides convenient access to user-generated information, allowing travelers to compare restaurants, local specialties, prices, and destination attributes (Liu et al., 2013). This utilitarian value is particularly pronounced among Millennials, who primarily rely on digital media platforms for interactive and efficient pre-trip research to guide their culinary destination choices (Hysa et al., 2021; Wachyuni et al., 2022). Consequently, when social media satisfies Millennials' functional needs during the planning process, utilitarian decision gratification is expected to increase the likelihood of selecting gastronomy-related destinations. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Utilitarian decision gratification obtained from social media use positively influences the selection of gastronomy-related destinations.*

2.1.3. Information Search and Assurance Gratification

Information search and assurance gratification refer to the cognitive benefits users obtain from social media by acquiring credible travel details and reducing uncertainty prior to decision-making. Grounded in U&G theory, individuals actively engage with media to satisfy cognitive needs by seeking reliable, decision-relevant content (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In gastronomy tourism, user-generated content—such as authentic food photography and peer reviews—enables travelers to evaluate local culinary quality, authenticity, and overall expected experiences, thereby mitigating the perceived risk of destination selection (Leung et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2013). This assurance mechanism is especially vital for Millennials, who rely heavily on social media during the pre-travel stage to validate culinary choices and guide their destination decisions (Wachyuni et al., 2022). Consequently, when social media fulfills the Millennial need for credible information and risk reduction, information search and assurance gratification are expected to increase their likelihood of selecting gastronomy-related destinations. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Information search and assurance gratification obtained from social media use positively influence the choice of a gastronomy-related destination.*

2.2. Pre-Visit Destination Impression in the Destination Decision-Making Process

Recent tourism research increasingly highlights impressions as crucial evaluative mechanisms influencing destination choices (Deng & Chen, 2023; Qiu et al., 2018), particularly as rapid reactions to digital environments and website designs (S. Kim, 2019; Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021). In these contexts, an impression is a preliminary assessment formed before actual visitation, rather than an evaluation derived from direct experience. Grounded in this perspective, this study defines pre-visit destination impression as an immediate overall evaluation of a destination formed during initial exposure to gastronomy-related social media cues. It operates as a rapid, largely heuristic judgment that synthesizes central and peripheral digital information into a holistic evaluation (Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021).

Empirical evidence underscores the critical role of these early assessments within destination choice models. Conventional decision-making frameworks suggest that tourists process information hierarchically, combining beliefs and perceptions into a global assessment that guides final choices (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). When cognitive resources or time are limited, this synthesized evaluation functions as a heuristic shortcut, allowing travelers to narrow their options efficiently. While pre-visit impressions conceptualize an early-stage evaluation, they are closely related to the established construct of destination image—traditionally defined as “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). While traditional destination image is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, affective, and conative evaluations accumulated over time (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), a pre-visit impression represents a distinct construct. Although conceptually related, the two differ across three primary dimensions: formation inputs, processing mechanisms, and temporal horizons.

First, destination image develops through the accumulation and integration of diverse organic, induced, and experiential information sources over time (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In contrast, pre-visit destination impression is generated from limited but highly salient digital cues, such as food photography, short-form videos, influencer posts, and electronic word-of-mouth encountered during initial online exposure (Deng & Chen, 2023; Qiu et al., 2018). Second, destination image is formed through the gradual accumulation and integration of cognitive and affective evaluations, resulting in a relatively comprehen-

sive mental representation of a destination. By contrast, pre-visit destination impression emerges through rapid heuristic processing, whereby potential tourists quickly synthesize immediately available visual and textual cues into an overall positive or negative evaluation before extensive cognitive elaboration occurs (Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021; Qiu et al., 2018). Finally, destination image evolves continuously throughout the travel lifecycle and is further refined through direct destination experiences after visitation. In contrast, pre-visit destination impression exists only during the earliest stage of destination discovery, capturing the brief period in which potential tourists form an initial evaluation upon first encountering destination-related content (Deng & Chen, 2023). Consequently, while destination image reflects a relatively stable and comprehensive mental representation, pre-visit destination impression functions as an immediate evaluative mechanism that guides destination choice before a more developed destination image has been established.

This conceptual distinction is particularly important in contemporary digital tourism. Mobile technologies and social media platforms expose travelers to a continuous stream of user-generated content, allowing destination appeal and authenticity to be evaluated within seconds (Barbe et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2013; Pop et al., 2022). Food-related visual content is exceptionally potent in this environment because it simultaneously conveys many emotional, sensory, and information cues that trigger immediate reactions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Furthermore, the strength of social media's impact on travel decisions depends heavily on how users interact with and interpret these digital cues (Tham et al., 2020; Tešin et al., 2022). Favorable initial impressions formed on digital platforms significantly anchor subsequent cognitive processing, influencing website engagement, destination evaluations, and final choices—especially among digital native cohorts (Deng & Chen, 2023; Martínez-González & Álvarez-Albelo, 2021).

In summary, while traditional decision-making models acknowledge impression-based evaluations, contemporary digital environments accelerate this process, enabling impressions to form rapidly from mediated cues. Consequently, this study operationalizes pre-visit destination impression as an essential early-stage evaluative mechanism that mediates the relationship between social media-derived gratifications and gastronomy destination choice.

2.3. The Mediation Effects of Pre-Visit Destination Impression Between Gratification and Destination Choice

Building on U&G theory and the destination decision-making literature, this study proposes that pre-visit destination impression serves as the central psychological mechanism linking social media gratifications to gastronomy destination choice. U&G theory posits that individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy distinct cognitive, functional, and emotional needs (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In digital tourism, while media gratifications drive exposure and engagement, they do not directly dictate destination selection. Instead, the experiential, functional, and informational outcomes derived from social media are first synthesized into a preliminary psychological assessment—a pre-visit impression—which subsequently guides behavioral decisions (Deng & Chen, 2023).

This sequence reflects modern destination choice frameworks. Traditional models viewed tourist decision-making as a linear, highly cognitive process where information is systematically integrated into destination evaluations (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). However, contemporary scholars emphasize that tourist choice often relies on informal, affect-driven, and heuristic processes (McCabe et al., 2016). Social media cues—particularly visually salient food photography—trigger rapid visual aesthetic processing, evoking immediate emotional responses and positive first impressions with minimal cognitive effort (Deng et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2013). This rapid impression formation acts as a cognitive shortcut, enabling travelers to evaluate and narrow options efficiently (Qiu et al., 2018).

Rather than acting as a direct catalyst for behavior, social media gratifications shape these early mental evaluations, which then translate into destination selection. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Pre-visit destination impression mediates the relationship between social media gratifications and gastronomy-related destination choice.*

To capture the specific psychological and functional pathways, this mediating mechanism is conceptualized across three distinct gratification dimensions. First, experiential–inspirational gratification arises from interacting with visually rich, emotionally engaging food content. Visual stimuli such as food photography and short-form videos evoke strong aesthetic emotions and sensory allure, allowing potential tourists to mentally simulate the gastronomic experience (Deng et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2013). Because Millennials are highly visually sophisticated and seek novel, shareable travel experiences (Bolton et al., 2013; S. S. Kim et al., 2021), this emotional and sensory stimulation generates an immediate, positive first impression of the destination (Deng et al., 2021). This favorable impression subsequently increases the likelihood of choosing the destination. Thus:

Hypothesis 4a (H4a). *Pre-visit destination impression mediates the relationship between experiential–inspirational gratification and gastronomy-related destination choice.*

Second, utilitarian decision gratification reflects the functional benefits users obtain when social media simplifies pre-trip planning and enhances decision efficiency. Millennials, characterized by short-term focus and a preference for immediate, uncomplicated processes (Khaeriah et al., 2024; Viswanathan & Jain, 2013), rely on digital tools to compare dining options, local specialties, and prices with minimal effort (Wachyuni et al., 2022). When social media successfully fulfills these functional needs, it enhances perceived destination feasibility and convenience, fostering a favorable overall pre-visit impression that subsequently guides destination selection. Thus:

Hypothesis 4b (H4b). *Pre-visit destination impression mediates the relationship between utilitarian decision gratification and gastronomy-related destination choice.*

Third, information search and assurance gratification are derived from acquiring credible, peer-generated content that mitigates decision uncertainty. High-involvement choices like culinary travel entail perceived risks regarding authenticity and quality (Leung et al., 2013). Millennials exhibit loss-averse tendencies and heavily rely on social networks, peer reviews, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to validate their choices (Dabija et al., 2018; Viswanathan & Jain, 2013; Wang, 2015). Obtaining reliable, socially validated information reassures travelers, building early trust and forming a positive pre-visit impression that ultimately drives destination choice (Deng & Chen, 2023). Thus:

Hypothesis 4c (H4c). *Pre-visit destination impression mediates the relationship between information search and assurance gratification and gastronomy-related destination choice.*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. Grounded in U&G theory, the framework posits that gastronomy-related social media use influences destination choice through three distinct gratifications: experiential–inspirational, utilitarian decision-making, and information search and assurance. The model indicates that these gratifications operate through distinct psychological pathways, both directly and indirectly, with pre-

visit destination impressions serving as a crucial mediator linking media engagement to travel decisions.

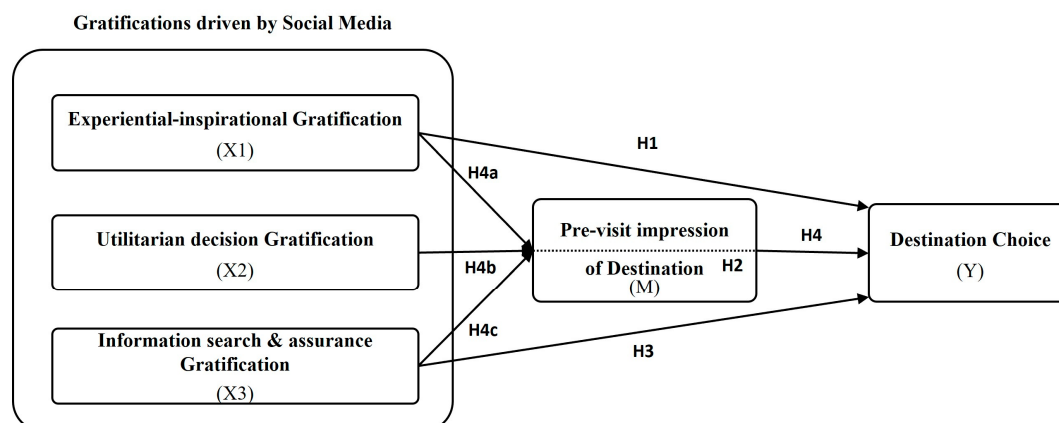


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework of the Study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Sample

The literature review established that travel motivation can differ according to tourist nationality, among many other influences (Kozak, 2002; Wondirad & Verheye, 2023), and that the importance of social media in travel planning also varies across cultures. To further explore these contexts, the present study focuses on Chinese tourists, considering their market size, culinary culture, and behaviors. As of January 2025, China's population was 1.42 billion, accounting for 17.4% of the global population and ranking second after India (Thomala, 2025). Millennials make up 28.6% of China's population but represented 35.4% of domestic tourism in 2018 (Statista, 2019). China also had 1.08 billion social media users in January 2025, much larger than the US, with 253 million, and the UK with 54.8 million (Kemp, 2025).

Furthermore, Chinese culture highly values food and eating customs (Guan & Jones, 2015). However, globalization has also shaped Chinese food preferences, making exotic and fusion cuisines popular and sought after (Eves & Cheng, 2007). As Chinese tourists become more experienced, their interests have expanded to include dining out and cultural activities in addition to sightseeing (Guan & Jones, 2015). Gastronomy has thus become increasingly significant in Chinese tourism, with the desire to learn more about its contexts driving many food lovers to travel. In particular, gaining insights into the activities of Chinese Millennial tourists is especially important for providers of gastronomic tourism, both locally and globally.

The study operationalized Chinese Millennials as individuals aged 23–41 during data collection. The initial target sample size was calculated with Cochran's formula for a large population, using a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a maximum variability ($p = 0.50$). This resulted in a minimum of roughly 384 respondents. Since non-probability convenience sampling was used, this figure served as a planning reference rather than an indicator of population representativeness.

3.2. Design of the Research Instrument

The survey questionnaire was designed specifically for this study. It first collected demographic information, including gender, age, residence, and occupation. Second, it assessed travel behavior and social media use for trip planning, including travel frequency, levels of social media usage, and the platforms used. Finally, it evaluated the gratification obtained from social media that affects destination choice. Each gratification type was

measured with multi-item scales, mostly adapted from previous research, though some items were developed when existing measures did not suit social media-driven gastronomy destination choices. Destination choice was measured with a single item that assessed respondents' overall view of social media's role in their final decision, rather than capturing the entire, multidimensional process. Past research indicates that single-item measures can provide adequate predictive validity when the judgment is clear and straightforward (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). However, since destination choice is a broader and more complex behavior, relying on a single item is recognized as a limitation of this study.

The measurement items were modified to fit the context of gastronomy-related social media use and destination choice. Items from established scales were rephrased to focus specifically on culinary content, information, and travel decisions, while maintaining their original meanings. As shown in Table 2, measures for experiential–inspirational, utilitarian decision-making, information search and assurance, and destination choice were adapted from existing studies. Meanwhile, pre-visit destination impression items were created based on previous research on first impressions in tourism. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. As shown, all retained items loaded adequately onto their respective constructs in the EFA, with factor loadings between 0.738 and 0.851. The findings also support the adequacy of the multi-item constructs, with acceptable KMO values, significant Bartlett's tests, single-component solutions, and reliable coefficients. Therefore, these results confirm that the measurement items are strongly linked to their intended constructs.

Table 2. Measurement of study variables.

Construct	Measurement Items	EFA Factor Loading	Sources of Items
Experiential- inspirational gratification (EIG)	EIG1: The sensory stimulation experienced on social media motivates me to travel.	0.786	Adapted from Liu et al. (2013), Sundar and Limperos (2013)
	EIG2: I visit a location popular on social media to learn about its culture through local cuisine.	0.738	
	EIG3: I enjoy travelling to destinations to try local dishes and share experiences on social media.	0.750	
	EIG4: I become interested in specific destinations after seeing recommended food on social media.	0.741	
	EIG5: I want to visit a place primarily because of its distinctive food revealed by social media.	0.777	
Utilitarian decision gratification (UDG)	UDG1: I use social media platforms to discover specialty restaurants at different destinations.	0.799	Adapted from Liu et al. (2013), Paul et al. (2019)
	UDG2: I use social media to gather information on food service quality at various destinations.	0.797	
	UDG3: I use social media to monitor food prices.	0.791	
Information search and assurance gratification (ISAG)	ISAG1: Social media is a primary source of information when planning a trip.	0.835	Adapted from Liu et al. (2013), Moon and An (2022), Sundar and Limperos (2013)
	ISAG2: Food photos/videos shared on social media play a key role in destination choices.	0.776	
	ISAG3: Reviews and comments about food on social media play a crucial role in choosing destinations.	0.828	

Table 2. Cont.

Construct	Measurement Items	EFA Factor Loading	Sources of Items
Pre-visit destination impression (PVDI)	PVDI1: Social media content about local food characteristics shapes initial impressions of a destination.	0.766	Developed based on Martínez-González and Álvarez-Albelo (2021)
	PVDI2: Food-related content on social media influences motivation and attitude toward a destination before visits.	0.851	
	PVDI3: Food information from social media helps me form a first impression of a travel destination.	0.819	
Destination choice (DC)	DC: Social media plays an important role in the choice of the final destination.	n/a	Adapted from Tešin et al. (2022)

Source: The Authors.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study complied with all relevant guidelines and regulations for studies involving human subjects. Before the survey, participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to refuse to carry out the survey or withdraw at any moment, and how their data would be used. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout.

To progress the study, a pilot test with a small group of Chinese Millennials was carried out in advance to resolve any unclear wording and to confirm that questions properly assessed the targeted variables. Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 Chinese Millennials who were similar to the target respondents. The pilot test focused on the clarity and comprehensibility of the wording, respondents' interpretation of the measurement items, and the overall flow of the questionnaire. Participant feedback indicated that the questionnaire was generally understandable. Minor wording and presentation adjustments were made to reduce ambiguity and improve clarity; however, no substantive changes to the measurement items or underlying constructs were required following the pilot test.

The main data collection occurred across China between July and September 2023. Participants were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling method. The questionnaire was distributed online via WeChat, a widely used social media, research and messaging platform in China. This method was suitable for reaching Millennial social-media users, but may not ensure a probability-based sample of this group. Specifically, recruiting via WeChat could, it was felt, result in the attraction of more active social media users or those particularly interested in travel and gastronomy, while less active users may be underrepresented. Also, participation was voluntary, which may lead to self-selection bias if those more interested in the topic were more likely to respond. These problems are discussed below. Participants were drawn from seven geographic regions to increase geographic heterogeneity. However, this procedure does not fully eliminate selection or self-selection bias. A total of 460 responses were initially collected. Responses were excluded if participants did not match the target age or nationality, if questionnaires were substantially incomplete or contained over 30% missing data, or if patterned or straight-lined responses appeared across multiple Likert-scale items. After this screening, 418 responses remained for analysis. Additionally, a sensitivity power analysis for the regression-based mediation models showed that, with $N = 418$, four predictors, $\alpha = 0.05$, and 80% power, the sample was adequate to detect an effect of about $f^2 = 0.029$, confirming its suitability for the planned PROCESS analyses.

As a preliminary assessment of potential common-method bias, Harman's single-factor test was performed using the measurement items for the key constructs. The first factor explained 51.3% of the total variance, slightly above the commonly used 50% threshold,

indicating that common method variance could not be ruled out. Because Harman's single-factor test provides only a preliminary assessment of common method variance, an additional CFA-based assessment was performed using the 14 indicators of the four multi-item constructs. The proposed four-factor model [$\chi^2(71) = 318.290$, CFI = 0.917, TLI = 0.893, RMSEA = 0.091, SRMR = 0.048] was compared with a single-factor alternative [$\chi^2(77) = 341.073$, CFI = 0.911, TLI = 0.895, RMSEA = 0.091, SRMR = 0.049]. The four-factor model provided a significantly better fit, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 22.783$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the theoretically specified multidimensional structure better represented the covariance among the items than a single common factor could. Nevertheless, common method variance could not be completely ruled out and is retained as a limitation. The valid data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29 and Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) for the mediation analyses, while SmartPLS 4 was used to conduct the CB-SEM CFA and CFA-based model comparison.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of Respondents

As shown in Table 3, 44.3% ($n = 185$) of respondents were male, and 55.7% ($n = 233$) were female. The largest age groups among the Millennials in this study were 23–30 years ($n = 188$, 45.0%) and 31–35 years ($n = 186$, 44.5%). Respondents were geographically distributed across China, with the highest proportions from East China ($n = 122$, 29.2%), North China ($n = 74$, 17.7%), and South China ($n = 65$, 15.6%). The remaining respondents came from Central, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast China, indicating broad regional coverage. Regarding occupations, most respondents were company employees ($n = 138$, 33.0%), followed by business owners ($n = 82$, 19.6%) and self-employed individuals ($n = 75$, 17.9%). Student respondents accounted for around 6% of the sample in this study ($n = 25$). This indicates that most Millennials are professionals with purchasing power. The results also show that 69.4% of respondents ($n = 290$) traveled 1–2 times per year, followed by 26.8% ($n = 112$) who traveled 3–5 times per year. Respondents reported high use of social media to obtain travel information prior to their trips ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.85$), and younger respondents aged 23–30 reported the highest levels of social media use. The most frequently used social media platforms for travel information were WeChat (42.1%); TikTok (31.3%); and Xiaohongshu (25.7%). This highlights the prominence of visual content in how Millennials plan their gastronomy-related travel.

Table 3. Characteristics of respondents.

Characteristics	Respondent	N	%
Gender	Male	185	44.3
	Female	233	55.7
Age	23–30	188	45.0
	31–35	186	44.5
	36–41	44	10.5
City of Residence	North China	74	17.7
	Northeast China	40	9.6
	East China	122	29.2
	Central China	59	14.1
	South China	65	15.6
	Southwest China	32	7.7
	Northeast China	12	2.9
	Others	14	3.3

Table 3. Cont.

Characteristics	Respondent	N	%
Occupation	Student	25	6.0
	Government sector employee	40	8.6
	Employee	138	33.0
	Business owner	82	19.6
	Professional Practitioner	39	9.3
	Self-employed	75	17.9
	Retired	1	0.2
	No occupation	14	3.3
	Others	4	1.0
Travel Frequency (Yearly)	1–2 times	290	69.4
	3–5 times	112	26.8
	More than 5 times	16	3.8
Usage of Social Media (Multiple responses)	WeChat	172	25.7
	TikTok	281	42.1
	Xiaohongshu	209	31.3
	Others	6	0.9

Source: The Authors.

4.2. Measurement Validation and the Importance of Social Media for Destination Choice

Separate exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) were initially conducted for each multi-item construct to assess unidimensionality and internal consistency. For the measurement of ‘experiential-inspirational gratification’, sampling adequacy was acceptable (KMO = 0.774), and Bartlett’s test was significant ($\chi^2(10) = 696.48, p < 0.001$), supporting factoring. A single component emerged (eigenvalue = 2.878), explaining 57.57% of the variance. Internal consistency was also good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.815$; standardized $\alpha = 0.816$).

For the measurement of ‘utilitarian decision gratification’, the data were factorable (KMO = 0.677, $\chi^2(3) = 229.68, p < 0.001$). A one-component solution (eigenvalue = 1.90) explained 63.31% of the variance. Reliability was also acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.710$; standardized $\alpha = 0.710$). For the measurement of ‘information search and assurance gratification’, sampling adequacy was acceptable (KMO = 0.680, $\chi^2(3) = 284.32, p < 0.001$). The single component (eigenvalue = 1.984) explains 66.12% of the variance. Reliability tests show that internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.742$; standardized $\alpha = 0.743$). These results indicate that each measurement scale was sufficiently unidimensional and reliable. To further assess the theoretically specified measurement structure, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using the CB-SEM procedure in Smart-PLS 4 for the four multi-item constructs. The four-factor model produced $\chi^2(71) = 318.290$, $\chi^2/\text{df} = 4.483$, CFI = 0.917, TLI = 0.893, RMSEA = 0.091 (90% CI [0.081, 0.102]), and SRMR = 0.048. Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.630 to 0.717. Although the TLI and RMSEA indicated some remaining model misfit, the CFI and SRMR, together with consistently positive factor loadings, provided reasonable support for the proposed four-factor measurement structure. Destination choice was not included as a latent construct in the CFA because it was measured using a single item.

Descriptive analysis (Table 4) shows that social media plays a significant role in shaping Millennials’ decisions about gastronomy-related destinations. Overall, mean scores across all measurement items were approximately 4.0 on a five-point scale, indicating that social media is an important input into the destination decision-making process. The small variation in mean scores suggests that respondents value multiple social media functions equally, rather than relying on a single primary factor. With respect to experiential-inspirational gratification, respondents strongly endorsed the role of social media in influencing gastro-

nomie travel motivations and in favorably evaluating gastronomic destinations. Among indicators of experiential-inspirational gratification, food recommendations on social media scored the highest ($M = 4.00$), highlighting that endorsement cues from influencers or peers are especially influential in sparking interest in gastronomy-focused travel. This was closely followed by learning about local culture through experiencing local foods ($M = 3.97$) and discovering unique food features on social media ($M = 3.95$). These findings suggest that both cultural learning and the perception of novelty from food-related content significantly impact initial destination evaluations. For utilitarian decision gratification, respondents also placed high importance on destination-related attribute information shared via social media. The most influential external cue was specialty restaurants ($M = 4.01$), followed by price ($M = 3.99$) and service quality ($M = 3.93$). These results suggest that clear, actionable details, particularly regarding unique dining venues and expected costs, are vital for assessing gastronomic destinations. For information search and assurance gratification, social media was considered an essential platform for information gathering during gastronomic travel planning ($M = 3.99$). Respondents valued visual food content, such as photos and videos ($M = 3.99$), and relied on food reviews and comments. Hence, both visual media and user-generated reviews significantly influence Chinese Millennials' gastronomy destination choices.

Table 4. Gratification obtained from social media and gastronomy destination decision-making.

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Experiential-inspirational gratification	EIG1: The sensory stimulation experienced on social media motivates travel.	418	3.89	0.933	−0.581	−0.236
	EIG2: I visit a location popular on social media to learn about its culture through local cuisine.	418	3.97	0.886	−0.525	−0.386
	EIG3: I enjoy traveling to destinations to try local dishes and share experiences on social media.	418	3.92	0.951	−0.627	−0.191
	EIG4: I become interested in specific destinations after seeing recommended food on social media.	418	4.00	0.879	−0.682	0.153
	EIG5: I want to visit a place primarily because of its distinctive food revealed by social media.	418	3.95	0.918	−0.560	−0.341
Utilitarian decision gratification	UDG1: I use social media platforms to discover specialty restaurants at different destinations.	418	4.01	0.854	−0.599	0.100
	UDG2: I use social media to gather information on food service quality at various destinations.	418	3.93	0.886	−0.489	−0.298
	UDG3: I use social media to monitor food prices.	418	3.99	0.859	−0.483	−0.279
Information search and assurance gratification	ISAG1: Social media is a primary source of information when planning a trip.	418	3.99	0.908	−0.763	0.347
	ISAG2: Food photos/videos shared on social media play a key role in destination choices.	418	3.99	0.929	−0.801	0.376
	ISAG3: Reviews and comments about food on social media play a crucial role in choosing destinations.	418	3.94	0.878	−0.665	0.383

Source: The Authors.

4.3. The Effect of Gratification on Destination Choice

To investigate how gratification obtained from social media influences Millennials' choice of gastronomy destinations (H1–H3) and how the mediating effect of pre-visit destination impressions works (H4, H4a, H4b, H4c), mediation analyses were performed

using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals ($N = 418$). Each gratification was examined separately, controlling for the other gratifications to isolate their unique effects. Regarding the direct effects on destination choice (c' paths), experiential–inspirational gratification showed a significant positive direct impact ($c'_1 = 0.3255$, $p = 0.0001$) (Figure 2), supporting Hypothesis 1. Information search and assurance gratifications obtained from social media also had a significant positive direct effect, though smaller ($c'_3 = 0.2344$, $p = 0.0004$), supporting Hypothesis 3 (Figure 3). Conversely, the direct effect of utilitarian decision gratification based on destination attribute information shared on social media (e.g., specialty restaurants, service quality, and price cues) on destination choice was not significant after considering pre-visit impressions and covariates ($c'_2 = 0.0638$, $p = 0.4084$) (Figure 2). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Overall, these results indicate that experiential–inspirational and information search and assurance gratifications have a more direct connection to destination choice than utilitarian decision gratification.

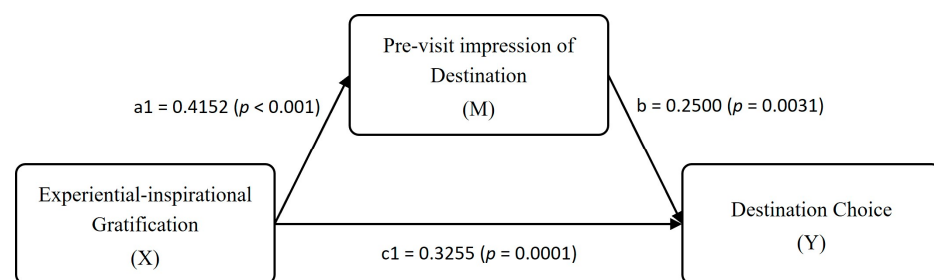


Figure 2. PROCESS Model 4: Experiential-inspirational Gratification—Pre-visit impression-Destination choice.

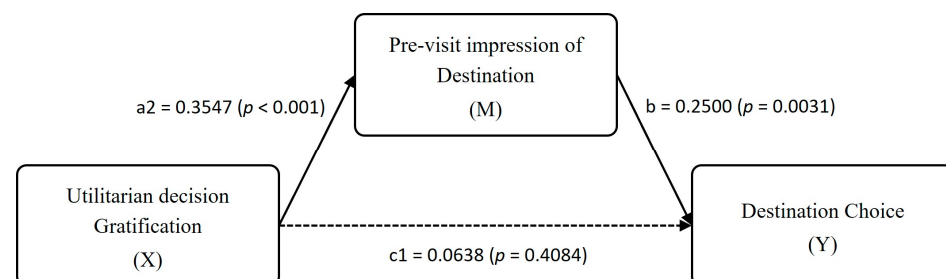


Figure 3. PROCESS Model 4: Utilitarian Decision Gratification—Pre-visit impression-Destination choice.

4.4. The Mediating Role of Pre-Visit Destination Impression in Destination Choice

The pre-visit impression of destinations was modelled as a mediator (M) linking each type of gratification, such as experiential–inspirational gratification, utilitarian decision gratification, information search and assurance gratification (X), to the choice of gastronomy-related destinations (Y) using Hayes' PROCESS macro. For each gratification, the others were controlled as covariates to assess the unique indirect effect of pre-visit impression. The results indicate that pre-visit destination impression significantly and positively predicts destination choice ($b = 0.2500$, $p = 0.0031$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

4.4.1. Experiential-Inspirational Gratification: Strongest Driver with Partial Mediation (H4a)

Experiential–inspirational gratification significantly predicted pre-visit destination impression ($a_1 = 0.4152$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly affects destination choice ($b = 0.2500$, $p = 0.0031$). The bootstrapped indirect effect is also significant ($a_1b = 0.1038$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.0071, 0.2135]), confirming a mediated pathway through impression.

Even after accounting for the pre-visit impression, experiential-inspirational gratification continues to have a significant direct effect on destination choice ($c'_1 = 0.3255$, $p = 0.0001$), indicating partial mediation (Figure 2). In this model, the indirect effect ($a_1b = 0.1038$) explains approximately 24.2% of the total effect (0.4293, the sum of direct and indirect effects), with 75.8% remaining as a direct influence. Therefore, Hypothesis 4a is supported.

4.4.2. Utilitarian Decision Gratification: Pre-Visit Destination Impression as the Primary Pathway (Indirect-Only Mediation) (H4b)

Utilitarian decision gratification significantly predicts pre-visit destination impressions ($a_2 = 0.3547$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly affect destination choice ($b = 0.2500$, $p = 0.0031$). The bootstrapped indirect effect was significant ($a_2b = 0.0887$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.0035, 0.1975]), confirming an impression-mediated pathway. However, the direct effect of utilitarian gratification on destination choice was not significant when considering pre-visit impressions and covariates ($c'_2 = 0.0638$, $p = 0.4084$) (Figure 3), indicating indirect-only mediation (Figure 3). Therefore, Hypothesis 4b is supported.

4.4.3. Information Search and Assurance Gratification: Dual Pathway with Partial Mediation (H4c)

Information search and assurance gratification significantly predicts pre-visit destination impressions ($a_3 = 0.1930$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, significantly influences destination choice ($b = 0.2500$, $p = 0.0031$) (Figure 4). The indirect effect through pre-visit impressions was significant ($a_3b = 0.0483$, 95% CI [0.0020, 0.1154]), while the direct effect on destination choice remained significant ($c'_3 = 0.2344$, $p = 0.0004$), indicating partial mediation. The model reveals that about 17% of the total effect (0.2827, combining direct and indirect effects) is explained by the indirect pathway, suggesting that information search and assurance gratification y influence destination choice directly (82.9%). Therefore, Hypothesis 4c is supported.

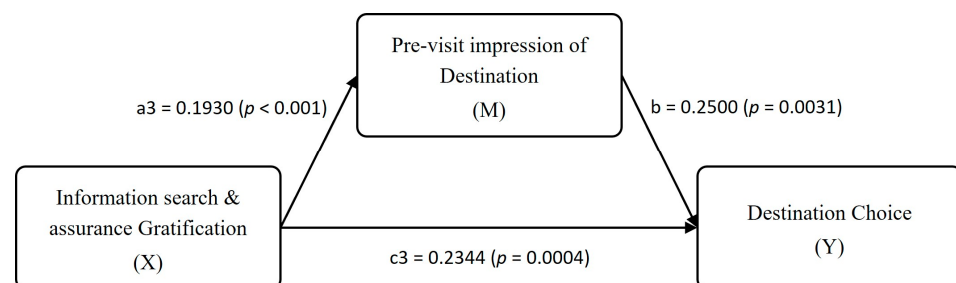


Figure 4. PROCESS Model 4: Information search—Pre-visit impression-Destination choice.

Overall, pre-visit impressions of a destination are crucial to how social media gratification affects destination choice, and the mediation patterns differed across the three gratifications (Figure 5; Table 5). Experiential-inspirational gratification had the strongest overall impact and involved a partial mediation pathway. Information search and assurance gratifications also showed partial mediation, but with a smaller indirect effect. Utilitarian gratification mainly influences destination selection indirectly, through initial impressions, rather than directly. These pathways thus demonstrate that distinct social media-derived gratifications influence destination decisions through distinct psychological processes, rather than a single, uniform social media effect.

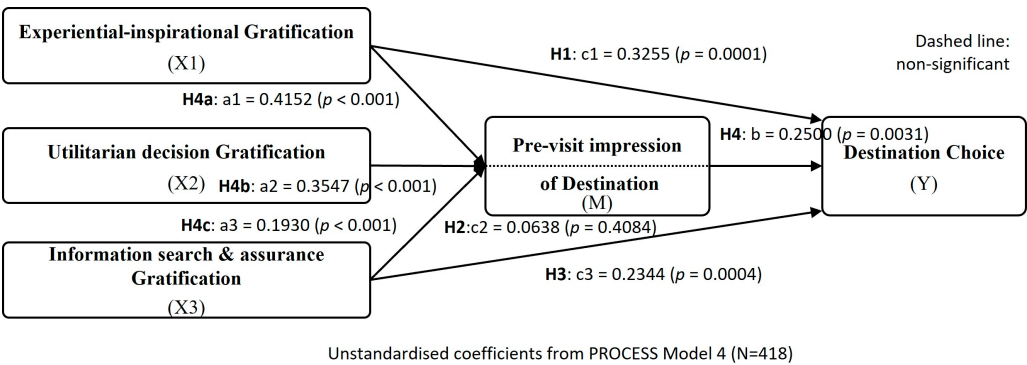


Figure 5. Mediation of pre-visit impression of the destination in the effects of social media factors on final destination choice.

Table 5. Direct and indirect effects via pre-visit impressions of the destination.

Predictors (X)	a	c'	ab	Boot 95% CI	Mediation Pattern
Experiential-inspirational gratification	0.4152	0.3255	0.1038	[0.0071, 0.2135]	Partial mediation
Utilitarian decision gratification	0.3547	0.0638	0.0887	[0.0035, 0.1975]	Indirect-only mediation
Information search and assurance gratification	0.1930	0.2344	0.0483	[0.0020, 0.1154]	Partial mediation

Source: The Authors.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Key Findings and Discussion

Grounded in U&G theory, this study explored how gratification derived from social media influences Millennials’ choices of gastronomy destinations, giving particular attention to the mediating role of initial impressions. The study focused on three types of gratification: experiential-inspirational, utilitarian decision-making, and information search and assurance. Mediation analyses found that a positive pre-visit impression of a destination significantly influenced the final decision across several pathways. However, the mediating role of pre-visit impression is not uniform across all gratification types. Rather, different forms of social media gratification activate distinct psychological pathways, requiring a nuanced theoretical interpretation that considers media psychology, generational traits, and cultural context.

The empirical findings indicate that experiential–inspirational gratification exerts the strongest influence on both pre-visit destination impressions and final destination choices. This outcome reflects the highly visual and experience-oriented nature of contemporary social media platforms. Unlike traditional destination marketing, social media presents gastronomic experiences through vivid photography, short-form videos, and immersive user-generated narratives that stimulate sensory imagination and emotional engagement well before travel occurs. U&G theory assumes that users actively select media to satisfy hedonic and psychological needs (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Gastronomy-related content is particularly potent because food naturally evokes rich sensory, emotional, and cultural associations. Food photography enhances perceived novelty and drives destination consideration (Liu et al., 2013), matching Millennials’ strong desire for authentic and visually engaging travel experiences (Defontes, 2024; Hysa et al., 2021). The emotional engagement generated by visual gastronomy content acts as a more immediate driver of destination evaluation than purely functional information.

Furthermore, the mediation analysis reveals that pre-visit destination impressions serve as a contingent mediator, with different pathways depending on the type of gratification sought. Experiential–inspirational gratification shows partial mediation: vivid sensory and emotional cues contribute to favorable pre-visit impressions, but there remains a direct, significant effect on destination choice. Therefore, its influence operates through both impression formation and a direct emotional pathway. Conversely, utilitarian decision gratification enhances destination evaluation by promoting efficient information processing and comparison. Practical cues, such as venue details, service quality, and pricing mainly influence destination choice after contributing to overall pre-visit impressions, aligning with the observed indirect-only mediation. Information search and assurance gratification follow a dual pathway: reliable reviews, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and peer-generated information strengthen impressions and directly reduce uncertainty, boosting confidence in destination choice. This aligns with prior research showing eWOM impacts travel intentions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) and that travelers use social media and others' travel experiences to lessen uncertainty during planning (Fotis et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013). The significance of the impression-mediated pathway is supported by Deng and Chen (2023), who identified that positive first impressions relate to destination selection, while the direct assurance pathway aligns with studies highlighting credibility, eWOM, and trust roles in tourism decisions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Pop et al., 2022). Overall, these findings expand U&G theory, showing that gratifications influence destination choice through multiple psychological processes: experiential gratification impacts both affective and impression-based pathways; utilitarian gratification operates predominantly through evaluative impression formation; and information search and assurance gratification operate via impression formation and direct uncertainty reduction.

In contrast, the relatively weaker influence of utilitarian decision gratification represents a noteworthy departure from the expected direct relationship. Previous research has emphasized the importance of practical information from digital media in shaping Millennials' choices for food and travel (Wachyuni et al., 2022). However, this study shows that utilitarian gratification does not directly influence destination choice once pre-visit impressions are considered. Practical details, such as pricing, location, accessibility, and service quality, help tourists assess destination viability and reduce cognitive load, but their effect operates mainly by shaping evaluative impressions rather than directly guiding destination choice. This aligns with research indicating that utilitarian benefits from social media can influence behavior indirectly via destination perceptions and attitudes (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Moon & An, 2022). It also reflects the context-dependent nature of social-media influence, which varies with factors like engagement level, destination familiarity, and planning complexity (Tham et al., 2020). Therefore, rather than downplaying utilitarian information, the findings suggest that in gastronomy tourism, practical info mainly serves as an input for pre-visit evaluation, which then impacts destination choice.

These distinct behavioral pathways closely align with the core generational characteristics of Millennials. As digital natives, Millennials seamlessly integrate social media into travel planning, discovery, and post-trip validation (Hysa et al., 2021). Beyond collecting factual data, they seek self-expression, identity alignment, and shareable experiences (Defontes, 2024; Valentine & Powers, 2013). The current findings also support Wachyuni et al. (2022), who found that Millennials mainly rely on digital media for local culinary information before traveling. Additionally, they align with S. S. Kim et al. (2021), who demonstrated that Generation Y is more responsive than older groups to food-tourism video content and engages more actively in further food-related searches. Millennials favor interactive, efficient planning and place greater trust in peer-generated online recommendations than in traditional, top-down marketing. Consequently, social media gratifications

shape not only which destinations Millennials discover, but also how they emotionally process and evaluate those options before departure. This generational reliance on digital validation explains why pre-visit impressions emerge as a pivotal psychological bridge between media exposure and destination selection.

Finally, these findings must be interpreted within the specific cultural dynamics of Chinese Millennials. Local cuisine holds a central position in Chinese tourism, functioning as both a major cultural attraction and an essential component of the overall travel experience. This observation is consistent with Guan and Jones (2015), who discovered that Chinese tourists' perceptions of local cuisine are closely related to their perceptions of the destination's attractiveness. Additionally, increased involvement and knowledge about local cuisine tend to lead to more positive evaluations of the destination. Chinese tourists frequently judge destination attractiveness through the lens of local food culture. Furthermore, younger Chinese travelers systematically consult multiple digital platforms prior to departure to verify culinary details, compare options, and mitigate travel risks (Wachyuni et al., 2022). The pronounced impact of social media gratifications observed in this study reflects an integrated cultural framework where gastronomy, digital media navigation, and cultural exploration intersect in contemporary Chinese travel behavior.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study advances our understanding of tourism by offering a more theoretical explanation of how social media influences destination choice through the lens of U&G theory. While prior studies often view social media as a precursor to destination choice, we show that this influence is not homogeneous but is structured by distinct, goal-oriented gratification mechanisms that activate different pathways. First, this study extends gastronomy tourism research by moving beyond the identification of media-use motivation to explain how gratification shapes gastronomy-related destination choice. The findings show that experiential-inspirational, utilitarian decision, and information search and assurance gratification play distinct roles. Experiential-inspirational gratification influences destination choice mainly through affective and hedonic responses, whereas utilitarian decision gratification operates through cognitive assessment, shaping destination choice only when practical information is incorporated into pre-visit impressions. Information search and assurance gratification bridge these processes by reducing uncertainty and strengthening evaluative judgments.

Second, this study contributes to destination choice theory by critically refining the role of pre-visit destination impression as a mediating construct. We suggest that mediation is not a uniform or linear mechanism but a contingent and pathway-specific one. Partial mediation for experiential and assurance gratifications, and indirect mediation for utilitarian decision gratification, suggest that pre-visit impressions function as a selective integrative mechanism, converting certain cognitive evaluations into destination preferences while coexisting with direct affective influences.

More importantly, the findings suggest that destination choice should not be viewed as the outcome of a single, uniform decision-making process. Instead, different types of social media gratification activate distinct psychological pathways leading to destination choice. Whereas experiential gratification can directly evoke affective responses while simultaneously shaping pre-visit destination impressions, utilitarian gratification influences destination choice only after practical information has been transformed into a favorable evaluative impression. Information search and assurance gratification operates through both uncertainty reduction and impression formation. This pathway-specific perspective advances destination choice theory by demonstrating that tourists do not process all destination-related information in the same manner; rather, the psychological mechanism

linking information acquisition to behavioral choice depends on the underlying motivation for media use.

Third, the study clarifies the distinction between pre-visit destination impression and destination image. While destination image is generally regarded as a multidimensional perception developed over time, pre-visit impression is conceptualized as a rapid, cue-driven evaluation shaped by social media. By confirming its mediating role, the study shows that early impressions are not merely precursors to destination image but can directly shape behavioral outcomes in visually intensive digital tourism contexts.

Finally, this study contributes to the gastronomy-related tourism literature by positioning destination choice within a U&G framework. Gastronomy tourism provides a useful context for examining media-driven decision-making because food-related content simultaneously conveys experiential appeal, practical information, and assurance cues. By showing how these gratifications influence destination choice through different pathways, the study illustrates that gastronomy serves not only as a tourism attraction but also as a mediated trigger for decision-making.

5.3. Managerial Implications

This study shows that social media influences on destination choice are not uniform but are mechanistically heterogeneous as explained by U&G theory. These findings are highly relevant to destination marketers and gastronomy tourism practitioners aiming to attract Millennials via social media. First, given that experiential-inspirational gratification exerts the strongest direct and indirect effects, destination marketing should prioritize content delivering sensory, emotional, and immersive experiences. In particular, since Millennials are highly responsive to visually rich social media content, marketers should invest in high-quality short-form videos, live-streaming, and user-generated storytelling that showcase local cuisine, chef narratives, traditional cooking methods, and authentic dining experiences. Rather than promoting individual restaurants, gastronomy should be presented as part of the destination's culture and lifestyle, enabling potential tourists to mentally experience local food before traveling. Collaborating with food influencers, travel bloggers, and local content creators on platforms widely used by Chinese Millennials, such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and WeChat, can further strengthen emotional engagement and stimulate favorable pre-visit destination impressions.

Second, the significant role of information search and assurance gratification underscores the importance of credibility and trust-building strategies. Credibility-based content, such as reviews and visual evidence, can build trust, reduce perceived risks, and increase confidence in decision-making. From a managerial perspective, this suggests that gastronomy-related destinations should actively manage online reputation and encourage user-generated content, as social validation plays a critical role in both impression formation and direct destination choice. As Millennials frequently consult multiple online sources before making travel decisions, providing consistent and trustworthy information across official websites, online travel agencies, and social media platforms is essential. Destination marketers should also encourage visitors to share authentic food photographs, dining experiences, and recommendations, as user-generated content serves as a powerful source of social validation that enhances both pre-visit destination impressions and destination choice.

Finally, utilitarian cues, such as prices, restaurant details, and service quality, primarily serve as inputs for impression formation rather than as immediate decision triggers. Nevertheless, sharing practical information about restaurants, costs, and service levels can foster a positive pre-visit impression, as utilitarian benefits shape destination choice at this point. But such information should not be presented in isolation, but hospitality

businesses should integrate functional information—such as restaurant locations, menu prices, reservation availability, service quality, payment options, language accessibility, and transportation—with visually appealing and emotionally engaging content rather than presenting these details separately. For example, short videos introducing local speciality dishes can simultaneously provide practical information about restaurant accessibility, pricing, and recommended menu items, thereby satisfying both functional and experiential needs. Such integrated communication strategies are likely to strengthen favorable destination impressions while facilitating efficient travel planning.

Overall, the findings suggest that gastronomy-related destination marketers should adopt a multi-layered content strategy that integrates emotional appeal, credible information, and practical details to address different gratification needs. More importantly, because Millennials actively use social media not only to obtain information but also to seek authentic experiences, social validation, and cultural exploration, destination marketing should move beyond one-way promotional communication toward interactive digital engagement. Encouraging visitors to create and share authentic gastronomic experiences, fostering online communities around local cuisine, and collaborating with trusted digital influencers can strengthen pre-visit destination impressions and ultimately increase destination choice among this influential market segment.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration in future research. First, this study employed non-probability convenience sampling and recruited respondents through WeChat. Although participants were drawn from multiple regions of China and the sample size was adequate for the mediation analyses, analytical adequacy does not imply population representativeness. Recruitment through a social-media platform may have introduced selection bias by over-representing relatively active social-media users while underrepresenting Millennials with limited social-media engagement. In addition, because participation was voluntary, self-selection bias may have occurred if individuals with stronger interests in social media, travel, or gastronomy were more inclined to participate. These sampling characteristics may have contributed to the relatively high levels of reported social-media use and may also have influenced the magnitude of the observed relationships. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted primarily in relation to Millennial social-media users rather than generalized to the broader population of Chinese Millennials. Future research should employ probability-based or stratified sampling where feasible, or quota sampling aligned with relevant population characteristics, and include respondents with varying levels of social-media engagement to assess the external validity of the proposed relationships.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on Chinese Millennials within a single research context—gastronomy-related destination choice influenced by social media. The findings may therefore not be directly generalizable to other tourism contexts, generational cohorts (e.g., Generation X or Z), or cultural settings (e.g., Western cultures). Generational differences in media use, information processing, and travel decision-making may influence how social-media gratifications shape pre-visit destination impressions and destination choice. Similarly, cultural differences may affect the relative importance of experiential–inspirational, utilitarian decision, and information search and assurance gratifications. Future studies should therefore test the proposed framework across different tourism products and destination contexts, as well as across generations and cultures, to examine the broader applicability of the findings.

Third, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation because social-media gratifications, pre-visit destination impressions, and destination choice were measured at

a single point in time. Although the proposed relationships are theoretically grounded, the present design cannot establish temporal ordering or confirm causal relationships among the variables. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how destination impressions evolve over time or experimental designs that manipulate different types of gastronomy-related social-media content to provide stronger evidence of the proposed causal mechanisms. In addition, destination choice was assessed using a single item. Although this item captured respondents' overall assessment of the role of social media in their final destination choice, it may not fully represent the broader destination-choice process and does not permit conventional assessment of internal consistency reliability. Future studies should therefore adopt validated multi-item measures and, where feasible, incorporate behavioral indicators of actual destination choice to strengthen measurement validity and assess the robustness of the proposed relationships.

Fourth, this study relied on a single quantitative survey methodology. Although this approach was appropriate for testing the proposed mediation relationships, it offers limited insight into how tourists interpret gastronomy-related social-media cues and how pre-visit destination impressions develop through individual decision-making processes. Future studies could complement quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews, focus groups, or mixed-method designs to provide a richer understanding of the psychological processes underlying impression formation and destination choice.

Finally, all principal variables were measured using self-reported data collected through a single online questionnaire, which may introduce response bias and common-method bias. Although the CFA-based comparison showed that the four-factor measurement model fit is significantly better than the single-factor alternative, the differences in several fit indices were modest, and Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor accounted for 51.3% of the variance. Common method variance therefore cannot be completely ruled out. Future studies could combine self-reported measures with behavioral indicators, platform-based engagement data, experimental observations, or other independent data sources. This approach would reduce reliance on a single source of measurement and strengthen the robustness of the proposed relationships.

5.5. Conclusions

This study applies U&G theory to explain how social media influences Chinese Millennials' gastronomic destination choice. It identifies three social media-derived gratifications and demonstrates that they operate through distinct direct and impression-mediated pathways. Pre-visit destination impression emerges as a crucial evaluative mechanism linking gratification obtained from social media to destination choice. By integrating U&G theory with pre-visit destination impressions and destination choice, this study extends gastronomy tourism research beyond general accounts of social media influence and reveals how distinct gratification needs lead to different decision pathways among Millennials. The findings also offer practical guidance for destination marketers seeking to design social media content that combines experiential appeal, credible information, and practical cues to foster favorable pre-visit impressions and encourage gastronomically related destination choice.

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Data Availability Statement: The data in this study includes confidential coding data. Due to privacy, ethical restrictions, and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the full data cannot be publicly accessed. An anonymized subset of coding data may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval and applicable ethical requirements.

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