

Transforming Cultural Capital into Soft Power: A Marketing Strategy for Promoting Food Tourism in Yaowarat

การแปลงทุนทางวัฒนธรรมสู่ซอฟต์แวร์: กลยุทธ์การตลาดเพื่อส่งเสริมการท่องเที่ยวเชิงอาหารในเยาวราช

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Abstract

This study investigates the structural transformation of cultural capital into soft power within the context of gastronomy tourism in Yaowarat (Bangkok's Chinatown). Against the backdrop of the global shift towards the "Experience Economy," this research integrates Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Capital with Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power and the 7Ps Services Marketing Mix to elucidate how heritage resources are converted into economic and symbolic value. Adopting a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design, the study analyses quantitative data from 400 international and domestic tourists using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and qualitative insights from 10 key informants, including heritage shop owners and community leaders. The quantitative results reveal that 'Place' (specifically accessibility via mass transit and atmospheric vibrancy) and 'Promotion' (digital influence and celebrity endorsement) are the primary drivers of perceived soft power. Contrary to classical economic assumptions, 'Price' has no significant direct influence on soft power formation, suggesting that gastronomy tourism in this heritage district operates under the price-insensitive logic characteristic of the experience economy. Qualitative analysis, however, uncovers critical vulnerabilities: the erosion of 'Embodied Cultural Capital' due to the retirement of master chefs, the threat of 'staged authenticity' driven by gentrification, and infrastructural deficits regarding hygiene and waste management. The study proposes the 'DRAGON Model'—a strategic framework integrating Deep Gastronomy, Revitalized Scape, Algorithmic Alliance, Guardianship of Community, Orchestrated Experience, and Neo-Soft Power—to elevate Yaowarat to a world-class, sustainable gastronomy destination.

Keywords: Soft Power, Cultural Capital, Gastronomy Tourism, Service Marketing Mix (7Ps), Destination Branding, Yaowarat, Thailand.

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้วิเคราะห์การเปลี่ยนทุนทางวัฒนธรรมสู่ซอฟต์แวร์ในการท่องเที่ยวเชิงอาหารย่านเยาวราช ภายใต้บริบทเศรษฐกิจฐานประสบการณ์ โดยบูรณาการทฤษฎีทุนของ Bourdieu แนวคิดซอฟต์แวร์และส่วนประสมการตลาดบริการ (7Ps) งานวิจัยใช้วิธีแบบผสมผสาน เก็บข้อมูลจากนักท่องเที่ยว 400 คนและผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญ 10 คน ผลการวิเคราะห์โมเดลสมการโครงสร้าง (PLS-SEM) พบว่า 'ช่องทางการจัดจำหน่าย' (การเข้าถึงและบรรยากาศ) และ 'การส่งเสริมการตลาด' (อิทธิพลสื่อดิจิทัลและคนดัง) เป็นปัจจัยหลักที่ขับเคลื่อนซอฟต์แวร์ ในขณะที่ยังพบว่า 'ราคา' ไม่มีอิทธิพลอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ สะท้อนให้เห็นว่าการท่องเที่ยวในย่านมรดกนี้ดำเนินงานด้วยตรรกะที่ไม่แปรผันตามราคา อย่างไรก็ตาม การวิเคราะห์เชิงคุณภาพพบความเสี่ยงสำคัญ ได้แก่ การถดถอยของทุนทางวัฒนธรรมในตัวบุคคลเนื่องจากการเกษียณของเชฟชั้นครู ปัญหาความแท้ที่ถูกรบกวน และปัญหาการจัดการขยะ งานวิจัยนี้จึงนำเสนอ 'โมเดล DRAGON' เพื่อยกระดับเยาวราชสู่การเป็นจุดหมายปลายทางด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงอาหารที่ยั่งยืนระดับโลก

คำสำคัญ: ซอฟต์แวร์, ทุนทางวัฒนธรรม, การท่องเที่ยวเชิงอาหาร, ส่วนประสมทางการตลาดบริการ (7Ps), การสร้างแบรนด์จุดหมายปลายทาง, เยาวราช, ประเทศไทย

1. Introduction

In the third decade of the 21st century, the global tourism landscape has undergone a seismic paradigm shift. The industry has transitioned from a "Service Economy," where value was defined by the efficiency, standardization, and quality of service delivery, to an "Experience Economy" (Wang, 1999). In this new modality, tourists are no longer passive consumers of sights or services; they are active seekers of "existential authenticity" (Wang, 1999). They crave immersion in a destination's living culture, seeking narratives that resonate on an emotional level and activities that offer a sense of participation in the local "habitus".

Within this experiential framework, "food" has transcended its physiological function as sustenance. It has ascended from a supporting amenity to a "Peak Experience," serving as a primary motivation for travel and a potent vehicle for cultural exchange (Jeaheng & Han, 2020). Food allows for the literal internalization of a foreign culture, making it one of the most effective media for cross-cultural understanding. This phenomenon has given rise to the concept of the "Foodscape"—a complex landscape combining taste, smell, atmosphere, and storytelling—which acts as the primary stage for the tourist's interaction with the destination (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

For Thailand, a nation historically positioned as the "Kitchen of the World," this shift presents both a strategic opportunity and a complex challenge. The Thai government has explicitly integrated "Food" as one of the 5Fs (Food, Film, Fashion, Fighting, Festivals) in its national soft power strategy, aiming to leverage culinary heritage not merely as a commodity but as a diplomatic asset that projects an image of vibrancy, creativity, and hospitality to the global community (Parichart & Rotchanakit, 2022).

Yaowarat, Bangkok's Chinatown, stands as the quintessential laboratory for observing this transformation. Established in 1891, the district has historically served as the commercial artery of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand (Juntavong, 2023). Geographically designed to resemble the curving body of a dragon—a symbol of prosperity in Feng Shui—Yaowarat possesses immense "Cultural Capital," both embodied in the tacit skills of its street food vendors and objectified in its Sino-Portuguese shophouses, gold shops, and shrines (Cifci et al., 2021).

However, Yaowarat is currently navigating a critical juncture characterized by the "double-edged sword" of viral popularity. The district has been catapulted into the global spotlight by digital media trends, most notably the "Lisa Effect"—the viral impact of K-pop superstar Lalisa "Lisa" Manobal filming her "Rockstar" music video in the district (Fathy et al., 2024). This event instantaneously rebranded the 132-year-old street from a traditional trading hub into a "Cyberpunk" destination for Gen Z pilgrims (Wong et al., 2019).

While this surge in visibility aligns with the state's soft power objectives, it has exacerbated underlying structural tensions. The district faces the paradox of success: while tourist numbers and revenue surge, the underlying social fabric is threatened by gentrification, overtourism, and the commodification of culture (Gotham, 2005). The "authenticity" that attracts visitors is increasingly at

risk of becoming a "staged" performance, hollowed out by the displacement of traditional communities and the erosion of local ways of life in favor of cafes and hostels designed solely for the "tourist gaze" (MacCannell, 1973).

2. Research Objectives

Despite the proliferation of literature on soft power and destination marketing, there remains a paucity of empirical research that empirically links the theoretical constructs of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu) and Soft Power (Nye) through the lens of practical Service Marketing (7Ps) in a heritage context. This study fills this gap by addressing the following objectives:

1. To analyze the influence of the 7Ps marketing mix on the perception of soft power among tourists in Yaowarat, identifying which factors act as proper drivers of cultural attraction.
2. To deconstruct the mechanism of capital conversion, explaining how the raw cultural assets of the community are transformed into symbolic power and economic value.
3. To investigate the qualitative nuances of sustainability risks, explicitly focusing on the tension between maintaining authentic heritage and adapting to the demands of mass tourism and digital trends.
4. To propose the 'DRAGON Model', a strategic framework for elevating Yaowarat to a world-class gastronomy destination that balances economic growth with cultural preservation.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital: The Raw Material of Soft Power

To understand the value proposition of Yaowarat, one must look beyond economic indicators to the sociology of capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) expanded the notion of capital beyond the monetary to include Cultural Capital, which exists in three states, all of which are present and contested in Yaowarat (Bourdieu, 1986).

3.1.1 The Embodied State: The Tacit Knowledge of the Master

This refers to the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (Bourdieu, 1986). In Yaowarat, this capital is embodied in the street food vendor—the rhythmic clang of the wok, the precise balance of spices in a broth perfected over decades, and the family recipes handed down. This form of capital cannot be instantly transmitted; it requires time, cultivation, and *Bildung* (self-cultivation). It is the chef's "habitus". The crisis facing Yaowarat today is the erosion of this embodied capital, as younger generations decline to inherit the grueling labor of street food vending, leading to a loss of the "hand" or "breath of the wok" (Wok Hei) that defines authentic taste (Chontawan et al., 2022).

3.1.2 The Objectified State: The Material Culture

Cultural capital also exists in material objects and media. In the context of this study, this encompasses the physical environment of Chinatown, including its distinctive Sino-Portuguese architecture. This red-and-gold neon signage creates the district's cinematic aesthetic, the shrines, and even the specific utensils used in food preparation. These objects are the tangible vessels of culture. The

"semiotic landscape" of Yaowarat, with its multilingual signs and visual density, serves as a powerful, objectified capital that signals "China-ness" to tourists (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

3.1.3 The Institutionalized State: Certification and Prestige

This form of objectification confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1986). For Yaowarat, the Michelin Guide's "Bib Gourmand" awards, Shell Shuan Shim certifications, or potential UNESCO recognition serve as institutional validations. These accolades legitimize the local food culture on a global stage, converting local "taste" into global "prestige" and transforming a street stall into a destination worthy of pilgrimage (Jeaheng & Han, 2020).

3.2 Soft Power and Gastrodiplomacy: The Mechanism of Attraction

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" to describe the ability to achieve preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (hard power) or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power rests on three resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies. Gastrodiplomacy operates within the cultural sphere of soft power (Li, 2025). It utilizes food as a non-threatening, pleasurable entry point to a nation's identity (Cabral & Carvalho, 2024). Food reduces the "psychic distance" between cultures; by consuming Thai-Chinese food, a tourist literally internalizes the culture, creating a bond of familiarity and affection. This study posits that Yaowarat functions as a massive, open-air theater of gastrodiplomacy, where the state's role is often secondary to the organic power of the food itself (Eser, 2024).

In the digital age, this soft power is increasingly mediated through digital platforms. The viral spread of culinary content creates what can be termed "Digital Soft Power," in which engagement, shares, and algorithmic visibility measure influence. The "Lisa Effect" is a prime example of how a single piece of digital content can exponentially amplify a location's soft power, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels entirely (Fathy et al., 2024).

3.3 The 7Ps of Service Marketing in the Context of Heritage Tourism

Given the service-dominant nature of tourism, the traditional 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) are insufficient. This study adopts the extended 7Ps Framework to analyze the holistic visitor experience (Booms & Bitner, 1981):

3.3.1 Product: The core food offering, but also the "story" and the "authenticity" of the experience (Praesri et al., 2022).

3.3.2 Price: The monetary cost, but more importantly, the "value for money" and the psychological cost in the experience economy.

3.3.3 Place: Accessibility (physical and digital), location, and the "atmospherics" of the district.

3.3.4 Promotion: Integrated marketing communications, with a heavy emphasis on digital channels and influencer marketing.

3.3.5 People: The vendors, service staff, and the local community who co-create the experience. Their "hospitality" is a key component of the product.

3.3.6 Process: The flow of service, queuing systems (digital vs. analog), and hygiene practices (Seo & Lee, 2021).

3.3.7 Physical Evidence: The sensory environment—lighting, cleanliness, seating, and the visual clutter that defines the aesthetic.

3.4 The Threat of Gentrification and Overtourism

As cultural capital creates economic value, it attracts capital investment, leading to Gentrification. In historic districts like Yaowarat, Song Wat, and Talad Noi, this manifests as "commercial gentrification," where traditional trades (e.g., spare parts, herbal medicine, paper offerings) are displaced by high-rent cafes, galleries, and hostels catering to the "Creative Class" and tourists (Gotham, 2005). This process threatens the very "authenticity" visitors seek, creating a paradox in which the success of tourism undermines its own foundation—a phenomenon often referred to as "tourism-phobia" or overtourism, characterized by overcrowding, waste management failures, and the alienation of residents (Milano et al., 2019).

3.5 Synthesis of Contemporary Tourism Dynamics

To fully conceptualize the transformation of heritage into soft power, this study synthesizes five interlocking domains of contemporary tourism literature. First, **Digital Soft Power** refers to the algorithmic amplification of cultural assets, in which global digital footprints replace traditional state-led cultural diplomacy (Fathy et al., 2024). Second, the **Experience Economy in Tourism** holds that consumer value is derived from psychological and emotional immersion rather than from utilitarian consumption (Wang, 1999). Third, **Food Tourism Behavior** serves as an embodiment of this experience, in which international visitors use local gastronomy as a primary gateway to cross-cultural understanding (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). Fourth, **Heritage Tourism Sustainability** demands a delicate equilibrium between generating economic vitality and safeguarding vulnerable living cultures (Orea-Giner et al., 2026). Finally, **Gentrification in Tourism Cities** acts as a structurally disruptive force, in which escalating commercial rents frequently displace the authentic community residents who created the destination's original cultural appeal (Gotham, 2005).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts a Pragmatic Paradigm, acknowledging that the complexity of soft power requires a pluralistic approach to uncover both objective trends (the "what") and subjective meanings (the "why" and "how"). A Mixed-Methods Exploratory Sequential Design was employed, prioritizing the quantitative phase to establish structural relationships, followed by a qualitative phase to provide deep contextualization (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Theoretical-Empirical Mapping Note: It is critical to clarify that, while Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital serves as the foundational conceptual framework for the entire study, it functions as an implicit baseline. Within the quantitative statistical model, Cultural Capital is operationalized and mediated through the measurable components of the 7Ps Services Marketing Mix. Therefore, the empirical structural model specifically evaluates the causal

path: 7Ps Marketing Mix → Perceived Soft Power → Behavioral Outcomes (Travel Decision & Revisit Intention), establishing a verified conceptual link between local heritage transformation and international marketing efficacy.

4.2 Phase 1: Quantitative Study

Population and Sample: The target population consisted of Thai and international tourists visiting Yaowarat and its vicinity (including Talad Noi and Song Wat). A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using Cochran's formula for unknown populations (95% confidence level, $\pm 5\%$ precision). Sampling was conducted using a quota method (stratified by zone and time of day) followed by convenience sampling to ensure a diverse representation ([Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017](#)).

Instrument: A structured questionnaire was developed based on the 7Ps framework and Soft Power dimensions. It utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). The instrument passed validity ($\text{IOC} > 0.5$) and reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.7).

Data Analysis: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed using SmartPLS software. This method was chosen for its robustness in testing predictive models with latent constructs and non-normal data distributions, which is common in social science research ([Praesri et al., 2022](#); [Hair et al., 2021](#)).

4.3 Phase 2: Qualitative Study

Key Informants Selection & Matrix: A purposive sample of 10 key informants (KIs) was carefully curated to capture the multi-layered ecosystem of the Yaowarat district. To ensure institutional representativeness and sampling transparency, strict inclusion criteria were established: informants were required to have at least 5 years of active operational/residential history in the area, direct financial or cultural stakes in the tourism supply chain, and demonstrated engagement in local heritage development. The final cohort balances the "Guardians of Tradition" with the "Agents of Change" to map out systemic tensions:

Group 1: Heritage Entrepreneurs (n=3): Multi-generational business owners operating historically verified gastronomy establishments for over 30 years directly on Yaowarat Road.

Group 2: New-Wave Adaptive Entrepreneurs (n=3): Modern micro-business operators (boutique hostels, specialized cafes, and creative bars) established within the last 5 years in the peripheral gentrifying zones of Song Wat and Talad Noi.

Group 3: Community Custodians & Residents (n=4): Active members of localized community development committees and long-term socio-cultural residents who hold non-commercial institutional memory of the neighborhood ([Juntavong, 2023](#)).

Data Collection: In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview guide focused on changes in the district, the impact of digital trends, operational challenges, and perceptions of "authenticity".

Analysis: Thematic analysis was performed to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and deeper narratives regarding the tension between heritage conservation and commercial adaptation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Quantitative Findings: The Structural Drivers of Soft Power

The PLS-SEM analysis provided a clear structural model. The assessment of the measurement and structural models is presented in the following tables, confirming reliability, validity, and hypothesis-testing results.

5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability and validity of the constructs were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All values exceeded the recommended thresholds (Alpha > 0.7, CR > 0.7, AVE > 0.5) (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (ρ_a)	Composite Reliability (ρ_c)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Place	0.852	0.860	0.895	0.682
Promotion	0.835	0.842	0.880	0.648
Product	0.810	0.825	0.875	0.635
Price	0.795	0.801	0.854	0.595
People	0.805	0.815	0.862	0.610
Soft Power (Perceived)	0.885	0.892	0.915	0.725
Travel Decision	0.840	0.855	0.890	0.670
Revisit Intention	0.825	0.838	0.882	0.655

5.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of AVE for each construct (diagonal values in bold) is greater than its correlation with any other construct.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Place	Promotion	Product	Price	Soft Power	Travel Decision
Place	0.826					
Promotion	0.542	0.805				
Product	0.485	0.510	0.797			
Price	0.125	0.150	0.220	0.771		
Soft Power	0.620	0.585	0.540	0.115	0.851	
Travel Decision	0.590	0.565	0.510	0.130	0.750	0.819

5.3 Structural Model Assessment

The model's predictive power was evaluated using the Coefficient of Determination (R^2). The results indicate that the 7Ps factors explain a substantial amount of variance in Soft Power, which in turn predicts Travel Decision and Revisit Intention.

Table 3: Coefficient of Determination (R^2) Assessment

Endogenous Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Interpretation
Soft Power	0.645	0.642	Moderate to Substantial
Travel Decision	0.580	0.578	Moderate
Revisit Intention	0.525	0.522	Moderate

5.4 Hypothesis Testing (Path Coefficients)

The bootstrapping procedure (5,000 subsamples) was used to test the significance of the path coefficients. Place and Promotion were identified as the strongest drivers, while Price was found to be insignificant.

Table 4: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis (Path)	Path Coefficient (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Result
H1: Place → Soft Power	0.382	5.120	0.000	Supported
H2: Promotion → Soft Power	0.315	4.450	0.000	Supported
H3: Product → Soft Power	0.290	3.890	0.000	Supported
H4: People → Soft Power	0.210	2.950	0.003	Supported
H5: Price → Soft Power	0.052	0.850	0.395	Not Supported
H6: Soft Power → Travel Decision	0.650	8.250	0.000	Supported
H7: Soft Power → Revisit Intention	0.580	7.110	0.000	Supported

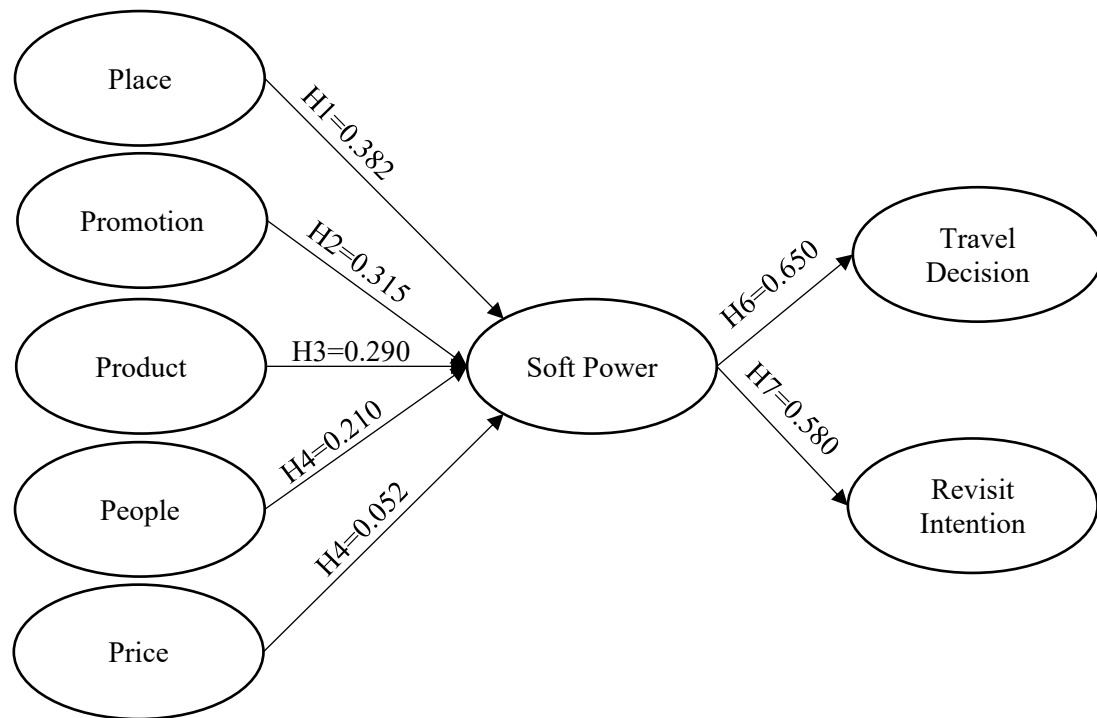


Figure 1: Structural Model Path Coefficients

5.5 Discussion of Quantitative Results

The lack of correlation between Price and Soft Power (Table 4) suggests that gastronomy tourism in Yaowarat operates strictly under the logic of the Experience Economy (Wang, 1999). Tourists do not evaluate street food based on a cost-plus model (i.e., ingredient costs). Instead, they are paying for the experience, the story, and the authenticity. A bowl of noodles in Yaowarat commands a premium not because of the flour and water, but because of the chef's "Embodied Capital" and the street's "Objectified Capital." High prices, within reason, do not diminish soft-power appeal; in fact, they may even enhance perceived value by signaling prestige (the Veblen Effect).

6. Qualitative Findings: The Fragility of Heritage

While the quantitative data paints a picture of a thriving destination driven by accessibility and digital hype, the qualitative data reveals a more complex, fragile reality. The analysis of key informant interviews identified three major themes that highlight the "vulnerability of sustainability" (Orea-Giner et al., 2026).

6.1 Theme 1: The Tug-of-War between Authenticity and Adaptation

This theme explores the existential struggle of food vendors who must navigate the fine line between preserving their heritage (Embodied Capital) and surviving in a modern market driven by changing tastes.

6.1.1 Sub-theme: The Dilution of "Cheng."

Traditional Thai-Chinese culinary philosophy values Cheng (clear, subtle, balanced). However, the modern tourist palate, influenced by global trends and the "Mala" craze, demands hyper-palatable, intense flavors.

"Grandpa taught that good soup must be clear like a mirror but deep in taste... But customers these days, especially the teenagers and some tourists, say it's 'bland'. They ask for Mala chili, chili sauce... I feel pain, like my art is being splashed with paint. But if I do not let them season, I cannot sell. I have to survive." — KI-01 (Third-generation Fishball Noodle Vendor, Yaowarat Road).

This quote illustrates the "Cultural Dilution" occurring at the micro-level. The vendor views their broth as "art" (Embodied Capital), yet market forces compel them to compromise, risking the loss of the very identity that defines them.

6.1.2 Sub-theme: Commoditization of Cuisine

To remain relevant on social media platforms like TikTok, some vendors resort to visual gimmicks that have no roots in local culture.

"We used to sell just traditional oyster omelets... Now customers show me pictures on their phones and ask, 'Do you have the cheese version?'... We have to add 'fusion' menus to keep the kids interested. However, deep down, I feel this is not Yaowarat anymore; it is just Siam Square inside a Chinese building." — KI-03 (Oyster Omelet Shop Owner).

This reflects the "Disneyfication" of food culture, where the visual appeal (the "cheese pull") supersedes culinary integrity, transforming food from a cultural artifact into a digital prop (MacCannell, 1973).

6.2 Theme 2: The Double-Edged Sword of Viral Trends

The impact of digital media, particularly the viral success of Lisa Manobal's music video, acts as a powerful accelerator of tourism but also brings chaos and superficial engagement in its wake (Fathy et al., 2024).

6.2.1 Sub-theme: The Volatility of the "Event Economy."

The surge in visitors following the "Rockstar" MV release created a temporary economic boom but stressed the local capacity.

"When the Lisa MV dropped, Yaowarat exploded. Sales went up 300% in one night... However, it's a mix of joy and exhaustion. It came like a storm, and when it faded, it left trash and chaos. It is not stable growth; it is like winning the lottery. We cannot build a business plan on viral trends." — KI-04 (Bar Owner in Soi Nana/Chinatown).

6.2.2 Sub-theme: Performative Consumption

Informants noted a shift in tourist behavior towards visual consumption rather than gastronomic appreciation.

"Kids these days order food, arrange it, take photos for half an hour... standing on chairs, blocking the way... then they eat two bites and leave. I feel sorry for the food. We put our heart into making it, but it becomes just a 'prop' for their Instagram." — KI-02 (Street Seafood Vendor).

This "check-in culture" contributes to Overtourism without necessarily contributing to deep cultural understanding (Wong et al., 2019). It crowds out genuine diners and creates congestion that alienates locals.

6.3 Theme 3: Infrastructure Collapse and the Threat of Gentrification

Despite the glossy image presented online, the physical reality of Yaowarat suffers from systemic neglect and structural inequality.

6.3.1 Sub-theme: The "Shell" of Heritage (Gentrification)

Rising land prices, driven by the MRT and tourism speculation, are displacing traditional trades.

"Rent has skyrocketed. The old drugstores, the paper offering shops... they cannot survive the new rates. Hostels, cannabis shops, and craft beer bars are replacing them... If this continues, Yaowarat will be left with only the shell of Chinatown, but no Chinese soul." — KI-07 (Community Committee Member).

This warns of a hollowed-out future in which the architectural shell remains (Objectified Capital), while the living culture (Embodied Capital) is evicted—a process of commercial gentrification (Gotham, 2005).

6.3.2 Sub-theme: The Hygiene Time Bomb

Sanitation remains the district's critical weakness, threatening to undo all soft power gains.

"When there are many people, trash is massive. The bins are overflowing. Rats run in packs at night behind the beautiful stalls. If a clip of a rat on a plate goes viral... just one clip... that is the end of Yaowarat street food. We are sitting on a time bomb." — KI-05 (New Gen Entrepreneur).

This confirms the "fragility" mentioned in the abstract. Hygiene is a "Hygiene Factor" in the Herzberg sense—its presence does not motivate, but its absence causes catastrophic failure (Seo & Lee, 2021).

7. Discussion

7.1 The Price Paradox and the Experience Economy

The quantitative finding that 'Price' does not influence soft power perception challenges classical economic theory but aligns perfectly with the Experience Economy framework (Wang, 1999). In the realm of cultural tourism, "value" is derived not from low cost but from high emotional engagement and authenticity. Tourists view the premium paid for Yaowarat's food not as a cost for nutrients, but as an admission fee to a cultural theater. However, the qualitative data suggests a limit to this insensitivity; as rents push prices higher (due to Gentrification), there is a risk of crossing the threshold from "premium experience" to "exploitation," which could alienate domestic tourists and erode the local customer base.

7.2 Digital Soft Power: Accelerator vs. Disruptor

The research confirms that digital promotion is a critical driver of soft power (Wong et al., 2019). The "Lisa Effect" demonstrates the rapid pace at which pop culture can recontextualize a heritage site, transforming it from a "place for old people" to a "cool destination" (Fathy et al., 2024). However, the qualitative findings reveal that this "Digital Soft Power" is volatile and often superficial. It fosters Overtourism, creating tension between the destination's image (cool, vibrant) and the reality experienced by residents (crowded, dirty, expensive) (Milano et al., 2019).

7.3 The Crisis of Authenticity

The study identifies a critical threat to Yaowarat's soft power: the loss of Embodied Cultural Capital. As traditional shop owners (the carriers of tacit knowledge and history) are priced out by gentrification, they are replaced by investors who possess financial capital but lack cultural depth (Gotham, 2005). This substitution creates a "Simulated Authenticity" or "Disneyfication," in which the aesthetics of Chinatown are preserved but its soul is lost (MacCannell, 1973).

8. Strategic Recommendations: THE DRAGON MODEL

To navigate these challenges and elevate Yaowarat to a "World-Class Gastronomy Destination" that is both profitable and sustainable, this study proposes the DRAGON Model. This model is designed to harmonize the 7Ps while preserving cultural capital.

8.1 D - Deep Gastronomy (Diversity & Depth):

8.1.1 *Strategy*: Move beyond surface-level "food porn." Implement a "Gastronomy Storytelling" program.

8.1.2 *Action*: Create QR codes at heritage stalls that link to videos of the chef explaining the history of the dish (Embodied Capital). Encourage vendors to maintain "Signature Heritage Menus" alongside modern adaptations, preserving the "Cheng" taste as a premium, authentic option (Praesri et al., 2022).

8.2 R - Revitalized Scape (Resilience & Hygiene):

8.2.1 *Strategy*: Address the "Hygiene Time Bomb" to secure Physical Evidence.

8.2.2 *Action*: Invest in innovative waste management systems (e.g., underground bins, timed collections). Enforce strict zoning for street vendors to ensure Walkability without sanitizing the chaotic charm (Seo & Lee, 2021). Upgrade lighting to enhance the "Neon Heritage" while improving safety.

8.3 A - Algorithm & Alliance (Digital Intelligence):

8.3.1 *Strategy*: Leverage the power of the algorithm but steer it towards "Mindful Tourism".

8.3.2 *Action*: Form alliances with influencers to create content that educates tourists on cultural etiquette and the deeper history of the area, not just visual highlights. Use "Social Listening" tools to monitor sentiment on price and hygiene in real time.

8.4 G - Guardianship of Community (Governance):

8.4.1 *Strategy*: Protect the social fabric from Gentrification.

8.4.2 *Action*: Establish a "Heritage Fund" derived from a portion of tourism revenue to subsidize rents for traditional trades (herbalists, craftsmen) that are culturally significant but economically vulnerable (Gotham, 2005). Involve local "Guardians" (community leaders) in zoning decisions.

8.5 O - Orchestrated Experience (Operations):

8.5.1 *Strategy*: Improve the flow and connectivity of the district.

8.5.2 *Action*: Design "Walking Loops" that disperse tourists from the main Yaowarat Road to secondary cultural alleys like Talad Noi and Song Wat. This reduces congestion (Overtourism) and distributes economic benefits to peripheral communities (Milano et al., 2019).

8.6 N - Neo-Soft Power (New Narratives):

8.6.1 *Strategy*: Foster a new generation of cultural ambassadors.

8.6.2 *Action*: Create mentorship programs where old masters teach young entrepreneurs ("One Village One Thai Chef" concept adapted for Chinatown), ensuring the transfer of Embodied Cultural Capital. Use Soft Power not just to attract, but to sustain relationships through loyalty programs and deep cultural engagement events (e.g., "Awakening Song Wat") (Orea-Giner et al., 2026).

9. Conclusion

The transformation of cultural capital into soft power in Yaowarat is a dynamic and contested process. While the district possesses immense potential driven by its gastronomic heritage and digital appeal, it stands on a precipice. The current trajectory, fueled by unchecked tourism and gentrification, risks eroding the very authenticity that constitutes its core value. This research demonstrates that successful destination marketing in the experience economy cannot rely solely on "Price" strategies or superficial "Promotion". It requires a holistic management of "Place" and "People." The DRAGON Model offers a strategic pathway that integrates economic objectives with socio-cultural preservation. By valuing the embodied capital of its people as much as the objectified capital of its buildings, Yaowarat can evolve from a chaotic street food hub into a sustainable, world-class destination that projects the true, resilient power of Thai-Chinese culture to the world.

10. Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative findings, this study proposes the following strategic recommendations for stakeholders to sustain Yaowarat's status as a world-class gastronomy destination:

10.1 Managerial Recommendations for Entrepreneurs

10.1.1 Transition from Visuals to "Deep Gastronomy": Food vendors should move beyond purely visual appeal ("Instagrammable" food), which risks commodification. Instead, they should leverage digital tools, such as QR codes linking to video narratives, to communicate the chef's "Embodied Capital" and the dish's history.

10.1.2 Balancing Heritage with Innovation: To address the tension between traditional "Cheng" flavors and modern preferences for strong tastes, vendors should adopt a "Portfolio Approach."

This involves maintaining "Signature Heritage Menus" to preserve culinary integrity while offering separate, clearly marked fusion options for younger demographics, ensuring the core identity remains undiluted.

10.2 Policy Recommendations for Government and Community Leaders

10.2.1 Urgent Infrastructure Upgrades: The "Hygiene Time Bomb" regarding waste management poses a critical threat to the district's soft power. Local authorities must prioritize installing modern, concealed waste-disposal systems (e.g., underground bins) and enforce strict zoning to maintain walkability without sanitizing the vibrant street atmosphere.

10.2.2 Establishment of a "Heritage Fund": To combat commercial gentrification that displaces traditional trades, a portion of tourism revenue should be allocated to a community-governed fund. This fund would subsidize rents for culturally significant but economically vulnerable businesses (e.g., herbalists, craftsmen), thereby preserving the district's "living soul" rather than just its architectural shell.

10.2.3 Orchestration of Visitor Flow: To mitigate overtourism and congestion on the main road, destination managers should design "Walking Loops" that actively disperse tourists to peripheral heritage zones like Talad Noi and Song Wat, distributing economic benefits more equitably.

11. Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers significant insights into the transformation of cultural capital, several limitations should be noted:

11.1 Geographic Scope: The research is strictly limited to the Yaowarat district and its immediate vicinity (Talad Noi, Song Wat). Consequently, the findings regarding the dynamics of soft power and gentrification may not be directly generalizable to other heritage districts in Thailand with different demographic compositions.

11.2 Cross-Sectional Design: The quantitative data represent a snapshot in time. As the "Experience Economy" and digital trends (such as the "Lisa Effect") are highly volatile, this study cannot capture the long-term causal effects of these viral phenomena on local sustainability.

11.3 Sample Limitations: Although the mixed-methods design provides depth, the qualitative phase relied on a purposive sample of 10 key informants. Future research could benefit from a broader longitudinal study involving a larger cohort of residents to better understand the displacement effects of gentrification over time.

11.4 Focus on Gastronomy: The study primarily focuses on food as the vehicle for soft power. Future studies should investigate how other dimensions of Yaowarat's cultural capital, such as religious festivals or Chinese opera, interact with the service marketing mix to influence tourist perceptions.

Ethical Declaration

This study involved collecting primary data from human participants, including surveys of tourists and interviews with community stakeholders. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The research protocol adhered to standard ethical guidelines for

low-risk social science research, focusing on public behavior and business operations without collecting sensitive personal identifiable information.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The author(s) confirm that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilized in the writing, analysis, or creation of this manuscript. All content presented herein is the original work of the author(s).

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest or competing financial interests that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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