



Promoting Food Tourism Through Digital Media With Special Reference To Sri Lanka As A Tourist Destination

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ABSTRACT

Many travellers recognize food experiences as a must-do activity at travel destinations as much as the interest shown by them, Destination Management Organizations around the world have identified food as a part of special interest tourism and an experience that helps differentiate a destination's offerings against competitors. The current study set out to explore whether travellers perceive food as a travel attraction that motivates them to travel to a destination and whether food can provide a memorable experience to such travellers and how well destination management organizations promote food tourism through digital media in a setting where many travellers search for information online. The study included a preliminary study in which the opinions of travellers were identified through a content analysis of experiences shared on online travel review sites and social media. The study conducted a qualitative research approach where interviews were conducted to gain further insights into travellers' food experiences. Further, the effectiveness of promoting food tourism through digital media by destination management organizations was analyzed through a content analysis of textual and visual content on websites. The findings of the study indicate that travellers consider food as a major motive to travel, as an experience booster, a novel and exciting experience, an experience beyond just eating, an aid to learning about locals' lifestyle, an experience worth recreating and an experience that results in a change in lifestyle becoming a peak touristic experience. It was apparent that Local Destination Management Organizations do not effectively communicate these factors about food experiences through their digital platforms. This study is significant in a theoretical aspect as it presents seven characteristics of food experiences concerning the conceptual model of tourist experience and for applying this model to the digital context taking the destination management organization's point of view. It is also significant in a practical aspect as it shows the potential of food to be a main attraction for Sri Lanka Tourism and portrays space for improvement in marketing such experiences, especially in digital media.

Keywords: Food tourism, memorability, motivation to travel, digital media, destination management organizations, promoting tourist attractions, peak touristic experience.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, tourism is a widely discussed subject area by many scholars as well as corporates (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2017), in the year 2016, the total contribution of Travel and Tourism to the Global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was over US\$ 7.5 Trillion which is equivalent to 10% of the Global GDP. While the Global figures are highly impressive, Sri Lanka too has shown significant growth in the tourism sector over the years. In the year 2016, tourism generated a revenue of US\$ 3.5 billion and over 2 million international visitor arrivals in comparison to the US\$ 2.98 billion generated in the year 2015 (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017).

While the country is very well known for its beaches and heritage on one hand, on the other hand, the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs (2017) has identified that Sri Lanka's tourism product and market mix lacks diversity (p. 5). Further, adding to this, LópezGuzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares (2012) have stated that there is an increasing need for new and different destinations. In this setting, the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs has identified 10 different niche market segments for tourism in Sri Lanka according to the Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan, 2017-2020. This includes market segments such as Health and wellbeing, Cuisine and Whale and dolphin watching. Sri Lanka's traditional and mostly known element of tourism is the sun, sea and sand concept (Fernando, Bandara & Smith, 2013). However, some scholars suggest that this low-cost element of tourism which attracts low-

budget travellers is easily substitutable as a destination (Okumus, Okumus& McKercher, 2007). They also mention that food tourism is a great alternative to this problem of substitutability as it gives the country a competitive advantage. Applicability of this aspect of tourism to Sri Lanka is further supported through the Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan, 2017-2020, as it identifies 10 niche market segments that include cuisine which is an element of food tourism. Sri Lanka has a rich and diverse culture associated with food, from the point of production to preparation and consumption, and has many different opportunities to grow in this targeted market segment (Ashish & Shelley, 2015). The Tourism Strategic Plan, 2017-2020, further states that a significant number of foreign visitors from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and China show interest in Sri Lankan cuisine as much as the exotic beaches.

As Sri Lanka already possesses a wide variety of offers in the food tourism segment, it will be easier to attract a group of travellers who are food enthusiasts. This category of travellers is known to be a highly loyal group of individuals as per a study by Kivela and Crotts (2005). A study by Alahakoon (2018) revealed that most of the travellers who visited Sri Lanka mentioned the experience of tasting, preparing and the consumption of Sri Lankan food as one of their most memorable experiences after visiting the country. However, the study further found out that these travellers got to know about the diversity and attraction of food and food-related culture only after visiting the country. This suggests that Sri Lanka has not been effectively

marketed as a tourist destination for food enthusiasts outside the country despite the availability of a rich food-associated culture. Being a country with such rich diversity in cooked food, raw ingredients and a vibrant culture and heritage associated with the preparation and consumption of food, Sri Lanka too has the potential in differentiating and building a destination image as a food tourism destination thus gaining a very high rate of growth in tourism in the region (Ashish & Shelley, 2015).

Most travellers who visit Sri Lanka are quite unaware of the local food and associated traditions until the point of experiencing them (Alahakoon, 2018). Against this backdrop, this study investigates one of the most effective ways of promoting tourism which is digital media (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2012; Howison, Finger & Hauschka, 2014). The study focuses on elements of digital media and how they are being used in influencing the perception of travellers about food-related experiences in Sri Lanka. An in-depth analysis of travel review sites, social media platforms and websites as well as interviews with travellers who have visited Sri Lanka have been carried out to evaluate how well the local destination management organisations (DMOs) promote food tourism through digital media and how the travellers perceive food experiences in Sri Lanka.

The significance of this study in a theoretical sense is trifold. The study is mainly based on the conceptual model developed by Quan and Wang (2014) to identify whether a specific traveller's experience is a peak touristic experience or a supportive consumer experience. As the first contribution, probably for the first time, this model has been applied to a digital media context in this study in

analysing the travellers' experiences. Secondly, the model has also been looked at from the promotional activities of DMO's point of view, whereas the original study by Quan and Wang (2014) glances only at experiences from a traveller's point of view. Thirdly, this study addresses the issue of the lacuna of studies which focuses on food tourism in Sri Lanka and promoting it through digital media. In a practical sense, the study is significant as it contributes to identifying the level of importance of engaging in food tourism in Sri Lanka and how these experiences are portrayed in digital media. Further, it will help in identifying whether food tourism is a viable option for managers and national policymakers and if it is, to support them in designing new offers differentiating from traditional sun, sea and sand tourism.

The paper proceeds from the above introduction with sections organized as follows: the next section presents a review of related literature, followed by research methods, findings and discussion. Finally, it presents the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is an industry that has been extensively discussed in the literature for a very long period (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). Amongst these studies, research on Food Tourism has increased significantly from 2000 to 2005 as a result of the importance given by local DMOs (Lee & Scott, 2014). Research has shown that globally, amounts spent on food and beverages add up to a major portion of a tourist's budget, which can be as much as a third of the overall expenditure during a visit to a specific destination (Henderson,

2009). Another significant comment that was found in the literature is that the allocation made for food and beverages in a tourist's budget is the least likely expenditure to be cut down among all other expenditures that are to have occurred during a journey (Au & Law, 2002). Moreover, the food image of the country has a great impact on the travellers' intention to visit a destination for experiences with food and practices associated with the preparation and consumption of food (Karim & Chi, 2010).

Food tourism, in simple terms, refers to the various experiences a traveller can gain concerning the production, preparation and consumption of food (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Marketers of destinations have identified food tourism and its associations as an important element with great potential in branding a destination with increased competitive advantage (Henderson, 2009). Certain countries such as Turkey have identified their wide variety of local and international cuisine as a differentiating factor over the traditional sun, sea and sand tourism, in promoting the country as a tourist destination for food lovers (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). A study by Kivela and Crofts (2005) confirms that this particular segment of tourism could be a highly loyal segment of the tourism market; thus, the focus could be redirected from the traditional sun, sea and sand concept of tourism towards food tourism. They further state that it will be highly unlikely to have any impact on the tourism activities from seasonality as in the case of the traditional tourism concept. Food tourism is also gaining a lot of interest in terms of being incorporated into government policies and developing destination marketing strategies as it has

been identified under the category of Special Interest Tourism (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Kamblea & Bouchon, 2014). This suggests the importance given to food tourism as an area with increasing significance in the whole tourism industry by national policy setters, industry experts as well as scholars who study these areas. The modified theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ryu & Jang, 2006) was used to investigate tourist encounters with local food at a destination. Eves, et al. (2009) used grounded theory to develop a model of local food consumption.; At food events and festivals, the links between elements for guests such as food-related personality traits, enjoyment, and loyalty were explored (Eves et al., 2009). The study is mainly based on the conceptual model developed by Quan and Wang (2014) to identify whether a specific traveller's experience is a peak touristic experience or a supportive consumer experience. Quan and Wang (2014) contended that non-visual experiences can be either peak or supporting experiences. Both were significant, depending on the circumstances. To demonstrate the differentiation and interchangeability of both peak experiences and supporting consumer experiences in tourism, a structural model has been developed, which allowed for a better understanding of the role and position of various experiential components, particularly non-visual experiential components.

Tikkanen (2007) states that despite the important role food plays in the field of tourism, food tourism is still one of the least researched areas in the field. Tikkanen (2007) suggests that motivation is a critical variable in assessing the behaviour of travellers at a

particular destination and food plays different roles of motivation at different levels of the hierarchy of needs according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. For a food tourist, fulfilling nutritional requirements or suppressing hunger will not be considered satisfactory, but a complete food-connected experience will be. This experience which is memorable and motivating travellers is what leads food to be considered a peak touristic experience for the traveller as explained by Quan and Wang (2004). In their study, they explain how a daily routine task as simple as eating could be converted into a memorable experience which would motivate travellers to visit a destination by extending, intensifying and contrasting from the daily routine in a travel context. The available literature has studied various aspects of food as a motivating factor for travellers to visit destinations (Tikkanen, 2007). Studies further reveal that food is a motivator for travellers to not just travel to a destination once, but revisit the destination more than one time to regain the previously gained experiences (Lee & Scott, 2014). For a country like Sri Lanka, attracting foreign food enthusiasts could give a great level of competitive advantage and returning travellers due to the very vibrant food-associated culture (Ashish & Shelley, 2015). In a study which reviews the tourism policy of Sri Lanka, Kamblea and Bouchon (2014) mention that food tourism has been categorised under special interest tourism in the Sri Lankan Tourism Development Strategy 2011-2016, the tourism blueprint document which portrays the significance given to the field of food tourism at a National level. However, according to the study, it has just been mentioned as a Special Interest Tourism area but has not been

addressed in detail with regards to any strategies or action plans in promoting it as a possible segment of tourism. Further, a study by Ashish and Shelley (2015) focuses on food tourism effectiveness on websites of SAARC countries where the Sri Lankan official travel website has received a very low ranking even though there is a wide variety of food that is available in the country. Thus, this opens a gateway towards further studies on the aspect of food tourism and whether Sri Lanka is competitively utilising digital platforms in the process of promoting food as a tourist attraction. However, countries such as Hong Kong have successfully been able to promote themselves as a destination for food lovers and motivate food travellers to visit Hong Kong to get a diverse culinary experience through their marketing campaigns and websites which provide in detail information about the culinary experiences a traveller can gain once they visit the country (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). While Hong Kong is a hub for international cuisines, countries such as Italy, Spain, Turkey and Thailand have also managed to attract travellers for their authentic local food (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012; Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007; Roquea & Raposo, 2015).

It is difficult to draw any conclusion on whether Sri Lanka has effectively promoted food tourism for foreign visitors due to the lack of available literature that has directly addressed the area.

Considering the scope and literature available on these elements of digital media discussed above and the importance given by scholars to these elements in their work, this study will limit the focus to digital media as a

source of information, to these elements, namely, websites, social media and review sites.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the available literature and the nature of the research problem under consideration, the research philosophy was identified. The current study is based on the experiences of travellers and how they interpret them and it will be based on an interpretive ontology as it speaks of social phenomena being given meaning through social interactions and how such meanings keep continuously changing according to differences in interpretations (Bryman, 2001). As opposed to positivism, interpretivism disregards abstract theories and believes that conclusions are drawn based on the interpretation of the participants of the study (Bryman, 2001). As this study set out to explore how travellers who visit Sri Lanka perceive and interpret food experiences in Sri Lanka and how digital platforms are utilised by local DMOs to portray such food experiences, this epistemology was seen as appropriate. The research strategy adopted was qualitative as an in-depth exploration was necessary to study whether food experiences in Sri Lanka are peak touristic experiences or supporting consumer experiences for travellers, and on the other hand, it was necessary to compare and see whether local DMOs use digital media to promote food tourism to match with the travellers' perception.

As the main study, a series of interviews were carried out with travellers who have visited the country in the past years. All these respondents had experienced Sri Lankan food during their visit. A snowball sampling

technique was adopted for selecting travellers who have visited Sri Lanka and experienced Sri Lankan food as it "is effective in the research of organic social networks" (Noy, 2008, p.340). The snowball sampling technique refers to a mechanism where the participants of the study refer the researcher to more participants and such participants are contacted by the researcher to obtain more data and information about more prospective participants (Noy, 2008). The sample included a total of 15 participants from diverse backgrounds who visited the country from regions covering Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. By nature, the semi-structured interviews, created an opportunity to interactively converse with the interviewees (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) while being guided by the interview guide (Appendix 2). Based on the findings of the preliminary study, a detailed interview guide was prepared. Accordingly, it consisted of three major sections which were aligned to the conceptual model put forward by Quan and Wang (2004) as well. These three sections were namely, memorability of the food experience, motivational nature of the food experience and the overall food experience as a peak touristic experience or supporting consumer experience. Further, when developing the interview questions the factors that determine memorability and motivation as identified by Alahakoon (2018) were used. In some instances, different probing questions were asked to obtain further clarification on points made by the interviewees. Before moving on to the interviews, one pilot interview was conducted so that the nature of answers given to the questions and the length of the interview can be judged as suggested by Kvale (2007). A few adjustments were done to the guide based on this

pilot interview. The interviews lasted for 20-40 minutes and were conducted over Facetime and Facebook Messenger. These interviews were carried out in October and November 2022. All interviews were recorded with a mobile phone and transcribed for the study. To achieve the third objective of identifying whether DMOs in Sri Lanka promote food experiences to travellers through digital media, a quantitative content analysis was carried out by comparing the website of 'Sri Lanka Travel' and 'Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA)', the local DMO which were compared with the 'Sri Lanka Food Tour' website by Seasons Travel, a local DMC. Content analysis is an approach previously used by researchers in studying the effectiveness of websites in promoting food as a tourist attraction (Hornig & Tsai, 2010), thus adopted in this study as well. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse interview data. This approach was identified as the most suitable one for carrying out the analysis of the current study as stated by Walters (2016, p.115). The steps of carrying out a thematic analysis as specified by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used in this study. Accordingly, the interviews were firstly verbatim transcribed, and thoroughly read for better familiarisation and important facts were taken note of in the first reading itself. Afterwards, the entire data set was coded before identifying common ideas.

ANALYSIS

TRAVELLERS PERSPECTIVE

This section discusses the themes that emerged through the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with

travellers to Sri Lanka. In general, these themes represent the nature of food experiences from travellers' perspectives, with special consideration to whether such food experiences are peak touristic experiences or supportive consumer experiences.

FOOD AS A MAJOR MOTIVE

For some travellers, food is the sole motive or one of the major motives to visit a destination where the whole experience revolves around food and the different elements attached to food such as consumption, preparation and presentation. Some travellers believe that food is a major component to be experienced when visiting a destination and that it is an experience of its own. Some even believe that it is worth visiting a destination just for the food because it's an experience worth gaining because of its uniqueness compared to their home country. This portrays how food experiences have the potential to become a major attraction for a destination.

Food, as believed by some respondents is an experience worth gaining on its own. *Respondent 1*, a traveller from the Middle East sees food to be a major component of any destination and that Sri Lanka has great significance in terms of food and associated practices. This depicts how food is a major attraction for some travellers thus making it a motivation to travel to the destination.

"...I think the food is a huge part of any visit to any country and Sri Lanka is no exception to this. It's an experience of its own..." (*Respondent 1*).

Adding to the same idea, *Respondent 2* believes for, visiting a destination is not only about food, but food plays a major role in choosing a destination, thus

establishing the fact that food is indeed an attraction that motivates travellers to visit a destination.

“I would say, not just to visit it, but it would be a main factor to visit it ”
(*Respondent 2*)

Additionally, other travellers wish to gain food experiences through planned and coordinated tours when visiting countries. They actively search for such opportunities. Travellers like *Respondent 2*, actively search for planned food journeys, yet the DMOs and DMCs have not been able to effectively communicate the availability of such opportunities indicating a gap in required and available information.

“Definitely...but I think, from my own experience it was really hard to get a food journey. For instance, in my home country, we have several food travellers who like to travel to bureaus planning how you can get as many food experiences...we didn't meet that in Sri Lanka. We didn't see food journeys of that kind.” (*Respondent 3*).

Sri Lanka is a country with great diversity in terms of culture and nature. However, for some travellers, the whole experience of food is much more important than any other attraction. They believe it is a “big part” (*Respondent 3*) of the journey and it is worth experiencing it if they are to visit the country again. Such importance given to food experiences by travellers such as *Respondent 3*, demonstrates how well food serves as a significant attraction out of many offers a destination has on offer thus portraying the motivation to visit the destination only to get a food experience.

“Yeah, but I also know Sri Lanka has so much else to offer like culture and also like nature wise.

But of course, eating is a big part so yeah I would just go for the food.” (*Respondent 3*).

Overall, it is evident that travellers identify food to be a major attraction and specifically within the context of Sri Lanka, food and associated experiences are capable of motivating them in travelling to the destination.

FOOD AS AN EXPERIENCE BOOSTER

Some travellers think food is only a part of a much bigger experience. That is, food is thought to be a factor that enhances the overall experience as well as a significant part of the overall experience. These travellers believe food has the potential to strengthen an experience (i.e. intensify) and act as a boost for the overall experience of visiting a destination. Thus, it plays a role in making the overall experience of a destination more memorable.

As reflected by *Respondent 4*'s experience, travellers identify diversity to be an extremely unique feature of Sri Lanka in terms of what it has to offer to a traveller. Such uniqueness is not just limited to food but other experiences as well. Thus, they view a visit to a destination as one big experience where food is also a major component that increases the memorability of the experience.

“...I think the power of Sri Lanka is that it's so diverse as a country. It has its diversity in food, diversity in nature but also in activities you can do. I think that as a whole. Not just the food.”
(*Respondent 4*).

There are some travellers, who believe food is a major component of the 'Sri Lankan experience'. As *Respondent 5* states, food has the capability of enhancing an experience of a destination by changing "the whole experience", which suggests food is a "major part" of a traveller's experience even when it's not a main attraction. Therefore, it is evident that food as an experience has the power to intensify the overall experience a traveller would gain at a destination.

"Yes definitely, it would change the whole experience. Food was a major part of my experience in Sri Lanka." (*Respondent 5*).

Further, travellers believe that a visit to a destination would not be complete if they did not have a taste of the local food. This again shows the role local food experiences play in enhancing the overall experience of a traveller as indicated by *Respondent 6*.

"Yeah, just food, definitely. Food is one of the biggest reasons why I love Sri Lanka. And there are other reasons as well. ...With food is the best." (*Respondent 6*)

Some believe when in Sri Lanka, a traveller has a vivid range of elements for exploration. However, as evident in this theme, food is thought of as not being of high significance when considered solitarily. Incorporating food together with another experience or "ingredient" (*Respondent 7*) will create a much better experience.

"I would say, that if the main reason, the focus of a plan, is just to, specific plan to know more about the food, I wouldn't say is the right way. I think in Sri Lanka the whole experience is amazing. It's not only the food or it's not only the

Anuradhapura. It's not only the Sigiriya Rock. It's not the local markets. I think the whole experience in Sri Lanka is a nice thing. The food itself, of course, it's very good. But I think you need another kind of ingredient if I can say like this, another ingredient just to make all the experience of Sri Lanka very great." (*Respondent 7*).

Respondent 8 further supports this aspect of experiencing food as part of other experiences. She expresses that she would not visit the country for food alone but would explore different experiences combined with food. Regardless of the contrasting nature of food when compared to her home country and how much of a different experience it is, food is believed to give the best experience when combined with another experience or activity to create a sense of variety.

"I think when it is a combination of food, adventure and exploring the landscapes, yes. But not just to go to or fly to Sri Lanka just to get rice and curry. I mean it's nice but it wouldn't be a reason for me to fly there." (*Respondent 8*).

Therefore, some travellers believe food to be a part of a bigger experience, but consider it to be important for the whole experience to be a complete one. Thus, even though the food might not be a main attraction of a destination, it plays a major role in providing a better experience for travellers by making the journey more memorable as indicated by the respondents. This was reflected through the findings of the preliminary study as well where there were 37 references to food and associated experiences as a 'great experience' out of the analysed 66 reviews and captions.

FOOD AS A NOVEL AND EXCITING EXPERIENCE

Some travellers who have even experienced different types of food from different regions of the world believe that Sri Lankan food is all about being surprised, indicating its novelty. According to them, the varied nature of taste, ingredients and the variety of food items creates a great sense of uniqueness for Sri Lankan food compared to food from other parts of the world. For travellers who are new to the food experience in Sri Lanka such as *Respondent 1*, it is considered nothing but a source of pleasure, surprise and excitement. His claim that Sri Lankan food is an “explosion in your mouth like fireworks” deserves a special mention in this regard.

“My god, it's an experience. For someone who has not come before, wow, it's salty, it's spicy. It's very different to Arabic food. But I enjoy this... yes of course. someone who has eaten Greek, Arabic, Turkish food all life, when we experience different tastes, the sheer experience is like an explosion in your mouth like fireworks” (*Respondent 1*).

Travellers such as *Respondent 9* were able to recall a wide range of different varieties of food they tried in Sri Lanka and they even remembered some of the local terms of food items even after a lapse of time. This clearly shows the memorability that has been created through the excitement and novelty associated with food experiences. As reflected in *Respondent 9*'s thoughts, the different varieties of new and familiar food which are prepared in different new ways to what they have experienced before or are used to before, have helped

them in gaining a memorable experience.

“We tried a whole lot of different curries... I hope I can remember everything. So one of them was one which I definitely like was dhal. Then we had some pumpkin curry and some beans. What was it called, ah, jackfruit? Some kind of fish curry, chicken curry. Mostly vegetable curries. And of course, we also had some roti, some kottu and rice, fried rice and all these things. And of course, coconut, king coconut. For breakfast, we also had Sri Lankan breakfast a lot of times which was mostly pancakes with coconut and sugar and of course all the fruits and most importantly pineapple. We loved the pineapple, bananas...” (*Respondent 9*).

As much as variety, how enjoyable the food is, is another significant aspect. While eating and preparing food is a day-to-day activity that satisfies a basic human necessity, food is considered pleasurable as well. From the data, it is evident that food can decide whether an overall visit to a destination could be a pleasurable one or not. Reflecting this, some travellers have experienced food in an extremely submerged manner that could not have changed their experience any further suggesting that food was able to complete their experience as a whole. As

Respondent 9 mentioned, “Basically food makes us happy”, which suggests how memorable and joyful the local food was as an experience.

“Yeah of course, if the food was bad, then we probably would not have had such a great time. So, I think food plays a big role because basically, food makes us happy... I don't think food could

change our experience more than it did.” (*Respondent 9*).

Travellers have various tastes and preferences concerning food. *Respondent 10* is one such traveller who wishes that he could experience things differently from his normal habits and differently from what the people he associates prefer. He said that Sri Lankan food is “very spicy” yet “very good”. Such aspects of food can enhance and intensify the experience of food to deliver an enjoyable and memorable experience to the traveller that is contrasting from what they are used to.

“The kind of food is very unique. The restaurants are unique as well... It's very spicy and very good... At some point, I thought the water was also spicy. I like spicy food more than other people in my house. In my case, I didn't mind at all.” (*Respondent 10*).

In certain circumstances, some practices of foreign cultures are rather surprising for travellers. They sometimes have second thoughts about taking a risk and gaining an experience due to the unusual nature and unfamiliarity of their home country's cultures which they are familiar with. However, as related by *Respondent 11*, they are mostly ready for the challenge of gaining a new experience and end up enjoying it instead of having thoughts of doubt or being uncomfortable. Such new and challenging out-of-the-ordinary encounters result in the experience being memorable as well as enjoyable.

“For the first time, I saw people eating with their hands. Somehow it was disgusting for me because I'm not used to eating with my hands and in the culture, I'm from, we don't do it. But once I got convinced that it was ok, I can

wash my hands and started eating it. It was really good.” (*Respondent 11*).

Food and associated preparation, presentation and consumption practices are considered to be highly diverse from one destination to another. Such diversity brings novelty to the travellers experiencing food and through novelty they find enjoyability. The preliminary study provided insights which support this idea with 15 references to novelty, 15 references to different and six references to the authenticity of Sri Lankan food.

Therefore, it is evident that Sri Lankan food is no exception in this regard, thus creating a highly memorable experience due to its very intensifying and contrasting nature.

FOOD AS AN EXPERIENCE BEYOND JUST EATING

Travellers have the idea that it is always best to adapt to the culture and practices of the destination they are visiting. As much as it is an exciting and fun experience to imitate the locals, as mentioned by *Respondent 4*, it also indicates respect towards the culture of the country they visit. It further allows them to get a deeper understanding of the different practices of different countries which creates memorability through engagement.

“...which prepare differently and present the food differently where one would present on a banana leaf and the other present on a plate... Eating with the hand, was good... pretty good. I also find it a way of respect. Since I lived with a family and I think as a foreigner you should always try to adapt as much as possible to the culture of the country you're visiting. So yeah. For me, it was

not difficult to eat with my hand...”
(*Respondent 4*).

Another aspect worth considering is, for travellers Sri Lankan food is not just another meal but an entire process of learning. The food, its ingredients, preparation methods and presentation are highly contrasting to what they would usually experience in their home countries. It is evident from how *Respondent 12* compared the colourfulness, spiciness and even the style of cooking with her home country whereas, in Sri Lanka, it is more intricate, yet enjoyable. Such differentiation results in Sri Lankan food and associated practices being much more experiential over just a simple routine and familiar task of simply cooking and eating thus making it a memorable experience.

“It’s a bit more, let’s say, first of all, it was more colourful... and it’s a bit spicier than I am used to but in general yeah let’s say in Denmark, Danish food is not like, the traditional Danish food is not spicy at all. But when I cook, I like to put spices in. So, if we have to say like a typical Danish dish, Sri Lankan food is way spicier and tasteful... I would say that Sri Lankan food is way more slow-cooked. It takes a while to get a nice dhal or nice, in Denmark and Western countries I don't know... you just cook your meal. You do some pasta then you add some pesto and that's it.”
(*Respondent 12*)

A traveller would most of the time compare his or her journey with what is usual and what is more common. They would think about certain experiences in comparison to experiences in their home country's daily routine and they will try to identify the various contrasting elements of such experiences. Even

though there are similarities with regards to certain elements of food such as the ingredients and the types of food, travellers identify Sri Lankan food experiences to be rather intensifying in nature. *Respondent 9* expressed how well she enjoyed the freshness of local fruits and how it is “totally fine to eat rice everyday” compared to their home country where they would prefer having a different dish every day. When such differences make an experience much more enjoyable and intense, it creates a more unforgettable memory of the journey.

“Of course the variety of the spices. The cooking was of course, we do have all the spices but we just don't cook with them... normally Germany buys vegetables, but they have gone a long way. We import everything. So that was nice to find the fruits and everything tastes way better... Here we always have processed food. In Sri Lanka, it's fresh and made from scratch. No additional likes, everything is fresh and made locally... its way more colourful. Colour is different to what we have here... in Germany, we always try to have different dishes everyday and in Sri Lanka, it's totally fine to eat rice everyday.” (*Respondent 9*)

Further, for certain travellers, some activities with negative connotations can become very interesting and adventurous in the context of travelling or visiting a destination and food-related experiences are no exception. As much as the experience is relatively challenging or stressful, it would be an extraordinary experience in that context. Such extension of the usual experience and the extraordinary nature of the experience is thus converted into a more entertaining and enduring experience as reflected by *Respondent 3*'s experience.

“We went to Pettah several times, for the food and marketing stuff. That’s a whole new world as well. It was kind of, at first chaotic and full of flies, but interesting” (*Respondent 3*).

As evident in the analysis, food as an experience is much more than simply consuming food to suppress hunger. It lets a person encounter different practices that are different to their daily routine. This suggests that food as an experience has the potential of creating memorable experiences for travellers.

FOOD AS AN AID TO LEARNING ABOUT LOCALS’ LIFESTYLE

Food emerged as a “gateway” (*Respondent 9*) to learn about the local culture and lifestyle of a particular country or its people. For travellers, cooking and eating is a social act as well as a mirror that reflects the culture. They believe food reflects the culture of the destination and that food has a story attached to it which shows why a particular culture eats or cooks a certain food item in a certain distinct manner. This makes food experiences a clear attraction for those who want to learn about local cultures at a destination.

Some travellers find the consumption of food inadequate as an experience. Therefore, they start searching for much deeper knowledge concerning food as an experience. Food is a major reflector of the diverse groups of people at a destination and these differences are based on why people consume certain types of food or why they prepare it in a particular manner. As mentioned by some travellers like *Respondent 10*, this kind of questioning helps them understand the country and the diverse nature of such cultures at a much broader level. Such interest and

enthusiasm reflect that food is not just a mere experience but an attraction that opens up an avenue to explore local cultures beyond consumption and preparation practices thus making it a motivation to visit a destination.

“Yeah for sure. I think all kinds of dishes have a story behind why that culture or why that population started to eat that and why people ate that and where it comes from and when you start making questions about where it came from and why people started to eat there if you start to get...different kind of question, helps a lot to know more about the country.” (*Respondent 10*)

According to some respondents, if there is a way to learn about cultures while travelling, food is the “gateway” (*Respondent 9*) for it as food is a “big part of the culture” (*Respondent 9*). As an experienced, food allows one to get insight into different cultures of a destination, connect with the locals and actively participate in those experiences. As expressed by *Respondent 9*, it allows understanding of such cultures and people in a much more substantial manner thus making the experience quite intensifying and contrasting from a usual food consumption context. “Everyone else was eating with hand then it was fine. I didn't feel uncomfortable at all. I liked it...but it was nice because once I ate with my hand and had the curries around. I felt more connected to the culture, food and people around me. I didn't feel like a tourist. I felt more included. You can connect to the people around you and the culture... you get to think about the culture, the people and how the food is made.” (*Respondent 9*).

Food is an element attached to the culture as well as the people of a country. As identified by *Respondent 11*,

to gain an authentic experience of culture, food is a component that needs to be present.

Similarly, as respondent 05 mentioned, to get an understanding of the food, interaction with locals is a significantly important aspect. Thus food, culture and people are quite interconnected and one cannot appropriately get an idea of each other components in the absence of another one. This kind of experiential learning through interacting with local people and local cultures enables travellers in gaining an authentic glimpse, thus making it a memorable experience as well as an attraction that motivates travellers.

“...we have been to someone's place. He is a Sri Lankan guy. We spent a night there at his home. In the morning he showed us and explained why they eat everything and how they make it. It was really good... they taught me how to eat curry and rice with my hand. It was really good to know how you eat it traditionally.” (*Respondent 11*).

Further, it is astonishing how an everyday routine activity like eating can go the extra mile in making a person distinguish between cultures within the same country. The taste, style of preparation and presentation of food items in Sri Lanka is quite diverse due to the cultural influences and that diversity is observed and experienced by travellers. This nature of deep understanding of a culture through a simple activity such as eating signifies the importance of food as a whole, especially in the case of visiting a foreign destination.

“...Sri Lankan food on the other hand comes from the intricacies in the culture you know...you can taste the differences whether it's a rice and curry made by a

Muslim family and rice and curry made by a Buddhist family...” (*Respondent 1*).

Food as an experience is considered a way of interacting with and getting to know more about the locals and local cultures of a destination. According to the views of the respondents, food, culture and people are three inseparable components of a destination and in Sri Lanka, it is highly significant due to the impact these components have on each other. This very nature of food makes it a mandatory component of an experience exploring local people and cultures, making it a memorable visit to the destination as a result of the extended and intensified experience. It also serves as an attraction for those who want to learn about local cultures as well. More evidence for these findings was observed in the preliminary study as well where 21 of the 66 reviews stated that they tried local cooking classes, visited local markets and engaged with locals in experiencing Sri Lankan food.

FOOD AS AN EXPERIENCE WORTH RECREATING

Out of the various experiences gained by travellers during a visit to a destination, many experiences are forgotten quite easily. Food on the other hand does not appear to be among those experiences of immaterial nature. As expressed by most respondents, for almost every traveller, it is nothing less of a memorable and exciting experience worth recalling.

In most cases, the travellers expressed their desire to try Sri Lankan food again. Sometimes, as in the case of *Respondent 3*, that motivation is much higher when they would distinguish between other regional food and choose Sri Lankan food over that food.

“I’m a bit sad that it’s something we don’t have here in my home country. It’s mostly from that part of the world, Indian food. We don’t have any local Sri Lankan restaurants.” (*Respondent 3*)

Travellers visiting Sri Lanka have the opportunity to enjoy the wide variety of options available for meals as well as the various preparation methods. As reflected in *Respondent 13*’s opinion, it would be worth waiting to try Sri Lankan food again and also engage in many vivid activities associated with food not limited to consumption, production and presentation. This kind of enthusiasm and interest that leads to engaging with food and associated activities suggests that it can be identified as an attraction for travellers, thus making it a motivating factor to visit the destination.

“...I often tried to make rice at home and I asked many times to give me recipes. I love Sri Lankan food and I can’t wait to try it again... Probably, when I come back, I thought to record a video of me, my mom and my Sri Lankan mom cooking together because it will be nice... learn to eat with my hands... activities like cooking with children will be lovely to cook with children...” (*Respondent 13*).

Motivation to retry food or revisit the experience of preparation and consumption of food is an interest shown by many travellers who have had food experiences as part of their journey in Sri Lanka. While some of them wish they could try it again, some have effectively taken action to replicate the experience in the means of cooking Sri Lankan delicacies back in their home countries which is reflected through the insights shared by *Respondent 9*. The level of motivation towards trying Sri

Lankan food portrayed through this ensures that it is an experience worth regaining.

“It would be great if we had a cooking class here. Maybe also try it at home. Online videos. How to make roti for example. I already Googled that...” (*Respondent 9*).

For some of the travellers such as respondent 06, the need to recall and regain the experience moves another step ahead where they would want to recreate the experience by themselves.

Thus, travellers consider what different opportunities would let them recreate and regain that experience at its best. “I would like to be able to cook it myself better. I think I would have to cook with my friends more often. Maybe with their moms. Probably they cook better...” (*Respondent 12*).

Many travellers who have experienced Sri Lankan food, believe it is worth revisiting and regaining those memories through various means as well as moving a step ahead and recreating the experience due to the enjoyable and pleasing nature of it. Thus, it suggests that food can be a highly memorable experience that is enjoyed and recalled by travellers.

FOOD AS A CHANGE IN LIFESTYLE

This theme addresses the capability of food not just to make travellers want to regain or recreate the experience but also to change an individual’s daily routine. Sri Lankan food is no exception to this. Some have incorporated it into their daily diets, some have changed their usual way of having meals and some have even looked into ways of incorporating Sri Lankan food into their other food types through fusion cooking.

This aspect of food-associated experiences which portrays the influence it can make on the travellers in the longer run depicts how memorable food can be as an experience of its own.

Undoubtedly, every individual is proud of their home-country food, where food is considered a part of their culture and traditions. However, as reflected by the respondents these perceptions are highly likely to be changed upon experiencing the food of a different country and especially in the Sri Lankan context due to its very vibrant flavours and variety. *Respondent 13's* thoughts reflect that food can impact the lifestyle so much that they would change their preferences from what they used to be before travelling, to what they experienced while travelling. This shows the impact food can have on the daily lifestyle of a person and how memorable food could be in terms of experiencing it due to the intensified nature of that experience.

“As I'm an Italian, many Italians think that, ok, our food is the best and we are so proud of it that we are critical and sceptical of other food. But when I tried Sri Lankan food at first it was so spicy to me but it was so good...pasta is like a must you should have in your lunch. I wanted rice. I remember me telling my grandma, no grandma, I prefer rice... it has a great impact...” (*Respondent 13*).

As much as they would change their lifestyle, some travellers even opt for Sri Lankan food over their home country food. This portrays the significant impact Sri Lankan food can make in the usual practices of a traveller as exclaimed by *Respondent 7*.

“...if I could choose this dinner in three hours with Portuguese and Sri Lankan food, I would choose Sri Lankan.” (*Respondent 7*).

Sri Lankan food and preparatory methods are rather contrasting in nature in comparison to many countries. They are rich in flavour with plenty of spices mixed to bring out the perfection to satisfy every taste bud. This prompts some who experience Sri Lankan food like Raheeq to be much more creative and incorporate it into their styles of cooking extending and intensifying the entire act of cooking, making it an exciting experience.

“I'm someone who cooks for myself regularly. Yes, I could see myself looking up a couple of recipes on the internet... I'm thinking of incorporating some of it into my cooking...there are some areas in the tongue and the Middle East, you can't even explore those areas with food. But here, there are so many spices. I even want to try some fusion cooking myself.” (*Respondent 1*).

As evidenced by the responses, travellers would love to gain food experiences while still at that destination. However, some of them are intrigued enough to incorporate food and associated practices from a destination into their lifestyle making food an intensified experience that becomes memorable.

PROMOTING FOOD AS AN EXPERIENCE THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

This section elaborates on the findings from the content analysis that was carried out comparing the official website of SLTDA with the website of Seasons Travels, a local DMC. The evaluation of the websites was based on a quantitative word frequency approach taking into account the seven different themes identified in the study. The two websites were examined to find textual and visual representations of food as an

experience from the experience providers' side. In doing this comparison, the first-level and second-level pages of both websites were taken into consideration.

The themes that emerged through the interviews that reflect the travellers' perspective were used as guidelines to identify how the local DMO portrays food as an experience as opposed to the selected local DMC. This approach was

taken to identify whether there is a gap in the travellers' perspective of food experiences and how it has been portrayed by experience providers. The content analysis portrayed the level of significance that was placed on food and associated services by the individual websites of the DMO and the DMC. A summary of the frequency organised using the themes has been illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency table

Theme	SLTDA (DMO)	Seasons Travels (DMC)
Food is a major motive	0	3
Food as an experience booster	1	5
Food as a novel and exciting experience	0	1
Food as an experience beyond just eating	2	4
Food as an aid to learning about locals; lifestyle	0	1
Food as an experience worth recreating	0	0
Food as a change in lifestyle	0	0

While the DMC has used content and wordings that present food experiences to travellers who perceive food as a major motive to travel, the DMO's website has no such references. The main highlight of the DMC's website concerning food experiences was that it was portrayed as an experience booster where food experiences were combined with other experiences to provide a wholesome experience in Sri Lanka. This was not observed in the DMO's website as comprehensively as the

DMC's website. The only reference it had was to a list of restaurants in Sri Lanka. The DMC's website used images and text to illustrate the novelty and exciting nature of Sri Lankan food experiences whereas the DMO website only had an insignificant amount of visual content and no textual content. The only mention with regards to food as an experience on the site of the DMO was a list of spice gardens in Sri Lanka whereas the website of the DMC had contrastingly shown food as a

significantly diverse experience which is beyond just consumption and satisfaction of a need. Food is thought to be a major component of the culture of any country as believed by travellers. This is portrayed by the website of the DMC where they have stated “food and people”, “spend time with welcoming locals keen to share the mysteries of Sri Lankan cuisine and so on. However, both the websites of the DMO nor the DMC had not emphasised the aspect of food experiences where it could be worth recreating and how it could have any impact on the lifestyle of the travellers which are two important after-effects of food experiences.

Food and practices associated with the production, consumption and presentation of it vary from country to country. Similarly, certain parts of the world like Sri Lanka, it has a great level of diversity even within the country. Even though the uniqueness of food experiences in Sri Lanka is identified by travellers. The local DMOs have not given enough (i.e. due to low prominence given) and correct (i.e. due to the limited experience highlighted) attention to promoting this specific category of ‘Special Interest Tourism’ through digital media as reflected through the content analysis. Thus, the various aspects of the food experience in Sri Lanka as well as how local DMOs and DMCs have focused on food as an experience in digital media were analysed in the sections above concerning the conceptual model presented by Quan and Wang (2004). However, other countries have shown different results in terms of food promotion such as Hong Kong has successfully been able to promote itself as a destination for food lovers and motivate food travellers to visit Hong

Kong to get a diverse culinary experience through their marketing campaigns and websites which provide in detail information about the culinary experiences a traveller can gain once they visit the country (Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). While Hong Kong is a hub for international cuisines, countries such as Italy, Spain, Turkey and Thailand have also managed to attract travellers for their authentic local food (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012; Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007; Roquea & Raposo, 2015).

Therefore, this study explores how the area of food promotion in Sri Lanka should be further implemented to gain a competitive advantage over other rival countries. Further, food promotions should be expanded over the other countries to attract those foreigners to travel to Sri Lanka. Tikkanen (2007) states that despite the important role food plays in the field of tourism, food tourism is still one of the least researched areas in the field, therefore, this study contributed to the literature in the area of food tourism in Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study suggest that food experiences in Sri Lanka have the capability of providing a contrasting experience compared to the daily routine experiences of the traveller. This means that food experiences in Sri Lanka are a peak tourist experience that consists of memorability and motivation (Quan & Wang, 2004). Food that creates a distinctive image of the destination, can enhance the overall experience of a traveller, thus making it “the most memorable part of the trip” (Karim & Chi, 2010, p.534). Further, Chang,

Kivela, & Mak (2010, p.993) claimed that “when food consumption in tourism becomes a major or one of the major motivations for travel, it can turn to be a peak touristic experience”. Thus, the two aspects of memorability and motivation must be highlighted in promoting food tourism, especially concerning food experiences in Sri Lanka. However, it was evident that even though a local DMC managed to do this to a certain extent, the official DMO, SLTDA has not been able to portray food as a peak tourist experience. This is indeed a great loss of opportunity for the destination.

The limitations of this study include difficulty in finding a sample with an adequate number of travellers who have experienced Sri Lankan food, biases in paid online reviews, and difficulty in distinguishing food as a motivating factor through reviews. However, several measures were identified which helped in minimising the effect of these limitations. Future studies focusing on the quantitative and qualitative in-depth study into the areas of evaluating the attractiveness and nature of experience in terms of food and how well a Sri Lankan DMO can promote food as an attraction provide a significant contribution to the field under study. This would also provide many alternatives for DMOs that could be applied in a practical setting to attract more food enthusiasts to the country and convert it into a competitive feature of Sri Lankan tourism in comparison to the destinations in the region.

Further quantitatively and qualitatively in-depth study into the areas of evaluating the attractiveness and nature of experience in terms of food and how well a Sri Lankan DMO can promote food as an attraction provides a significant contribution to the field under

study. This would also provide many alternatives for DMOs that could be applied in a practical setting to attract more food enthusiasts to the country and convert it into a competitive feature of Sri Lankan tourism in comparison to the destinations in the region.

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APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening Questions

Would you like to start by telling me a bit about yourself and your visit here in Sri Lanka?
What made you interested in coming to Sri Lanka? Who or what convinced you to visit Sri Lanka?

Main Questions

1. Did you try Sri Lankan food and beverages during your visit?
 1. What type of food/drinks did you try?
 2. What are your favourite Sri Lankan food or beverages?
 3. Did you know any information about Sri Lankan food before you visited Sri Lanka?
 1. How did you get to know?
 4. Did you look for any information on Sri Lankan food before visiting the country?
 1. If yes, from where did you get your information?
 2. Were online resources helpful?
 3. If so, what?
 5. Did you consider ways of experiencing Sri Lankan food in the process of planning your visit?
 1. Do you think you would have planned your journey differently if you knew about the different food and related practices in Sri Lanka?
 6. What exactly do you wish you knew about Sri Lankan food before you started your journey?
 1. How would you have preferred to get that information?
 2. Anything you would have searched online?
-
2. Now that you have tried Sri Lankan food, what can you say about the overall experience of Sri Lankan food?
 1. What do you think about the variety of Sri Lankan food?
 1. Do you think the variety is a unique feature of Sri Lankan food?
 2. What are the different activities you did in Sri Lanka to taste or get to know about Sri Lankan food, its ingredients and preparation?
 1. Did you try restaurants?
 2. Cooking classes/demonstrations?
 3. Eating with your hand?
 4. Visits to spice gardens/markets/estates?
 3. What differences do you see in Sri Lankan food from your home country's food?
 1. In terms of taste / look and feel / cooking methods/ingredients used
 4. How would you describe Sri Lankan food to a person from your home country?
 5. Was your food experience here in Sri Lanka a special experience for you?
 1. If so, why?

3. Do you think it would be worth visiting Sri Lanka just to get a Sri Lankan culinary experience? Why?
 1. Would you like to try Sri Lankan food again? If so why?
 1. Is it just the taste/variety etc? Or do you feel like it gives you other benefits like understanding the local culture?
 2. Would you like to learn more about Sri Lankan food or beverages?
 1. If yes, what do you think you will do to learn more?
 3. Would you recommend trying Sri Lankan food to your friends and family who might visit Sri Lanka in the future?
 1. Using what ways do you think you will make those recommendations? (e.g. will you use social media? Review sites? Will you tell them when you meet them face to face?)
 4. What top 3 activities or experiences would you try if you had a chance to visit Sri Lanka again?
 5. Do you think those activities and experiences let you experience Sri Lanka at its best?
 1. What do you think would have enhanced that experience?
 2. Do you think food would play a role in changing the experience? If yes/no, why?

Closing Questions

- Do you have any other comments or views about Sri Lankan food and other activities associated with it?
- Demographic Details:
 - Where are you from?
 - Gender: Male / Female
 - Age: 18-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, 51-60 years, more than 61 Purpose of travel?
 - How many times have you visited Sri Lanka? Where did you visit in Sri Lanka?
 - Any restaurants you wanted to visit in particular before visiting the country or once visited?