

Investigating the Role of Food Tourism in Shaping Destination Branding : A Qualitative Research Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose : The qualitative research paper delved into the dynamic interplay between food tourism and destination branding, aiming to understand how culinary experiences contributed to shaping the overall image of a destination.

Design and Methodology : This study used a qualitative research design, conducting in-depth interviews with food tourists in Delhi to explore the impact of food tourism on destination branding. Data were collected from 25 participants, and thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns. We used MAXQDA Pro Analytics software to analyze themes and a word cloud generator for the word cloud.

Findings : The research findings revealed that food tourism transformed destination branding. The research examined the cultural, social, and economic aspects of food tourism, shedding light on how local cuisines and gastronomic experiences influenced tourists' perceptions and contributed to the distinct identity of a destination. The analysis yielded 10 themes and 45 sub-themes, helping marketers build Delhi-NCR as a food tourism brand.

Research Limitations : The limitations included a focus on a specific destination, subjectivity in data interpretation, a small participant pool, time limits, external influences, and an overemphasis on positive features. Addressing these limits and exploring new opportunities could significantly contribute to the conversation around food tourism and destination branding.

Originality : This research offered original contributions to both academia and destination management. It unveiled the dynamic interplay between food tourism and destination branding, bridging gaps in the existing literature, and shedding light on a transformative aspect of modern tourism.

Keywords : food tourism, destination branding, culinary experiences, qualitative research, cultural identity, thematic analysis

JEL Classification Codes : M370, Z320, Z330

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Food tourism transforms the travel industry by blending culture, tradition, and innovation. It connects visitors to a destination's cuisine and culture, involving visits to food producers, festivals, and restaurants. This special interest in travel form diversifies the travel business, helps regional economies thrive, and encourages authenticity. The primary reason travelers visit a location is to experience local food, and food tourism is a travel motivator that influences travel decisions, resulting in sensory, cultural, and social interactions. This study explores the interplay between food tourism and the branding of travel destinations, highlighting the importance of culinary adventures in modern travel.

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The study was conducted in Delhi-NCR, renowned as India's “melting pot” and a major tourist hub, receiving 19,32,425 foreign tourist arrivals in 2022 (Ministry of Tourism, GoI, 2023). Delhi is a fascinating travel destination (Singh et al., 2023). Delhi's culinary scene, influenced by global and traditional elements, encompasses Italian, Chinese, Thai, and American cuisines (Maitra et al., 2021). The city's diverse cuisine, including parathas, kababs, chole bhature, and the famous butter chicken, attracts food enthusiasts (Maitra et al., 2021). Delhi's food tourism, notably Chandni Chowk, offers a wide array of culinary choices and activities such as food tastings, photography walks, and culinary courses (Kaushal & Yadav, 2021). Despite its significant potential, there is a lack of promotion of native cuisine in union territories and northeastern states, hindering the recognition of food tourism in these regions (Seal & Piramanayagam, 2018). In urban India, particularly Delhi and Kolkata, food tourism is still emerging and requires greater attention in destination branding efforts. The study emphasizes the need to understand and enhance Delhi's branding as a food destination.

Understanding tourists' experiences and feedback is crucial for destination branding, especially in the context of food tourism, which revolves around experiential tourism (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Destination branding, a marketing strategy focusing on creating a distinct identity, enhances a destination's appeal and reduces search costs. Brand image plays a critical role in food tourism, influencing international travelers' plans. Managers should emphasize unique characteristics and expand brand-related initiatives to gain a competitive edge. This study aims to comprehend tourists' perceptions of Delhi as a food destination, providing valuable insights for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and marketers to enhance destination branding. The insights generated here will assist policymakers and governments in aligning food tourism transactions with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (Ravichandran et al., 2023).

The study's significance extends beyond academia into destination management, where crafting a unique identity for a location impacts tourism, economic growth, and community enrichment. Examining how food tourism contributes to a destination's brand image becomes pivotal in this context. Additionally, from an academic standpoint, the research enriches the intersection of tourism, gastronomy, and branding, filling gaps in the literature with fresh insights into the intricate dynamics of food tourism as a driver of destination branding.

Research Questions

- What is the impact of food tourism on the brand image of destinations?
- How do culinary experiences influence tourists' perceptions of a destination?
- What are the key factors contributing to the success of food tourism initiatives in shaping destination branding?

In pursuit of these objectives, we employ a qualitative research approach, engaging in in-depth interviews and participant observation to capture the multifaceted experiences and narratives of tourists engaged in food tourism within selected destinations. A thematic analysis serves as our chosen method for unveiling the patterns, narratives, and themes within the qualitative data, offering a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between food tourism and destination branding. Our exploration not only unravels the flavors, aromas, and cultural narratives that tourists encounter but also delves into the transformative impact that food tourism has on destinations. As we navigate the enchanting world of culinary journeys, we invite readers to savor the rich tapestry of experiences that transcend the ordinary, redefining the way we perceive and brand destinations in the ever-evolving landscape of travel and tourism.

Background Literature

This section reviews existing literature on food tourism, destination branding, and the intersection of the two fields. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between food tourism and destination branding, highlighting key concepts and previous research findings.

Food as a Tourism Product

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food is the most basic human need (Maslow, 1943). It is necessary for survival and an important part of the tourism sector. Food is also considered an essential part of the 5A's of tourism and is viewed as an attraction for food tourists (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). However, food tourism is more than just dining at restaurants; it also includes tasting specialized meals and local produce or trying a chef's recipes. The "tourist's conundrum" emphasizes the distinction between mandatory and symbolic food consumption during vacations. According to Ellis et al. (2018), food tourism focuses on cultural anthropology, understanding interactions between tourists and places through food. Policy and business managers manage cultural resources from users, images, sustainability, development, and profit perspectives (Ellis et al., 2018). Food tourism, a special interest in travel, is a form of culinary, gastronomic, gourmet, or cuisine tourism that reflects consumers' interest in food and wine as a form of "serious leisure" and connects society through activities like joining gastronomic societies (Andersson & Mossberg, 2017). Hall et al. (2003) defined food tourism as the practice of exploring primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and other particular regions with the primary goal of engaging in food tasting and/or experiencing the characteristics of a highly specialized food production region (Hall et al., 2003). According to the World Food Travel Association, food tourism is the "act of traveling for a taste of a place in order to gain a sense of place" (World Food Travel Association, n.d.).

Food tourism, defined by UNWTO, involves interactions with food, related goods, and activities during travel. It includes visiting regional producers, participating in food festivals, and participating in cooking classes. Food culture and wine tourism diversify the travel industry, support regional economic growth, and promote authenticity. It helps market destinations, preserves regional traditions, and attracts new sectors (UNWTO, 2022). The desire to try local cuisine is commonly thought to impact food tourists' motivation to visit the location significantly. The most significant, probably the primary explanation for why a visitor goes to a destination is the food of a specific region (Lee et al., 2014). Food is a travel motivation and a factor influencing travel decisions. Food tourists choose vacation destinations based on anticipated eating experiences, seeking food, meals, and activities. Holiday food consumption leads to sensory, cultural, and social experiences (Andersson et al., 2017).

Food as Destination Identity

Food is a significant component of destination brand identity, embodying unique characteristics that contribute to various advantages. The potential of food tourism extends beyond revitalizing tourism to fostering local economic growth, offering new agricultural applications, and serving as a diplomatic tool in the tourism industry (Zhang et al., 2019). Gourmet services and food practices have substantial environmental, social, cultural, and economic implications, promoting local customs and diversity while providing authenticity and unique experiences. Local food not only reflects a destination's culture but also supports economic growth and sustainability, making it a crucial element in tourism. Emphasizing regional flavors and traditional cooking methods in local cuisine enhances a destination's appeal and authenticity, attracting tourists and supporting sustainability. The uniqueness of food items can be integrated into events or enterprises to create a powerful impression on travelers, fostering a meaningful connection among the tourists, foods, and the destination (Lin et al., 2011).

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation recognizes the increasing importance of local cultural heritage in attracting global travelers (UNWTO, 2023). Stakeholders and industry practitioners can identify key characteristics of local food to differentiate their offerings, ensuring effective communication of their brand identity (Lin et al., 2011). Preserving and strengthening a destination's unique identity is crucial for branding research and tourism marketing, aligning product offerings with tourists' perceived attractiveness of local food and experiences, thereby fostering long-term tourism growth. Understanding diverse impressions of food image is essential for assessing product offerings and ensuring overall appeal (Lai et al., 2019).

Destination Branding and Food Tourism

Destination branding involves creating a distinctive identity through marketing activities, symbolizing a memorable travel experience, reinforcing emotional connections, and influencing destination choice (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017). It gained prominence in the late '90s, with examples from Canada, Oregon and Hawaii in the USA, emphasizing emotional attributes understood by diverse (Ban et al., 2011). Brand image is crucial in culinary tourism, influencing travel intentions (Horng et al., 2012). Numerous destinations, including Australia, South Africa, Taiwan, and China, have successfully used food tourism for branding (Lai, 2018; Lin et al., 2011; Li et al., 2020; Mankhomwa et al., 2020). The study by Horng et al. (2012) highlighted the impact of destination brand equity on tourists' inclinations. They emphasized the need for distinctive traits and brand-related activities for a competitive edge (Horng et al., 2012). Conversely, Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata need to redefine themselves as urban food destinations by promoting local culinary traditions and enhancing visitor experiences (Amore & Roy, 2020).

Image of Food in Destination Branding

The literature review delves into the three facets food tourists perceive when evaluating a destination: cognitive, affective, and conative images. Cognitive aspects encompass tangible and intangible elements like geography, cultural aspects, and food quality. The affective image involves feelings and symbolic values, while the conative image reflects behavioral aspects such as satisfaction. The review underscores the necessity of integrating these dimensions to create a unified and appealing destination brand (Lai et al., 2019). Previous research found that perceived cognitive and affective images significantly impacted tourists' travel motivation (Shankar, 2020). The literature review also shows a positive correlation between cognitive, affective, and conative components (Vishnoi et al., 2023).

The literature review underscores a research gap in destination branding for food tourism, particularly in Asian countries, despite their cultural richness and diverse food experiences (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Assessing destination image is crucial for preserving and strengthening a unique identity, aligning product offerings with tourists' perceived attractiveness of local food and experiences. Recognizing stakeholders' perspectives, including tourists, entrepreneurs, locals, and the government, is essential for sustainable tourism (Amoako et al., 2022). Precise dimensions for measuring food image value creation are needed, emphasizing the importance of understanding potential tourists' behavior associated with destination food (Lai et al., 2019). The destination branding process involves vision and stakeholder management, target customer and product portfolio matching, differentiation strategies, communication strategies, and feedback management. More research is needed to study the experiences and perceptions of food tourists, providing valuable insights for positioning and promoting destinations as appealing gastronomic images (Horng et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2019). Overall, understanding the nuances of food tourists' experiences is crucial for developing a destination as a brand for food tourism.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design is employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with food tourists visiting Delhi whose primary motivation for traveling to Delhi-NCR is exploring the city's food. Data was collected from 25 participants, as food tourism is a special part of the tourism industry (Rittichainuwat, 2018; Ying et al., 2018). Participant observations and content analysis were conducted to understand the research phenomenon comprehensively. A purposive sampling technique selects participants with diverse perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of the research questions. The data was collected from November–December 2023. The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns (Sood et al., 2023) related to the impact of food tourism on destination branding. For the analysis of themes, the researcher used MAXQDA Pro Analytics software, and for the word cloud, they used a word cloud generator. The analysis aims to provide insights into the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of the relationship between food tourism and destination image.

Data Collection and Profile of the Respondents

Data was collected through interviews using open-ended questions from 25 food tourists, including domestic and international tourists visiting Delhi-NCR. The profile of the tourists is mentioned below in Table 1.

The study's demographic analysis (Table 1) reveals that the cohort comprised 25 participants—12 females and 13 males. Predominantly, the respondents were Americans ($n = 6$), followed by French ($n = 4$), British ($n = 3$), and two participants each from Spain, Israel, and Sweden. Single participants represented Russia, South Korea, the UAE, and Italy. Regarding the age distribution, five respondents were 51 years and above, two fell within the 41–50 age bracket, eight were between 31–40 years old, another eight were in the 21–30 age range, and two were below 20 years old. Regarding educational attainment, the participants' qualifications varied, with four holding Ph.D. degrees, ten possessing master's degrees, eight being graduates, and three having undergraduate qualifications. The professional background of the respondents showcased diverse occupations, with 11 engaged in private service, six being self-employed, six pursuing academic studies, and two employed in government positions.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Tourists

Respondents	Gender	Nationality	Age (in years)	Qualification	Profession
R01	Female	French	41 – 50	Ph.D.	Private service
R02	Male	Israel	31 – 40	Graduate	Private service
R03	Male	UAE	31 – 40	Graduate	Private service
R04	Male	British	21 – 30	Masters	Self-employed
R05	Female	British	21 – 30	Ph.D.	Private service
R06	Female	American	51 & above	Masters	Private service
R08	Male	American	51 & above	Masters	Private service
R07	Male	Israel	21 – 30	Graduate	Private service
R08	Female	Italy	21 – 30	Graduate	Student
R09	Female	German	31 – 40	Masters	Self-employed
R10	Female	Italy	21 – 30	Masters	Private service
R11	Male	American	31 – 40	Ph.D.	Private service

R12	Female	French	21 – 30	Under Graduate	Student
R13	Female	French	Below 20	Under Graduate	Student
R14	Female	French	Below 20	Under Graduate	Student
R16	Male	American	51 & above	Masters	Self-Employed
R17	Female	American	51 & above	Masters	Self-Employed
R18	Male	American	31 – 40	Masters	Private Service
R19	Female	South Korean	31 – 40	Masters	Government Service
R20	Male	Spanish	31 – 40	Graduate	Private Service
R21	Male	Spanish	31 – 40	Graduate	Self-employed
R22	Female	Sweden	21 – 30	Graduate	Student
R23	Male	Sweden	21 – 30	Graduate	Student
R24	Male	British	51 & above	Masters	Self-Employed
R25	Male	Russian	41 – 50	Ph.D.	Government service

Analysis and Results

Table 2 synthesizes the key aspects of food tourism in Delhi-NCR as discussed in the document, including the experiences that shape the perception of Delhi-NCR as a food tourism brand, the sources of information about food and outlets, the contribution of the city's culinary culture to its brand identity, the specific dishes or traditions that made an impact, the interactions with local culinary experts, and the elements that were successful in promoting the city's brand. The numbers indicate the frequency of mentions or responses related to each sub-theme, providing an overview of the study's emphasis on different aspects of food tourism. The analysis extracted ten themes and 45 sub-themes, as illustrated in Table 2. Integrating these themes with literature provides a robust foundation, validating the study's findings within the broader context of existing knowledge in food tourism and destination branding. Detailed explanations of themes based on responses are as follows:

Culinary Heritage and Tradition & Access to Historical Sites

Explore Old Delhi's culinary heritage, highlighting the role of historical and cultural elements in shaping a destination's image. Heritage walk experiences and gastronomic delights align with cultural tourism's immersive nature. The focus on pre-independence food outlets echoes the growing trend in food tourism studies, emphasizing authenticity and tradition.

Respondents highlighted their enriching experience of food tourism in Delhi, such as:

Respondent 01 : “Visiting old Delhi and trying local delicacies was an enriching experience.”

Respondent 13 :

It was a heritage walk that I attended around the Red Fort area. There, we had a chance to eat food from an outlet that dated back to pre-independence. It was a memorable experience, and Delhi has much potential for food tourism. I have visited the outlets around the Jama Masjid area as they are popular for the Mughlai cuisine.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Responses

Themes	Sub Themes	Share a memorable experience related to food tourism during your visit.	Experience that shaped Delhi-NCR; your overall perception as a food tourism brand.	Source of information about the food and food outlets.	Contribution of the culinary culture of the city leading to its unique brand identity as a travel destination.	The specific dishes or culinary traditions that left a lasting impression on you and influenced your perception of the place.	Recall your interactions with local chefs, food producers, or culinary experts and how these interactions enhanced your understanding and appreciation of the city's culture and brand as a food destination.	The elements you believe successfully promoted and shaped the city's brand.	Total
Culinary Heritage and Tradition & Access to Historical Sites	Old Delhi Exploration–Visit Old Delhi and try local delicacies and age-old recipes passed down through generations, contributing to its unique identity.	4	5	–	5	3	4	2	23
	Heritage Walk Experiences– Providing a deeper understanding of Delhi-NCR's historical and cultural roots.								
	Pre-independence food outlets.								
	Historical sites as tourist attractions.								
Diverse Culinary Offerings	Food Walks in Various Locations–Food walk at Chandni Chowk, Hauz Khas Village.	7	4	–	6	6	7	3	31
	Spice Market Exploration–Pungent aromas at Spice Market.								
	Regional Cuisines at Dilli Haat–Visit								

	Delhi Haat and consume delicacies and regional cuisines at Dilli Haat.						
	Tempting Foods in Different Locations–Traditional North Indian breakfast. Range of Cuisines–Combination of the whole of India; a rich tapestry of flavors. Quality and Taste Considerations–Artistic presentation.						
	Local Interaction with Small-Scale Producers–Tradition of communal dining. Interacting with local shopkeepers and spice merchants. Community engagement programs.						
Local Market Exploration and Street Food Culture	Parathe Wali Gali Memories–Visit the iconic Parathe Wali Gali. Street Food Adventures in Different Areas–Tempting street food in different areas of Delhi–NCR. Sampling chaat.	4	–	3	9	4	30
	Unique Local Delicacies–Mughlai cuisines. Browsing local markets.						
	Fresh produce and spice exploration.						
Innovative Culinary Experiences	Cooking Classes–Cooking classes to learn the art of making butter chicken. Butter chicken and North Indian delicacies.	2	–	–	1	2	8
	Educational and delicious experiences. Innovation and Contemporary Culinary Experiences–Innovative dishes at Indian Accent. Trying Innovative Dishes–Specialised menu. Personalized service at Starbucks.						
	Fusion of Culinary Styles–Blend of old and new, international, and fusion food. DIY culinary experiences, browsing through local markets. Wine and cheese pairing workshops.						
Cultural Immersion Through	Cultural Interactions–Interacting with local food outlet owners, interaction with food bloggers	1	–	2	–	2	8

Food	and artisans at Dilli Haat. Community engagement programs.								
	Sipping masala chai at a roadside stall was a cultural immersion.								
Perception and Branding	Positive perception shaped by food walk.	3	2	5	-	-	2	-	12
Influence	Perception of Delhi as a Culinary Delight-Positive perception of Delhi, a melting pot of unique culture. Visitors stay connected, and there are numerous food options for vegetarian and non-vegetarian tourists.								
	Recommendations by friends and family.								
Memorable Culinary Events	Memorable Experiences at Specific Locations-Dining at Karim's.	1		4				10	18
	Meeting Chef Ajay Chopra at Plaka. Interacting with the chef at Hotel Leela Palace. Interaction with the head chef of QLA.								
	Dining at Historic Places-Heritage properties.								
	Culinary Delights in Heritage Settings-The trend of rooftop dining with panoramic views.								
	Food festivals and events, immersive storytelling. Food tasting sessions.								
	Farmer's market.								
Global Influence and Collaboration	Adapting to Global Culinary Trends-Customer experience at Starbucks India: dynamic and evolving food scene that stays in tune with global tastes. Discussion with bakery owners. Using Bangkok as a model.	1	-	3	5	-	2	-	11
	Getting Michelin-star restaurants in Delhi-NCR.								
	Collaborating with Renowned Chefs-The government collaborates with renowned chefs.								
	Cross-Cultural Exchanges-Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the city and catering to international								

palates; integration of food and nightlife.

Connecting people from different cultures and backgrounds and culinary exchange programs will help in global influence on food tourism.

Hygiene and Safety Considerations Hygiene Importance-Increase the hygiene. Awareness campaigns for sellers. 1 2 - - - 2 5

Perception of Safety in Street Food-Cleanliness.

Improvements Needed-Research to identify customers, make a logo, adopt a balanced approach with alterations/moderations, and avoid overcharging from foreign tourists.

Promotion and Accessibility Promotion Campaigns - 2 23 - - 2 27

Improvement-Improved infrastructure for street food owners; supporting agricultural community.

The Traditional Ways of Marketing-Leaflet/newspaper promotions, food channels, web search, Condé Nast, articles, advertisements, and slogan, and crowd eye-catching poster, creating a catalog of dishes.

Accessibility of culinary hubs.

Develop a user-friendly mobile app.

Word of Mouth-Friends, Zomato, Swiggy, food critics.

Reference through Social Media Channels-Food bloggers, Instagram, Facebook pages, Youtube, and food vlogs, explore hidden gems with a wider audience.

Sustainability-Supporting local businesses, sustainability certifications, promoting eco-friendly practices, and preserving its authentic flavors. Engage the youth.

The below questions were part of the interview:

- Could you please share a memorable food tourism experience during your Delhi-NCR visit?
- How did this experience shape your overall perception of Delhi-NCR as a food tourism brand?
- From where did you get the information about Delhi-NCR's food and food outlets? Was the information relevant and sufficient?
- In your view, how does the culinary culture of Delhi-NCR contribute to its unique brand identity as a travel destination?
- Were there specific dishes or culinary traditions in Delhi-NCR that left a lasting impression on you and influenced your perception of the place?
- Could you recall interacting with local chefs, food producers, or culinary experts in Delhi-NCR? How did these interactions enhance your understanding and appreciation of Delhi-NCR's culture and brand as a food destination?
- What elements of the food tourism initiatives in Delhi-NCR do you believe were successful in promoting and shaping the city's brand? Conversely, were there any aspects that could be improved?

Diverse Culinary Offerings

Food walks and spice market visits are essential experiential aspects of food tourism, showcasing regional cuisines and culinary diversity. The study by Duttagupta (2013) highlighted the importance of tempting foods, quality, and taste in influencing tourists' perceptions of a destination, stressing the significance of culinary variety. Respondents noted their enriching experience of food tourism in Delhi, which included:

Respondent 02 :

Visiting Delhi Haat and consuming delicacies along with cultural interactions with small-scale producers. Perception: Delhi is a smorgasbord of delectables acquired over time under the influence of various invaders and migrants; hence (without having/faintly having), its own organically developed food habits are non-dominant. However, having a fusion of all foods, traveling to Delhi is a delight.

Local Market Exploration and Street Food Culture

Participants' fond memories of Parathe Wali Gali, street food adventures, and the exploration of local markets reflect findings in food tourism literature. Street food culture emerges as a powerful driver of destination image, contributing to the city's unique appeal. The DIY culinary experiences involving fresh produce and spice exploration align with studies emphasizing the importance of hands-on experiences in enhancing tourists' connections with the local culinary scene. Respondents emphasized their beneficial experiences with food tourism in Delhi, such as:

Respondent 15 : “Trying the different parathas in this iconic alley was a carb lover's dream. Sweet or savory, the choices were endless.”

Innovative Culinary Experiences

Participation in cooking classes and exposure to innovative culinary experiences resonates with studies discussing food tourism's educational and transformative dimensions. The fusion of culinary styles and engagement in DIY experiences aligns with the evolving trends in gastronomic tourism, where tourists seek a balance between traditional and contemporary culinary expressions. The emphasis on personalized services at establishments like Starbucks reflects the influence of service quality on overall destination perceptions. Respondents highlighted their enriching experience as follows:

Respondent 20 : “Trying innovative dishes at Indian Accent in New Delhi brought a contemporary twist to traditional flavors. Each dish was a work of art.”

Cultural Immersion Through Food

Cultural interactions and immersion experiences—such as sipping masala chai at roadside stalls and connecting with small-scale producers—align with the growing literature on experiential and immersive tourism. The emphasis on local interactions and cultural engagement through food resonates with studies discussing the cultural significance of culinary experiences and their impact on tourists' perceptions of a destination. Responses shared by food tourists such as:

Respondent 15 : “Conversations with street food vendors provided insights into their family traditions, secret spice blends, and the historical significance of their stalls, adding depth to the street food experience.”

Respondent 23 : “Conversations with artisans at Dilli Haat highlighted the craftsmanship behind regional delicacies, showcasing the cultural diversity that contributes to Delhi-NCR's culinary tapestry.”

Perception and Branding Influence

The positive perceptions shaped by food walks and participants' overall view of Delhi-NCR as a culinary delight correspond with research emphasizing the role of positive experiences in shaping destination image. Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family align with studies on the influence of social networks in shaping tourists' choices and perceptions of a destination. These findings reinforce the interconnected nature of experiential elements and interpersonal influences in shaping culinary destination brands. Respondent added the valuable comment by adding:

Respondent 05 : “Delhi has a mix of everything; it is a melting pot of unique cultures and various food tastes.”

Memorable Culinary Events

The recall of specific locations for memorable culinary events and dining at historic places aligns with literature discussing the significance of unique and memorable experiences in culinary tourism. The integration of historical charm with gastronomic indulgence resonates with studies emphasizing the role of heritage in creating distinctive culinary destinations. The emphasis on culinary delights in heritage settings reflects the intersection of cultural and historical elements in shaping the overall brand image. Respondents highlighted their wonderful experience of food tourism in Delhi as follows:

Respondent 16 : “Interactions with spice merchants in Old Delhi unveiled the meticulous art of blending spices and the integral role they play in preserving the authenticity of Mughlai and North Indian cuisines.”

Respondent 18 : “Engaging with culinary historians during heritage walks deepened my understanding of how historical events shaped the city's food culture, connecting the past to the present.”

Global Influence and Collaboration

Adapting to global culinary trends and collaborations with renowned chefs reflects the city's responsiveness to evolving gastronomic preferences, aligning with studies on the dynamic nature of culinary tourism. Cross-cultural exchanges through culinary experiences resonate with research highlighting cultural diversity's role in enhancing a destination's attractiveness. The emphasis on cosmopolitan and culturally diverse experiences aligns with the broader discourse on the globalized nature of contemporary culinary tourism. Answers of tourists include the following highlights:

Respondent 02 : “Delhi, as such, is a fusion of all food habits acquired over time. Hence, the culinary culture has a mixed feeling of national, international, and fusion food to make the taste more palatable for traveling.”

Respondent 07 : “Getting Michelin to start ranking the restaurants in Delhi will help put it on the international map. Bangkok may be a great model to emulate.”

Hygiene and Safety Considerations

Participants' recognition of the importance of hygiene and safety in street food and culinary establishments corresponds with existing literature discussing the impact of health and safety perceptions on tourists' culinary choices. The acknowledgment of progress and suggestions for improvement align with studies emphasizing the role of perceived hygiene and safety in influencing tourists' overall satisfaction and confidence in exploring culinary offerings. Tourists' concerns include:

Respondent 09 : “I would suggest maintaining hygiene while preparing food as street food vendors used to lead to food poisoning. If hygiene is maintained, then I believe any tourist would have a good impression of Delhi cuisine tourism overall.”

Respondent 14 : “Improving infrastructure for street vendors could enhance the overall street food experience, addressing concerns related to hygiene and accessibility.”

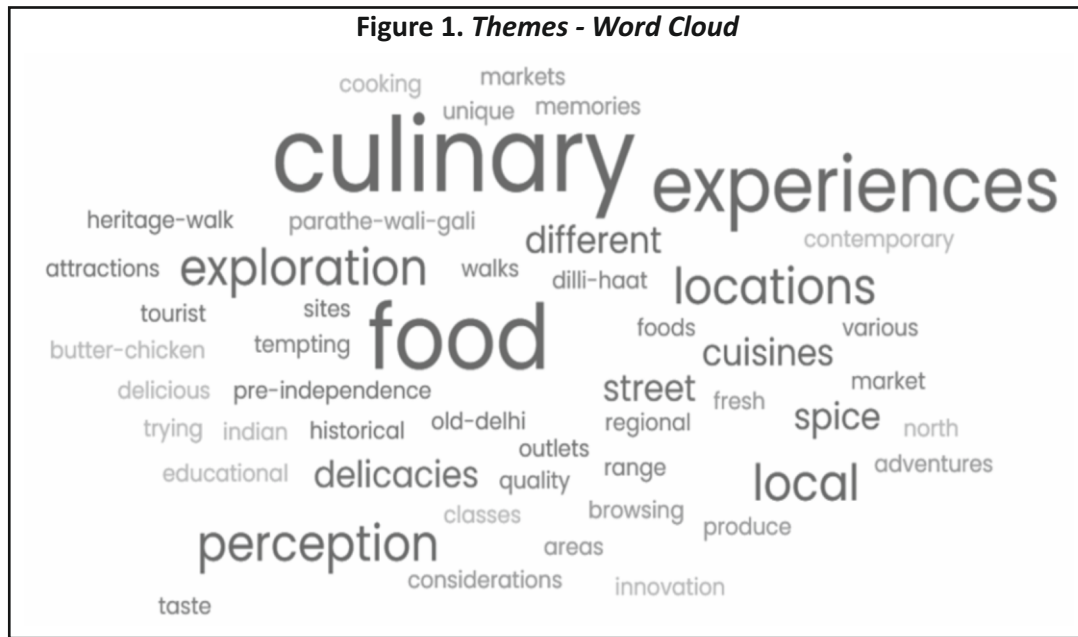
Promotion and Accessibility

The recommendations for improvement in promotion campaigns and enhanced accessibility to culinary hubs align with literature emphasizing the role of marketing and accessibility in promoting culinary destinations. The significance of word of mouth and social media references resonates with studies highlighting peer recommendations and online platforms' influence on tourists' choices and perceptions of culinary destinations. These findings reinforce the interconnection. Responses from tourists include:

Respondent 02 : “Information about the destination was received through word of mouth, leaflet/newspaper promotions. Partially sufficient, as while visiting food hubs, many discoveries were made related to food stores whether roadside or prominent outlets.”

Word Cloud

The word cloud (Figure 1) provides a snapshot of the key terms and concepts discussed in the results. It emphasizes the importance of culinary experiences in shaping a tourist's perception of a destination and how it can be leveraged for effective destination branding. “Central Themes” includes the largest words, such as “culinary,” “experiences,” “exploration,” “food,” and “perception,” suggesting that these are the central themes of the research. They imply that the study heavily focuses on culinary experiences and exploring food as a core component of the tourist experience. Perception might be related to how tourists perceive the destination through its food offerings. “Related Concepts” surrounding these central themes are words that provide context or related concepts. For example, “street,” “local,” “spice,” “markets,” and “cooking” suggest that street food, local cuisine, spices, and food markets are significant elements in the food tourism experience. “Specific References” involve some words that hint at particular focuses within the research, such as “heritage-walk,” “parathe-wali-gali,” “butter-chicken,” “Old-Delhi,” and “Indian.” These terms indicate a specific cultural or geographic focus on Indian cuisine and food-related cultural heritage walks in areas like Old Delhi. “Experience Qualities” involves words like “unique,” “memories,” “tempting,” “delicious,” and “quality” relating to the qualitative aspects of food tourism and how they contribute to the branding of a destination by creating memorable and high-quality experiences. “Diversity and Variety” includes the presence of words like “different,” “various,” “regional,” “cuisines,” and “adventures,” which suggest that the research explores the diversity of food experiences and the variety of cuisines as a part of the destination's appeal.



Based on the keywords, themes are further classified into cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of the destination image.

Cognitive Image

Tourists form cognitive images based on culinary heritage, diverse offerings, local market exploration, innovative culinary experiences, cultural immersion through food, global influence and collaboration, and hygiene and safety considerations. They may seek destinations where they can learn and experience local culture through food, explore local markets and street food culture, and learn about global influence and collaborations in the culinary scene.

Affective Image

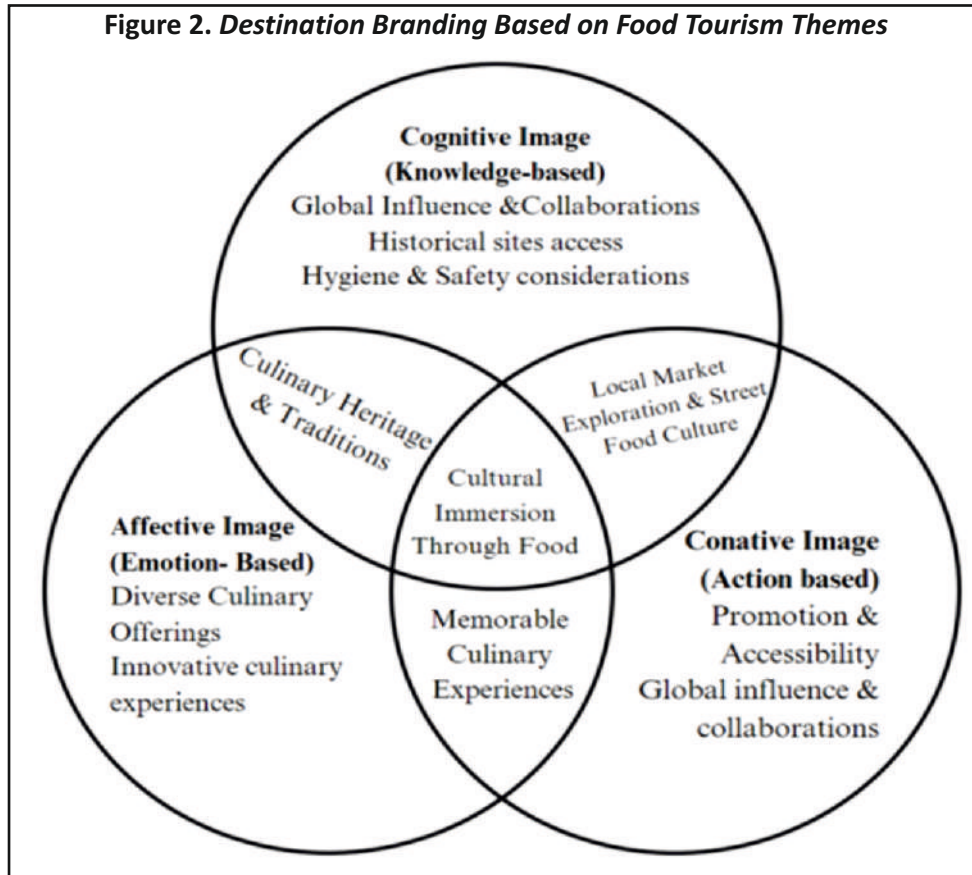
Affective image refers to tourists' emotional response toward a destination, influenced by branding and its culinary scene. It can be influenced by memorable culinary events and the perception of global influence and collaboration in the culinary scene, resulting in positive emotions.

Conative Image

The conative image of a destination is influenced by its promotional efforts, memorable culinary events, hygiene and safety considerations, and accessibility. Tourists are motivated to visit a destination based on these factors, with cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions interlinked in shaping their perceptions and decisions. Promotions highlight culinary offerings, memorable events, and local markets, while hygiene and safety considerations emphasize the importance of hygiene and safety in culinary practices.

Based on this Venn diagram, Figure 2 is being prepared:

Figure 2. Destination Branding Based on Food Tourism Themes



Discussion

Participants' experiences in Delhi-NCR's food tourism align with existing literature. Culinary heritage, explored through Old Delhi and heritage walks, reflects the importance of historical and cultural elements. The tourism sector is recognized as a significant global industry, catalyzing and driving infrastructure investments and preserving regions' cultural heritage (Jaswal et al., 2017). Diverse culinary offerings, including food walks and regional cuisines, emphasize the significance of culinary diversity (Hall et al., 2003). Emotional connections with street food align with the emotional dimension of food tourism. Innovative culinary experiences, such as cooking classes and local culinary traditions (Kim et al., 2013), align with research on the educational aspects of culinary tourism. Positive changes in the culinary landscape, tourism, and historical connections contribute to destination loyalty (Li & Stepchenkova, 2012). Memorable culinary events align with literature on creating memorable experiences (Swarbrooke & Page, 2001).

Global influence and collaboration reflect adaptation to global culinary trends, aligning with the globalization of food (Hall et al., 2003). Hygiene and safety considerations align with studies emphasizing safety perceptions. Lastly, promotion and accessibility resonate with literature on effective promotion and accessibility in destination branding. Digital and social media marketing practices are contemporary yet pervasive (Bakshi & Chauhan, 2022). Yet, a significant number of audiences still rely on traditional methods. This integration validates the study's findings within the broader context of food tourism and destination branding literature. The study also focuses on the benefits of regenerative tourism, like food tourism, for sustainable consumption of tourism resources that would hand over valuable tourism resources to the next generations without degrading their

originality (Ravichandran, 2023). This will help destination management organizations build Delhi-NCR as a food tourism brand, as Delhi-NCR has all the elements but lacks destination branding.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The study introduces theoretical implications for destination branding, enriching existing models by incorporating culinary dimensions that recognize the role of intangible experiences in shaping brand perceptions (Pike, 2009). It aligns with the call for a holistic approach to branding, emphasizing cultural and heritage elements (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Morgan et al., 2003), specifically focusing on how culinary heritage enhances brand uniqueness. The inclusion of temporal storytelling aligns with the narrative turn in destination branding literature, extending the concept of storytelling by introducing temporal dimensions. These theoretical contributions influence the evolving understanding of destination branding, shedding light on the significance of culinary elements, cultural integration, and temporal storytelling in shaping destination perceptions.

Managerial Implications

As recommended, the strategic promotion of food tourism aligns with the call (Richards & Munsters, 2010) for destinations to leverage unique cultural assets for distinct tourist experiences (Hospers, 2008). Heritage walks, recognized as effective branding initiatives, resonate with discussions on experiential marketing in destination management (Mitsche et al., 2013), emphasizing the importance of creating memorable experiences. Quality assurance and authenticity, highlighted in the study, correlate with preserving cultural integrity in destination development (Leask et al., 2014), underscoring authenticity as a crucial driver of visitor satisfaction and positive destination image. The incorporation of storytelling with food tours aligns with the dynamic approach to destination narratives advocated by providing historical context and contemporary relevance. Finally, the study contributes to the discourse on the dynamic nature of destination branding in food tourism, connecting these implications to existing literature.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

The study on food tourism and destination branding offers valuable insights. Still, it is limited by its focus on specific destinations, a minor participant pool, and a qualitative approach prone to subjectivity. Findings may lack generalizability, urging caution due to a modest sample size of 25 participants. Future investigations should incorporate larger, more diverse samples, blend qualitative and quantitative methods, and explore cross-cultural influences and the impact of digital platforms on food tourism branding. The study analyzes the effectiveness of destination branding strategies in utilizing food tourism as a marketing tool, considering the qualitative method as the tourist's perspective plays an important role. The study aims to offer insights and recommendations for destination marketers, policymakers, and researchers regarding integrating food tourism into branding initiatives.

Authors' Contribution

Sonal Gupta developed the research topic, refined the technique, and analyzed the data for the study. Dr. Manohar Sajnani contributed to the research by reviewing, editing, visualizing, and validating the research idea using his research experience. Finally, Dr. Vanessa GB Gowreesunker revised the manuscript's final narrative and discussed future research constraints and directions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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