

Determinants Encouraging Gastronomic Tourism Sustainability in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Perceived as one of the vital components in enriching tourists' experiences while at a tourism destination, gastronomic tourism is considered as an important protector of local food heritage, which unites the local people and their local food traditions together. The objective of this study is to explore the determinants that encourage the gastronomic tourism sustainability from the perspective of local tourists, hospitality and tourism lecturers and hospitality industry experts. By employing qualitative research design, a total of 9 individual in-depth interviews were conducted face-to face and the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically. The result of this research shows that the use of local and seasonal ingredients, local food culture preservation, the promotion and implementation of sustainable practices, training and education, collaboration between stakeholders, community involvement and economic factor are the determinants that motivates the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. It is hoped that the results of this study would encourage further research within the topic of local food and beverages sustainability perhaps within different states, culture, or religion. Additionally, research on the effective marketing strategies should also be taken into consideration by local authorities and stakeholders to continuously supports the movement of gastronomic tourism sustainability in Malaysia.

Keywords: Local Food and Beverages, Gastronomic Tourism, Sustainability of Gastronomic Tourism, Malaysia.

Introduction

In recent decades, the term sustainability has gained a wide coverage within the context of tourism. Sustainability which can be defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” as suggested by United Nation Brundtland Commission (1987) requires an integrated approach that takes into consideration environmental concern along with economic development (United Nation, 2022). Further, a total of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that addresses the global challenges including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice to name a few were developed by the United Nations to achieve a better and more sustainable future for the humankind (United Nation, 2022).

As one of the world’s largest and fastest growing industry, tourism was recognized as the ideal platform for sustainable development as it is an industry which relies on the maintenance of a strong and healthy environment for its long-term well-being in many areas (Ain et al., 2010). From the viewpoint of tourism, sustainable tourism can be interpreted as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of the visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (World Tourism Organization, 2022). Ivasciuc and Ispas (2023) on the other hand asserted that as an integral part of sustainable development, sustainable tourism can be looked as a reasonable step in preventing the excessive and unrestrained use of tourism attraction and resources.

Local food and beverages have long been a medium of attraction for tourists who seeks for a unique and different experience during their trip (Richards, 2002). Local food and beverage offer an impressive range of possibilities for tourists or various sensescapes; which includes soundscapes, smellscapes, tastescapes, the geography of touch, in addition to landscapes as a motivator for the tourists who are on the quest for something extraordinary other than climate, accommodation and captivating scenery. Thus, the quest for local food and beverages experience and activities while travelling by the tourist or also known as gastronomic tourism does not only allow them to achieve the desired goals of relaxation, excitement, escapism, status, education and lifestyle (Zainal et al., 2010; Frochot, 2003) but at the same time become a platform for the destination to revitalize and diversify tourism, promote local economic development and destination, maintaining and preserving local tradition and cuisine, and harnessing and rewarding authenticity.

According to Zhang et al (2019), local food can be looked as an important tool for the sustainable development of the destinations and to achieved sustainable tourism experiences. Local food is not only different from the tourist’s everyday food and meals (Apak & Gurbuz, 2023), but it also represents the cultural heritage of the geographical areas visited by the tourists’ (Sthapit et al., 2019). Besides providing entertainment, the consumption of local food also provides opportunities to learn about local culture and heritage to the tourists as asserted by (Suhartanto et al., 2018). By looking at this situation, this study aims to explore the determinants that encourage the gastronomic tourism sustainability from the perspective of local tourists, hospitality and tourism lecturers and hospitality industry experts in Malaysia. Specific information about Malaysia’s culinary heritage is important Karim et al (2009), along with the comments and feedback from the tourists Kivela & Crotts (2006), academicians, and hospitality industry experts. Empirical studies on tourism and gastronomy sustainability have been carried out comprehensively in other countries (Apak & Gurbuz, 2023; Dixit, 2019;

Gálvez et al., 2017; Diaconescu et al., 2016; Scarpato, 2003), yet in Malaysia, the study on this area is still scarce and limited. Given the extent to which determinants would motivate gastronomic tourism sustainability, research on its outcomes is clearly warranted (Sanip & Mustapha, 2020). Indeed, the investigation into gastronomic tourism and sustainability is crucial to explore the behavior of the tourists and simultaneously aid with food marketing aspects. To fill the gap in the tourism literature, this study was designed to identify the underlying determinants that encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability in Malaysia.

Literature Review

A unique nation well known for its multicultural diversity, Malaysia not only offer cultural experiences, but also a wide variety of natural attractions including beaches, mountain parks, and tropical rain forests to the tourist. Additionally, the country's rich culture, history, lifestyle, and the interactions between the three main ethnicities: Malay, Chinese, Indians, along with other ethnicities have contributed directly or indirectly to the cooking preparation and food presentation (Sanip et al., 2022). Rooting from the diversity of Malaysia multiethnicity through the decades, it is not surprising to see a significant range of local culinary delights has become an invaluable part of tourist's attraction for this country. Furthermore, the country strategic location which was situated at the 'heart' of Southeast Asia has given another advantage to the development of traditional Malaysian cuisines which was greatly influenced by traders from neighboring countries such as Indonesia, India, Thailand, the Middle East, China and others. By looking at the local cuisines as an intangible heritage, it is apparent that the delectable taste of the food not only allow tourists to experience authentic cultural experience, yet at the same time creates an opportunity to sustain the local gastronomic food heritage and tourism.

In recent years, studies focusing on gastronomic tourism was carried out extensively by numerous scholars all around the world (Ullah et al., 2022; Indra et al., 2022; Sanip et al., 2022; Millán et al., 2021). Gastronomy tourism which can be defined as the quest for local food and beverages experience and activities while travelling by the tourist along with authentic. traditional and/or innovative culinary experiences (World Tourism Organization & Basque Culinary Center, 2019) has become a worldwide phenomenon and was recognized as a niche component under the tourism umbrella. As a results of changes to international trade agreements and the move toward tariff removal and reductions in agricultural subsidies, added with the rapid development in mobility and changes in consumer tastes, many producers had to find new ways of doing business (Hall & Mitchell, 2011), and therefore gastronomic tourism sector was looked as a 'gold mine' for the producers to start their new business venture.

As the interest towards gastronomic tourism grows, it is pivotal to highlight the importance of sustaining this niche component of tourism. As suggested by Georghe et al (2014), the environmental and cultural sustainability can be presented in gastronomic tourism in a way that is consistent with solely economic reasoning. Recent developments in the tourism industry are a mix of behaviors that are obviously unsustainable, and the designs are nominally sustainable. In the case of gastronomic tourism, the goal is to develop a leveraging sustainability mechanism into account rather than to impose new pressure on the culinary heritage in an indiscriminate manner. It focuses more on getting visitors to engage in the local culture through cuisine, local goods, and all the services and activities that are

offered in their immediate surroundings than it does on innovative ways to draw tourists (Georghe et al., 2014). By doing this, not only the local food culture can be sustained, but at the same time increase the awareness towards local food heritage and products.

In Malaysia, gastronomic tourism acts as a key in guiding tourists around Malaysia (Zainal et al., 2010). The strong linkages between local food and tourism not only benefits the industry but may also strengthen the local image and community identity, which helps to promote local culture and heritage. Additionally, the unique culinary spectrum resulting from the blending of multi-ethnic population in Malaysia through different taste, ingredients, and cooking methods from one another has created a delicate cuisine which needed to be protected for the future generations. Hence, it is utmost important to understand the determinants that would encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability as it not only gives an edge in maintaining local food culture from foreign homogenizing pressure, but it also preserves the creation of valued products, in particular local delicacies (Sanip & Mustapha, 2020; Ramli et al., 2016; Shariff et al., 2008, UNESCO, 2008).

Methodology

This study employed an in-depth qualitative method and was conducted from April 2021 to September 2021. This study is part of a larger study which explored the impacts of gastronomic tourism on hospitality industry in Malaysia. The present manuscript provides information on the determinants that encourage the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. Participants' background was strictly confidential, which was accomplished by assuring them that their information would be anonymized, allowing them to share their thoughts honestly and freely.

A total of 9 adults aged 21 to 53 years old were included in this study. The participants were segregated to three different categories: local tourists, hospitality and tourism lecturers, and hospitality industry experts who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and localities in Malaysia. The inclusion criteria were (1) local Malaysian citizen and above 18 years old; (2) possess the knowledge and experience with the topic under investigation; (3) have the willingness to participate and share their experiences related to the topic of study; and (4) possess effective communication skills. Participants were recruited through a composite of convenience sampling technique, comprising of purposive sampling method. It was deemed that the theme saturation was successfully achieved upon completion of 9 interviews. According to Guest et al (2006), 9 participants in a homogenous group would be adequate to get the saturation of data for interviews. Homogenous group for this study refers to the three groups of participants as they are expected to be familiar with the gastronomic tourism and the hospitality industry.

The interview was conducted by the first author alone, without third party presence to prevent from bias. The interview was audio recorded using voice recorder. A total of 21 questions were developed for the in-depth interviews and each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. Previous literature related to the subject of gastronomic tourism was used as a guideline for the interview as well as in developing the interview questions. When appropriate, prompts were deployed to re-direct or encourage interaction. A pilot qualitative testing was conducted on 3 adults aged 21 to 40 years of age to test the clarity, flow, and the duration of interview before the interviews was conducted. All the interviews were

transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically. Table 3.1 below summarize the participants profile for this study.

Table 3.1

In-depth Interview Participants Profile

Category	Code	Age	Race	Gender	Education Level
Local Tourists	LT1	21	Chinese	Male	Bachelor's degree
	LT2	40	Malay	Female	Master's degree
	LT3	40	Bidayuh	Female	Diploma
Hospitality and Tourism Lecturers	HTL1	52	Malay	Female	Master's degree
	HTL2	38	Chinese	Female	Master's degree
	HTL3	34	Malay	Male	Master's degree
Hospitality Industry Experts	HIE1	45	Chinese	Female	Master's degree
	HIE2	53	Malay	Male	Master's degree
	HIE3	51	Malay	Male	Master's degree

Findings and Discussion

Participants Characteristics

A total of 9 participants aged 21 to 53 were recruited for this study. 4 of the participants are from the age range of 31 to 40, 3 participants from the age range of 51 to 60, and 1 participant from the age range of 41 to 50, and 21 to 30 respectively. 5 of the participants were females (55.6%) while another 4 were males (44.4%). Most of them were Malays (55.6%), followed by Chinese ethnicity (33.3%) and Bidayuh (11.1%). Regarding education level, majority of the participants had completed their education at master's level (77.8), followed by bachelor (11.1%) and diploma education level (11.1%).

Determinants that encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability in Malaysia

The participants proposed several determinants that would encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability in Malaysia. The most prevalent determinants were the use of local and seasonal source of ingredients when preparing the local food and beverages (n = 9, 100%); followed by local food culture preservation (n = 7, 77.8%); implementing sustainable practices (n = 7, 77.8%), providing training and education (n = 6, 66.7%), and collaboration among the stake holders (n = 5, 55.6%). The least recommended determinants were community involvement (n=3, 33.3%), and economic sustainability (n = 2, 22.2%). Findings of the study are captured and presented below.

The use of local and seasonal food ingredients when preparing local food and beverages

A majority of the determinants resonates around the use of local and seasonal source of ingredients when preparing the local food and beverages. All the participants addressed that Malaysia are blessed with having a fertile land and strategic location, and therefore it is not surprising to see bountiful of fresh local ingredients can be found easily whether at the supermarket, wet market, or even farmer's market. The participants further claimed that some of the local recipes used local ingredients, and therefore, it is important to ensure that the same kind of ingredients was used so that the authenticity of the dishes can be preserved. The ideas differed by participants category emphasizing the use of local ingredients. Firstly, *'I think that Malaysia is a blessed country since our soil is very fertile and we can grow varieties*

of vegetables, or fruits trees without having any problem. We can just throw or plant the seeds of any vegetables or fruits that we wish for, water the seeds a bit, and within a few weeks or even months the seeds have already sprout. The location of our country would be another advantage since we can get plentiful of food sources from our neighboring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia or Singapore through import or export practices.' (LT1) implying that Malaysia has a fertile soil and there would be no shortage of ingredients as we can rely from neighboring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia or Singapore through import and export trade system.

Secondly, *'I believe that it is important for us to use our local ingredients when preparing our local food and beverages. As we know, we can get all the ingredients from either supermarket, wet market or pasar Tani (farmer's market), so I do not think it would be a big problem for us to use the local ingredients to prepare our local food. And yes, some of our local dishes used ingredients that can only be found seasonally, so it is important to make sure that we use the same ingredients so that we can preserved the originality of the dishes.'* (HIE2) suggesting the importance of using local ingredients when preparing local food and beverages as it will helps in preserving the authenticity of the dishes prepared.

Furthermore, the participants asserted that *'Yes, we are lucky that our country, Malaysia is blessed with fertile soil and are abundant with food sources. You can get variety of fresh local ingredients; vegetables, fruits, meats, fish for example at the market without any problems to prepare our local dishes. I do agree that some of our local dishes need to use specific ingredients especially seasonal ingredients, so we try to follow the exact recipes when preparing the food. This is important to ensure that the authenticity of the dishes can be maintained especially when it comes to the taste of the food itself.'* (HTL3) and *'we are blessed that we can buy variety of ingredients at local groceries or market at affordable prices, and we are able to prepare our local food without having to compromise the taste of it'* (HTL1). This have shown that local fresh ingredients are very important for the preparation of local dishes as it would enhance or maintained the authenticity of the food prepared.

Local Food Culture Preservation

Another significance determinants were the local food culture preservation. Participants of the three categories explicitly expressed their opinions on this factor. For example, participants asserted that *'By promoting the unique food culture of a destination, gastronomic tourism can attract a more niche and discerning market, which may have a lower impact on the environment and local communities'*(HTL1) and *'In my view, by showcasing our local food culture through the cooking utensils that we used, or through our traditional cooking techniques, this will encouraged the tourists experiences while traveling to our country'* (HIE1). This demonstrated that the local food culture can be an important platform to sustain Malaysian gastronomic tourism.

In addition, another participant highlighted that through local food culture preservation, it may increase the tourists' interest towards local food products. As suggested by the participant, *'I believe that by showing the tourist our local food culture through the food preparation methods, it may increase their interest towards our local food products. As we know we have different states in Malaysia, and each state have different local dishes. Therefore, by informing them that each state has different kind of dishes based on their*

different food culture, this will spark interest for the tourist to visit Malaysia continuously' (HTL2). The same notion was suggested by participant LT3 who stated 'For me, local food culture not only can be used as a tool to promote tourist to visit Malaysia, but it also plays an important role in sustaining our tourism product particularly gastronomy. As we know, gastronomy does not only concern with the local food itself, but it also includes activities related to it while traveling, such as visiting local producers, markets, and others. All these activities give meaningful experiences to the tourists; therefore, it would enhance the tourists interest towards our Malaysian food.'

From another viewpoint, participants outlined that *'the promotion and preservation of local food culture and contents would increase the visitor's knowledge and experiences while travelling' (HIE2) and 'the exposure to local food culture and traditions can encouraged tourists to appreciate the unique differences between ethnicities and promotes cultural diversity among the tourists' (LT2). This demonstrated that local food culture can be used as a resource tool that would add knowledge to the tourists who visit a tourism destination.*

Promoting and Implementing Sustainable Practices

Beside the use of local and seasonal ingredients, and local food culture preservation, promoting sustainable practices were also listed as the determinants that would encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability in Malaysia. According to half of the participants, promoting sustainable practices would help in reducing the negative impact on the environment from the point of food production. For instance, participant mentioned *'by implementing sustainable practices, this may lead to a better food and waste production strategy which can reduce the carbon footprint of food production and transportation' (LT1). This notion was supported by another participant which suggested that 'the hotel industry has contributed to vast amounts of food waste. Therefore, by implementing sustainable practices especially within the food production area, this can improve the local environment and biodiversity. By using the correct way of recycling the food waste, it can be used as fertilizers which is beneficial for local farmers or agricultural sector' (HIE2). This highlights the pivotal role that sustainable practices would have towards gastronomic tourism in Malaysia.*

On the other hand, one of the participants asserted that local authorities play an important role in encouraging the hotel industry to employ sustainable practices. As suggested by HTL2, *'the government and local authorities can promote sustainable practices in the hospitality industry by providing incentives for hotels and restaurants to adopt environmentally friendly practices, such as reducing energy and water consumption, reducing waste, and using local and seasonal ingredients.'* Similar idea was brought up by participant LT3 who stated that *'I think it is wise if some kind of rewards or benefits was given to the hoteliers by the local authorities if they implement green practices at their premises. I have seen a few resorts in Malaysia adapting green practices at their hotels, and it certainly helps in protecting the environment.'* Hence, this revealed that the local authorities should encourage and co-operate with hospitality industry players in executing the sustainable practices and comes up with strategies that will give benefits for both parties in the future.

Providing Training and Education

Several participants expressed that educating the locals as well as the tourists on the importance of preserving local food and beverages would also be a great tool in sustaining

gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. According to participant LT2, through education, the locals along with the tourists will be informed on the importance of sustaining local food culture and traditions, and this would create an awareness among them towards the local food. She claimed that *'For me, the most appropriate way to enhance the awareness on the sustainability topic would be through education. As we know, tourists are always fascinated about local culture when they travel to certain destination, therefore, by informing them on our local food culture and showing them our norms when eating, or preparing the food, this would increase their awareness towards our culture'*. In addition, other participants suggested that *'I think that education plays a crucial role when it comes to sustaining our gastronomic heritage. As far as I am concern, there are a few universities here in Malaysia that teach our students on the topic Malaysian cuisine. This would be a great platform to ensure that our local food heritage can be sustained and at the same time increased our student's knowledge when preparing local food dishes'* (HIE3).

From the viewpoints of academicians, the participants acknowledged the importance of training and education in sustaining gastronomic tourism. Participant HTL1 for example claimed that *'it is important for the locals and tourists to be aware of our local food culture and traditions. I do believe that through education such as advertisement or pamphlets, we can convey the information about our gastronomic products, our traditions, or even culture to those who visit Malaysia'*. As for HTL3, he emphasized that the curriculum or syllabus related to Malaysian cuisine should be included in any hospitality and tourism programme. He commended *'as a person who have taught hospitality and tourism for more than 8 years, I would stressed that it is compulsory to include Malaysian cuisine subject in any of the hospitality and tourism programme. By doing this, we will not only able to educate our students on our local food preparation practices, but more importantly we can create awareness and increased their interest and appreciation towards our local food. Initially, this will also enhance their knowledge on the history of our local food which will lead to responsible tourism'*. This points out the fact that education and training have significant role on gastronomic tourism sustainability.

Collaboration between Stakeholders

Participants indicated that the collaboration within different stakeholders would also encourage the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. Through the collaboration, this will help in creating a more integrated and strategic approach. For instance, participants asserted that *'promoting sustainability within the area of gastronomic tourism requires a concentrated effort from all stakeholders, including the government, local authorities, hospitality industry, and tourists. Effective strategies should be developed by the local authorities and the key players in the hospitality industry to ensure that it will benefits all parties'* (HIE1). Additionally, the participants also claimed that *'different stakeholders have different strategies when it comes to practicing sustainability. However, if the local authorities can create a plan that will benefits all parties, therefore the collaboration between the stakeholders will certainly become a reality and the objective of sustaining the tourism industry, gastronomy for example can be achieved'* (HIE3).

As for LT3, she posited that *'I think when it comes to collaboration between stakeholders, it would take a lot of efforts before it can be implemented especially in our country since different states have different rules and regulations. To ensure that the plan can*

be executed, the Malaysian government through appointed ministries and hospitality industry players should sit together and discuss on the policies, rules, and regulations so that it will not have any effect towards the implementation of the strategies.'. This implies that collaboration between different stakeholders should not be taken by granted as it gives an added advantage in sustaining gastronomic tourism.

Community Involvement

On the other hand, very few participants stressed on the community involvement as a determinant that encourage gastronomic tourism sustainability. For instance, participants LT2 claimed that *'I believe that the local community might only get involve in sustaining gastronomic tourism when the tourists visit their village or at any homestay. It is hard to see the community involvement in any sustainability occasion these days maybe due to COVID-19 pandemic'* (LT2). Additionally, participants expressed that *'we can see community involvement at certain tourists' spot such as in Jonker Street, Melaka, Kuala Selangor or in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. Most of the community involvement happens when the tourists stay at certain villages that offers homestay packages, but I rarely saw it these days. Yes, COVID-19 has certainly given such a big impact on our tourism industry'* (LT3). Consequently, increasing the community involvement not only will encourage the preservation of local food heritage through the food preparation methods practices at the villages or tourists' destination, but the exchanges of information and interactions between the local community and tourists may also enhances their knowledge and understanding on the significance of sustaining local gastronomic products.

Economic Sustainability

Finally, very few participants mentioned on the economic sustainability during the interviews. One of the participants posited that *'yes, I believed that through gastronomic tourism it can somehow increase the income of small business or local food producers. In comparison to international tourist, I personally think that local tourists would be the one who usually bought the local food, or snacks as they are more familiar with the food.'* (HTL3). Participants HIE3 on the other hands claimed that *'off course gastronomic tourism gives a lot of benefits to the local producers, or to those small stalls at the villages, tourist spots. In terms of economy yes it will benefit them, but nowadays local snacks are becoming expensive due to the economic inflation. I think something need to be done to helps the local food producers, so that the local food can be sustained in a long run'* (HIE3). This shown that local authorities should concern on the economic sustainability of local producers to ensure that the constant supply for local food or snacks can be supported and at the same time contribute to its long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

This study which investigates the determinants encouraging gastronomic tourism sustainability through qualitative in-depth interviews has managed to recognize the important elements that would contribute to the sustainability of local food and beverages in Malaysian gastronomic tourism industry. Despite the limited scale of this study which relies heavily on individual in-depth interviews, it is hoped that the findings of this study would encourage further research within the topic of local food and beverages sustainability perhaps within different states, culture, or religion. Each of the determinants which has been highlighted in this study has their own significant meanings for the participants, and their

views and opinions on the topic should be acknowledged. In addition to all the determinants mentioned, the pivotal key to strengthen the sustainability of gastronomic tourism lies on the continuous efforts and strategies taken by all the stakeholders in Malaysia. As suggested by Sanip and Mustapha (2020), by engaging and recognizing the importance of culinary heritage in tourism, it will not only benefit the local authorities and hospitality and tourism industry, yet at the same time creates awareness towards the local community and its economy, social as well as cultural aspects of sustainable tourism for the future generation.

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