Culture promotion through food tourism: A case of Qatar's local cuisine

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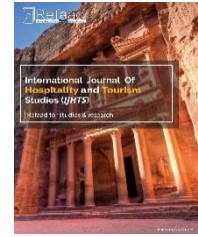
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Abstract: *Globally food has been considered a unifying factor that cuts across boundaries even of languages. Destinations have been at the forefront of the tourism industry mainly due to their culinary offerings. Trends such as street food markets and local food tours have become popular with many tourism destinations. Qatar is considered a conservative nation with a great potential for its culinary culture to feature prominently through its tourism offerings. The aim of this research is to understand how a destination's food culture may sway visitors to visit or re-visit that destination. Further, what role Qatar's cultural cuisine can influence the promotion of the country's heritage globally. A focus and development of the nation's culinary policies and packages in the promotion of its cultural heritage was the end intent of this study. Focus groups discussions were employed in attaining results. The results were formulated and interpreted around context; internal consistency; frequency; intensity of comments; specificity of responses; extensiveness and the big picture. The discussions reveal that Qatar offers a vibrant Middle Eastern culinary experience for tourists; however, its conservativeness can be a bit of a letdown for some travelers especially the drinking aspect of the food tourism offerings which is restricted and confined to certain spaces. The research concludes by recommending to authorities to introspect some of their stances with regards to rigidity in this sector of the tourism.*

Keywords: *Culinary Tourism; Gastro Tourism; Food culture; Qatar; Tourist experience.*

1. Introduction

On a global scale food has been noted and regarded as one of the most universal languages which has the capabilities and immense functionality of bringing people together, nations together and possibly the world together - in a feel-good way (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014). Furthermore, since time-immemorial, food has been at the epicenter of world trade as a host of countries engage in imports and exports of different culinary ingredients often to entice or at the very least, ensure supply of somewhat 'homely' foods for expats that are dotted all around the world in the various and different destinations that are homes away from home (Ranta, 2015). This is the DNA of a culinary culture.

According to a UNESCO study (2001), culture embodies and encompasses a huge part of people's traditions and heritages, and this is inclusive of their way of life. This embodiment is brought to light through the various elements of culture such as rituals, food, traditional dances and euphoric festivals, designs emboldened on buildings, costume dressings, other practices and even religion. A culinary food culture was also the order of the day thousands of years ago when traders and merchants alike, would scale the vast seas in search of food items and goods for trade purposes (Okech, 2014, July). Food items such as spices, wines, all types of oils and fruit varieties were the trading currencies of the times. The more modernized tourists or travellers, however, have now settled for the more accommodative and comfortable walls or outdoor spaces of eateries and wineries instead of the old way of the merchants (Okech, 2014, July). Further studies have intimated that culture is the basis upon which the mosaic of

destinations, foods, artistic pieces of sorts, traditions, and the experiences of persons, is built on (Wadawi et al, 2009; 2008; Nasaa-art, 2004). This is the essence of culinary tourism.

Qatar, like many other destinations, is not devolved from this construct either. Being a part of the Middle East, food is an integral part of the Middle Eastern food culture especially as many Arabic homes pride themselves in authentic, home cooked meals or dishes (Ranta, 2015). Known for its fishing heritage and the energy-giving date fruit, it is no wonder that a whole lot of fish inclined and inspired local cuisine, as well as a host of sweet-anytime treats and desserts are a part of the foundational food line up in many homes and indeed in many local, Qatari owned restaurants (Ranta, 2015; Nirwandy & Awang, 2014). Food in Qatar is thus a huge aspect of national identity, which has eventually brought people to its shores from wide and far.

Of course, not everyone will likely share this sentiment towards what defines a nation's identity being summed up and disguised in this manner and form. A study once contrasted the confusions and nuances that popped up with this construct when it was mentioned that a popular generalization of nationalism being manifested in such a dramatic manner as an expression driven towards a destination's populace, was misplaced (Billig, 1995). Furthermore, it has been commonly accepted in other spheres of academia such as social psychology and gastronomy that imputing a nation's identity as an expression of a narrow construct of purely culinary delights is vaguely cumbersome (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014).

This is just one way of indicating how the logic behind a nation's identity can be couched and it is very much not limited to any one specific nation, but, to any and everyone 'outside' of such nation included. It is a notion suggesting how interestingly similar to other elements of national identity, such as a nation's anthem or flag, food of a nation can be, and this is quite huge for a nation's image broadly and a nation's cultural heritage in particular (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014).

1.1. Importance of the Study & Purpose

Qatar is on a massive drive in the direction of diversification of its economic contributors and one of these is through tourism. The country already enjoys successes through its sports, leisure, and cruise tourism sectors. Additionally, the country enjoys a vibrant culinary and authentic food heritage. It seems, however, that it has largely been unexplored by tourism authorities as a possible conduit of promoting the nation also as a food tourism destination. The study will examine how different individuals' palates have an influence on their decisions to either visit or re-visit a destination based, amongst other factors, its food cuisine offerings. Because Qatar is considered a conservative nation, especially in the space of its food culture, a noticeable gap in the academic discourse necessitated the undertaking of this study in achieving its aims of interlinking the promotion of culture and its food tourism.

1.2. Food as a National Brand

Food has been and continues to be the hallmark of a non-verbal language the world over. It transcends boarders and quashes barriers to interaction in ways that have not been witnessed before and this is not just a modern-day occurrence and neither is it a nation-specific phenomenon (Okech, 2014, July). Research indicates that for many years merchant traders would scour the seas in search of food ingredients that they would then utilise as currency to trade with other nations wherever it is they set their anchors on around the globe (Okech, 2014, July; Nirwandy & Awang, 2014).

This non-verbal methodology of communication has been labelled as exceptionally powerful and resoundingly responsible, in large measure, for our current political and economic global sphere and has further been aptly termed 'Gastro-Diplomacy' (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014, p. 327). Gastro-diplomacy may have been heavily contributory to the current global diplomatic and political discourse and further to 'nation-ness' – an identity of a nation through its culinary culture, an aspect which requires further investigation. Studies have shown that food cuisine is very much foundational when it comes to a nation's brand with food and spices having been currency tools for envoys and emissaries a long time ago (Ashley et al, 2004). Often even wars and invasions were the order of the day just for the fulfilment of some insatiable appetites for certain food ingredients by such warring parties and ultimately the building of trading partnerships through the palate and natural resources was fostered (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014).

Research has defined culinary tourism as a subdivision of agri-tourism with a specific focus on uncovering and the quenching of a yearning for drink and food whilst on the other hand, the same research (Hall & Sharples, 2003) defines food tourism as the fulfilment of a craving for a specific culinary delight or produce of a particular or specific geographical area. Okumus et al (2007) mention that food tourism has thus created various opportunities for economic development coupled with copious opportunities as well for tourists alike. Furthermore, food tourism has indeed been praised as a very important (and very often times informal) conduit for development at a regional level, the fortification of production on a local scale through what may be termed as 'the back-room' links to the tourism supply chain nerve (Renko et al, 2010). This inter-play and inter-weaving within the sector is thus contributory in essence to the building of any nation's brand through its food industry and impliedly so, the promotion of its culture.

On the other hand, however, even though local, regional and international food cultures hold the greatest potential to provide contributions to the competitiveness of a destination on a sustainable basis and to the strengthening of it as a brand, study has noted the short comings in further studies and industry marketing material in giving minimal cognisance of food culture as a promoter of sustainable tourism in a destination and its marketing. Examples of such key destinations given mention are South Africa, Canada, and Australia (Du Rand & Heath, 2006). As such, studies towards such contributions on an academic level (such as the current study), attract more researchers to attempt to fill the void and better prepare tourism authorities in integrating policies and strategies that will see and ensure better and more promotion of their respective food cultures. The next pertinent inquiry would then be how does food tourism embody or fit in a cultural set-up?

1.3. Culture promotion through Middle Eastern cuisine

Research has intimated that it appears the addition of a nationality tag to food stuffs, has a magnifying effect or its perception thereof, on its value and appeal (Ranta, 2015). The reckoning on this assertion is that almost in any destination that a person will visit and happen to walk into a food store, the probability of coming into labelled food items or those that are marketed as originating from a specific nation, is very high. It is thus not so surprising to come across rhetoric that specifies particular foods as identifying with a specific nation such as for example, Turkish coffee, Australian beef, South African pears or indeed Qatari dates (Ranta, 2015). The nation's culture is then inadvertently promoted through such nation's brand and labelled food stuffs, found even in foreign markets thus projecting a vividly constructed imagery of that nation's cuisine. Such is the same even with Middle Eastern cuisine.

The Middle East is considered one of the harshest environments in the world especially weather-wise with temperatures known to hover above the 50 degrees Celsius barometer. As such (with Qatar as a very good example) the region is mainly characterized by little local or domestic food production, very limited arable land or fresh water (Seed, 2015) and these seemingly disastrous ingredients may lead to a misconception that there is not much about Middle East as a destination region to even mention when it comes to culinary tourism. This, however, is what makes Middle Eastern cuisine so unique.

Because of the vastness of the landmass that comprises the Middle East (and the countries that make up this massive territory), it is sufficient to note how versatile Middle Eastern food is (The Spruce Easts, 2019). The ingredients that are most common to the region include, Olive, Lemon juice, Parsley, Cumin and Mint, which basically represent a variation of spices, herbs and grain-based components (Tuwani et al, 2019). Examples of food items of Middle Eastern origin that have even become popular globally (with some counting amongst the most expensive) include, Pita bread (the world's oldest known bread), the Falafel, Eggplant and perhaps one of the world's most expensive spice – Saffron (The Spruce Eats, 2019). These and much more other Middle Eastern delights, have come to define the food culture of the region and have been responsible in large part to the good image that the region is mainly known for and the growth of most tourism sectors in the same breath. In much the same way, Qatar is not divorced from this construct.

1.4. Qatar's food culture and the promotion of its heritage

Qatar, apart from being Middle Eastern, is specifically Arabic and as such there are those unique food tastes associated with the country that then identify as Qatari. Coming from a backdrop of some political and economic upheavals over the last couple of years, with the squabbles it is embroiled in with its neighbouring GCC brothers (Saudi Arabia, UAE) (The Peninsula, 2018), Qatari authorities have gone on to identify some 'soft-power' methodologies that do not involve 'politics' directly, to spruce up its image as a renowned and hospitable destination globally (The Gulf Times, 2019) thus making it attractive to the global audience at the same time promoting its cultural heritage.

An example is in 2019, when the country's Social Development Centre (Nama) in conjunction with the MME, took part in an International Agricultural and Food show in Tunisia with the focus of advertising the country's food heritage and its ability to grow and advance its food production capabilities and showcasing these to the world through two chosen and specific Qatari cuisines chosen for the showpiece (The Gulf Times, 2019).

This study is therefore a realization that a gap exists in the research field that has a focus on Qatar and how the country has or can use its food culture to promote its heritage to the global community. There are possibly so many projects that possibly even the policy makers themselves may not be aware they can leverage on to 'grow' the country's image thus making it more attractable to visitors from far and wide. At this stage it is sufficient to note that the research will consider a dearth of methodologies that will be employed to tackle the realization of the objectives set out for it as well as the instruments that will be utilised to collect data to then achieve this. It is hoped that the result will be the review and acceptance of a thoroughly researched output with existential recommendations for policy makers alike.

1.5. Conceptual Model

At this stage, it is sufficient to mention that the study will conform to a trajectory that utilizes the development of concepts and theories based on both primary data extracted from specified research methods such as focus groups and the infusion of secondary data obtained through the literature review section. A host of concepts and categories have already been summed up in the study thus far on how food tourism can be a catalyst in the fortification of the imagery of Qatar's culture. The review basically dissected the issues on a generalized perspective before rounding it off with a specific look at the current Qatari food culture and how (if at all) it currently promotes the nation's heritage.

The research will then attempt to provide insights and recommendations that will be achievable in yielding better results for tourism policy makers to develop polices and strategies that will see a marked increase or effect on the country's broad outlook to a global audience, achieved through its 'upgraded' food cultural tourism. And lastly, since the review has revealed a gap and knowledge of a limited uptake on research in this field, it is hoped that this research will definitely provide the much-needed direction and reportable data that will assist in filling that existing gap thus further providing for further studies in any new concepts that may pop up during this investigation.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this research is to formulate research questions that aid in the understanding of the structure and DNA of the food tourism in Qatar and just how data collected and collated from this research exercise was beneficial to all stakeholders in both the academic and industry spheres. Preliminary questions encompassed the following.

- With the growth of food tourism as a differentiator for a destination's image and attractiveness, how may Qatari tourism authorities leverage the country's food tourism sector as a promoter of its overall culture?
- To what extent has Qatar's food tourism been key in attracting visitors to the country as a tourist destination?
- May the tourists' food experiences in Qatar become an influential factor in the growth or lack thereof of the tourism industry in the country?

2.1. Design of the Study

Objectives were formulated for this current study and an attempt to provide data and statistics on the value addition of culinary tourism in the promotion of Qatar's heritage, was the essence of the research. A gap was further identified thus fortifying the reasons why the research was important to be undertaken. At this stage, it was vital and cogent to note that the study did take on a qualitative approach in favour of other recognized methods of approach, with a mixed methods methodology being also plausible in giving essence to the objectives of the study and the provision of responses to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Because a 'smaller' audience was purposed for this research, it was plausible to prefer a qualitative approach. An appeal to the senses as a foundational notion of culinary tourism, demanded an understanding of the feelings that emanated when respondents were quizzed regards their emotional views on the subject matter, thus strengthening the argument for a qualitative approach (Kotari, 2004).

A hybrid methods approach was also considered as it did provide a synopsis of both a quantitative investigation infused with a qualitative one in giving essence and fortitude to the research objectives as were formulated. The one aspect though about this approach is its appetite for copious amounts of time needed to be invested in, in the preparation of the data collection, collation, analysis and reporting thereof (Bell et al, 2018). Data collection may be employed through structured instruments such as interviews or questionnaires. The reasoning in this instance was that the methodology to be employed to collect the data, as suggested and preferred, was a focus group study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It was the favoured approach for this research as it was accommodative of the essence and envisioned outcomes of the research and its objectives. The basic flow chart was related as below:
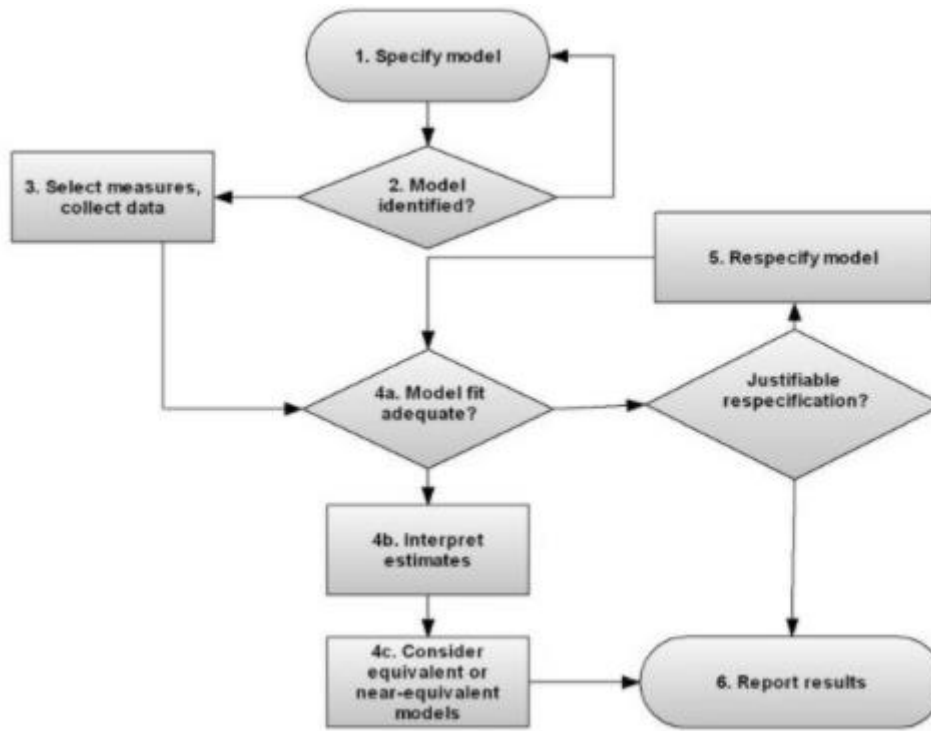
Figure (1): Basic Culinary Tourism Flow Chart (source: Kline, 2016)

2.2. Research Matrix

The research matrix of a study basically gives the researcher an opportunity to elaborate more on the issues that will be under investigation during the process of the data collection (Bell et al, 2018). This, in essence implies that there has to be some form of direction in how the data collection process unfolds. Data cannot just be collected in a void and some substance in the form of concepts would need to be the 'stencil' upon which the responses are gathered (Thornhill et al, 2009).

For this present research, the concepts as were drummed up included the value proposition of food tourism as a promoter of cultures, whether food tourism could indeed or did have a profound influence on tourist figures to a destination and ultimately its tourism growth or demise and whether authorities or other stakeholders could leverage on the popularity of a destination's culinary tourism heritage to promote that destination's overall cultural appeal, mainly based on the tourists' experiences. These concepts were then dissected in the form of sub-concepts that then fed the data collection point leading to responses that could be collated and analysed and eventually giving essence to the research objectives. The objectives include:

*   The decision by a culinary tourist to visit a food destination is based on that destination's food image,
*   The type of information sources about a destination's culture has a profound effect on a tourist's decision to visit that food destination,
*   The promotion of a destination's cultural heritage is heavily influenced by the tourist's demographic characteristics to that food destination, and,
*   The tourist's culinary experiences will have a great effect on the promotion of that destination's cultural heritage.
    Specific questions formulated for the realisation and achievement of these objectives were the following:
*   Would you travel to certain holiday destinations because of the food cuisine it has to offer (for example Italy, China)?
*   Would food cuisine influence your decision the most when choosing a holiday destination and how?
*   Is a destination's food cuisine an important cultural aspect for you at a chosen destination?
*   Do you actively seek out information about where your food comes from?
*   Are reviews from various information sources about a destination's food culture important to you?
*   Do you often seek information regards a specific destination before travelling there or do you ask locally once you arrive there?
*   While you are on holiday do you prefer to try local/national food, or do you look for similar food to what you would eat at home?
*   While on holiday do you prefer to prepare your own food or eat out?

- How important for you is the availability of regional / national cuisine whilst visiting a destination?
- Would a bad food experience have any influence on you deciding not to return to a destination?
- Would a great food experience have any influence in your return to a destination?
- While on vacation, is culinary exploration of new cuisine an important factor influencing your culinary experiences?

2.3. Sample Size and Description

The sample consists of 3 focus groups of different demographic participants. For a diversity of responses which would encompass the trajectory of the study inquiry, effort was put into identifying participants who would cover a wide spectrum of imagined responses of the study. The groups consist of friends who are on visit to Qatar and have travelled to various destinations (Group A), a Qatari group of similar interest colleagues who have a love for travelling and blogging about their touristic experiences locally and internationally (Group B) and representatives from the QNTC (Group C) which is the organization that basically patron's tourism issues in Qatar including policy formulation and implementation. On the day of the 'discussions', all the participants, save for one in Group B, who did not turn up due to an emergency, showed up at the venue. This was a culmination of the hard work for the researcher and a small personal team composed of colleagues who helped with the logistics. Each group had a specific time allocated of when they would be expected to arrive. The discussions lasted for about 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours with each group.

2.4. Abbreviations & Meanings

Abbreviations were also created for the ease of analysis and will be referred to throughout the analysis. Abbreviations are as follows:
- GAP1 to 6 refers to Group A Participants 1 to 6.
- GBP1 to 6 refers to Group B Participants 1 to 6.
- GCP1 to 6 refers to Group C Participants 1 to 6.
- Gen X refers to Generation X, and are the participants born between 1965-1980.
- Gen Y, or Millennials, refers to participants born between 1981-1994.
- Gen Z, refers to Generation Z, and are the participants born between 1996-2015.

3. Research Findings & Discussions

3.1. Research Overview

This research work was undertaken as a deep investigation into the role food or culinary tourism takes in the promotion of cultures. The research basically explored various sources of interpretation of culinary tourism in different markets, with a resultant focus on the Qatari cuisine industry and how it promotes the greater heritage of the Qatari culture. Explored greatly was the concept of cultural identity especially how culinary tourism is foundational in how a destination is effortlessly identifiable based on its food culture and how this often also translates to the notion or concept of national identity for a people of such a destination in a country capacity. In addition, to understand the importance of culinary tourism, a foundational exploration of its uniting characteristics in history, between nations, was also conducted. Furthermore, the researcher delved into a regional expose of how culture is promoted through Middle Eastern cuisines with a preliminary round off on how Qatar's heritage and culture are magnified through its own local cuisine culture. To achieve the latter, primary data was collected via focus group interviews. The population for this research was composed of 21 individuals. Furthermore, the groups were 3 in total with the first group (Group A) consisting of a contingent of 6 friends who were on holiday in Qatar, which was one of their stops on a round-robin trip of the Middle East countries. Group B was composed of a contingent of local residents who loved touring not only locally, but internationally as well, enjoying all things culinary in their travels. Group C was an interesting group as it was composed of senior staff members that work in a governmental institution that regulates Tourism in Qatar. Participants were guided by a pre-populated questionnaire that would kick start the discussions with possible 'controlled' trajectory questions and themes popping up during the discussions. The data was vast, however with cross referencing of recurring themes and trends, the researcher was able to narrow down the most pertinent data from the raw data through the proven 'Framework Analysis' model (Krueger, 1994).

The interpretation of the data from this discussion exercise was specified into headings as were recommended by Rabiee (2004), developed by Krueger & Casey (2000) and formulated by Krueger (1994). These were words; context; internal consistency; frequency; intensity of comments; specificity of responses; extensiveness and the big picture.

	Krueger (1994)		Krueger & Casey (2000)		F Rabiee recommendation
1.	Words			1.	Words
2.	Context			2.	Context
3.	Internal consistency			3.	Internal consistency
4.	Frequency and extensiveness	1.	Frequency	4.	Frequency
5.	Intensity of comments	2.	Motion	5.	Intensity of comments
6.	Specificity of responses	3.	Specificity of responses	6.	Specificity of responses
		4.	Extensiveness	7.	Extensiveness
7.	Big ideas	5.	Big picture	8.	Big picture

Figure (2): Interpretation Headings for Focus Groups (source: Rabiee, 2004)

With these headings in mind, the data for the focus group on this research could be reported as follows:

3.1.1. Words & Context

When the participants in all the 3 groups spoke about the term 'culinary tourism', it became evident that their actual experiences, be it through travel on international or local excursions, showed a slight disjointed understanding of the context within which it was purposed in the research objectives and before the discussions commenced. It seemed that there existed a rather loose belief that culinary tourism involved a specific type of tourism that had 'food' as a theme and nothing more than that aspect. It then was apparent that with the participants, they had not viewed any of the holidays they had taken as conforming to culinary tourism per se. A redefinition of this key term was necessary for them to come to terms with it.

As far as culture was concerned, all the participants were well aware of the concept and what it entailed. Participant 5 in Group B, aptly and heartily termed culture as 'national oneness' in signifying the pride of a nation to belong to a particular identity. This sentiment was shared by all the participants despite the differing backgrounds from which they came from.

In considering the contextual meaning of the words, the participants were not, in instances, asked to talk about their actual experiences of culinary delights in the numerous trips and journeys they had undertaken, but this was illuminated by the conversation on what their perceptions about the food culture of a place are, it jolted them to then engage regards their experiences with particular destinations. The following precepts from the discussions are worth mentioning:

- GAP2: 'I didn't think such could be related to the food and place together, which is what I experienced when I got to Timbaktu.'
- GBP1: 'But certainly before I travelled to Hong Kong, I thought certain places could not be linked to the type of food cuisine they are known for,
- GCP6: 'And they kept saying have you tasted one like this anywhere else and I said no, and they said you must have some its indigenous to this region only.'
- GAP5: 'Well having only heard about the ramen they serve there; I have found it more exciting to look forward to having a taste different from where we come from.'
- GBP3: 'I don't believe I've tasted goat meat before, I still find it very difficult to taste raw meat, but the smell of it cooked shows it is a delicacy identifiable in this region.'
- GCP6: 'Well, what is difficult about various food options on offer is the time and basically 'space' to eat everything on display.'

The phrasing and words of the moderator's questions and subsequent commentary made by others in the groups had a major influence on the context within which the comments were made.

3.1.2. Frequency & Extensiveness

Frequency is connected to considerations of how comments or views aired during the discussions are made, at the same time keeping an eye out for those insightful ones. Similarly, extensiveness relates to the number of participants who give expression to a specific view or notion. In our exemplified precepts above, the sampled participants engage in some form of experiences of a culinary nature they had the opportunity of partaking in save for GAP5 who had only heard about the culinary delights of the origins of the Asian dish, Ramen, which he would have never thought would invoke so much culinary interest for him and was looking forward to experiencing what he had heard about. This process was a sort of coming to terms with their journeys they had undertaken, but not envisioned as encompassing culinary aspects. It was a moment of storytelling for the participants. Along with the

specific journeys they mention above, the participants reminisced other specific travels where the food cultures of those destinations had a profound effect on their return decisions to the same destinations:

- GBP5: 'Being from Qatar, I never thought any other place would have such a beautiful selection of food, it was one of the factors that made me visit 4 times already!'
- GAP1: 'I will forever cherish my visit to Watumu in Kenya. Never did I expect my food to be caught fresh from the sea and prepared for me right by the beach! I understand it is a long-standing tradition that fishermen who would come from a hard day's fishing trips, would 'appease' their appetites first before sending their wares to the markets for sale.'
- GCP4: 'Whenever opportunity has presented itself, Thailand has become my second home. The street vendors, especially the night vibrancy, is what always satiates my love for their culinary offerings. There lies a uniqueness about it!'

3.1.3. Intensity of the Comments

Intensity deals with a consideration of the deep connectedness of the feelings behind comments expressed during the group discussions. It basically is an enquiry on 'how individuals feel at present'. Group A participants used more 'upbeat' terms to describe the number of times they had travelled internationally and about whether they felt food culture was a defining factor in how a destination was perceived amongst visitors globally? Group B participants also were upbeat in their descriptive feelings on the same inquiry. However, Group C participants were more 'sombre' in their descriptions, citing work commitments as not according to them that much of an opportunity of travel for them to make realisations of whether a destination's food culture could be influential to that destination's perceived image:

- GCP1: 'The past couple of years have been subdued for me when it comes to travelling as I am always swamped with work, the only leave I get I visit family back home! The last holiday I had; I am doubtful I can say food was a specific factor of consideration for me more than the relative experiences of relaxation I needed?'
- GAP1: I get very excited whenever I must taste indigenous food on holiday. Although it is not exactly my primary consideration when selecting the place for travel, food definitely ranks high for me in recommending or coming back to such a place!'
- GBP4: 'Most of the Asian countries I have visited, the food has been amazing to warrant a re-visit and yes for me, as a blogger, the culinary offerings of a destination are vital for the marketability of such a destination. I guess I am a foodie at heart!'.

3.1.4. Internal Consistency

This aspect of the analysis has to do with the changing demographics of the discussions by the participants especially on issues that arise and for which viewpoints then take a different trajectory to the line of thought which was under discussion pursuant the change. In the present case, participants from Group A were in consensus regards the fact that they did not actively seek food outlets of a destination before arriving at the place, but did so when they did arrive there, intimating that even though food was a factor of consideration for their travels, it did not feature as a top priority for them to change their choice of destination before travelling. The following extracts indicate the change in the participants' viewpoints and extent of agreeability:

- GAP4: 'I have often found that it is less the food of the places I tend to visit that put me off from visiting again, much more it being the people of the place that sometimes are not hospitable that in the whole irritate me to not returning to that place ever again!'
- GAP2: 'You are correct, I actually find some people repulsive in how they see you as a tourist and their engagement turns to harassment as they think you are loaded with money to buy from them!'
- GAP1: 'It's a clear lack of national and cultural awareness for such people if you ask me!'
- GAP5: 'Aren't we being a bit harsh and conclusive. I mean there are those of us, like myself, who do not mind how a few "bad apples" behave at a particular place. It is after all conceivable that such kinds of people are found at every destination that you will visit, it would have just been a coincidence that you meet such at that particular moment!'
- GAP2: 'I think that's a good point. My husband always warns that it is better to find out a lot more about the place you will be holidaying in, especially the areas to be weary of so that if you can, avoid these as far as possible to enjoy your holiday without issues!'

3.1.5. Specificity of Responses

Under this scrutiny, a great deal of focus is placed on the participants' personal references in opposition to imagined scenarios. This was aptly represented in most of the precepts already divulged and presented above for example:

- GAP5 mentioned that he had never tasted Ramen from where it originates and looked forward to it. This was a specific and related answer.

3.1.6. Big Ideas

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the focus group exercise is the generation of 'big ideas' in the form of trends and whole concepts as they become apparent from the recurring evidential material emanating across the different discussions. Research suggested a break period for a researcher at this stage of food says to 'drown' out any disturbing thoughts with a goal to refocusing on the bigger picture of the objectives of the research (Krueger, 1994). For this present research the following trends emerged from the whole exercise especially with a focus on Qatar's food culture:

Trend 1: Tourist Food Tours facilitated by Locals

One of the most reverting trends to emerge from the focus group discussions was the realisation that locals play a very pivotal role in the manifestation of a particular destination's culinary tourism image. It seems travellers revel more and learn more about their destination if local food tours are organized for them in the different parts of the destination. Of course, what all 3 groups found a bit of a damper was the fact that public alcoholic beverage consumption in Qatar was not allowed by law and for some of the participants (especially those not of Qatari or Muslim religion) it may have been one of the elements that was a negative with their current trip in the country especially. It emerged that participants from Group A had already experienced some form of the food tours with excursions in the desert as part of the safari on offer by some local tour companies which included a selection of local cuisines and Middle Eastern delights, especially sweets. 85% of the participants indicated they had even visited Qatar's Baladna Dairy farm and sampled some of the local produced dairy products.

Trend 2: Qatar can benefit from Street Food Markets

Another emerging trend was that Qatari tourism could do with a boost from street food markets which it was agreed by the participants that these were few to non-existent. Participants from Groups A & B indicated that street food markets were a great way of experiencing a destination's cultural offerings through local cuisines. This was further bolstered by the fact that food cuisines from the street markets in other destinations was experiencing quite a transformation towards sophistication of the food offered. An Executive participant from Group C even intimated at the popularity of one such place he had visited, the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, Turkey, which had become very popular over the years thus increasing the imagery of Turkey tourism as a must-visit attraction. It was also the ensuing consensus that there was a serious lack for such kinds of markets in Qatar and this created an area of interest that authorities could investigate as a channel for improving the tourism imagery of the country especially with the World Cup in 2022 looming. It emerged also that the social historical discoveries such as pop-culture were very much enhanced with the existence of these markets.

Trend 3: Qatari Air BnBs offering Authentic Home Foods

The one aspect that participants of Groups B and C could agree on, especially because they are based in Qatar, was the fact that Qatari locals were such an inviting people. This intimated that families were prone to inviting visitors into their homes to share home meals even when such visitors where not known to them intimately. Participants from Group A had spent a week with one such family as part of experiencing local living and they could also attest to the authenticity of this sentiment. In essence all groups could agree that locally home cooked meals created an opportunity for the visitor experiencing traditions around culinary indulgences on a first-hand basis. Friendships were built even with reciprocal promises also on the cards. This trend was seen as markedly different from the food tours explored earlier.

Trend 4: Food Cooking Local Experiences

One participant from Group C (GCP4) mentioned how a popular hotel group based in Thailand offered, as part of some of their stay packages, local cooking classes with their leading, award winning Executive Chefs. About 75% of the participants in all the groups indicated and agreed this seemed to be a growing trend amongst tourist destination places. The participation in the cooking preparations and classes was viewed as a class leading and differentiating activity that was sure to enhance that destination's image as an authentic experience provider for travellers. This also enables travellers to have insight into how local cuisines are prepared and how interaction occurs in such settings as well. This trend seems is on the rise globally and it also showcases how culinary influences are manifested in various destinations. Below follows a discussion of the focus group exercise.

3.2. Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions were centred on 4 sub-concepts developed from the specified research questions. The discussions ensuing below were thus the culmination of the collation and analysis process of the exercise in totality. The 4 sub-concepts include Destination's Food Image Influencing Factor, Information Sources Influencing Decision Making Factor, Demographic Characteristics Influencing Food Destination Factor, and Experiences Promoting a Destination's Cultural Heritage Factor.

3.2.1. Sub-Concept 1: Destination's Food Image Influencing Factor

Overall, 65% of the participants indicated and argued that a destination's popularity in terms of its culinary and drink culture was a huge factor of consideration for them in choosing a destination for a holiday. 25% indicated

that they would not mind whether food would be a priority on their travels as it did not influence their decision making to travel to such a place. The remaining 10% indicated they would travel for food thus intimating that a destination's culinary reputation was very central to their decision to travel to it. For the 65%, by tacit implication, such decision making was not only based on the destination's culinary image, but it with other factors was what influenced their thought process. This was in tandem with a global 2018 survey which indicated that 27.6% of global travellers responded by holding that decision making based on a destination's food image was key (Global Data, 2018). For the bulk of the participants, food ranked right there with cultural heritage, architecture, and breath-taking landscapes amongst other factors. This was tabulated as follows:
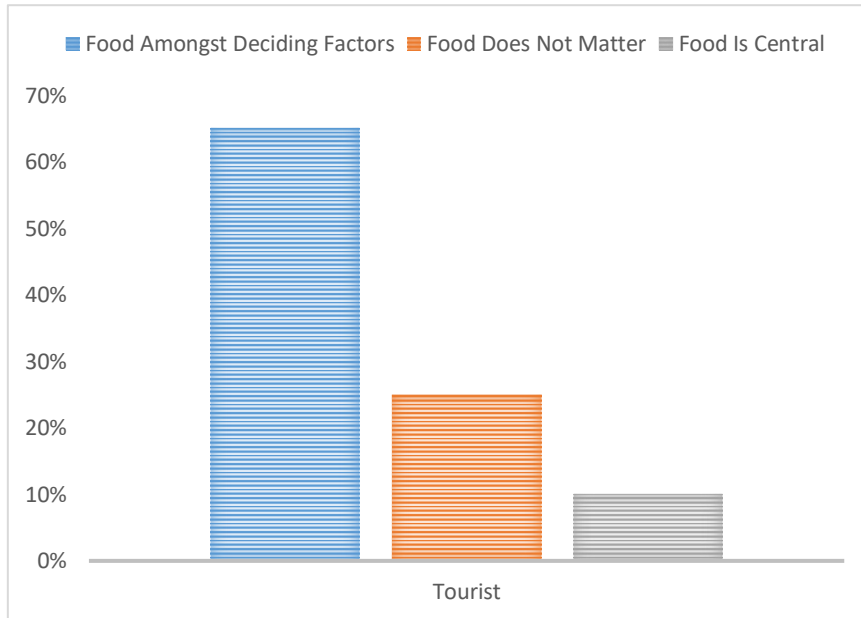

Figure (3): Destination Food Image (source: own emphasis)

3.2.2. Sub-Concept 2: Information Sources Influencing Decision Making Factor

Another emerging major discussion point was the issue of information disseminated by the various sources with regards to a destination's food image. The recurring point of consensus for the participants seemed to be that how a destination is portrayed, especially by those that had been to such a place, was likely to influence whether they would also visit such a place or not. According to the leading view on this point, it became apparent that on the question of social media information about a destination, 78% of the participants were more than likely to consider the various social media sites when making bookings for a holiday to a particular destination. Furthermore, 64% of the participants seemed to lean towards listening to recommendations about a destination from friends and relatives who would have been to such a destination. Lastly, and this seemed to be more of the 'older' generation, 42% indicated that they still believed in the influence of news, articles such as travel guides or publications when it came to information about a destination's reputation when it came to decision making about visiting that place.
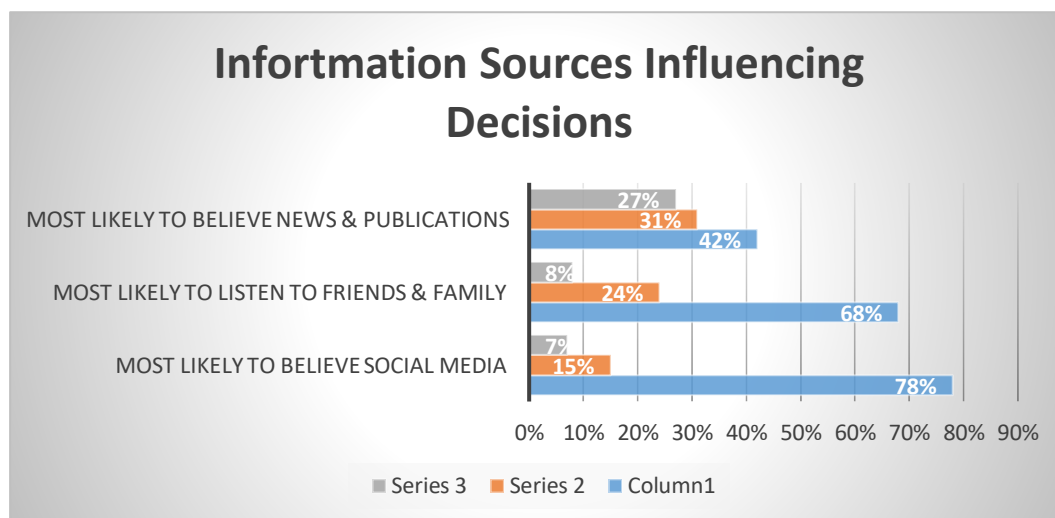

Figure (4): Information Sources that Influence Decision Making (source: own emphasis)

This section seemed also to bring out much about the generation of traveller that the participants seemed to belong to. From the discussions, it seemed highly likely that millennials were a major perpetuating element in the popularity of culinary tourism. The 'older', often conservative, generation was becoming more amenable to trying out different food offerings at the various destinations that they visited. Figure 6 above aptly represented these viewpoints.

3.2.3. Sub-Concept 3: Demographic Characteristics Influencing Food Destination Factor

The issue of characteristics seemed to feature often during the discussions, and it emerged overall that characteristics were more connected to the type of generation that the participants belonged to. By necessary imputation, Group A was composed of Gen X and Millennials. Furthermore, this group was of couple-friends who were holidaying in the Middle East and the greater Asian Pacific region. They also showed a more composed, but vibrant demeanour during the discussions as it felt they had taken the stance of seasoned travellers and thus were more knowledgeable with a host of destinations and what those destinations offered in terms of culinary culture offers. Group B was composed of the much younger generation, Gen Y and Gen Z. Their actions could be termed as vivacious and spirited. They were of Arabic origin and were all friends. Their claim to travelling was not as extensive as that of Group A, but they had had their fair share of travelling to other countries besides the Middle East region. They were the most popular on social media sites, especially because they blogged or 'posted' everything that had to do with their travels. The aspect of food on such blogs is what would perpetuate that destination's reputation it was found.

Group C was a unique group. It had 3 participants who held very senior positions with the QNTC and were from the Baby Boomers and Gen X era. 2 participants were from the Gen Y and 1 was from Gen Z. Their major connecting link was that they were senior Executives with the tourism authority in Qatar. Two of the 3 Baby Boomer and Gen X participants were from Asian origin with the last being from Arabic origin, specifically from Qatar. The other 3 were all from Qatar as well. This group was more subdued during discussions, defining a much calmer and composed stature amongst participants. It emerged that Gen Y participants were the more vocal as regards a destination's food image and as such would be in agreement with studies already carried out along the same line of thought (Bellia et al, 2016). Furthermore, with all the participants, it became apparent that the more they liked a particular destination, the more likely they were to try out or experiment with food products from various cultures (Global Data, 2018). Finally, the Baby Boomer participants indicated that although they preferred to 'stick' to what they already knew, even when travelling to different destinations, they were now more likely to be swayed into trying the different offerings of cuisines on their travels mainly due to family influences.
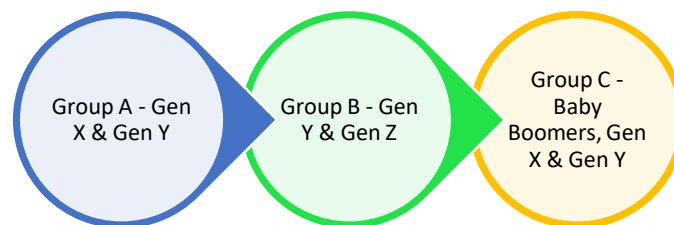

Figure (5): Characteristic Demographic (source: own emphasis)

3.2.4. Sub-Concept 4: Experiences Promoting a Destination's Cultural Heritage Factor

Under this sub-concept the discussion reasoning had a double purpose. The first was about the personal perceptions of the participants in relation to their travels to the destinations they had been to. On the one hand, 88% of the participants had indicated that they were very much likely to be influenced by how other travellers felt about a particular destination and basically what they had written about it especially on review sites. This was because most often than not, people expressed true feelings of their experiences on review sites much more than it would be for purposes of tarnishing a destination's image. Research has indicated this to be a major element in the marketability of such destination's food tourism as well (Du Rand & Heath, 2006). The same participants indicated they had actually left behind commentary that had served to boost a destination's overall ratings for other travellers to experience what they had the pleasure of experiencing from such a place, including the food culture there. The participants felt it was vitally important that travellers get a rounded picture about and connection to a destination not only from professional sites about such a destination or pictures taken selectively to entice would-be travellers. The sentiment was that 'raw' information from what a traveller had partook in or experienced was very personal to showing exactly what a destination had on offer that would in all probability go on to entice other possible travellers to experience similar or same activities and indulgencies. This was in tandem with research that had indicated an

impressionability about the utility of reviews from social media sites and other travelling blogs (Anderson & Rainie, 2012).

The second reasoning was especially important for the Tourism authorities, and it was special that Group C participants were from such an authority and could weigh in on this discussion more vividly. It became apparent that many destinations were becoming conversant with the element of embracing localism when it came to food and drink offerings as a form of creating that authentic experience for travellers. This would intimate towards shared reviews of such experiences and for which studies had indicated began bearing fruit. In a 2017 study it was found that tourist expenditure on food services on international travel peaked at a staggering US$186.8 billion culminating in the food section occupying the 4th spot in the different measured categories (the others were leisure, transportation, and accommodation) (Global Data, 2017).

Even though this did not mean that all travellers did so for the culinary experiences, it did show just how much of a potential contribution to tourism growth food culture can have for any destination. Authorities can develop policies that may allow for various and diversified food offerings that will improve the attract-ability of such a destination.

In conclusion, the findings of the focus group discussions did indicate the need for greater promotion of the food industry in Qatar. A lot of what the discussions centred around seemed not to be of paramount exposure in many circles around Qatar. A great deal of other food culturally related activities may still need to be promoted and marketed widely such as street food markets. Of course, this may be due to various factors which did feature, though not prominently, during the discussions such as rigidity of the religious aspect of the way of life in the country. Perhaps raising awareness towards the food culture undertaking may be a conduit for the protection of local food traditions and its cultures associated with it. Qatar is composed of many ethnic backgrounds with locals numbering less than a million. So, the possibility of adapting to the food tastes of other destinations creates a threat to the food culture of the country instead of promoting its uniqueness which will safeguard it.

4. Conclusions

It was evident from the discussions that culinary tourism was on the rise and fast gaining popularity across generations that were represented by the focus groups. It became an emerging theme that it is possible to a large extent for travelers to journey to other countries, and destinations were the purpose for such journeys is the exploration of the culinary delights of such a place as the core objective to the overall experiences. The essential inputs of such travelling would be for the traveler to learn more about the local cuisines of the destination. Furthermore, it would be for the appreciation, consumption and indeed indulgence of the culinary offerings of such a place including its heritage and cultures. On the other hand, even though all travelers would indulge in some food and drink in their journeys, not all of them had that primary purpose in undertaking such journeys. These same travelers could be loosely termed 'opportunistic culinary tourists. Kim et al.'s (2013) study indicated this demographic as very often important in the perpetuation of such a destination's overall touristic appeal more so when it came to reviews posted and highlighted of it.

A further conclusion that could be drawn from this research exercise was the fact that globalization and the various economic factor influences were beginning to shape the decisions of many travellers to explore and experiment with new culinary offerings. This intimated that due to a lot of global movement (especially from countries in the West to the East), the figures recorded for food enthusiast had been markedly increasing over the years and this was a huge boost for the culinary tourism sector. Qatar, for example, announced that it was wavering entry visas for citizens to 80 countries (Qatar Airways, 2017) and for a conservative country such as this, this was a very bold move that was tourism inspired. These factors coupled with the global boom in travel patterns around the world indicated that travellers were creating opportunities to become familiar with the various options of culinary cultures that the various destinations had to offer. It became evident from the discussions on this that when travelling, people naturally became inclined to exploring exotic food elements which may be due to the fact that it is an experience that will remain with the traveller for life and is not a daily repeated exercise either for it to become mundane. Qatar was viewed as a very cultural destination on a tributary enquiry during the discussions, however, the groups felt more could still be achieved for the country in terms of its culinary offerings and how these were presented and packaged.

Further conclusions drawn showed that food tourism could be utilised as a conduit for understanding a destination's culture and heritage much better. This was so because travellers not only engaged in travels for just the mere sake thereof but did so in search of authentic and very much transformative journey experiences. The opportunities to peek through an understanding of the historical background of a people and their cultures, that was offered by local cuisines was very immense and unique. Research further indicated that programs on TV and online platforms of celebrity chefs engaged in cooking, travel and some form of gastro-inspired competitions had basically also had an addition value towards more people relaxing to the idea of partaking in a culinary indulgence at some point (Global Data, 2018). These same programs it seemed had lasting effect on the influences of how people prepared their meals from all over the globe by infusing somewhat of that particular destination from where the

show would be broadcast. Most notably, however, was the manifestation of this infusion when people were engaged in travel.

A conclusion that could be drawn was that Qatar had a very huge potential to manifest more of its cultural offerings through the perpetuation of its food tourism. This was as based on indications that completion was growing widely between tourist destinations (Global Trends, 2018). Yes, the country was a very conservative one with religious impediments being the core factor in the restrictions against a full-scale culinary culture tradition. The participants in the group discussion intimated that this could be because most citizens of the country were quite wealthy but were not exposed much to overseas travel. This was an imputation mainly from Group C participants. A relaxation of some of these restrictions could go a long way in improving the country' imagery index as a go-to culinary destination in parallel to other of its local cultural offerings.

4.1. Managerial Connotations

Results suggest that implications for practice essentially may immensely profit from being presented in the form of express recommendations in writing form. The purpose being for a particular managerial role; and increasingly moulded and improved when proposed frameworks for them to be useful for managers in the food tourism sector are undertaken. Current and future actions are implicit from this study. Figure 6 (above) dictated that most of the participants can be swayed by social media content in deciding on visiting a destination above other means of communication. This information is especially pertinent for managers in the digital marketing, strategic marketing, business-development, and operations space. The fact that the study uncovered Qatar as reserved and conservative in its culinary tourism offerings, provides a gap that may be taken advantage of by tourism managers mentioned above. New value in business relationships may be forged through communication forums such as trade shows, food tours and street market days on a national scale, to bolster the country's image as a formidable food destination.

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