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SUSTAINABLE FOOD TOURISM: IMPACTS, OPPORTUNITY, AND CHALLENGES IN THE MODERN ERA

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Abstract

Food tourism has recently emerged as a significant trend in the global tourism industry, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak, as people are looking for some pleasurable experience such as authentic culinary experiences. This study aims to explore how food tourism can promote sustainability by examining its economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts. The researcher uses qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local producers, restaurant owners, tourism operators, and sustainability experts. The findings reveal that sustainable food tourism plays a significant role in local economies by promoting farm-to-table practices and local ingredients sourcing, and enhancing economic resilience. However, there are some challenges emerged in the food tourism scene, such as the high costs of sustainable practice and the risk of over-commercialization were found. In socio-culturally aspect, food tourism helps preserve local culinary traditions, but concerns about the loss of authenticity due to the influence of global tourist preferences were raised. On the environmental aspect, sustainable practices in food tourism such as reducing food waste and promoting organic farming are mitigating negative impacts, though over-tourism and resource depletion remain significant challenges.

Keywords: Food Tourism, Sustainability, Gastronomic Tourism

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Introduction

Lately, food tourism has occurred in a promising scene in the tourism industry in a global tourism industry scale especially after the COVID-19 outbreak (Fountain, 2022), where people eagerly look for the travel experience outside of their accommodation. Therefore, gastronomic tourism is seen as an attractive tourism choice that can provide pleasurable experience to the traveler. It does not only offer travelers chance to travel outside of the traveler familiar zone, but the food tourism also provides unique opportunities to the travelers to have chance to experience the cultural and gastronomic heritage of different regions (Liberato et al., 2020). Therefore, the interest in culinary experiences has grown and therefore has led to an increased demand for authentic and locally-produced food, fostering economic benefits for local communities (Ellis et al., 2018). Meanwhile, food tourism provides unique tourism experience to the travelers together with the chance to revive the travel scene in the global scale; however, the expansion of food tourism also brings forth challenges related to environmental sustainability and the preservation of cultural integrity.

Sustainable food tourism addresses these challenges by promoting practices that not only enhance the visitor experience but also ensure that the local environment, culture, and economy are preserved and enriched for future generations (Leer, 2020). This approach aligns with the broader goals of sustainable development, which seek to balance the needs of present and future generations through responsible management of resources.

This research aims to explore the dynamics of sustainability in food tourism business. The researcher wishes to explore the current situation of the food tourism industry and how does it take to preserve the natural resources which leads to the environmental sustainability, support the local economic community and to retain the cultural food heritage locally.

The researcher wishes to study the interplay among the three pillars of food tourism sustainability, which are environmental, cultural and economic. What could be the best practice that can be developed to be the strategy that could be widely use in the food tourism industry? The researchers wish that this could be a guideline that the food tourism stakeholders can initiate the plan and use it for the economy viable benefits and the local will have an environmental responsible plan that is easy-to-apply in the community.

Literature Reviews

Definition of Food Tourism

Food tourism is referred to as a culinary tourism or a gastronomic tourism, it is also defined as the pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences as a primary motivation for travel (Okumus, 2021). Food tourism or gastronomic tourism includes range of variety activities including visiting local food markets, participating in cooking classes, dining at local restaurants, and engaging in food-related festivals or events. According to Hall & Sharples (2003), food tourism involves not only the consumption of food but also a chance to explore the cultural, historical, and geographical context in the local community where the travelers visit. This action allows travelers to experience local culinary traditions, local food ingredients, regional agricultural practices, and the broader cultural landscape, thus allowing travelers to have a deeper understanding of a destination's identity. In this sense, food tourism is comprised with a multidimensional concept that intersects with cultural heritage, environmental sustainability, and economic stimulation. These components make food tourism becomes a significant player in both the tourism industry and local economies.

The Concept of Sustainability in Food Tourism

As the concept of sustainability in tourism is a multidimensional that seeks to balance the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism activities to ensure long-term viability and benefits for destinations, travelers, and communities (Weaver, 2006). The concept approach is framed around three important key pillars, that are environmental sustainability,

socio-cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability, each of which plays a critical role in maintaining the integrity of destinations while fostering meaningful and responsible tourism experiences (Harris et al., 2002).

Environmental Sustainability refers to the responsible action of natural resources usage together with the minimization of tourism's ecological footprint. In the context of food tourism, environmental sustainability includes several significant practices, such as, an action of reduce food waste, promote and usage organic and local food sourcing, and lower carbon emissions through the use of sustainable transportation and energy-efficient food production methods (Sutton, 2004). For example, farm-to-table initiatives, seasonal menus, and the promotion of locally sourced ingredients help reduce the environmental impact of food tourism by supporting local ecosystems and minimizing the energy required for long-distance transportation (Dong & Hauschild, 2017; Worrachananun, 2023). One can also see the vital example from a significant global event, such as Olympic 2024 when France attempts to practice the sustainable food practice by using only local ingredients sourcing. Chef in athlete village will only use the ingredients that is not far more than 100 km from the village to cook, in order to reduce the carbon footprint in food practice and to support local farmer and economic.

Moreover, sustainable food tourism often encourages agricultural practices that preserve biodiversity, reduce water usage, and minimize the use of harmful chemicals. Or one can say that sustainable food tourism usually supports healthy way farming.

Socio-Cultural Sustainability focuses on preserving and retaining the cultural identity and heritage of local communities, ensuring that tourism does not undermine or exploit cultural practices (Liu & Li, 2021). In food tourism, this pillar highlights the significance of protecting culinary traditions, the traditional way of cooking and local ingredients using, ensuring that local food cultures are cherished rather than commodified (.ibid). By engaging travelers in authentic food experiences, such as participating in traditional cooking classes or visiting local food markets, food tourism can serve as a vehicle for cultural exchange and heritage preservation (Ong et al., 2011). It also involves the empowerment of local communities, where tourism activities are developed in collaboration with local stakeholders, ensuring that their cultural practices are respected and preserved for future generations.

Economic Sustainability seeks to ensure that tourism generates long-term financial benefits for local economies without depleting the resources on which these economies depend (Zhong & Wu, 2015). As one needs to accept that if the amount of adequate income from the tourism, it may not be safe to call that the economy in the local will be sustain in the long-term, as there is no financial currency in the system the economic atmosphere will not be friendly both to the tourists and to the local. In food tourism, economic sustainability is reflected in the support for local farmers, food producers, and small-scale businesses, creating a positive economic impact that extends beyond the immediate tourist experience (de Jong & Varley, 2018). By prioritizing local food supply chains, food tourism can help reduce economic leakage, ensuring that a greater proportion of tourism revenue remains within the host community (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Furthermore, sustainable food tourism contributes to the diversification of local economies by offering new business opportunities, such as food tours, culinary workshops, and food festivals, which can attract a wide range of visitors and provide a stable source of income (Worrachananun, 2022).

The Interchange of Sustainability and Food Tourism

As many studies have an attempt to discover the potential of food tourism to promote sustainable practices, particularly in the areas of local sourcing, food waste reduction, and the preservation of culinary traditions. These practices also align with the broader goals of sustainability by supporting local economies, minimizing environmental impacts, and safeguarding cultural heritage (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013).

One of the key sustainable practices in food tourism is to use local ingredients to cook and use in the food tourism practice. Local sourcing not only reduces the carbon footprint associated with the transportation of food products from one place to another; but it also supports local farmers and producers, as a result, the local farmer and local food producers will be able to survive sustainably in the food systems (Robinson, 2021). Research by Bessière (1998) reveals how food tourism encourages the consumption of locally grown, seasonal ingredients, promoting sustainable agricultural practices. The study from Bessière (1998) also shows a connection between tourists and the local food landscape, providing travelers with an authentic food tourism experience that reflects the unique identity of the region. In other words, using local sourced ingredients in food tourism helps increase the attraction and impression in gastronomic experience among travelers. Studies have shown that tourists increasingly value sustainability in their dining choices, preferring restaurants and food tours that emphasize farm-to-table practices, as the sustainable practices in food tourism also helps them to reach authentic gastronomic experience and let them feel as they are playing parts that helps the sustainability practice viable in the destination community (Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011).

In addition to local sourcing, food tourism has been recognized for its role in reducing food waste. Several studies have shown how food-related tourism helps initiate, such as cooking classes and farm visits, can raise awareness about consumption responsibility among the travelers (Robinson, 2021). By educating travelers on the significance of using all parts of a product and incorporating food waste into culinary traditions, these experiences promote mindful eating habits. For instance, research by Sargent (2014) demonstrates how food tourism can play a significant role in promoting waste-conscious behaviors by introducing tourists to practice variety of zero-waste cooking techniques and encouraging sustainable dining practices. Additionally, local restaurants involved in food tourism often adopt practices such as composting, portion control, and menu design that minimize waste, contributing to a more sustainable food system.

Preserving local culinary traditions is another vital aspect of sustainability in food tourism. Studies reveals that food tourism can act as a catalyst for protecting and revitalizing traditional food practices that might otherwise be lost due to globalization and homogenization (Everett, 2019). By placing a spotlight on regional cuisines, food tourism helps to maintain the cultural identity of a destination. This is particularly important in rural areas where traditional agricultural methods and food preparation techniques are integral to community life. Long (2010) highlights how food festivals and local food tours not only provide economic benefits but also play a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge to both locals and visitors, ensuring that these practices are preserved for future generations.

Research Methodology

This research uses the in-depth interview as the tool to collect the data from key informants in the food tourism industry. The key informants that the research interviews represent stakeholders that have an impact and get effect from the food tourism business. This research interviews 12 key informants who reside in Thailand and are involved with gastronomic tourism. The key informants are comprised of 2 local food producers, 2 restaurant owners, 2 tourism operators, 2 local government officers, 2 sustainability experts, and 2 food tourists.

The criteria for selecting the key informants in this research are that they have to be involved with the food tourism sector, and they can play any part or any role in the industry ranging from the producer to the policy maker and consumer. The sustainability literature is not required among the key informants, except for the sustainability experts. The interview questions are listed based on the review of literature about the concept of food tourism, sustainability, and the intersection of food tourism and sustainability. The sample of the questions are for example, what is the significance of sustainability in the food industry? How

is the situation of food tourism sustainability now? What could and should be done to sustain the food tourism industry?

Research Results

This study's exploration of sustainability in the food industry, particularly within the context of food tourism, reveals constructive dynamics across the three pillars of sustainability: economic, cultural social, and environmental impacts. These dimensions collectively shape the impacts associated with sustainable food tourism in the modern era. Or one can say after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Economic Impact

The results from the interview show that sustainable food tourism has significant positive effects on local economies. The emphasis on locally sourced ingredients and farm-to-table practices allows farmers and small-scale producers to tap into the growing demand for authentic, regional cuisine. Many interviewees, including local farmers and restaurant owners, noted that food tourism contributes to economic positive atmosphere in the local community by diversifying income streams in many different ways. For example, seasonal fluctuations in agricultural production are balanced by year-round tourism demand, which as a result it helps stabilize local economies. This aligns with findings by Okumus (2021), which indicate that local sourcing in food tourism supports the financial sustainability of rural communities.

However, the study also uncovered economic challenges. Farmers and small producers often face difficulties meeting the higher standards required by tourism markets, such as the need for organic certification or sustainable farming techniques, which involve increased costs and labor. The local farmers are sometimes and somehow lack of knowledge of how-to get certified the organic product from the authority agents. Additionally, tourism businesses reported difficulty in scaling sustainable practices while maintaining profitability. As the demand for sustainable products increases, there is a risk of over-commercialization, which could drive up prices and reduce accessibility for local consumers. Therefore, the balance between the demand of the sustainable product or so-called the locally-organic product need and the ability to reach that products by the local has to be seen and considered by the related authority.

Cultural and Social Impacts

The result reveals the central role that food tourism plays in preserving and promoting local culinary traditions, which are a key part of a region's cultural heritage. Many interviewees from the tourism sector emphasized to the researcher that tourists are increasingly seeking experiences that connect them with the authentic culture of the destination, particularly through food. While they can find any kind of cuisine anywhere right now in the globalized era, but when they travel to the local destination; they expect to have a touch of authentic experience in gastronomic that can help them connect with the local identity. This has led to a revival of traditional cooking methods and the preservation of endangered culinary practices. The findings show relevant results with the result from the previous studies (Everett, 2019) that assert the importance of food tourism in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

However, challenges remain in maintaining the authenticity of cultural practices while catering to tourism. Some local chefs who practice sustainable food practice and tour operators expressed concern over the commodification of local food culture, where traditional dishes are altered to suit international tastes, diluting their authenticity. This issue is further complicated by the pressure to meet the expectations of a global tourist base, which can lead to a homogenization of food offerings.

However, the challenges always come with the opportunities, in this case there are opportunities to enhance cultural sustainability by promoting local food festivals, cooking workshops, and farm visits, which create platforms for both locals and tourists to engage meaningfully with the region's food heritage. These initiatives not only preserve culinary

traditions but also foster cross-cultural understanding, creating a deeper connection between tourists and the host community.

Environmental Impacts

Once again that the result shows that environmental pillar of sustainability in the food industry presents both significant opportunities and substantial challenges. The promotion of local food sourcing in food tourism directly contributes to reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance food transportation. Moreover, many restaurants and food producers are adopting sustainable practices such as organic farming, composting, and minimizing food waste. These practices are in line with global environmental sustainability goals and have been shown to reduce the negative ecological impacts of food tourism (Leer, 2020).

Despite these advances, environmental sustainability remains a major challenge. Interviewees frequently cited the difficulty of maintaining environmentally sustainable practices while meeting the increasing demand for food tourism. For instance, small producers often struggle to implement eco-friendly farming methods due to limited resources and technical knowledge. Using chemical substance nowadays in agriculture is surprisingly cheaper than organic practice, moreover the usage of chemical in agriculture saves more time for the farmers. Therefore, this lures some farmers to use the chemical in agriculture rather than using sustainable practice in farming. Furthermore, while local food sourcing reduces transportation emissions, the influx of tourists can strain local ecosystems, particularly in fragile rural areas. Over-tourism can lead to increased waste, pollution, and depletion of natural resources, highlighting the tension between economic growth and environmental sustainability.

However, the result from the interview also identified opportunities to strengthen environmental sustainability through more widespread adoption of zero-waste practices, promotion of sustainable transportation options, and increased collaboration between local governments and tourism operators to manage tourist numbers in environmentally sensitive areas. There is strong interest from the local chef and farmers that want to practice sustainable practice in the food tourism as they realize and value the concept of sustainability benefits in the long run. These efforts could ensure that the environmental impacts of food tourism are mitigated while maintaining the sector's economic and cultural benefits.

Conclusion and Discussion

The research reveals many opportunities that sustainable food tourism presents, particularly in terms of promoting local economic resilience, preserving cultural heritage, and advancing environmental goals. The increasing demand for authentic, sustainable food experiences represents a significant market opportunity for regions that position themselves as responsible food tourism destinations.

However, these opportunities are also accompanied with substantial challenges. Economically, small-scale producers face barriers to entry due to the high costs of sustainable practices. Culturally, there is a risk of losing authenticity as local food traditions are commercialized for tourism. Environmentally, the pressure of increased tourism can lead to resource depletion and ecological harm.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that achieving sustainability in food tourism requires a careful balancing of economic, cultural, and environmental priorities. Collaboration between local stakeholders, governments, and the tourism industry is essential to ensuring that food tourism can continue to grow in a way that benefits both tourists and host communities while safeguarding the resources and traditions that make food tourism an enriching and sustainable experience.

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