

STREET FOOD VENDORS' EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA: A STUDY OF TOURIST ENGAGEMENT

H.A.I.S. Perera^{1,*} and K.T.N.P. Abeywickrama²

^{1,2}*Department of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.*

*Corresponding author (Email: hm2019025@mgt.rjt.ac.lk)

ABSTRACT

Street food is an integral part of Colombo's tourism landscape, reflecting Sri Lanka's rich culinary heritage. Despite its importance, there is limited research on street food vendors' perspectives on tourist engagement. This qualitative study explores street food vendors' experiences, challenges, opportunities, and tourist engagement in Colombo and Sri Lanka. Theoretical frameworks such as Social Exchange Theory and Service-Dominant Logic analyze vendors' interactions with tourists. Institutional Theory addresses the regulatory and infrastructural challenges faced by vendors, while Innovation Diffusion Theory explores how vendors can innovate their offerings to meet tourists' demands for creativity, quality, and technology. Employing a phenomenological approach, this study used purposive sampling techniques to select participants, and conducted semi-structured interviews with eight street food vendors in the Galle Face and Aluth Kade areas of Colombo. This study analyzed data thematically to explore various aspects of street food tourism, focusing on tourist engagement, vendors' experiences, the challenges faced, and future opportunities. The findings indicate that vendors have a positive perception of tourist engagement, but encounter communication barriers that hinder meaningful interactions and the ability to meet tourists' expectations. Vendors report resourcefulness and adaptability despite economic hardships, demonstrating a proactive approach toward enhancing their offerings and services. Key challenges include limited access to financing and a lack of integration into tourism supply chains, which restricts vendors' growth potential. Despite these challenges, vendors recognize the potential of street food tourism for business growth and are eager to explore innovative strategies to attract more tourists. This study underscores the importance of supportive policies, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable practices to harness the full potential of street food tourism in Colombo. These measures can foster local entrepreneurship and enhance a city's identity as an appealing culinary destination.

Keywords: Culinary heritage, street food vendors, tourist engagement, tourist expectations, vendor perception.