

An Exploration of Social and Cultural Drivers of Consumer Preferences in Heritage Food Retail in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The study explores the cultural and social factors that shape how consumers choose heritage food outlets. Using a qualitative approach, the researchers gathered insights through four interviews with the store owner, one foreign customer, and two new customers, and six focus group discussions involving three chefs, two service staff, two counter staff, two regular customers, ten new customers, and two foreign customers. This broad participant base allowed the researchers to explore how cultural identity, social norms and social connections influence consumer preferences and behaviours. The findings also highlight how shared experiences, cultural familiarity and social ownership contribute to consumer attraction and loyalty to traditional food establishments. Thematic analysis showed that traditional food is closely linked to cultural identity, cherished family memories, authenticity and the perceived health benefits of natural ingredients and time-honoured cooking methods. Social influences, especially from family elders, peer suggestions and social media, played a significant role in guiding food choices, particularly among younger diners. The outlet has strong ties to the local community and builds customer loyalty by offering more than just food. It provides a culturally rich experience. For businesses, the findings show the need to promote traditional values, engage families and communities and improve marketing through cultural storytelling. This study focuses on one outlet and a group of volunteer participants but helps to understand consumer behaviour and the importance of cultural preservation. On a larger scale, this study highlights how traditional food outlets help preserve heritage and strengthen connections between generations and the community.

Keywords: cultural identity, cultural storytelling, family memories, heritage food outlets, qualitative approach