

Viewers' Perceptions of Street Food in Colombo, Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Content Analysis of YouTube Food Vlog Comments

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Abstract

Street food has become an integral component of Colombo's urban culture and a vibrant attraction for both local and international visitors. With the growing influence of digital media, YouTube food vlogs have emerged as powerful tools shaping audience perceptions and travel intentions. This study explores how viewers engage with Colombo-based street food vlogs and how these interactions influence perceptions of authenticity, quality, and cultural significance. It also examines the role of such vlogs in influencing travel intentions and shaping Sri Lanka's image as a food tourism destination. A qualitative content analysis was conducted using NVivo software to systematically code approximately 18,000 comments extracted from the ten most-commented YouTube vlogs featuring Colombo's street food. Thematic patterns were analyzed to capture viewers' emotional, cultural, and experiential responses. The findings indicate that emotional appeal, perceived authenticity, and cultural richness are the key dimensions driving viewer engagement. Comments frequently emphasize the diversity, affordability, and sensory appeal of Sri Lankan street food, with many viewers expressing an intention to visit Colombo inspired by the vlog content. The study contributes to understanding how user-generated content (UGC) supports food tourism, enhances destination image, and promotes cross-cultural appreciation. These insights hold practical value for tourism marketers, local vendors, and policymakers seeking to leverage digital storytelling as a strategic tool for promoting Colombo's street food culture. Overall, the research demonstrates the transformative potential of digital media in shaping tourist perceptions, encouraging culinary exploration, and preserving Sri Lanka's rich street food heritage.

Keywords: food vlog, street food, User-Generated Content (UGC), viewer perception, YouTube