



SUSTAINABILITY OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA: THEORETICAL CONTEXT



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ABSTRACT

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As a niche part of the hospitality and tourism industry, gastronomic tourism can be considered as one of the elements for the tourists to assimilate with the culture and lifestyle of a destination which embodies different traditional values associated to the country they visit. The role that gastronomic tourism plays has its own contributions towards the growth of gastronomic experiences among tourists particularly on the quality and sustainability of local food products, as well as the landscape of traditions, culture and lifestyle. By looking at the rapid growth of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia, it is important for the hospitality and tourism players to promote and expand the horizons of tourists on the local culture and food. This paper aims to understand the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia from a theoretical context. By reviewing literature related to sustainability in the field of hospitality and tourism, this paper highlighted the relationship between Malaysian gastronomic heritage with three different components of the sustainability system; economic, social and environmental sustainability. Further research; both empirical and non-empirical must be taken in order to uncover the interconnection between these three main components in sustaining the gastronomic tourism landscape in Malaysia.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the relationship between gastronomic tourism and sustainability from three different contexts (economic, social and environmental) within the hospitality and tourism industry in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era where everyone can fly, tourism activities can be looked as a necessary segment in life, which provides not only new experiences to those who practice it, but also reduces tension and increases happiness in life. As a multifaceted industry, the tourism sector not only contributes to the development of well being, economic and social development of a country (Babolian, 2016; Diaconescu, Moraru, & Stănciulescu, 2016; Scarpato, 2003) but the sector also has a close relationship with other industrial segments including the environment and local communities as asserted by Diaconescu et al. (2016). The symbiotic relationship between tourism and other industrial sectors not only helps in support the economic growth of a country; by creating an opportunity for those who are seeking employment, but also strengthens a region's identity, sustain cultural heritage, contests fears of global food homogenization and facilitates the regeneration of an area's socio-cultural fabric (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

As a niche part of the tourism industry, gastronomic tourism can be considered an important tool in enriching the experiences of tourists from the aspects of food culture and traditions (Cusack, 2000; Harrington & Ottenbacher, 2010) authenticity of delicacies (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012; Mkono, 2011) different usage of ingredients as well as preparation methods (Babolian, 2016; Jalis, Che, & Markwell, 2014). For example, Harrington and Ottenbacher (2010) asserted that by consuming local foods, tourists are able to understand the identities and ethnicities of a certain people within a given destination. Cusack (2000) also suggested that as an essential part of cultural tourism, food experiences are recognized as an expression of identity and culture, in which the tourists will assimilate with when consuming the food. Moreover, through the consumption of local food products, it enables the tourists to experience excitement, different lifestyles, education as well as satisfaction (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2004).

Since the tourism industry has its own advantages and disadvantages, it is therefore wise for local authorities and communities to work together to ensure that both parties will gain benefits from this mutual relationship. Among the benefits of this relationship particularly within the environment and local communities as proposed by Diaconescu et al. (2016) includes:

- Revenues from tourism generated taxes can be used to improve community services and facilities (Sharples, Mitchell, & Hall, 2004).
- Stimulating the development of economics activities such as agriculture, fishing and handicrafts (Mkono, 2011).
- Stimulating the development of new and improved cultural and commercial facilities which can be used by both local residents and tourist.
- Allowing the collection of funds needed to preserve natural, archaeological and historical monuments and above all, contributing to improving the quality of the environment (Giaoutzi, 2006).
- Stimulating social changes occurring as a result of economic development and broader communication framework.

In the context of gastronomic tourism sustainability, Scarpato (2002) contended that, “gastronomy studies add a missing perspective to the quest for sustainable tourism”. The researcher also added that “the impact of tourism on gastronomy sustainability of communities is an issue of ‘food security, which today is not only predicted on pestilence, famine and conflict’ (Scarpato, 2003; Wahlqvist, 1999) but pertains among other things, to trade, food processing, retailing, human behaviors and food choice, and all traditional components of gastronomy (Scarpato, 2003). Having this in mind, this paper highlights the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia through the lens of hospitality and tourism literature reviews, and then discusses the research findings of the issues relating to the highlighted topic of interest. By exploring the ‘triple bottom line’ of economic, social and environmental sustainability (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Nair & Thomas, 2013) it can be suggested that each of these components have their own significant roles that support each other in ensuring the sustainability of Malaysian gastronomic tourism in facing the unpredictable changes within the global gastronomic tourism landscape.

2. SUSTAINABLE GASTRONOMY AND TOURISM

In order to understand the relationship between sustainable gastronomy and tourism, one must acknowledge the definition and development of sustainable tourism. The term ‘sustainability tourism’ has become a popular topic of interest since the late 1980s (Novelli & Benson, 2005). Derived from the concept of ‘sustainable development’, introduced as a policy consideration in order to combat some of the environmental problems by the World Conservation Strategy by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN, 1980) the term has been generally adopted in literature as a key term and concept by both researchers and practitioners (Novelli & Benson, 2005). According to World Tourism Organization (2019) sustainable tourism can be defined as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts,

addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Although there is considerable ambiguity and controversies regarding the interpretation of this term (Novelli & Benson, 2005; Scarpato, 2003) particularly among the tourism stakeholders, still this definition is widely adopted and used as a template for varied sustainable tourism development programs.

Within the perspective of gastronomy, gastronomic tourism can be looked as a key important issue in the subject of tourism sustainability (Scarpato, 2003). According to Scarpato (2000) sustainable gastronomy implies that communities can evolve socially and economically whilst keeping an eco-nutritional commitment to environmental sustainability and the optimal health of members of the community. In this case, the interactions between gastronomic tourism providers such as local food producers who prepare local delicacies that are environmentally safe and nourishing to both body and mind of tourists, will create a system that reflects the sustainability of gastronomy (Scarpato, 2003). Additionally, the interaction with other components of the industry will enhance the economic, social and aesthetics needs of these communities, which is significant in ensuring the success of gastronomic sustainability in tourism. This is in line with the implications suggested by Scarpato (2003) which can be applied to both rural and metropolitan contexts including:

- The survival of local food production, outlets and fresh markets.
- The viability of home cooking.
- The transmission of culinary knowledge and children's education and taste.
- The right to pleasure and diversity.
- The impact of tourism on gastronomic authenticity and community well being.

On the other hand, sustainable gastronomic tourism is also often liquidated as 'the food and drink which tourists are offered in a catering establishment and the extent to which it is local authentically traditional' as asserted by Scarpato (2003). Here, the concept of 'local food', 'authenticity' and 'tradition' are the three issues, which are usually associated with sustainability in gastronomic tourism. Moreover, the offerings of international menu or parodies of local dishes as contended by Swarbrooke (1999) is another important question that needs to be clarified in relation to the sustainability of dishes. In regards to ingredients, it has been claimed that 'the use of imported ingredients rather than utilizing local food products (Swarbrooke, 1999) is another sign of unsustainability that needs to be justified.

3. MALAYSIAN GASTRONOMIC TOURISM

As one of the countries in South East Asia, well known for its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual society, comprising of Malay, Chinese, Indians and other ethnicities, Malaysia is blessed with a vast number of gastronomic products that can be offered to international tourists (Mohd Hairi, Mohd Salehuddin, Muhammad Izzat, & Zulhan, 2007). The harmonious relationship between ethnicities has resulted in combination of various ingredients and unique gastronomic products with a diversity of flavors, ranging from mild to spicy and plain to sweet (Hutton, 2000; Mohd Hairi et al., 2007). Additionally, the way food and beverages are served, types of equipment used, selection of ingredients and cooking styles, different for each ethnic group has become part and parcel of Malaysian gastronomic products making it more fascinating (Mohd Hairi et al., 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the country has become a food-haven destination for gastronomic travellers (Jalis, Zahari, Zulkifly, & Othman, 2009; Tibere & Aloysius, 2013; Yusoff, Zahari, Kutut, & Sharif, 2013).

Throughout the years, Malaysia has received a high number of international tourists, from different continents, which has led to the development of the tourism industry. In 2018 from January to September, about 19.39 million international tourist arrivals were recorded generating total receipts of RM61.851 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). From these receipts, the food and beverage segment represented the third highest contributor with 13.3% revenues compared to other industries. This result has shows that gastronomic tourism which is usually considered

only to support products is now seen as an essential element in the attraction of more international tourists (Jalis, Zahari, Izzat, & Othman, 2009).

Whether through positive growth of industries, investments and employments, this strong positive link between local food and tourism shows that both sectors are closely related and have a beneficial long term relationship (Jalis et al., 2014; Tibere & Aloysius, 2013). As suggested by Zainal, Zali, and Kassim (2010) by promoting the local cuisine globally, it not only strengthens the country's image and identity, it also draws tourist's attention to the local cuisine experience. Additionally, great concerns and attention should be given to sustaining gastronomic tourism of a country, particularly the local food heritage as it is closely related to ingredient preparation methods, dishes, and eating decorum (Ramli, Zahari, Halim, & Aris, 2016). Through the continuous action of preserving heritage food, it not only gives an edge in maintaining local food culture from foreign homogenizing pressure, it also preserves the creation of valued products, in particular local delicacies (Ramli et al., 2016; Shariff, Mokhtar, & Zakaria, 2008; UNESCO, 2008). Hence, it is pivotal for the government to have a supportive policy and framework that is conducive in supporting the sustainability of local food as an important gastronomic tourism product.

4. METHODS

This research paper is solely based on a review and analysis of data from selected journals and articles within the scope of hospitality and tourism related to the topic of study. In the first stage, research was conducted using the Google Scholar search engine. Terms such as 'sustainability tourism' and 'sustainability of gastronomic tourism' were used. Although a large number of research articles appeared under sustainability tourism there was a limited amount of information found about the sustainability of gastronomic tourism. The most helpful piece of literature was Scarpato's work, *Sustainable Gastronomy as a Tourist Product*, which relates to the global issues relating to sustainable gastronomic tourism. Additionally, the work by Tibere and Aloysius study, *Malaysia as a Food-Haven Destination: The Vision and Its Sustainability* were useful in terms of content as the paper uses a case study of food and culinary tourism development in Malaysia. Table 1 below indicates the amount of journal articles that can be found according to the databases.

Table-1. Journal article databases.

Terms	Proquest	Taylor & Francis
Sustainability and gastronomic tourism	418	677
Sustainability and Malaysian gastronomic tourism	34	49
Malaysian gastronomic tourism	94	100

In addition to journal articles, other relevant sources of data included books either published or online, online dissertations, newspaper clips, or websites related to the topics of study were also explored in order to gain more information useful for this study.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

What is the significant relationship between sustainability and gastronomic tourism in Malaysia? The following paragraphs attempt to provide answers related to the three components of sustainability in gastronomic tourism within the context of economy, society and environment. It is worth mentioning that the analysis was interesting as each context has its own potential and opportunities, which might contribute to the development of future lifestyles, trends, campaigns and even cuisines.

6. ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY CONTEXT

6.1. *The Role of Malaysian Food Campaigns in Sustaining the Economy*

Launched in 2006, the 'Malaysian Kitchen for the World' program (MKP) was introduced by the Malaysian Government through the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). With the aim of increasing the interests of international consumers towards Malaysian cuisine, the program can be looked as a platform for sustaining Malaysian food within the context of economy by introducing Malaysian cuisine to the world, increasing exports of processed food, food ingredients and agriculture products as well as attracting tourists to Malaysia (Bernama, 2012; Nahar, Ab Karim, Karim, Ghazali, & Krauss, 2018; Nordin, 2010). In order for restaurateurs to be selected for the program, food served in their restaurant must comply with guidelines set by the Malaysian Government; the food served must be Malaysian food which is traditionally and customarily consumed by Malaysians (Sae, 2015). By looking at the current expansion of the numbers of restaurants involved within the program, from 465 restaurants in 2010 to 647 restaurants in 2012 (Nahar et al., 2018) the MKP has proven the ability of sustaining the economy through the utilization of Malaysian gastronomic products.

In addition to the Malaysian Kitchen Program, there are also other types of 'Promotional Plan', which were developed by the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (MPTB) in promoting Malaysian cuisine and local commodities worldwide (Jalis et al., 2014). For example, in the "Fabulous Food 1 Malaysia" campaign launched in 2009 by Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC), three Malaysian cuisine annual promotional events included "Malaysia International Gourmet Festival" or MIGF, "ASEAN Heritage Food Trail with Chef Wan" and "Street and Restaurant Food Festival" was organized specifically to promote Malaysian cuisine as one of the country's tourist attractions (Jalis et al., 2014; MOTOURL, 2011).

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that Malaysian Government (through the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board) has acted proactively and aggressively in their promotion of Malaysian gastronomic tourism by exposing Malaysian food heritage to the international market. Through this action, it has not only attracted international tourists to visit the country, but at the same time, the revenue from the sector has contributes to the sustaining of the Malaysian gastronomic tourism industry through extensive marketing and promotional activities.

7. SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY CONTEXTS

7.1. *Safeguarding Malaysian Food Heritage*

With over 19.39 million international tourist arrivals in 2018 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019), there is an important need in sustaining the social and cultural context of Malaysian food culture. Due to the fact that Malaysia is well known as a country with fabulous culture and history through its food heritage, which consists of the three major ethnics food tastes of the Malays, Chinese and Indians (Omar, Karim, Bakar, & Omar, 2015). The food heritage should be preserved well to ensure that the legacy of food and tradition can be preserved throughout generations. According to Matta (2013) who cited Bessiere and Tibere (2013) food heritage can be defined as a set of material and immaterial elements of food cultures, that been considered as a shared legacy or a common good. This food heritage includes agricultural products, ingredients, dishes, techniques, recipes and food traditions, table manners, the symbolic dimensions of food and its more material aspects, cooking artifacts and the table setting; utensils and dishware Ramli et al. (2016). Therefore, crucial steps have been taken by the Government in preservation of our social and cultural heritage, as well as environment sustainability particularly within the premises of Malaysian food heritage.

To date, a number of studies have been conducted in recognizing the importance of Malaysian food heritage (Jalis et al., 2014; Mohammad & Chan, 2011; Muhammad, Zahari, Shariff, & Abdullah, 2016; Omar et al., 2015; Ramli & Zahari, 2014; Ramli. et al., 2016; Ramli, Zahari, Ishak, & Sharif, 2013; Sharif, Zahari, Nor, & Muhammad,

2016). In a study by Ramli et al. (2016) it was found that Malaysian food heritage is associated with the traditional food which was passed down from one generation to another, and related to cultural background, original recipes, celebrations, authentic cooking methods, and have a pleasant sensory properties. The study also suggests that the findings may be used as a measurement tools for the Department of Heritage in developing new ways to impart knowledge of National Food Heritage to the public (Ramli et al., 2016). In the context of authenticity, Mohammad and Chan (2011) contended that the maintenance of traditional foodways, in how the food is prepared, served and consumed is another important aspect to preserving the sustainability of a group identity. By maintaining the 'traditional' eating habits within diasporic communities, it can act as a means of preserving group identity as the use or avoidance of certain foods becomes identified with a group and symbolic of it (Muhammad et al., 2016). The majority of these studies suggest that there is a crucial need for the local authorities, together with future generations to sustain the social, cultural environmental aspects of Malaysian food heritage. This not only can reflects their identity but it also preserves their food authenticity (Mohammad & Chan, 2011; Muhammad et al., 2016).

Throughout the reading, it was also discovered that in sustaining the social and environmental aspects of Malaysian gastronomic products, the Department of Heritage Malaysia (DHM) under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture has taken a bold step in preserving the Malaysian gastronomic heritage by releasing a list of 100 Malaysian Heritage Food List in December 2009 (Jalis et al., 2014). The list was expanded to 151 in the year 2013 (Department of Heritage Malaysia, 2019; Jalis et al., 2014) and by the year 2018, about 195 types of Malaysian heritage food was listed (Department of Heritage Malaysia, 2019). On the other hand, another initiative has been taken by Yayasan Hasanah, a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional, in preserving local Malaysian kueh (Karim, 2018). In a project entitled 'Kuih Warisan Ihsan Haridepan' or KWIH, a survey is currently being carried out by a team of researchers from one state to another in preserving and mapping the traditional kueh heritage from local traditional kueh maker. From the survey, about 80 types of traditional Malaysian kueh have been identified to date and it is expected that more traditional Malaysian kueh will be discovered from this survey.

Based on these findings from the articles, undoubtedly, it has been shown that some serious efforts have been taken towards sustaining the social and environmental of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia through the preservation of local food heritage. Although the efforts were taken only within the past few years, it can be looked as a stepping stone in preservation and integration of the development of culinary culture as a core tourism heritage product (Tibere & Aloysius, 2013). Moreover, with the collaborative efforts between the local authorities and communities, a policy which focused on sustaining the authentic local food recipes as well as the local food ways can be introduced in stages, and therefore the risk of losing local heritage food can be minimized.

8. CONCLUSION

This study on the sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Malaysia through theoretical context has certainly established interesting findings particularly in the steps that have been taken to preserve the Malaysian food heritage as a key component in sustaining Malaysian gastronomic tourism industry. Although the limited scale of this exploratory study makes it difficult to make any definite conclusion, it is hoped that it will encourage further research within the areas of gastronomic tourism and the sustainability of a local heritage cuisine with in a region. In the context of economy, it was found that Malaysian food campaign plays an important role in sustaining gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. From the 'Malaysian Kitchen for The World' program to the 'Promotional Plan' which was organized by Ministry of Tourism and Culture, each of these events had the specific aim of ensuring economic success while sustaining gastronomic tourism in Malaysia. In relation to the social and environment context, the task of safe guarding Malaysian food heritage is a pivotal component, which needs to be recognized by the authorities. Additionally, through collaborative actions with the local communities, the preservation, enhancement and integration of culinary culture as a core tourism heritage product (Tibere & Aloysius, 2013) can

be developed accordingly. This will not only give benefits to both parties, but it also creates awareness of the economy, social and cultural aspects of sustainable tourism development for future under takings.

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