



GASTRONOMIC TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND DESTINATION CHOICE IN PORT HARCOURT

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 20 th September 2023	This study investigated the relationship between gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice in Port Harcourt. Employing a descriptive survey design and convenient sampling technique, data was gathered and analysed from a sample of 185 respondents using a well-tailored questionnaire. Univariate analysis and bivariate analysis were employed to analyse 150 completed copies of the questionnaire. The findings revealed that gastronomic tourism attributes, including publicity, positioning, price, presentation, and palatability, significantly influence and are strong predictors of destination choice (with R^2 values of 0.364, 0.441, 0.452, 0.482, and 0.383 respectively at $P < 0.05$). Specifically, price, presentation, and positioning emerged as the most influential factors shaping tourists' destination choices, while publicity and palatability also played important roles, albeit to a lesser extent. In the light of these findings, the study recommended that Destination Management Organizations in Port Harcourt should prioritize these dimensions of gastronomic tourism attributes to enhance awareness of the city's gastronomic offerings, improve their product's attractiveness, enhance market positioning, influence tourists' sensory perceptions, maintain high-quality offerings, and ultimately attract more tourists, thereby increasing the destination's competitiveness.
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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a prominent industry in the global economy, with substantial research, including studies by Dwyer (2022) and Kastenholz et al. (2015), highlighting its growing significance. This sector contributes positively to various aspects of sustainable development, including global GDP, poverty reduction, job creation, security, societal inclusiveness, international relations, health, and overall well-being. Tourism encompasses a diverse range of purposes, from well-defined categories like eco-tourism, religious tourism, medical tourism, sports tourism, and cultural tourism (Tureac & Turtureanu, 2008). This underscores the importance and choice of a destination in preference to another. Hence, the tourism landscape is characterized by intense competition, reflecting the vast array of options available to travellers. As tourists become more informed about various destinations and activities, they make informed choices, creating competitive challenges for tourist destinations. Pawaskar and Goel (2014) noted that these choices have led to heightened competition among tourist destinations, necessitating the maintenance of a competitive edge.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in its 2019 report underscored the critical role of assets such as natural beauty, favourable climate, rich cultural heritage, and abundant human resources in fostering tourism. Developing countries like Nigeria possess a comparative advantage in these areas. Nigeria's diverse and culturally rich heritage has positioned it as a potential major foreign exchange earner through tourism (Alamai & Adamu, 2019; Umoh & Ndu, 2013). Awodiya (2016) emphasizes the need to strategically leverage Nigeria's cultural assets to drive economic growth through tourism, highlighting the indispensable role of culture in the tourism sector's success. With its cultural mosaic and culinary diversity, gastronomic tourism ranks high amongst tourism assets which has been identified by scholars (De Jong et al., 2018; Nwokorie & Ayogu, 2019) to have potentials that could drive tourism and economic development in developing countries like Nigeria. However, unlike other aspect of tourism like sports and cultural tourism, discussion on gastronomic tourism is still sparing amongst Nigerian scholars and tourism experts.

Gastronomic tourism, a thriving niche within the broader tourism industry, has captured the imaginations of tourists worldwide. With its unique blend of culinary delights and cultural immersion, gastronomic tourism offers a delectable journey for travellers seeking more than just a place to visit; it provides an experience for the senses. However, the competition among destinations to entice gastronomic tourists is fierce, demanding a deeper understanding of what influences their choices. In the heart of Nigeria, Port Harcourt stands out as a potential gastronomic tourism gem, blessed with a rich tapestry of culinary traditions and cultural diversity. Yet, it finds itself at a crossroads, excelling in business tourism but leaving its gastronomic tourism potential largely untapped. While other Nigerian states flaunt their culinary prowess, Port Harcourt struggles to attract the food enthusiasts.

The problem of this study is inherent in the difficulty to attracting and sustaining food tourists' patronage for profitable tourism business Port Harcourt. While business tourism is thriving to a degree in Port Harcourt due to its oil and gas status, cultural tourism, especially its gastronomic component, appears not to be faring well. This tends to suggest that Rivers State is not a preferred food tourism destination compared to other states (such as Cross Rivers and Akwa Ibom States) despite the availability of rich and varieties of local cuisines (Ajayi, et al., 2021; Ukabuilu & Nwokorie, 2010). Unfortunately, most of these local cuisines lack visibility and patronage in the domestic and international tourism markets. Gastronomic tourism practices still rank low in Port Harcourt compared to other cities like Lagos in Nigeria and some cities in African countries like Senegal (Dakar); Egypt (Cairo), Cape town (South Africa) just to mention a few. This could be a resultant implication of sparing literature on the subject matter to boost awareness and interest of tourism experts and other stakeholders to in this direction. The discussion on gastronomic tourism is widely dominated by foreign Scholars (Buiza et al., 2021; Correia et al., 2008; Fernandez et al. 2019; Nair & Mohanty, 2021; Oka et al., 2020) and these studies were carried with specific context to their countries. This study therefore sought to close this lacuna in theory and practise; while sprouting the interest of tourism experts both in public and private institutions towards the development of gastronomic tourism in Port Harcourt city and Nigeria at large.

The aim of this study therefore is to investigate the relationship between gastronomic tourism and destination choice in Port Harcourt. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to establish the possible impact of the dimensions of gastronomy tourism which are publicity, positioning, price, presentation, and palatability on destination choice in Port Harcourt. Based on these specific objectives, it was hypothesized that:

Ho:1 There is no significant relationship between publicity and destination choice.

Ho:2 There is no significant relationship between positioning and destination choice.

Ho:3 There is no significant relationship between presentation and destination choice.

Ho:4 There is no significant relationship between price and destination choice.

Ho:5 There is no significant relationship between palatability and destination choice.

This study embarks on a flavourful journey to uncover the relationship between gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice, focusing on the captivating city of Port Harcourt. As we explore the dimensions of publicity, positioning, presentation, price, and palatability, we aim to decipher the factors that shape tourists' decisions when it comes to savouring the tastes of Port Harcourt. With its cultural mosaic and culinary diversity, Port Harcourt has the potential to becoming a preferred gastronomic tourism destination. By understanding the influence of gastronomic attributes on destination choice, we hope to shed light on the path that can lead Port Harcourt to becoming a culinary haven, captivating the taste buds and hearts of gastronomic tourists far and wide. Thus this study would be beneficial to experts in tourism development as well as policy makers. Furthermore, the study would add to repository of empirical investigations on gastronomic tourism; thereby serving as a veritable tool for future research endeavours.

This study is a macro study conducted in Port Harcourt city, Rivers state, Nigeria. The city of Port Harcourt is the fifth most populous city in Nigeria (after Lagos, Kano, Ibadan and Benin); the city boasts of flourishing arrayed variety of menus, which can be harnessed to attract domestic and international tourists/visitors, some of which include Bole and fish, Onunu and Fisherman soup, and Rivers native soup. Fondly called the garden city, Port Harcourt is a home to various hospitality businesses; with diverse cultures, ethnic groups and local cousins, Port Harcourt city have the potentials to drive gastronomic tourism in Nigeria and Africa at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Underpinning

To provide a solid theoretical foundation for this study, two key theories have been incorporated to guide the investigation into the relationship between gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice in Port Harcourt. They are the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and Dann's Theory of Push and Pull Motivations.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is a prominent theoretical framework used to understand human decision-making processes. It posits that individuals make choices based on their personal preferences and rationality, striving to maximize their utility or satisfaction (Amadae, 2021). Originating from the work of philosopher Adam Smith, RCT initially found its place in microeconomics but has since expanded into various academic fields (Opp, 2019). In the context of this study, RCT suggests that tourists behave as rational economic units when selecting a gastronomic tourism destination. They evaluate different options based on factors such as publicity, presentation, positioning, price, and palatability of food and dining experiences, aiming to maximize their satisfaction. RCT assumes that tourists act consistently according to their preferences and within constraints, making decisions that align with their desires (Green, 2002). Rational Choice Theory is highly relevant to this study, as it aligns with the hypothesis that

gastronomic tourists are rational decision-makers influenced by various criteria and external factors. This theory will help us understand how tourists' personal characteristics, motivations, and external factors shape their destination choices in Port Harcourt.

Dann's Theory of Push and Pull Motivations is a well-established framework in the field of tourism. This theory categorizes the factors motivating tourists into "push" and "pull" factors (Dann, 1977). Push factors originate from tourists themselves or their immediate environment, such as personal needs, desires, or motivations. Pull factors, on the other hand, emanate from the destination and entice tourists to visit due to specific attractions or attributes (Dann, 1977). In the context of this study, gastronomic tourism attributes fall under "pull factors." These attributes, including food quality, dining experiences, destination reputation, and local food festivals, play a pivotal role in drawing tourists to a specific destination. Dann's theory suggests that tourists make choices based on a combination of push and pull factors, considering their own motivations and the attractions offered by a destination (Klenosky, 2002). By applying Dann's Theory of Push and Pull Motivations, this study seeks to identify the key drivers of gastronomic tourism in Port Harcourt. Understanding the interplay between push and pull factors will help clarify why tourists opt for one gastronomic destination over another, contributing to the enhancement of tourism in the city. This theory reinforces the notion that tourists select destinations that best align with their desires and needs, assuming other factors remain constant (*ceteris paribus*).

Conceptual Clarification

Gastronomy, derived from the Greek words "*gaster*" (stomach) and "*nomas*" (custom), is often described as the art of eating and drinking, an exploration of culinary experiences, and the establishment of dining rules. While its roots can be traced back to antiquity, it gained prominence during the 17th century in France, particularly during the reign of Louis XIV (Ory, 1996). Research (Hu & Ritchie, 1993) has demonstrated that food ranks as the fourth most important factor in tourists' perceptions of a destination's attractiveness, following climate, accommodation, and scenery. Food not only satisfies the palate but also embodies identity, culture, production, consumption, and sustainability. Gastronomy represents the intersection of food and culture, serving as a significant source of satisfaction for travellers and a pivotal component of their expenditure.

Gastronomic tourism, also known as culinary tourism or food tourism, involves travel to destinations where local food and beverages are the primary attractions (Real & Dias, 2022). This form of tourism, which predominantly occurs at the domestic level, has gained popularity in recent years. Gastronomic tourism encompasses various activities, including culinary master classes, visits to food festivals and fairs, participation in gastronomic excursions, and interactions with local producers and markets. Gastronomic tourism more than just tastes dishes; it involves immersing oneself in the culinary traditions of a region, participating in culinary events, purchasing local ingredients, and exploring food-related cultural aspects (Cun, 2011). It was introduced by Long (1998) to emphasize that tourists can experience diverse cultures through food, making gastronomy a primary motivation for travel. While food has traditionally played a supporting role in destination choice, it is now evolving into a central attraction. Gastronomy extends beyond food, reflecting the culture, heritage, tradition, and community identity of a place. Gastronomic tourism is a growing and significant segment of the tourism industry, offering tourists immersive and authentic experiences. This study concentrates on gastronomic tourism in Port Harcourt, exploring its influence on tourists' choice of this city as a destination. Several variables and dimensions have been identified by prior researchers (Nair & Mohanty, 2021; Oka et al., 2020) to analyse gastronomic tourism attributes and their connection to destination choice. For this study, the following dimensions are considered as shown in fig 1.

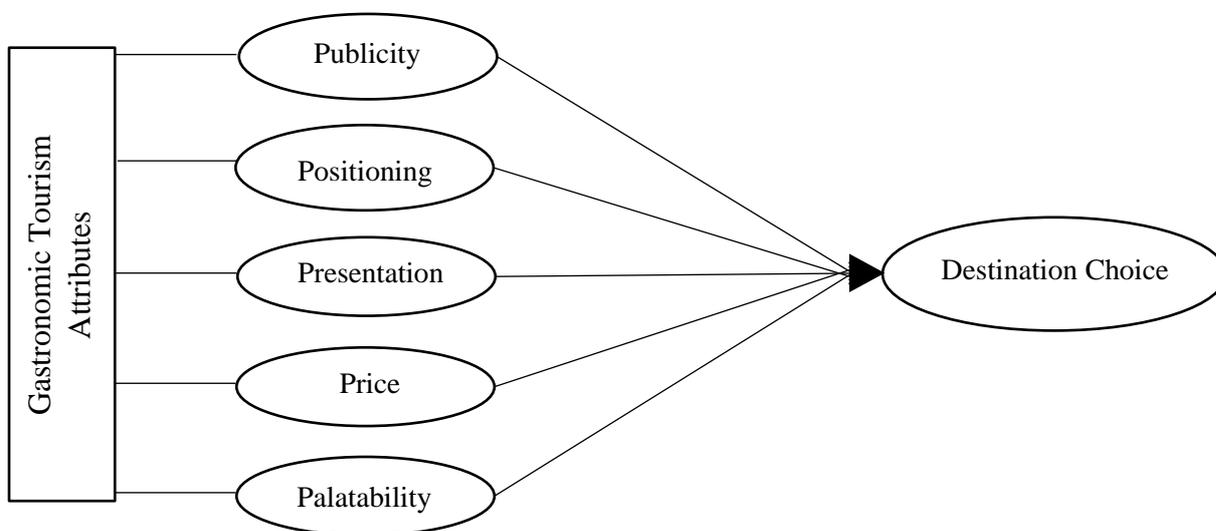


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.; Conceptualized Relationship between Gastronomic Tourism Attributes and Destination Choice in Port Harcourt.

Publicity

Publicity, a cornerstone of marketing, encompasses the dissemination of information about a product, service, person, organization, or location to the public (Purcell & Haire, 2022). In destination marketing, the primary objective of publicity is to raise public awareness and visibility of the various offerings at a destination. The attractiveness of a destination often hinges on how well it is portrayed in the public eye. Essentially, publicity involves conveying information through non-paid mass media channels, such as news outlets, to build goodwill, stimulate demand, and influence public opinion about the offerings, including gastronomic experiences, of a destination.

Originating from the French word "publicité," publicity has been ingrained in industries like tourism, entertainment, and commerce. Major players in these industries have leveraged print and social media to inform the public about their brands and offerings. Advertising, developed in the early 20th century, tapped into consumer psychology to promote brands. Over time, publicity has been widely employed as a promotional tool to enhance brand image, stimulate demand, and foster favourable public relations (Hahn, 2009; Rahman et al., 2019).

Various methods have been identified for achieving publicity for offers, brands, and destinations. These methods include:

1. News Outlets: Utilizing well-recognized media outlets, such as television and radio stations, to host paid sessions, interviews, and shows to showcase and discuss tourism offerings, allowing consumers to share their experiences.
2. Events and Festivals: Hosting events and festivals that highlight enticing offers, with media coverage capturing these events through magazines and news bulletins.
3. Entertainment Media: Incorporating subtle messages about available tourism offers in movies and music videos.
4. Digital Marketing: Utilizing the internet and social media platforms to reach a global audience through pop-up ads and engaging posts that convey available offers.
5. Government Involvement: Issuing press releases to establish government involvement, instilling confidence in the public regarding the offer.

In the context of this study, publicity plays a crucial role in influencing the destination choice of tourists visiting Port Harcourt. It involves the promotion of the destination and its gastronomic offerings to potential tourists. Effective promotion can attract more tourists to the city, boosting the demand for gastronomic tourism. Conversely, inadequate promotion may result in lower demand for gastronomic tourism in Port Harcourt. Therefore, understanding the concept of publicity is essential for comprehending the impact of marketing activities on tourists' destination choices.

Analysing the promotional activities used to attract tourists to Port Harcourt enables an assessment of the city's marketing effectiveness in promoting gastronomic tourism. It also sheds light on the role of social media and digital marketing in drawing tourists to the city. Ultimately, publicity plays a pivotal role in the success of gastronomic tourism in Port Harcourt, as it influences how different promotional activities affect tourists' choices when visiting the city.

Positioning

Positioning in the context of tourism destinations is a vital concept that relates to how a location is perceived as a product with its unique brand image, loyalty, or equity. In essence, destination positioning is the linchpin and a crucial element in the development of tourism and, by extension, the economic growth of an area. Effective positioning sets a destination apart from its competitors based on attributes that hold significance for tourists, giving it a competitive advantage. This is especially critical because to enhance a destination's image and influence tourists' choices, it's essential to distinguish it from rival destinations. Positioning is akin to the keystone in managing a trademark (Chacko & Marcell, 2007; Saqib, 2019).

Tourism-dependent areas that recognize the significance of tourism must employ strategies that effectively promote the destination to potential visitors. The role of positioning in creating and maintaining a tourism destination cannot be overstated. To thrive in an increasingly competitive environment, destination management necessitates a potent positioning strategy. From a destination's standpoint, positioning refers to how tourists perceive it in terms of crucial attributes.

The primary goal of positioning is to carve out a distinctive niche in the minds of both potential and current tourists. It helps them discern how a destination differs from its rivals and how it can fulfil their specific leisure needs better than other options (Tkaczynski et al., 2008). By positioning a destination in a particular way, it can establish a clear and unique identity, making it easier for tourists to recognize and select the destination that aligns with their particular desires and interests. Positioning is imperative here because it aims to create a place of prominence in tourists' minds, setting the destination apart from others.

In the context of this study, positioning encompasses factors like cultural distinctiveness, the authenticity of natural ingredients, and additional services that bolster the appeal of gastronomic tourism at the destination.

Price

Price, in the context of this study, pertains to the monetary value charged for gastronomic tourism experiences and services. It encapsulates all the costs that consumers are willing to pay to enjoy these experiences. Price plays a pivotal role in the consumer decision-making process and is often a key determinant in the selection of a tourist destination. Numerous studies have indicated that, for the average consumer, price is a paramount consideration and holds immense sway over their choices and purchase frequency (Bucklin et al., 1998 [as cited in Shamsher, 2014]; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

For gastronomic tourists, price carries significant weight, especially when considering that tourism products may be bundled as packages or consumed individually. The overall cost of such packages and individual culinary experiences can significantly impact the choice of a gastronomic tourism destination, particularly for those with budget constraints (Christie & Crompton, 2001). Dwyer and Kim (2003) distinguish between two categories of price: travel cost, which pertains to expenses related to reaching the destination, and ground cost, which encompasses commodity prices within the destination. Both categories of price can influence tourists' destination choices. However, price on its own is meaningless; its relevance only emerges when associated with a particular destination, tourism product, and corresponding quality and services (Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto, 2003).

A destination's ability to present fair and reasonable prices in consideration of the quality of its tourism offerings can give it a competitive edge. Price competitiveness is often deemed one of the most critical attributes for a destination's competitiveness (Crouch, 2011). Price sensitivity among travellers can vary significantly across markets. Price satisfaction, from the tourist's perspective as the end consumer of gastronomic tourism products, revolves around how much they are willing to spend to fulfil their needs while maintaining a balance between cost and quality. Informed by several criteria, tourists assess the affordability of gastronomic experiences when making menu choices, underscoring the importance of price. Additionally, price can shape tourists' perceptions of the quality of their experiences. High prices may lead tourists to expect higher quality, while lower prices may set different expectations. The affordability of gastronomic offerings and related services is a central consideration in this study, acknowledging that price plays a multifaceted role in influencing tourists' destination decisions.

Presentation

Presentation in the context of gastronomic tourism refers to the art of enhancing the visual and sensory appeal of food and culinary experiences. It encompasses various elements such as arrangement, decoration, and organization of food to create visually appealing and appetizing dishes (Duran, 2019). The presentation of food is the final step that showcases creativity and aesthetics, significantly impacting the way customers perceive and receive their meals (Zampollo et al., 2012). Over the centuries, different cultures, particularly in the Western world, have developed techniques to use food presentation as a means to showcase their culinary culture. What was once reserved for the elites has now become accessible and popularized, improving the dining experience for people from all walks of life (Piqueras-Fizman & Spence, 2014).

In the context of gastronomic tourism, presentation holds immense importance. It is not limited to fine dining but extends to organizing food-related events, shows, competitions, and festivals that highlight local cuisines. Gastronomic tourism is centred on the culinary experience, and therefore, local dishes must be presented in a way that engages tourists from diverse backgrounds and cultures (The Culinary Pro, 2022). Presentation is considered the first impression of gastronomic products for tourists. It goes beyond just plating and includes organizing food fairs, shows, and festivities that showcase local cuisines. The visual appeal is as crucial as the taste when it comes to food, and presentation plays a vital role in enhancing the overall experience for tourists (Duran, 2019).

Factors to consider in food presentation include colour, cultural relevance, cleanliness, texture, theme, mood, and the disposition of the presenter. All these elements must harmoniously work together to create an appealing and memorable dining experience. Ambiance and cleanliness are crucial aspects of presentation, ensuring that both the food and the environment where it is served are clean and hygienic plays a significant role in attracting gastronomic tourists.

Palatability

Palatability in the context of gastronomic tourism is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the quality of food or culinary offerings. It plays a crucial role in the overall success of gastronomy businesses and destinations. Quality, in this context, refers to the degree of excellence of the culinary service or product provided. Customers have specific standards and expectations for the food they consume, and palatability is a key factor that influences their satisfaction and loyalty (Oslen, 2002). Palatability extends beyond taste and includes various factors that influence consumers' acceptability of a menu or culinary offering. This includes positive attributes such as nutritional value, appearance, taste, flavour, and texture, as well as negative attributes like spoilage, contamination, adulteration, and food safety hazards (Siwach, 2022).

In today's highly competitive food and service industry, delivering high-quality food and ensuring its palatability or fitness for consumption are essential for maintaining a competitive advantage. In gastronomic tourism, the quality of the culinary experience is synonymous with the palatability of the food offered (Lopez et al., 2019). Peri (2006) presented a comprehensive model of consumer requirements for food palatability, including safety, commodity standards, nutrition, sensory appeal, production context, ethical considerations, guarantees, and market availability. These requirements can be divided into two categories: those related to the product as a food and those related to the product as a marketed object or offering. When these requirements are met, the food is considered to be of excellent quality.

Palatability has both objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension refers to the physical characteristics of the product, typically addressed by engineers and food technologists. The subjective dimension is how quality is perceived by consumers. The alignment between these two dimensions is crucial for the economic importance of quality, making palatability a competitive parameter for gastronomic tourism destinations (Kumar, 2019).

Gastronomy Tourism Potentials in Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, situated in the southern part of Nigeria, is renowned for its status as a hub for boat building, fishing industries, and fish-freezing facilities (Chinelo, 2022). As the country's fifth-largest city, it boasts a rich culinary tradition, particularly seafood-based cuisine due to its riverside location. A culinary exploration of Port Harcourt unveils a diverse array of delectable dishes, with a special focus on popular offerings like bole and fish, onunu, fisherman soup, and Rivers native soup in this study.

Bole, a popular street food in Port Harcourt, consists of roasted plantain paired with grilled fish, often accompanied by roasted yam and/or sweet potatoes. This delicacy can be prepared using ripe, half-ripe, or unripe plantains and is served with a specially crafted sauce comprising pepper, salt, onions, oil, and seasonings. Additional accompaniments include ugba, finely diced onions, fresh pepper, and chopped utazi greens. Bole and fish are known for their high dietary fibre content, aiding digestion and reducing constipation. They also provide essential nutrients such as potassium, vitamins A, C, and B complex (including folic acid), which act as antioxidants, repair tissues, and enhance overall body function. Additionally, the dish contains vital minerals like iron, magnesium, and phosphorous (Omotolani, 2022).



Source: Bolt Foods, 2023



Source: Guardian.ng, 2019

Onunu is a traditional Nigerian delicacy made by pounding boiled yam and ripe plantain together with palm oil to create a silky orange swallow. It's considered one of the notable swallows in Nigerian cuisine, alongside popular ones like amala, Eba, and Semo. Historically, Onunu was reserved for royalty, particularly royal wives and new mothers. It was also served in fattening rooms, mainly by the wealthy, due to its exquisite taste and nutritional benefits. Onunu is often enjoyed with Odu (a special fresh fish stew) or the native Ikili stew, along with other traditional accompaniments (Philips-Kemenanabo, 2021).

Port Harcourt's popular Fisherman soup, though its origin is debated, is renowned for its deliciousness (Agbo, 2019). Made primarily with seafood, this dish is rich in protein and low in calories, total fat, and saturated fat. Research (Chinelo, 2021, 2022;; Hosomi et al., 2012) has highlighted the health benefits of seafood, which include reducing the risk of heart attacks, strokes, obesity, and hypertension. Seafood is also packed with essential vitamins and minerals. Therefore, for seafood enthusiasts seeking a flavourful and nutrient-rich option, Port Harcourt's Fisherman soup is an excellent choice.



Source: Nks_kitchen, 2020



Source: LifeWithRozy 2021

The native soup in Port Harcourt, locally known and loved, is a simple yet cherished daily staple (Chinelo, 2021). Frequently enjoyed by regular patrons at eateries and local bukkas (Mama-put), this soup boasts a delightful mix of prawns, shrimps, crabs, antelopes, periwinkle, cow tongue, stockfish, kpomo, and meat, all combining their flavours to create a memorable culinary experience. Ofor, a medicinal thickener, takes the spotlight in this soup, although achi and cocoyam are also used as thickeners. Additionally, various green vegetables, with Oziza leaves being the most popular, can be added to enhance the dish.

Concept of Destination Choice

The concept of destination choice is a fundamental aspect of tourism marketing and research, as it pertains to understanding the decision-making process of tourists when selecting a destination to visit. Various factors influence this decision, and the study of destination choice has garnered significant attention in the field of tourism. Destination choice can be defined as a tourist's decision on which destination to visit from among multiple options (Liu, 2014). It essentially involves selecting a preferred touristic place from the available choices (Cavlak, 2021).

This decision-making process is often sequential and involves several steps, including need recognition, passive information gathering, initial choice considering situational constraints, evaluating and comparing alternatives, active information search, and ultimately making a final selection (Liu, 2014; Um & Crompton, 1990). Additionally, frameworks have categorized the factors influencing this process into groups such as socio-demographic background, psychographic profiles, marketing variables, destination-related attributes, and destination awareness (Lang et al., 1997). Another categorization distinguishes between environmental factors and individual trait factors. These frameworks emphasize that destination choice is a complex process influenced by a multitude of factors, both internal and external to the individual tourist.

Understanding the concept of destination choice is crucial in destination management considering that tourists may not always have a clear idea of what they want, and destination marketing organizations play a crucial role in presenting attractive attributes and alternatives to tourists. In summary, the concept of destination choice is complex and involves a range of influencing factors, including individual, destination-related, and experiential aspects. Researchers and destination marketers aim to better understand this process to effectively attract and satisfy tourists.

Empirical Literature

Although not many literatures exist on the topic of interest to this study, Gastronomic Tourism Attributes and Destination Choice, significant research on local food as a feature of a tourist destination has revolved around various management issues and consumer understanding. Among these studies include Gastronomic tourism in Greece and beyond: A thorough review (Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020); Food tourism in local economic development and national branding in Nigeria (Nwokorie, 2015); and The Impact of the Gastronomic Offer in choosing tourism destination: The Case of Albania (Brokaj, 2014). However, various studies related to the influence of different factors on tourists' destination choices were considered in the present study.

Ajake (2015) assessed the influence of marketing strategies on destination choices in Cross River State, Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of effective marketing communication and recommendations from friends and family. Mirtaghiyan et al. (2013) focused on food tourism branding in Iranian tourism, with advertising identified as a key factor in influencing tourists' choices. Merabet (2020) explored the role of social media in tourists' destination choices, concluding that it significantly affects these choices and recommending improved content quality and user experiences for destination managers. These studies collectively underscore the importance of strategic marketing, branding efforts, and an active social media presence in shaping tourists' destination preferences.

Azmat and Lakhani (2015) studied brand positioning strategies' effect on consumer perception. They examined three strategies: beneficial, surrogate, and competitive positioning. The study suggests marketers adopt innovative strategies to win over quality-conscious consumers. Getachew (2019) on the other hand, explored the impact of positioning on customer loyalty, focusing on Ambassador Garment and Trading Plc. in Addis Ababa. The study found a significant positive relationship between positioning determinants and customer loyalty. These findings align with prior research by scholars like Samani (2003) and Li and Green (2010). Both studies emphasize the importance of brand positioning in shaping consumer perception and loyalty, offering insights for effective brand strategies.

Ndu and Chikwe (2018) investigated the relationship between destination attributes and tourist destination choice at Port Harcourt Pleasure Park and Obudu Mountain Resort. They assessed affordability (price), accessibility, and safety as dimensions of destination attributes. The study found that affordability significantly influences destination choice, suggesting that high prices deter tourists. This aligns with the findings of Javid and Roma (2016), highlighting price's influence on tourist decisions. In another study Moussa et al. (2020) explored the impact of tourism product pricing on tourists' purchasing decisions in Karbala, Iraq. Their results indicated that product price significantly affects purchasing decisions. The study concluded that when the product aligns with tourists' preferences and is within budget, it wins their purchasing decisions, emphasizing the competitive role of product pricing in attracting tourists.

Michel et al. (2015) conducted an experiment on the impact of plating styles on diners' food experiences. Their study revealed that different plating styles significantly influenced diners' preferences, overall satisfaction, and their willingness to pay for a dish. The results supported the notion that visual presentation plays a crucial role in enhancing or diminishing diners' experiences, reinforcing the idea that people "eat first with their eyes." This aligns with the idea that food presentation contributes to food quality and affects customers' appetites and perceptions of food quality, consistent with the findings of Namkung and Jung (2007) and Zainol et al. (2018).

Brunstrom et al. (2016) conducted a study to investigate the influence of portion size on food choice in relation to palatability and expected satiety. Their research was conducted in two phases. In Study 1, they found that with smaller portions, both expected satiety and palatability played equally important roles in food choice. However, as portion sizes increased, palatability became the dominant factor driving food choices. In Study 2, they explored how different scenarios affected food choice and discovered that palatability consistently remained the primary driver of choice across various portion sizes and scenarios. This research emphasized that palatability strongly influences food choices, with portion size influencing the relative importance of palatability and expected satiety in decision-making.

The existing literature reviewed in this study supports the anticipated connections outlined in the present research. However, there hasn't been a comprehensive investigation into these connections concerning Gastronomic Tourism Attributes and Destination Choice in Port Harcourt. Therefore, this study can be seen as addressing this research gap and expanding our understanding of how Gastronomic Tourism Attributes, including Publicity, Positioning, Presentation, Price, and Palatability, are related to Destination Choice.

Methodology

This study utilized descriptive survey design to investigate gastronomic tourism attributes and their relationship with destination choice. Correlational research design is also employed to assess the association between these attributes. The study includes residents and non-residents of Port Harcourt city, domestic and international tourists. The broad scope acknowledges that gastronomy tourists encompass both residents and non-residents and focuses on Port Harcourt as a destination choice.

Purposive sampling is adopted due to the large and unknown population size. The sample size of 185 tourists, including both resident and non-resident tourists, is determined using the Freud and Williams (1994) formula. Primary data was collected through questionnaires, distributed both in hardcopy and e-copy formats to individuals within and outside Port Harcourt. The questionnaire, designed after an extensive literature review, comprises two parts. Part 1 captures demographic information, while Part 2 includes questions related to the study's subject matter. Responses are structured on a Likert 5-point scale.

Two sets of variables were defined: independent and dependent. The independent variables include questions about exposure to local cuisine publicity, preferences for presentation, cost considerations, and palatability. The dependent variable assesses tourists' willingness to explore local cuisines when visiting Port Harcourt.

Content validity and face validity were used to ensure the questionnaire's construct validity. Peer vetting assessment by relevant academics was conducted to validate the instrument. Inter-rater reliability testing and internal consistency testing are employed to assess instrument reliability. The Cronbach alpha test in SPSS version 25.0 confirms the reliability of the variables.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics using Cronbach's alpha.

Constructs	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Publicity	5	.702
Positioning	5	.846
Price	6	.820
Presentation	5	.747
Palatability	5	.829
Destination Choice	5	.859
Overall variable	31	.909

Source: Survey Data 2022 with IBM SPSS version 25.0

Demographic distribution is analysed using tables and frequencies. Univariate analysis relies on mean and standard deviation. Bivariate analysis employs Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to test hypotheses, facilitated by Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Univariate Analyses

Decision Rule

If Mean score > Criterion mean = accept variable otherwise, reject variable
 Grand mean > Criterion mean = accept variable otherwise, reject variable

Table 2: Summary of Descriptive Statistics on the Dimensions of Gastronomic Tourism Attributes

N= 150

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision Rule
Publicity	4.5079	.47598	Accept
Positioning	4.4485	.58980	Accept
Price	4.1212	.60775	Accept
Presentation	4.6198	.56093	Accept
Palatability	4.3275	.63366	Accept
Grand mean	4.4050	.48172	Accept

Criterion mean = 3.0

Source: IBM SPSS version 25.0 Output, 2022

Information on table 2 indicates the summary of univariate statistical result of gastronomic tourism attributes. The mean scores of all the dimensions of gastronomic tourism attributes and the grand mean of 4.4050 are greater than the criterion mean of 3.0 and therefore acceptable. The criterion mean of 3.0 on a five-point Likert scale is considered appropriate as regards acceptability.

Table 3: Summary of Descriptive Statistics on the Measures of Destination Choice

N= 150

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision Rule
Destination Choice	3.8501	.50057	Accept
Grand mean	3.8501	.50057	Accept

Criterion mean = 3.0

Source: IBM SPSS version 25.0 Output, 2022

Information on table 3 indicates the summary of univariate statistical result of destination choice. The mean score was greater than the criterion mean of 3.0 and therefore satisfactory or acceptable. The grand mean of 3.8501 is greater than 3.0 and therefore satisfactory or acceptable.

Test of Hypotheses

Decision Rule

If P.Value < 0.05 = Reject H₀ (Null hypothesis)
 P.Value > 0.05 = Accept H₀ (Null hypothesis)

- H₀:1** There is no significant relationship between publicity and destination choice.
- H₀:2** There is no significant relationship between positioning and destination choice.
- H₀:3** There is no significant relationship between price and destination choice.
- H₀:4** There is no significant relationship between presentation and destination choice.

H₀₅: There is no significant relationship between palatability and destination choice.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis Summary of the Relationship between Gastronomic Tourism Attributes and Destination Choice.

Hypothesis	R	R ²	P-value	Decision Rule	
				H ₀	H _A
H ₀ :1	.603	.364	.000	Failed to uphold	Upheld
H ₀ :2	.664	.441	.000	Failed to uphold	Upheld
H ₀ :3	.672	.452	.000	Failed to uphold	Upheld
H ₀ :4	.694	.482	.000	Failed to uphold	Upheld
H ₀ :5	.619	.383	.000	Failed to uphold	Upheld

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Source: IBM SPSS version 25.0 Output, 2022

Table 4 shows the correlation between the dimensions of gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice. The results as presented indicate the nature of correlation as well as the extent to which the independent variables are predictive of the dependent variables. Table 4.16 shows that in relation with destination choice, publicity has a correlation coefficient $r=.603$ and coefficient of determination $r^2=.364$; positioning has a correlation coefficient $r=.664$ and coefficient of determination $r^2=.441$; price has a correlation coefficient $r=.672$ and coefficient of determination $r^2=.452$; presentation has a correlation coefficient $r=.694$ and coefficient of determination $r^2=.482$; and palatability has a correlation coefficient $r=.619$ and coefficient of determination $r^2=.383$.

The findings of this study suggest that gastronomic tourism attributes have significant relationship with destination choices and could be a strong predictor for tourists in their choice of tourism destinations. These results are not far-fetched from previous empirical evidence (Brokaj, 2014; Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020; Nwokorie, 2015) on local features of tourism destinations. For example Pavlidis and Markantonatou (2020) recorded similar result on gastronomic tourism in Greece while Brokaj (2015) found that gastronomic offers play significant roles in choosing tourism destination in Albania. Similarly, Nwokorie (2015) provided empirical evidence on importance of food tourism in local economic development and national branding in Nigeria.

The study also corroborated the findings of Ajake (2015) who assessed the influence of marketing strategies on destination choices in Cross River State, Nigeria, the results emphasized the potency of effective marketing communication and recommendations from friends and family on tourists' destination choices. Similarly, Mirtaghiyan et al. (2013) found that food tourism branding in Iranian tourism, with advertising identified as a key factor influenced tourists' choices. Merabet (2020) also had similar findings, exploring the role of social media in tourists' destination choices. The finding concluded that social media usage significantly affects destination choices and recommended improved content quality and user experiences for destination managers.

Furthermore, Azmat and Lakhani (2015) and Getachew (2019) supported the findings of this study; with empirical evidences in their studies which emphasised that brand positioning strategies' affect consumer perception, choices and customers' loyalty. Ndu and Chikwe (2018) investigated the relationship between destination attributes and tourist destination choice at Port Harcourt Pleasure Park and Obudu Mountain Resort. They also found that affordability (price), accessibility, and safety are destination attributes that significantly influences tourists' destination choice, suggesting that high prices deter tourists. In another study Moussa et al. (2020) found that pricing of tourism product has serious implications on tourists' purchasing decisions in Karbala, Iraq. Their results indicated that product price significantly affects purchasing decisions. Other empirical investigation (Zainol et al., 2018) gave supporting evidence on plating style (Brunstrom et al., 2016), and found that portioning size of food are all gastronomic attributes that influence destination choice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shed light on the crucial relationship between gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice in Port Harcourt. The five dimensions of gastronomic tourism attributes—publicity, positioning, price, presentation, and palatability have been thoroughly examined, and their impacts on tourists' destination choices have been ascertained. The findings of this study reveal several key highlights as follows:

1. Effective promotional efforts, such as social media campaigns, food fairs, and articles can significantly increase awareness of Port Harcourt's gastronomic offerings among tourists.
2. Emphasizing the unique cultural aspects of local cuisine, interactions with local producers, and convenience would contribute to making Port Harcourt a preferred gastronomic tourism destination.
3. Price sensitivity is a crucial factor, and implementing pricing strategies to cater to different income levels is essential for attracting a diverse range of tourists.
4. Visual appeal, cleanliness, hygiene, and server demeanour play a significant role in enhancing tourists' experiences and influencing their choices.
5. The quality and sensory appeal of gastronomic offerings, including taste, texture, appearance, and nutritional value, are vital factors in attracting and satisfying tourists.
6. The study also noted the relevance of rational choice and push-pull theories in explaining tourists' destination choices, emphasizing the complexity of decision-making processes.

Therefore, understanding the interplay between gastronomic tourism attributes and destination choice is crucial for Destination Management Organizations to create effective marketing strategies and position their destinations as preferred choices for tourists seeking memorable culinary experiences.

Based on these findings these recommendations for Port Harcourt Destination Management Organizations were proposed:

1. Intensified efforts should be made in promoting Port Harcourt's gastronomic tourism offerings through various channels, including social media, food festivals, articles, and multimedia campaigns.
2. Emphasize the unique cultural and experiential aspects of Port Harcourt's gastronomic offerings, highlighting convenience and local producer interactions to create a distinctive positioning in the market.
3. Implement pricing strategies that ensure affordability for a wide range of tourists, making gastronomic offerings accessible to different income groups.
4. Invest in culinary techniques, training, and sensory experiences to enhance the presentation and appeal of gastronomic offerings.
5. Collaborate closely with local food producers and chefs to ensure high-quality gastronomic experiences that meet tourists' expectations.

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study opens avenues for further research in the field of gastronomic tourism such as:

1. Investigation into the impact of gastronomic tourism attributes on destination choice in different geographical locations to expand the understanding of this phenomenon.
2. Exploring the influence of cultural differences, including local food preferences, traditions, and norms, on gastronomic tourism choices.
3. Examining the role of sustainability in shaping tourists' destination choices, considering factors such as local food sourcing, waste management, and sustainability initiatives.

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