



**DEVELOPING CULINARY TOURISM BRANDING GUIDELINES IN
SRI LANKA**



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**A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Naresuan University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts in Tourism and Hospitality Management
2025**

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Thesis entitled “Developing Culinary Tourism Branding Guidelines in Sri Lanka.”

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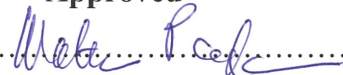
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8 JAN 2026

Title	DEVELOPING CULINARY TOURISM BRANDING GUIDELINES IN SRI LANKA
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Academic Paper	Master of Arts Thesis in Tourism and Hospitality Management, Naresuan University, 2025
Keywords	Culinary tourism, Branding challenges, Branding identity, Branding guidelines, Sri Lanka, Stakeholder perspectives

ABSTRACT

Culinary tourism has become a significant dimension of the global tourism industry, offering destinations opportunities to strengthen cultural identity and stimulate economic growth. Sri Lanka, with its rich food heritage, diverse flavours, and traditional cooking methods, possesses immense potential to emerge as a leading culinary destination. However, this potential remains underdeveloped due to critical branding issues. Culinary tourism is often underrepresented in national promotional strategies, overshadowed by the emphasis on beaches and heritage attractions. Regional culinary diversity is insufficiently highlighted, stakeholder collaboration remains weak, and there is no unified branding framework to connect local food traditions with the country's tourism identity. These gaps have hindered the recognition of Sri Lanka as a culinary tourism destination and created a clear need for systematic research. This study explored the challenges of culinary branding, identified elements of Sri Lanka's tourism brand identity, and developed branding guidelines aimed at positioning the country as a recognized culinary tourism destination.

The research adopted a qualitative methodology, primarily involving in-depth interviews with international tourists, officials involved in the tourism sector, and members of local communities. This study focused on investigating the challenges related to culinary branding in Sri Lanka, with an emphasis on identifying key elements of the country's culinary tourism branding identity. It also aimed to develop branding guidelines to position Sri Lanka as an exclusive culinary tourism destination. The outcomes were intended to assist policymakers and industry stakeholders in formulating

strategies to enhance the global image of Sri Lanka's culinary tourism and ensure that these strategies aligned with broader tourism development goals.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is submitted to the Graduate School of Naresuan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Tourism and Hospitality Management.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Montira Intason. This research study could not have been completed without her insight, feedback, invaluable advice, and thoughtful comments. She is a great mentor and a wonderful person who genuinely cares about her students and consistently provides guidance and support.

I am also sincerely grateful to the Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) for their scholarship and support, which enabled me to pursue this master's degree. Their encouragement, resources, and commitment to education have made this academic journey possible.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the research participants, including international tourists, tourism officials, and local community members, who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights. Their contributions provided the foundation for this study and enriched the findings with valuable perspectives on culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my family for their unwavering encouragement, love, and support throughout this journey. Their guidance, care, and belief in me have made this academic journey possible and have allowed me to fulfill my dream of studying in an international country. I would also like to thank my colleagues for their encouragement and support, which contributed greatly to the successful completion of this thesis.

Ms. Sathiyabbriya Kodeswaranathan

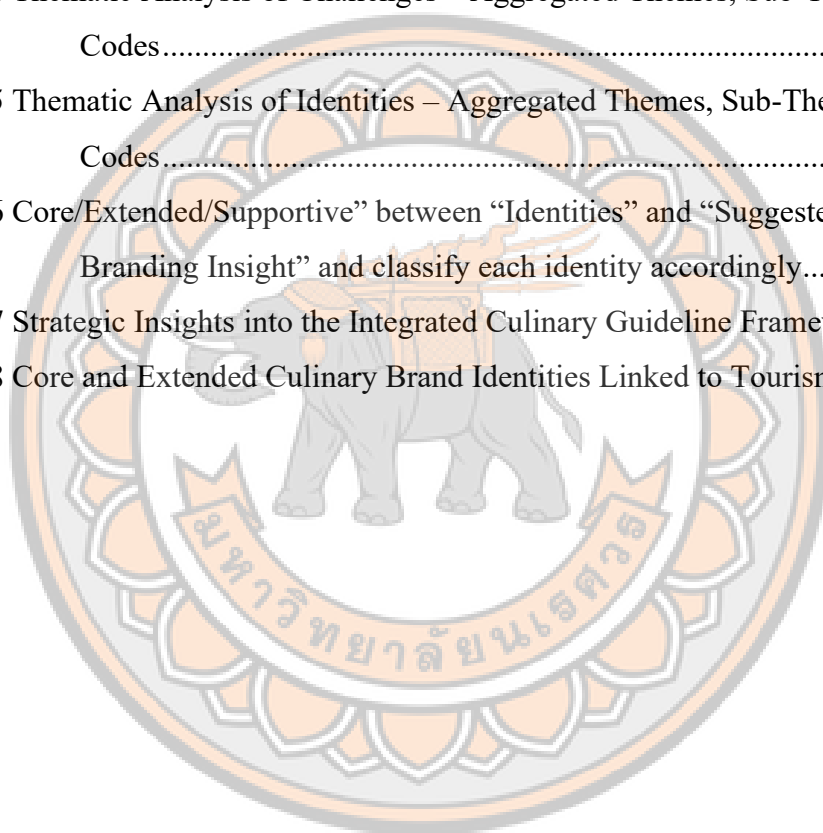
LIST OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	C
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	E
TABLE OF CONTENTS	F
LIST OF TABLES	H
LIST OF FIGURES	I
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. Background.....	1
1.2. Significance of the Study.....	3
1.3 Purpose of the Study.....	4
1.4 Statement of the Problem.....	4
1.5 Objectives of the Study.....	5
1.6 Research Questions.....	5
1.7 Scope of the Study.....	6
CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 Destination Branding.....	7
2.1.1 Definition of Destination Branding.....	7
2.1.2 Key Elements of Destination Branding.....	8
2.1.3 The Role of Food in Destination Branding.....	9
2.1.4 Challenges in Destination Branding.....	10
2.2 Food Tourism Branding.....	12
2.2.1 Definition of Food Tourism Branding.....	12
2.2.2 Key Elements of Food Tourism Branding.....	13
2.2.3 The Role of Food Tourism Branding.....	15
2.2.4 Challenges in Food Tourism Branding.....	16
2.3 Analysis of Successful Food Tourism Countries and Their Culinary Brands....	18
2.4 The Current State of Culinary Tourism in Sri Lanka.....	22
2.5 Conceptualizing Culinary Brand Identity for Sri Lanka.....	23

CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	28
3.1 Research Instruments.....	28
3.2 Data Collection.....	29
3.3 Population and Sample.....	31
3.3.1 Selection Criteria for Participants.....	31
3.3.2 Sample Size.....	35
3.4 Data Analysis.....	35
CHAPTER IV RESULTS.....	38
4.1 Objective 1- Challenges in Culinary Branding.....	38
4.2 Objective 2 – Identities of Culinary Branding.....	49
4.3 Objective 3- Developing Culinary Branding Guidelines.....	54
4.3.1 Methodological Approach to Guideline Development.....	55
4.3.2 Thematic Integration of Challenges and Identities.....	56
4.3.3 Integrated Culinary Tourism Guideline Framework for Sri Lanka.....	60
4.3.4. Suggested Strategic Branding Insights.....	67
CHAPTER V DISCUSSION.....	70
5.1 Discussion on the Integrated Culinary Tourism Guideline Framework.....	70
CHAPTER VI CONCLUSIONS.....	74
6.1 Summary of the Study.....	74
6.2 Theoretical Contribution.....	74
6.3 Practical Contribution.....	75
6.4 Recommendation.....	76
6.5 Limitations.....	77
6.6 Directions for Future Research.....	78
REFERENCES.....	79
APPENDIX.....	84
BIOGRAPHY.....	95

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1 Successful Food Tourism Countries	21
Table 2 – Culinary Branding Identity Framework	25
Table 3 – Selection Criteria of Participant Group	34
Table 4 Thematic Analysis of Challenges – Aggregated Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes.....	47
Table 5 Thematic Analysis of Identities – Aggregated Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes.....	53
Table 6 Core/Extended/Supportive” between “Identities” and “Suggested Strategic Branding Insight” and classify each identity accordingly.....	57
Table 7 Strategic Insights into the Integrated Culinary Guideline Framework Stage..	61
Table 8 Core and Extended Culinary Brand Identities Linked to Tourism Products ...	65



LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework.....	27
Figure 2 Integrated Culinary Tourism Guideline Framework for Sri Lanka.....	66



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Culinary tourism is an expanding phenomenon in the larger travel and tourism marketplace for tourists who travel to destinations that attract visitors not only for their natural beauty and cultural heritage, but also to experience the authentic local cuisine that has a direct relevance to the heritage and culture of the destination (Hall & Mitchell, 2002). Culinary tourism plays a significant role in cultural tourism, especially for visitors unfamiliar with the destination, by fostering emotional connections to a place's history and cultural identity through food (Richards, 2002).

Food is an integral aspect of travel. It has much to do with a destination and appeal to make travel memorable (Hjalager, 2002). Beyond personal satisfaction, food tourism helps to create a platform for cultural exchange, economic development, and social integration (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Countries like Italy, France, Thailand, Mexico, and Malaysia are considered to represent certain consideration of growing culinary tourism, which mainly indicates the more general demand in the world for food travels (UNWTO, 2012).

The culinary tourism dimensions of Sri Lanka have more potential, especially due to the culinary heritage and diversity. The signature dishes, such as rice and curry, hoppers, and seafood, reflect a deep integration of local ingredients with international influences, offering unique culinary experiences (Fernando, 2013). Most significantly, the culinary strength of Sri Lankan culture has been hindered by several limitations within its food culture, preventing it from fully capitalizing on the international tourism market. Absence of a clear, defined culinary tourism brand has limited its positioning as a culinary destination, missing key rich food traditions for promoting internationally.

Recent research on culinary tourism has explored its economic, cultural, and experiential dimensions. Scholars such as Hall and Sharples (2003) have focused on local economic development, while others have examined tourist satisfaction and the experiential aspects of food tourism. Kivela and Crotts (2006) highlighted that food tourism provides rich sensory experiences—through the taste, smell, texture, and

appearance of food—along with emotional connections, such as happiness, nostalgia, and excitement from trying something new. It also promotes cultural engagement by helping travellers understand traditions through local cuisines, and encourages social interaction through activities like food festivals, cooking classes, and shared meals with local people. Altogether, these experiences strongly influence how travellers perceive and connect emotionally with a destination.

However, while these studies offer valuable insights into how food contributes to the tourism experience, most of them have examined economic, cultural, and experiential aspects separately, rather than in an integrated manner. This has led to a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these dimensions collectively support the development of a strong culinary tourism brand. In the case of Sri Lanka, there is still very limited research that specifically addresses culinary branding challenges or the identification of a clear culinary brand identity.

Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic understanding of how Sri Lanka's culinary features—both core and extended identities—can be translated into practical branding guidelines for tourism promotion. This study addresses this gap by linking stakeholder insights with theoretical frameworks to create actionable strategies.

As a result, important factors such as authenticity, identity, and uniqueness of Sri Lankan cuisine are often overlooked, reducing the perceived value of the country's culinary offerings in the international market. Therefore, developing a distinct culinary tourism branding identity that captures Sri Lanka's authenticity, traditional food culture, and unique flavours is essential for improving its global competitiveness.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to identify the branding challenges faced by Sri Lanka, clarify its culinary brand identity, and analyse successful branding practices from other destinations. It also seeks to define Sri Lanka's current culinary tourism brand identity by focusing on authenticity, taste, and regional diversity. It also systematically operationalizes identified core and extended culinary identities into practical branding guidelines, providing direct guidance for tourism authorities and local stakeholders. The findings are expected to contribute to developing practical branding guidelines that can strengthen Sri Lanka's image as a culinary destination. By addressing these challenges, the proposed guidelines will help enhance the authenticity and richness of Sri Lankan cuisine, build a stronger international

reputation, foster cultural appreciation, and create greater economic opportunities within the tourism industry.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic value by contributing to the growing body of knowledge on culinary tourism branding, particularly within the context of developing countries. Research in this area remains limited in South Asia, as most existing studies have focused on Western or East Asian destinations. By addressing this gap, the study introduces new insights into how culinary identity, authenticity, and regional diversity can be effectively integrated into tourism branding strategies. It advances the academic discourse on place branding by extending its application to culinary tourism in Sri Lanka, thereby offering a conceptual model that can be adapted to other emerging destinations. Furthermore, the branding framework developed in this study not only enriches theoretical discussions on cultural identity, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable tourism branding but also provides a foundation for future research in similar contexts.

Beyond its theoretical implications, this study is also significant for the tourism industry of Sri Lanka, as it focuses on culinary tourism branding—a promising avenue for diversifying and strengthening the nation's tourism product. Although Sri Lanka possesses rich culinary traditions and varied cuisines, the absence of systematic branding guidelines has restricted its ability to position itself as a leading culinary destination. By clearly defining core and extended culinary identities and translating them into practical branding guidelines, this study offers a direct roadmap for policymakers, tourism authorities, and local communities to strengthen the country's culinary tourism sector. Identifying branding challenges and defining a clear culinary tourism identity can provide the country with a competitive edge, attract more international tourists, and generate greater economic opportunities for food vendors, restaurants, and local communities. Strengthening culinary branding will also enhance the visibility of Sri Lankan heritage foods and contribute to their long-term preservation. Establishing a well-defined culinary brand will thus help Sri Lanka differentiate itself from competing destinations while offering visitors deeper cultural and sensory experiences.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Sri Lanka's diverse food culture lacks clear guidelines for promoting its culinary uniqueness on the global stage. The purpose of this study was to develop comprehensive branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka by systematically analysing stakeholder perspectives on branding challenges and identifying a distinct, authentic culinary brand identity. The study further operationalizes core and extended culinary identities into actionable strategies, ensuring practical application of the branding framework. These guidelines are designed to strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary image, enhance strategic marketing efforts, promote regional culinary diversity, and position culinary tourism as a key driver of sustainable economic growth, cultural preservation, and inclusive community development.

1.4 Statement of the Problems

The culinary tourism potential in Sri Lanka is severely underdeveloped, despite the country having a vast range of culinary diversity, from authentic dishes such as hoppers, Jaffna crab curry, and Pol Sambol, which all reflect the country's cultural identity (SLTDA, 2023). The tourism marketing focus on the global map has paid undue importance to landscapes, beaches, and culture-affiliated heritage sites, relegating the significant worth that local foods can hold as a tourist attraction (SLTDA, 2023). Consequently, countless international tourists remain unaware of the wide range of culinary experiences available in Sri Lanka. The authenticity and appeal of these foods have been poorly explored and rarely highlighted, reducing their potential to enhance tourists' overall experiences.

Sri Lankan food culture is underexplored because the country's culinary tourism lacks a clear and structured branding framework. The absence of a framework linking core and extended culinary identities to practical tourism branding strategies has limited Sri Lanka's potential as a competitive culinary destination. In the absence of such a framework, Sri Lanka has been unable to position its cuisine as a distinctive culinary attraction in the global market. This gap in culinary tourism branding limits Sri Lanka's ability to draw attention in the global food tourism market. From an academic perspective, there is also a lack of comprehensive research that integrates culinary identity, authenticity, and branding within the Sri Lankan tourism context. Previous

studies have primarily focused on economic or cultural aspects of tourism, without addressing how branding strategies can be developed for culinary tourism in developing countries.

By developing systematic branding guidelines, Sri Lanka could strengthen its culinary tourism sector, emphasize its rich culinary heritage, and attract more international tourists who are interested in authentic food experiences. Addressing this academic gap will also contribute to the theoretical understanding of culinary tourism branding by providing an applied model for destinations with similar cultural and economic contexts. It will also provide guidance for operationalizing culinary identities into stakeholder actions and tourism products. Such guidelines would additionally foster collaboration among stakeholders in the food and tourism industries, ensuring that culinary tourism becomes a key component of the country's overall tourism development.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka. This study filled an existing gap in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka by establishing the need for culinary branding guidelines. The area has remained mostly undeveloped and lacked a proper and clearly defined. The study identified challenges and the existing brand identity for culinary tourism, and developed of branding guidelines that may be effective for reinforcing the identity of Sri Lanka as a competitive culinary tourism country. Accordingly, this study aimed to offer branding guidelines for strengthening Sri Lanka's cuisine tourism branding and global competition.

These are the three objectives of this study:

1. To identify the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka
2. To identify the culinary tourism branding identity in Sri Lanka
3. To develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka

1.6 Research Questions

This study aimed to address the key objectives related to culinary tourism branding for Sri Lanka, specifically, identifying the challenges in branding, the existing

brand identity of culinary tourism, and developing branding guidelines. The following research questions were developed to align with these objectives and guide the study to explore Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. These questions enabled the study to concentrate on the challenges of branding, culinary identity, and developing branding guidelines to establish a stronger Sri Lankan culinary tourism brand. This study answered the following three research questions:

1. What are the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka?
2. What are the culinary tourism branding identities in Sri Lanka?
3. What are the branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka?

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study examined the development of branding guidelines for culinary tourism by analysing the challenges of culinary branding and the culinary tourism brand identity in Sri Lanka. It particularly targeted key stakeholders, including international tourists, government officials, and private agencies involved in the tourism sector, and local community members engaged in culinary tourism activities. The qualitative research approach employed insights from in-depth interviews with diverse participants to identify branding challenges, brand identity, and develop guidelines that enhance culinary tourism branding. By integrating core and extended culinary identities with practical branding components, the study ensures that its recommendations are directly actionable by SLTDA and local tourism stakeholders. By comparing Sri Lanka's culinary tourism branding efforts with successful models worldwide, the study provides practical recommendations, strategic insights, and innovative solutions to enhance the country's position, competitiveness, and sustainability in the global culinary tourism market. These guidelines offer a clear vision and path toward aligning Sri Lanka's culinary identity with a supported strategy to promote culinary tourism across the country.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination branding, along with food tourism branding, is seen as an aspect that influences a country's tourism identity. Accordingly, the review starts with destination branding, its definition, components, the role of food in branding, and associated challenges. Thereafter, it moves on to food tourism branding, explaining the core components that carry their own functions and challenges in becoming well-branded. Successful food tourism destinations and their culinary branding strategies offer lessons for founding a culinary tourism brand for Sri Lanka, while this chapter also examines the present situation of Sri Lankan culinary tourism, highlighting its current context.

2.1 Destination Branding

Destination branding is the planned process of deciding how to present a place to the visitors to create and sustain an attractive, coherent, and distinctive image of the area that stimulates interest and potential visitations within a highly competitive global tourism marketplace (Anholt, 2007). In the present saturated tourism industry, any destination must go out of its way to gain the attention of potential visitors. Effective branding creates an emotional connection with tourists, making them enhance their probability to select a given destination and spend more on their experience there (Morgan et al., 2003). This is a process that goes beyond logos or taglines, but it is an intricate narrative that dives deep into the soul of the place through its culture, natural beauty, historical features, and unique experiences (Govers & Go, 2009).

2.1.1 Definition of Destination Branding

Destination branding refers to a place, such be it a city, region, or country, and its unique attempts to build a unique image and identity for that place. Images and identities are eclectically developed around tangible and intangible characteristics of a destination, such as culture, history, people, attractions, and increasing food (Morgan,

et al., 2003). Destination branding is about setting a location apart from others in the global tourism market by highlighting what is special or unique about it. It is about an emotional story that invites tourists to visit and experience it themselves (Anholt, 2007).

A destination brand includes more than public relations and marketing to promote a destination's attractions. It is much more than the visual representation of the attractions; it is about the whole tourist experience, how the destination is perceived by tourists, and how it can be influenced via other experiential avenues (Govers & Go, 2009). Creating lasting impressions and positive associations will, in turn, encourage word-of-mouth promotion and repeat visits. An effective destination brand will be equated with specific experiences and feelings such as adventure, relaxation, luxury, culture, or, quite notably, its food (Morgan et al., 2003).

Food, as an integral part of a destination's culture and heritage, plays a key role in creating memorable experiences and establishing a distinctive brand identity.

2.1.2 Key Elements of Destination Branding

Destination branding is an essential part of defining a place and appealing to tourists. Authenticity, consistency, differentiation, and above all, relevance to the target audience are some of the various components that contribute to effective branding. Food, the most central element of a cultural identity, has almost become an essential ingredient for destination branding as it gives tourists a flavor of experience within the place and connects them to the heritage of the place. This section elaborates on the significance of food in destination branding and emphasizes how culinary tourism activates the uniqueness within the destination, strengthens its cultural identity, and competitiveness in the global tourism market. The key elements of destination branding are Authenticity, Consistency, Differentiation, and Relevance to the Target Audience.

Authenticity: Tourist credibility and emotional engagement are two components that depend on the authenticity of a destination (Beverland, 2006). Authentic branding draws on representations of a place that show its real character, including culture, values, history, and lifestyle. On the other hand, misrepresentation and commercialization undermine credibility. Authenticity is especially concerned since

tourists' genuine desire is an authentic food experience that reveals something about living in the local way of life (Beverland, 2006).

Consistency: Consistent branding is a key part of creating an identity that is both recognizable and coherent (Keller, 2001). By constructing a cohesive message across various media, including the use of visual elements (logos, colors, etc.) and storytelling, every platform, such as websites, brochures, advertisements, and social media, will collect its share of the picture. Inconsistent branding will undermine potential tourists and hinder the cohesive image of the destination, which greatly impedes its chances of recognition in competitive niches.

Differentiation: Since many destinations compete for the same tourist market, differentiation is an important factor here. The destinations must highlight anything and everything that makes them unique, such as natural beauty, historical landmarks, cultural traditions, or food experiences (Holt, 2004). An effective differentiation helps a destination identify its competitive market and appeal to specific segments of tourists. For instance, France's culinary heaven would be the differentiation, while Thailand would prefer its exotic street food culture.

Relevance to Target Audience: The branding message should be matched with the desires and expectations of the target tourist demographic. It creates the opportunity to develop a compelling messaging strategy that appeals to motivate or interest prospective visitors (Keller, 2001). Such food tourism targeting culinary tourists emphasizes authenticity, local flavors, and experiential engagement, even while adventure or eco-tourism might focus on nature and outdoor activities.

Collectively, these elements guide destinations in creating a coherent and compelling brand, with food serving as a vital link between cultural authenticity and tourist engagement.

2.1.3 The Role of Food in Destination Branding

Food is fast becoming a significant aspect of destination branding. Food is increasingly at the heart of experience marketing toward culture and immersion,

thereby offering a good connection with the essence of a place for tourists. These culinary experiences are entry points for visitors to engage with the culture, traditions, and social practices of the local community (UNWTO, 2012). This is especially for the food-centric countries, where cuisine is integral to the national identity.

Food tourism, a growing segment of the tourism industry, capitalizes on travelers' desires for an authentic culinary experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Food can solidify the identity of a destination's culinary become symbols of the culture and way of life of that country. Such as Italy's name is attached to its food traditions of pasta and pizza, wine, and coffee (UNWTO, 2012). Likewise, Thailand's food culture is a major theme in tourism, with names of dishes such as Pad Thai, Tom Yum soup, and Thai street food recognized worldwide and associated with the country (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Apart from supporting local businesses such as restaurants, food markets, and farms, food tourism provides a place for cultural exchange. Tourists learn from cooking methods, local ingredients, and traditions, which result in a stronger connection to the destination. Destinations may create dishes with authentic taste and cultural significance, which embed a destination as a unique experience that is very difficult to replicate elsewhere (UNWTO, 2012).

For Sri Lanka, highlighting authentic culinary experiences can enhance destination identity, attract food tourists, and contribute to the development of a cohesive culinary tourism brand.

2.1.4 Challenges in Destination Branding

Destination branding plays a vital role in attracting tourists and shaping the image of a place, yet many destinations continue to face significant challenges in promoting a clear and authentic identity. These challenges are particularly visible in culinary tourism, where inconsistent branding, limited cultural understanding, the underrepresentation of food as a cultural asset, and increasing global competition have constrained the ability of destinations to effectively communicate their uniqueness.

Such issues often prevent destinations from showcasing their authentic food cultures and exporting their culinary identity to the global market.

One of the key challenges lies in the lack of consistency in branding efforts, where various stakeholders—such as government bodies, local businesses, and tourism authorities—promote differing messages about the same destination. This inconsistency, as highlighted by Morgan et al. (2003), confuses potential visitors and weakens the development of a unified and recognizable brand image. Closely related to this is the poor understanding and representation of local culture, which leads to superficial or inauthentic portrayals of culinary traditions. Beverland (2006) explains that when branding fails to genuinely reflect a destination's food culture, it distorts reality and disconnects visitors who seek authentic cultural experiences. In many destinations, local culinary products are commercialized or diluted to cater to global tastes, which results in the loss of cultural authenticity and a missed opportunity for deeper tourist engagement.

Another major challenge is the underemphasis on food as a cultural asset. While some countries have successfully integrated their culinary heritage into their national tourism brand, others have not recognized food's potential as a key component of destination identity. According to the UNWTO (2012), this often stems from a lack of strategic focus or undervaluation of food as a cultural and economic resource. When destinations fail to highlight food as an attraction, they lose the chance to appeal to food-motivated travellers who increasingly seek authentic culinary experiences. In addition to these internal challenges, global competition further intensifies the difficulty of standing out in the international tourism market. As Holt (2004) notes, possessing a rich culinary heritage alone is insufficient; destinations must strategically differentiate themselves by emphasizing what makes their culinary identity unique and relevant to target audiences.

Recognizing these challenges is essential for understanding how Sri Lanka can strengthen its own culinary tourism branding. Addressing issues such as inconsistency, cultural misrepresentation, and lack of strategic positioning will help build a more coherent and authentic image for the country's culinary offerings. Moreover,

understanding the broader context of destination branding—along with the pivotal role of food within it—provides an important foundation for this study. By drawing insights from global best practices and aligning them with Sri Lanka's distinctive food culture, this research seeks to develop branding guidelines that enhance authenticity, consistency, and competitiveness. Ultimately, such efforts can contribute to a stronger culinary identity for Sri Lanka, increased tourist engagement, and a more sustainable presence in the global tourism market.

2.2 Food Tourism Branding

Food tourism branding is a dynamic feature and is an essential element in marketing a destination. It specifically seeks to capitalize on a destination's food culture to attract tourists, especially those who seek culinary experiences. Gastronomical offerings of a destination, promoted as part of the identity of that destination, should rank at the top of tourist attractions, thereby enhancing the overall travel experience. It differs from destination branding in that destination branding has many approaches to enhance the appeal of an area, while food tourism branding focuses exclusively on food culture to create an emotional and sensory connection in potential visitors (Ahanu & Christofani, 2020).

2.2.1 Definition of Food Tourism Branding

Food-tourism branding involves the process of developing a clear, appealing image of a destination through culinary experiences related to local flavors, traditions, and gastronomic culture. Food will be positioned as one of the major motivators for travel, where culinary experiences, such as food festivals, local delicacies, street food, cooking classes, or wine-tasting events, become integral to the destination's brand (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Lin et al., 2011).

It is a specialized form of branding aimed at attracting food-enthusiast tourists, for whom the primary motivation for traveling is such activities as tasting local food, understanding food history, and enjoying authentic dining environments. Food tourism branding provides the image and identity of a place with a unique food identity that differentiates that destination from others.

Food tourism branding may be seen in more extended settings as marketing food as the "product" for the tourist, just like a city or a country marketing any natural landmarks or historical sites (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). It is not merely about promoting restaurants. It encompasses the history, culture, social, and economic significance of food, and all such information that contributes to shaping the image of the destination in the image of potential visitors.

Understanding food tourism branding provides a basis for examining how Sri Lanka can develop a distinctive culinary identity that attracts food-focused travelers and supports the creation of effective branding guidelines.

2.2.2 Key Elements of Food Tourism Branding

Some main components make up food tourism branding. This is the destination established that would have its strong identity from the perspective of food enthusiast travelers. These components work together to build a compelling narrative that attracts tourists and fosters beautiful memories through culinary experiences. Among them are authenticity, sensory, storytelling, and differentiation through food. The key elements of food branding are Authenticity, Sensory Appeal, Storytelling, Differentiation: Food Tourism as a Unique Selling Point, Consistency, and Sustainability.

Authenticity - The base on which food tourism branding stands is authenticity. Tourists travel to seek out the past in the locality and the traditions. The destination should ensure the foods that are offered are true to roots, foods made from local products, and traditional methods of cooking. Authentic food experiences build trust, emotional connections, and encourage repeat visits and positive word of mouth in many cases. Such as food festivals and local markets present indigenous ingredients or cooking styles, helping ensure the authenticity of food tourism branding (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Sensory Appeal - Food tourism is associated with the sensory components of food, such as taste, smell, texture, and visual appeal. The promotional branding strategies must emphasize sensory experiences that bring something unique to the local flavor. A memorable meal does not just taste great; it's also characterized by its ambiance, its

presentation, and the feelings it evokes. This goes for the amazing, colorful street food scenes from Thailand or even the smell of bread baking in France; such experiences contribute to the destination's branding magic (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Storytelling - The role of storytelling in food tourism is crucial. They create emotional bonding towards places through stories surrounding the origins of dishes, cooking practices, or cultural meanings connected to food within the place. A good culinary story enriches the value of experience and lets a meal become a cultural journey. The stories in Italy surrounding pasta and wine or the stories in Japan regarding the sushi are making traditions contribute to building a compelling story in food tourism (Getz et al., 2014).

Differentiation: Food Tourism as a Unique Selling Point - A destination should differentiate itself by anchoring its food culture to the marketing appeal. It becomes the unique selling point for the destination, which then gives it a competitive edge within a large tourism market. The differentiation may be as simple as local dish characteristics, including culinary techniques or even regional food practices that one does not find similar anywhere else. For instance, India's street food culture is a strong selling point that attracts culinary tourists, while Thailand's spicy flavors and exotic ingredients create a unique culinary experience that makes it different from other places. By positioning food as a differentiator, it creates strong, memorable identities for destinations and attracts tourists seeking such experiences (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

Consistency - For a strong food tourism brand, a consistent message across all marketing channels, whether online, in promotional materials, or through local establishments, is key. Consistence keeps the identity and values in the minds of tourists, whether they are reading a brochure, perusing a website, or participating in local food experiences. This consistency helps create a trustworthy, recognizable food brand in the minds of tourists (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Sustainability - Sustainability is important in the tourism industry. The present need focuses on applying food tourism in an eco-friendly way and respects local communities. Sustainable food sourcing, reducing food waste, and supporting local

farmers and artisans are very important. A food tourism brand should capture this thinking and link it to the growing number of eco-tourists. For instance, promoting farm-to-table dining experiences or emphasizing foods produced locally and in season can reinforce a destination's eco-commitment (Everett & Aitchison, 2008)

Understanding these key elements of food tourism branding provides a foundation for developing Sri Lanka's culinary tourism branding guidelines, ensuring the country's food culture is authentically represented, memorable for tourists, and positioned competitively in the global market.

2.2.3 The Role of Food Tourism Branding

Food tourism branding plays a significant role in enhancing the identity of a destination and attracting specific tourist demographics. In today's competitive tourism market, food is no longer merely a supplementary aspect of travel for many travelers; it often becomes the primary motivator. By highlighting a destination's culinary heritage, food tourism branding helps shape and reinforce its identity, which is deeply connected with cultural, historical, and geographical elements. A strong culinary identity distinguishes a destination from its competitors and can earn global recognition. For example, France is closely associated with wine and fine dining, while Japan is recognized for sushi and traditional cuisine. Branding food alongside the destination allows culinary customs to become symbolic of the place, offering tourists authentic cultural immersion (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Food tourism branding also contributes significantly to economic growth by supporting local communities through the service sector, agriculture, retail, and food production. Promoting local food experiences attracts tourists who spend time on meals, culinary tours, and festivals, creating additional income streams for restaurants, markets, and producers. This localized demand benefits farmers, artisans, and food producers while enhancing the tourism economy (Hall & Sharples, 2003).

Moreover, food tourism branding encourages cultural exchange between visitors and the local community. Through culinary experiences, tourists gain insight into a destination's traditions, history, and values, while simultaneously contributing new perspectives to local food culture. These interactions enhance tourists' experiences and foster appreciation for cultural diversity (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012).

As food is inherently a sensory experience, culinary tourism branding creates memorable travel moments by engaging taste, smell, sight, and touch. Activities such as cooking classes, food festivals, wine tastings, and market tours provide emotional touchpoints, leading to repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Finally, food tourism branding positions a destination in the global market by targeting niche tourists whose travels are motivated by culinary experiences. Unique or internationally recognized cuisine can become a powerful differentiator, from Italy's pasta and wine to Thailand's street food culture. Additionally, food tourism branding can promote sustainable tourism practices by encouraging the use of local, seasonal, and environmentally friendly ingredients, supporting the local economy, and appealing to eco-conscious travelers (Hall & Sharples, 2008).

These insights guide the development of Sri Lanka's culinary tourism branding, ensuring the country's food culture is showcased authentically, sustainably, and attractively to international travelers.

2.2.4 Challenges in Food Tourism Branding

Branding food tourism presents distinctive challenges for destinations that use culinary culture as a key attraction, as food lies at the very heart of the tourism experience. Despite its importance, food-based branding is often hindered by the lack of a cohesive culinary identity, questions of authenticity, difficulties in conveying cultural meaning, and growing concerns about sustainability. Effective food tourism branding must unify diverse culinary experiences under a strong and meaningful identity that reflects authenticity, cultural depth, and historical value. At the same time, it should integrate sustainable practices that mitigate negative environmental and social impacts. Addressing these interconnected challenges is essential to establishing a responsible and enduring food tourism brand.

One of the most persistent issues is the lack of a cohesive culinary identity. While many destinations possess rich and diverse culinary traditions, these are often fragmented or disconnected, preventing them from forming a unified image under one brand. Hjalager and Richards (2002) point out that when destinations promote their food offerings inconsistently, they fail to create a coherent story that captures tourists'

imagination. Such fragmented efforts can weaken the destination's marketing power and result in diluted brand messages. To overcome this, destinations need to integrate their culinary offerings within a clear and appealing brand framework that tells a unified story and reflects the essence of their food culture.

Another significant challenge is authenticity, which remains a cornerstone of successful food tourism branding. Travellers who seek genuine local cuisine are often disappointed when they encounter commercialized or modified versions of traditional dishes tailored to tourist tastes. As Richards (2002) highlights, food tourists desire authentic culinary experiences that reflect the true food traditions of a destination. However, balancing authenticity with international appeal can be difficult. Many destinations face the dilemma of maintaining traditional culinary practices while adapting to global market trends and visitor preferences. Therefore, food tourism branding must be grounded in authentic culinary practices while being flexible enough to meet the expectations of diverse audiences

Equally important is the challenge of conveying the cultural significance of food. Food embodies local history, culture, and social identity, yet communicating this depth to tourists is not always easy. As Everett and Aitchison (2008) suggest, a strong food tourism brand requires more than simply promoting local recipes; it relies on compelling storytelling that highlights the cultural and historical narratives behind each dish. Successful destinations such as Japan and Italy demonstrate how storytelling transforms food into a meaningful cultural experience—Japan with its detailed narratives surrounding sushi, and Italy with its regional pasta traditions that reflect deep cultural roots. Without such interpretive storytelling, food branding becomes superficial and fails to create emotional engagement between visitors and local cuisines (Getz et al., 2014).

A further challenge lies in ensuring sustainability within food tourism branding. The rapid growth of food tourism often increases pressure on local environments and resources. Over-tourism in popular food markets or excessive demand for specific ingredients can lead to environmental degradation and social strain. For example, overharvesting seafood to meet tourist demand has caused damage to marine ecosystems in some regions. Hall, Gössling, and Scott (2015) also note that the carbon footprint and food waste associated with tourism-related dining activities pose serious

sustainability concerns. Therefore, destinations must incorporate sustainable food practices, such as promoting local sourcing, farm-to-table systems, and responsible tourism that supports both communities and the environment.

Recognizing these challenges is essential for formulating strategies that can guide Sri Lanka in developing a unified, authentic, and sustainable food tourism brand. Understanding the principles, roles, and barriers within food tourism branding provides a vital foundation for this study, which aims to develop culinary tourism branding guidelines tailored to the Sri Lankan context. By analysing elements such as authenticity, sensory appeal, storytelling, differentiation, consistency, and sustainability—along with the challenges of cohesion, cultural representation, and environmental responsibility, this research identifies practical strategies for enhancing Sri Lanka's culinary identity. Ultimately, these insights can help unify the nation's diverse food traditions under a coherent brand, increase tourist engagement, and promote sustainable growth within Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector.

2.3 Analysis of Successful Food Tourism Countries and Their Culinary Brands

Culinary branding relates to the destination with a specific strategy a certain location adopts in positioning itself apart from other competing destinations. Successful destinations for food tourism include locations that effectively integrate their food heritage, tourism experience, and culinary identity into their tourism brand to attract domestic and international tourists. This section highlights the analysis of culinary branding strategies from five countries such as Thailand, France, Singapore, Italy, and Mexico. Furthermore, it analyzes how each of these countries succeeded in building a potent food tourism brand based on authenticity, storytelling, and cultural representation.

2.3.1 Thailand's Culinary Brand

Culinary tourism is one of the greatest successes brought about by Thailand itself. Among the nation branding strategies that positioned Thailand as the best tourist destination in the world is its food culture. Those unique elements are really flavorful, with lots of fresh ingredients, and there's a careful balance of sweet, sour, salty, and

spicy tastes. The Thai government has promoted this cuisine in international markets through various camps such as "Thai kitchen to the world," which offers support for Thai restaurants abroad and standardizes authenticity at all Thai restaurants around the globe. The culinary branding of Thailand is most associated with its street food culture, where most of the famous bustling markets across Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket would generally be international tourist attractions. The signature dishes popularly called Pad Thai, Tom Yum Goong, and Green Curry are prominently featured in promotional campaigns that create a connection between the promotion and the well branding of Thailand as a colourful and flavorsome food tourism destination (Lunchaprasith & MacLeod, 2018)

2.3.2 France's Culinary Brand

France is famous for one of the prestigious brands of culinary tourism and for cuisine associated with luxury, refinement, and gastronomic excellence. French culinary branding is based on haute cuisine, regional specialties, and wine culture. It has positioned itself as a premium food tourism destination that features Michelin-starred restaurants and renowned wine regions like Bordeaux and Champagne, and traditional bakeries. A signature enhancement to its culinary branding recognition came with the UNESCO declaration of the 'French Gastronomic Meal' as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, which adds to the cultural and social importance associated with French dining traditions (UNESCO, 2010). French tourism campaigns regularly showcase culinary experiences such as wine tours and cooking classes, along with food festivals, and this has helped to strengthen and differentiate France's culinary identity in tourism (Bessière & Tibère, 2013).

2.3.3 Singapore's Culinary Brand

Singapore has deliberately branded itself as a global food center, lending validity to its multicultural culinary heritage. Culinary tourism branding for this country is focused on the food domain, influenced by a mixture of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Peranakan elements. UNESCO's recognition of the hawker culture in its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage has further strengthened its culinary identity and authenticity. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) continued to promote culinary

identity through programs such as the "Passion Made Possible" advertising campaigns, which have put signature dishes such as Hainanese Chicken Rice, Laksa, and Chili Crab on the must-try list for visitors. With the Michelin Guide gracing Singapore, this told the world that Singapore has become a culinary power. It legitimized the quality and diversity of its food offerings (Chaney & Ryan, 2012).

2.3.4 Italy's Culinary Brand

The famous culinary tourism brand of Italy, highlighting authenticity, strong regional differentiation, and cultural heritage, derives from the culinary traditions present. Foodways of Italy are deeply connected to the destination, with specific regional preparations such as Neapolitan pizza, Tuscan wines, and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese from Emilia-Romagna. The "Made in Italy" tag name has played a key role in promoting Italy's culinary brand, giving traditional food products the ensure of authenticity and cultural significance. Events such as the Slow Food movement, which promotes sustainable practices and traditional food production, further promote Italian culinary tourism and Italy as a destination with values high-quality and artisanal cuisine (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2007).

2.3.5 Mexico's Culinary Brand

A brand has been created for Mexico, such as genuine, rich, diverse food culture, rooted in indigenous traditions and regional specialties. UNESCO declared Mexican cuisine as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, proving authenticity and historical significance. Many of Mexico's signature dishes, such as Tacos, Mole, and Tamales, serve as the culture's culinary branding, usually promoted by food festivals, street food experiences, and regional culinary tours. Food-marketing events have been incorporated into tourism, positioning food as a major tourist attraction next to cultural and historical sites. Part of the country's new culinary branding is tequila and mezcal, which includes tours to distillery tours and tasting events, which capture foreign gastronomic tourists (Thomé & Moctezuma Pérez, 2015).

By looking at such successful examples and getting some ideas, Sri Lanka may well secure its culinary tourism thanks to this idea by placing the food culture as one of the key pillars of the tourism brand.

Table 1 – Successful Food Tourism Countries

No	Country	Culinary Branding Focus	Key Elements of Branding	Signature Dishes/ Experiences	Cultural/ Heritage Recognition	Promotional Strategies
01	Thailand	- Street food -Authentic Thai cuisine	-Bold flavors, -fresh ingredients, - Traditional food preparation methods	- Pad Thai, - Tom Yum Goong, -Green Curry	- "Thai Kitchen to the World" initiative, - UNESCO recognition of Thai food culture	- "Thai Kitchen to the World" campaign, - Promoting street food in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket
02	France	-Haute cuisine, -Regional specialties, -Wine culture	-Luxury, refinement, -Regional diversity, -UNESCO recognition of French gastronomic meal	-Wine tours, -Cooking classes, - Michelin-starred restaurants, -French pastries	- UNESCO recognition of the "French Gastronomic Meal" as Intangible Cultural Heritage	-Food festivals, - Michelin Guide promotions, - Wine tours, -Cooking classes in French regions
03	Singapore	- Multi cultural culinary heritage - Street food	- Fusion of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Peranakan influences, - UNESCO recognition of hawker culture	- Hainanese Chicken Rice, - Laksa, - Chilli Crab	- UNESCO recognition of hawker culture as Intangible Cultural Heritage	- "Passion Made Possible" campaign, - Michelin Guide recognition, - Promotion of hawker culture and multicultural food scene
04	Italy	- Regional diversity, - Authenticity, - High-quality traditional food	- Strong regional identities, - Local terroir, "Made in Italy" label, - Slow Food movement	- Neapolitan pizza, - Tuscan wines, - Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese	- Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) - Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)	- Slow Food movement, - Promoting traditional food production and regional specialties, international culinary events
05	Mexico	- Vibrant and diverse food culture rooted	- Regional specialties, - Indigenous food culture,	- Tacos, - Mole, - Tamales, - Tequila,	- UNESCO recognition of Mexican cuisine as	-Food festivals, - Street food tours,

in indigenous traditions	- International recognition of Mexican cuisine	- Mezcal	Intangible Cultural Heritage	-Tequila and Mezcal tasting events, - Promotion of regional cuisine and indigenous foods
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Source – Created by Author

2.4 The Current State of Culinary Tourism in Sri Lanka

Culinary tourism in Sri Lanka holds strong potential for tourism development, drawing upon the nation's rich food heritage, regional diversity, and agricultural abundance. Each region contributes distinct flavors: the southern coasts are famous for seafood, while the hill country features dishes made with tea, dairy, and local herbs (Richards, 2002; Hall et al., 2003). Experiences such as food trials, cooking classes, and festivals can showcase these variations, enabling tourists to explore Sri Lanka's culinary spectrum (Telfer & Wall, 1996). Activities like market visits and cooking workshops where visitors prepare traditional dishes—such as rice and curry, kottu roti, and hoppers—enhance cultural immersion and connect sourcing, preparation, and consumption (Telfer & Wall, 1996; Hall et al., 2003).

National tourism policies have given limited attention to culinary tourism. The National Tourism Policy (2017–2020) refers to food mainly in a cultural context, without a clear strategic direction (SLTDA, 2017). Similarly, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) highlights food only as a supplementary feature in community-based initiatives like village tours in Ella and Sigiriya (SLTDA, 2019). These scattered efforts lack a cohesive national framework to fully utilize the country's culinary potential.

The Tourism Strategic Plan (2017–2020) and the Tourism Development Act (2005) also overlook culinary tourism as a specific focus. While the Master Plan emphasizes sustainability, culture, and community participation, it only mentions food as part of diversified cultural tourism, without defining strategies for its promotion.

This policy gap reveals a clear opportunity for strategic development. Although Sri Lanka's culinary traditions are rich and diverse, the absence of unified branding and coordination makes it difficult to communicate a consistent culinary identity. Issues such as authenticity dilution, limited infrastructure in rural areas, and sustainability challenges—like over-tourism, ingredient demand, and waste management—further constrain progress.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach. Developing national culinary tourism guidelines that unify regional diversity, support local communities, and embed sustainability principles can transform Sri Lanka's food heritage into a globally recognized culinary brand. Such efforts would enhance tourism competitiveness, preserve cultural heritage, and provide authentic, sustainable experiences for both local and international visitors.

2.5 Conceptualizing Culinary Brand Identity for Sri Lanka

This section synthesises the theoretical foundations used to interpret Sri Lanka's culinary attributes as components of a culinary tourism brand identity. While many destinations possess rich food cultures, only a few successfully transform these cultural assets into a coherent and marketable identity (Ellis et al., 2018; Everett, 2019). To support this transformation, the study integrates four key theoretical lenses—destination branding, culinary tourism identity, authenticity, and experience economy—which were introduced earlier in Chapter 2. These frameworks are not repeated in detail here; instead, they are used to clarify how cultural elements identified in the thematic findings can be strategically shaped into a culinary brand identity.

2.5.1 Definition of Culinary Brand Identity

Culinary brand identity refers to the strategic representation and communication of a destination's food culture to tourists. It encompasses cultural meanings, sensory experiences, symbolic values, and place-based narratives that collectively differentiate a destination from competitors (Bessière, 2013; Ellis et al., 2018). Drawing from Aaker's (1996) Brand Identity Model and destination branding frameworks (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011; Kavartzis & Hatch, 2013), this study defines culinary brand

identity as: “The structured set of culinary attributes, experiences, and expressions that a destination intentionally uses to position itself within the tourism market.”

This definition emphasises two key dimensions:

Intentionality – Culinary brand identity is not the full scope of cultural foodways, but the strategically selected aspects designed to communicate meaning and differentiation.

Experiential value – The identity becomes meaningful only when tourists engage with food through multisensory and culturally grounded experiences.

These principles guide how Sri Lanka’s culinary features are examined for their branding potential.

2.5.2 Distinguishing Culinary Identity and Culinary Brand Identity

Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent conceptually distinct ideas:

Concept	Focus	Created by	Purpose
Culinary identity	Cultural heritage, traditional food practices	Local communities	Represents “who we are”
Culinary brand identity	Strategically selected culinary attributes	Tourism authorities, DMOs, industry stakeholders	Represents “how we want to be experienced”

Culinary identity develops organically over generations through everyday food practices, heritage knowledge, and cultural continuity. Culinary brand identity, in contrast, is a deliberate interpretation of these cultural elements for tourism purposes, shaped through branding decisions, storytelling, product development, and experience design. Understanding this distinction is essential for analysing the qualitative findings, which include numerous cultural elements that must be evaluated for their strategic branding value.

2.5.3 Theoretical Foundations Guiding Culinary Brand Identity

Destination Branding: Destination branding theory positions identity as a combination of cultural resources and strategic communication. Food is recognised as a powerful brand element because it conveys place, emotion, memory, and cultural meaning (Morgan & Pritchard, 2011; Okumus et al., 2018).

Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999): Pine and Gilmore argue that destinations must design staged and meaningful experiences. From this perspective, culinary brand identity is interpreted according to how cultural attributes translate into memorable experiences such as cooking, tasting, storytelling, market visits, and demonstrations.

Authenticity Theory (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999): Authenticity—both objective and existential—is central to culinary tourism. Authentic food experiences strengthen emotional connection, cultural meaning, and symbolic brand value, which is particularly important in Asian tourism contexts where culinary heritage is deeply linked to identity.

Culinary Tourism Identity Frameworks (Long, 2004; Sims, 2009): These frameworks highlight regionality, cultural distinctiveness, tradition, local ingredients, and symbolic meanings of food as core dimensions of culinary identity.

Together, these theoretical perspectives guide this study in interpreting the themes not merely as cultural descriptors but as potential branding assets.

2.5.4 Applying Brand Identity Models to Culinary Tourism

Guided by Aaker's Brand Identity Model and supported by the four theoretical lenses mentioned above, this study conceptualises Sri Lanka's culinary brand identity through four interconnected components:

Table 2: Culinary Brand Identity Framework for Sri Lanka

Brand Identity Component	Definition / Purpose	Examples in Sri Lanka
Core Brand Identity	Represents the most enduring and defining culinary characteristics of Sri Lanka's food culture.	• Authenticity of traditional foodways • Regional culinary diversity • Heritage ingredients and techniques • Deep-rooted cultural meanings attached to food
Extended Brand Identity	Additional elements that enrich and differentiate the core identity.	• Street food culture • Family food traditions • Food rituals • Culinary storytelling • Multisensory food experiences

Brand Expression	How the identity is communicated to tourists and external audiences.	• Culinary festivals and events • Digital and media storytelling • Restaurant menus and branding • Destination marketing campaigns • Culinary documentaries and promotional content
Brand Touchpoints	Places or situations where tourists physically encounter the culinary brand.	• Local markets and food streets • Homestays and community kitchens • Restaurants and cafés • Cooking classes and food tours

This table provides a structured basis for interpreting how the thematic findings align with core and extended identity components, and how these elements can be operationalised through concrete tourism products and visitor experiences.

2.5.5 Conceptual Framework for This Study

Building on the theoretical foundations discussed earlier, this study develops a conceptual framework to demonstrate how Sri Lanka's culinary identity can be systematically translated into a coherent culinary tourism brand identity. The framework integrates four major theoretical perspectives—destination branding (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride), culinary tourism frameworks (Long; Ellis et al.), authenticity theory (Cohen; Wang), and the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore)—to strengthen the conceptual grounding of the branding process. These theories collectively explain how cultural meanings, sensory experiences, identity, and staged experiences contribute to building a strong culinary brand.

To structure the branding components, the framework adopts Aaker's Brand Identity Model, which distinguishes between core identity, extended identity, brand expression, and brand touchpoints. These components provide the analytical foundation for interpreting thematic findings and organising cultural attributes into a strategic branding structure suitable for tourism development.

The conceptual flow of the framework moves from culinary brand identity components → theoretical interpretation → culinary tourism branding guidelines. Core and extended identities derived from thematic analysis represent Sri Lanka's cultural, sensory, symbolic, and experiential strengths. Theoretical lenses ensure that these

identity elements are academically grounded and aligned with global branding practices. Finally, these interpretations inform practical and actionable culinary tourism branding guidelines, including strategies and operational steps for SLTDA and other stakeholders.

Overall, the framework ensures a coherent, evidence-based pathway for transforming cultural culinary attributes into a structured, strategic, and implementable tourism brand identity.

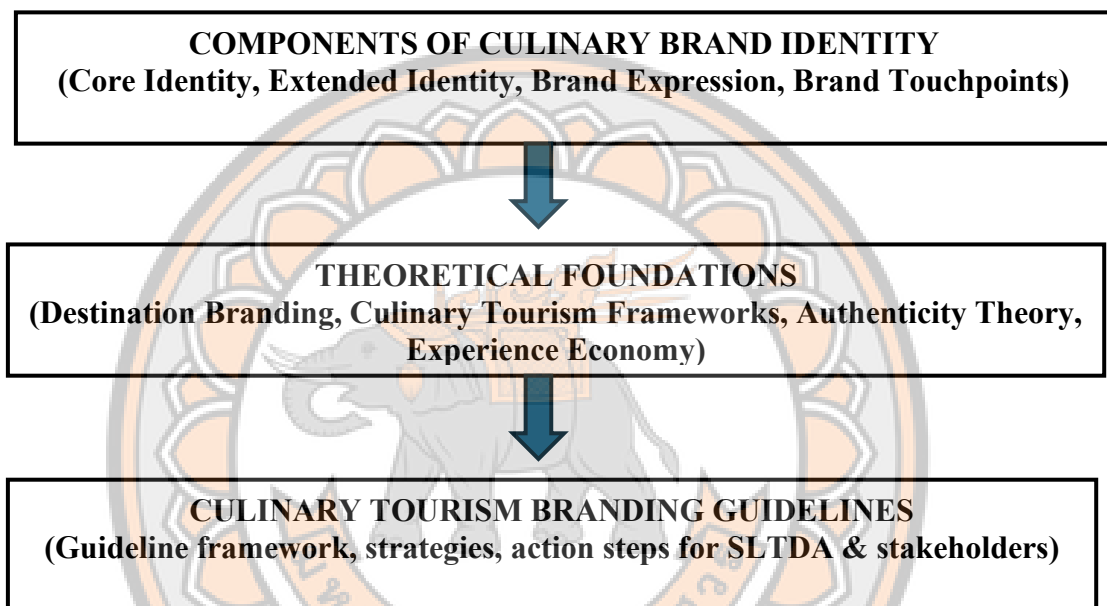


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Translating Sri Lanka's Culinary Identity into Culinary Tourism Branding Guidelines

This framework illustrates how Sri Lanka's culinary brand identity—comprising core identity, extended identity, brand expression, and brand touchpoints—is systematically interpreted through established theoretical foundations, including destination branding, culinary tourism frameworks, authenticity theory, and the experience economy. The theoretical interpretation informs the development of culinary tourism branding guidelines, providing actionable strategies and operational steps for SLTDA and other stakeholders. The flow demonstrates a coherent pathway from cultural attributes to strategic, implementable tourism branding initiatives.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka. This research identified challenges with culinary branding within the country, analyzed the existing culinary tourism branding identity, and formulated guidelines for a culinary brand. An in-depth interview approach was included in the collection of qualitative data from international tourists, as well as officials involved in tourism and local community members. The study will provide insights into the culinary tourism branding phenomena in Sri Lanka.

3.1 Research instruments

This study employed a qualitative approach to understand people's experiences, behaviours, and interactions in their natural context (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research provides depth and richness in data, making it suitable for analysing challenges in branding and identifying the branding identity within culinary tourism. This approach aligns with the study's objectives, as it allows for an in-depth examination of stakeholders' perspectives, experiences, and the subtle complexities of culinary tourism that are often overlooked. By capturing detailed and meaningful insights, qualitative methods help uncover hidden patterns and underlying issues, contributing both to practical branding strategies and to academic understanding in the field.

The primary research instrument used in this study was the in-depth interview, which allowed the researcher to gather comprehensive and nuanced insights directly from participants. Through in-depth interviews, the study explored stakeholders' opinions, experiences, and perceptions regarding the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka, examined the existing culinary tourism branding identity, and obtained valuable input for developing effective branding guidelines. This instrument was particularly useful because it encouraged participants to express their thoughts freely, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific issues and identify themes that emerged naturally during the conversation.

A qualitative approach supported by in-depth interviews also allowed access to a diverse range of stakeholder perspectives, including international tourists, officials related to tourism, and local community members. This approach made it possible to understand how these groups perceive culinary tourism branding from different standpoints, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the topic. Moreover, qualitative research is well-suited for exploratory studies such as this, as it offers flexibility to adapt and develop ideas throughout the research process.

This method also provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural aspects of culinary tourism. Understanding these aspects helped reveal how local food traditions, community participation, and cultural heritage influence tourists' experiences (Mak et al., 2012). By doing so, the study explored how authenticity, sustainability, and local identity shape culinary tourism experiences while preserving cultural integrity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The use of in-depth interviews with stakeholders—including international tourists, tourism officials, and local community members—was therefore instrumental in formulating practical branding guidelines that ensure long-term success and culturally responsible tourism development (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Overall, the qualitative research design supported by in-depth interviews offered the flexibility to capture unforeseen themes, ensuring that the full scope of the study was explored. This research design was thus well-suited for analysing the complexities of culinary tourism branding and effectively achieving the study's objectives.

3.2 Data collection

Qualitative data collection describes the process employed by researchers in collecting different varieties of information. It served as a source of rich and detailed data needed to bridge research questions. This approach aligned well with the focus of the research in terms of culinary branding in Sri Lanka, providing in-depth insights into stakeholders' experiences, which helped in understanding their perspectives, branding challenges, and views on culinary identity. In-depth interviews were used for data collection from various stakeholders, who are international tourists as well as officials involved in tourism and local community members. Engaging directly with stakeholders enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings.

In-depth interviews provided the opportunity for examining either into the planned themes or those that emerged and thus allowed investigations into the responses of participants (Creswell, 2013). The in-depth interview proved an effective tool in capturing the rich and personal insights of individuals engaging in culinary tourism with its necessary context and deep understanding requirements. This intimate interview setting encouraged respondents to speak candidly, sharing personal experiences and perspectives openly and honestly (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This method was preferred to focus groups because it enabled a better and individualized investigation of the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the participants compared to group dynamics, which limit individual responses.

Although surveys are often efficient for collecting large datasets, they were not suitable for this study, as they could not provide the nuanced understanding necessary for exploring complex and subjective concepts such as satisfaction, cultural perceptions, and socio-economic impacts. Therefore, in-depth interviews were selected to obtain a full and personalized understanding of stakeholders' experiences related to culinary branding in Sri Lanka.

The interview method was conducted with the following groups:

1. International Tourists – They provided insights on their experiences, perceptions, and concerns regarding Sri Lankans' culinary branding. Their feedback helped measure the effectiveness of the culinary branding identity and determine areas for improvement.
2. Officials (Government & Private) who are involved in tourism – They offered perspectives on the existing gaps and challenges affecting culinary branding. Their input will be valuable to understanding regulatory constraints as well as the potential for culinary branding at the international level.
3. Local community members- They shared their views on the socio-cultural impact of culinary tourism and branding. Their contributions informed how culinary branding impacts local identity, engagement, and cultural representation and supported the creation of successful branding guidelines.

This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in culinary branding, the existing brand identity, and the actions to create effective branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.

3.3 Population and Sample

In research design, sampling is an important tool responsible for ensuring the chosen participants effectively represent the population under study. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is often used as non-probability sampling as a means of selecting participants who can provide rich insights in detail, considering a particular context (Creswell, 2013). The inclusion criteria focused on participants actively involved in the culinary tourism sector in Sri Lanka. These included international tourists who have visited Sri Lanka and enjoyed its culinary offerings, officials working in tourism, and the local community members, including local tourists, vendors, restaurant managers, and local people, involved in the culinary tourism sector. These participants were expected to present an overview of the identity, challenges for Sri Lankan culinary branding, and assist in the formulation of branding guidelines.

The exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that only participants who had suitable experience and expertise were included in this study. Therefore, individuals who had no prior experience with Sri Lankan culinary tourism or possessed insufficient knowledge about the country's culinary experiences were excluded from the study. In addition, officials who were not directly involved in tourism or culinary tourism activities, as well as participants unable to provide relevant insights into Sri Lanka's culinary tourism branding, were not included in the sample.

3.3.1 Selection Criteria for Participants in Demography, Geographic Focus on Key Tourist Destinations, and Diversity in Stakeholder Representation

This research followed sampling universe criteria, including selection criteria of participants, all samples of locations, demographic groups, and stakeholders' experiences for depth in the understanding of culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.

The selection criteria are focused on the respondents who have a direct or indirect connection with Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector. They include international tourists who have tried or shown an interest in Sri Lankan cuisine, tourism officials who are involved in culinary tourism activities, and the local people who contribute to maintaining and representing the country's culinary identity. This representative participant ensured various perspectives in terms of the challenges of branding the

culinary sector, existing branding identity, and the development of useful branding guidelines. The participants also came from diverse demographic backgrounds, meaning various cultural and professional environments can be held, improving the overall perception of how culinary branding is interpreted. This approach provided comprehensive knowledge of the major challenges, branding identity, and measures to further develop Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector.

Geographically, the research included almost all the important tourist destinations and food places within Sri Lanka, providing a good representative sample from popular to less-popular areas. It covered famous tourist attractions, food markets, restaurants, and regional food festivals, as well as rural and lesser-known places where traditional food habits remain. Such geographic dispersion ensured that the research captured both commercialized and grassroots levels of culinary tourism branding experiences. Participants were selected from five districts in Sri Lanka that had been identified as important in the areas of tourism and food heritage. Since these five districts have been identified as high-density tourist and food heritage areas, the study provided rich and dynamic insight into the culinary brand. While the research focuses on geographical representation, it especially focuses on areas where the interaction of tourists with local culinary offerings was most observable to capture fully the role that local food heritage plays in tourism.

Diversity in stakeholder representation: the research ensured that stakeholders came from diverse groups based on age, gender, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural diversity. These differences in participants' inclusion in the research contributed to diverse perspectives and enriched the overall understanding of insights related to culinary tourism. It also helped to indicate the key branding, branding identity, and branding identity in various industry segments that exist and will continue to develop effective guidelines regarding branding culinary tourism in Sri Lanka. In this study, it was important that the participants' constructions came from different backgrounds; therefore, there were likely to be many perspectives included in this research study. This diversity of participants allowed the study to capture a wide range of experiences, opinions, and insights regarding culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.

International Tourists: In age, nationalities, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds, tourists participated in trying to analyze different insights and experiences of culinary tourism.

Local Community members: This group included local tourists, local vendors, restaurant managers, and local people. Their perspectives played a fundamental role in exploring the issues of culinary identity branding in Sri Lanka, identifying the existing culinary tourism branded identity, and setting guidelines for developing successful branding guidelines. The interaction of the study with residents from differing socio-economic and cultural backgrounds afforded insights into attitudes about cultural authenticity, local participation, and socio-cultural impacts of culinary tourism. This reflected on creating culinary branding in Sri Lanka that protects culture yet develops tourism sustainably.

Officials (Government & Private) who are involved in tourism – This group consisted of officers from the Ministry of Tourism, local authorities, and professionals from private agencies and other relevant tourism industries. Their professional insights were essential in analyzing the branding challenge of foods, understanding the branding identity of culinary tourism during the current period, and helping develop successful guidelines for branding. Tourism Ministry officials aligned culinary tourism branding coordination with national tourism goals, whereas regional government officials highlighted regional branding concerns and the role of cultural heritage in developing a distinct culinary identity. Industry professionals identified local food production, sustainability, and food safety standards as essential factors in enhancing Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. These diverse opinions contributed to analyzing the challenges of culinary branding, establishing what culinary tourism brand identity already existed, and developing branding guidelines.

By collecting interview data from a wide range of participants, the study applied data triangulation to enhance the credibility and depth of findings. This approach enabled the researcher to compare, and cross-verify information obtained from different groups, ensuring that conclusions were not based on a single perspective. Data triangulation strengthened the reliability of the analysis, provided a holistic understanding of Sri Lanka's culinary branding challenges and identities, and

helped develop guidelines that reflect both practical industry realities and cultural authenticity.

By including international tourists, local community members, and tourism officials from various demographic, cultural, and professional backgrounds, the research could identify multiple dimensions of branding challenges, uncover nuances in culinary tourism identity, and explore potential solutions from different viewpoints. Such variety enriched the findings, enhanced the credibility of the results, and ensured that the developed branding guidelines reflected both practical realities and cultural sensitivities across the industry.

This diversity ensured that the research findings comprehensively captured the multi-dimensional nature of culinary branding in Sri Lanka.

Table 3 – Selection criteria of participant group

Participant	Selection Criteria	Purpose/Contribution
Tourism Officials (Government & Private)	Officers from the Ministry of Tourism, local authorities, and private agencies are involved in tourism and culinary activities.	Provided professional insights on culinary branding challenges, national and regional branding coordination, cultural heritage preservation, sustainability, food safety, and local food production. Helped develop effective branding guidelines.
International Tourists	Tourists who have tried or shown interest in Sri Lankan cuisine, varying in age, gender, nationality, and socio-economic background.	Shared experiences, expectations, and perceptions of culinary tourism contributed to understanding how branding and authenticity are perceived from a global perspective.
Local Community Members	Local tourists, vendors, restaurant managers, and residents are involved in maintaining and representing Sri Lanka's culinary identity.	Offered perspectives on cultural authenticity, local participation, socio-cultural impacts, and existing culinary brand identity; helped shape guidelines for sustainable and culturally responsible branding.

3.3.2 Sample Size

A total of 31 participants were included in the in-depth interviews. In qualitative research, the determination of sample size often relies on the principle of data saturation, which is achieved when additional interviews no longer produce new themes, patterns, or insights relevant to the research objectives. This ensures that the data collected is sufficiently comprehensive to capture the range of perspectives necessary for the study, without introducing unnecessary repetition.

Interviews were conducted iteratively, with ongoing assessment of emerging themes to determine whether further data collection was needed. Data collection continued until no new information was observed, confirming that the sample size was adequate for capturing meaningful and robust insights. By following this approach, the study ensured that the findings are credible, reliable, and provide a strong foundation for comprehensive thematic analysis and the development of effective culinary tourism branding guidelines.

3.4 Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to identify meaning in the data gathered and derive meaningful conclusions that were related to the research goals. Thematic analysis was used as a tool to examine qualitative interview data to make certain that stakeholder perspectives could be investigated in depth. This approach will help to discover the most crucial challenges in food branding, analyze the brand identity strengths and weaknesses of current branding, and provide insights into creating branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka (Braun & Clarke, 200).

The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of stakeholder perceptions regarding challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka, existing culinary tourism branding identity, and the establishment of suitable branding guidelines. Thematic analysis was utilized to find recurring patterns and insights regarding the challenges of branding Sri Lankan cuisine, the existing culinary tourism branding identity, and determining culinary branding guidelines. This systematized technique ensured a profound investigation of the key themes that informed guidelines for strengthening Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand.

Thematic analysis consisted of the following steps:

Transcribing: First, recorded interviews of international tourists, government officials related to tourism, and members of the local community were transcribed. This was to make sure that all verbal responses were noted down, developing a textual basis for further analysis. Transcription gave a comprehensive examination of responses to identify key findings on culinary branding.

Organizing Data: The data, after transcription, were categorized by groups of participants such as government officials, international tourists, and local community members. The segmentation enabled structured comparisons and grouping of themes, allowing systematic analysis of different perspectives of culinary brand challenges, brand identity, and branding guidelines.

Reading and Re-reading: The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the data. This step facilitated the recognition of recurring patterns, meaningful statements, and themes specifically related to branding challenges and the current identity of Sri Lanka's culinary tourism. A deep understanding of participant opinions was developed before coding.

Coding and Categorizing: In this stage, the data were segmented into meaningful units, and codes were assigned based on emerging themes. The codes captured branding challenges, stakeholder perceptions of Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand identity, and recommendations for branding efforts. After coding, related themes were grouped into broader categories to systematically analyze stakeholder opinions and understand the interplay between challenges, existing identity, and potential strategies for developing effective culinary tourism branding.

Examining Relationships and Displaying Data: The relationships between themes were analyzed to understand how different branding challenges and brand identity elements were interconnected. Based on this analysis, the researcher developed branding strategies by synthesizing insights from both challenges and identity. Findings were visually represented using frameworks, tables, and charts to illustrate the process of deriving actionable strategies for strengthening Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand.

Authenticating Conclusions: The validity of interpretations and themes was verified by returning to the data, consulting experts, or seeking clarification from

stakeholders. This ensured that findings related to culinary brand issues, identity, and guidelines are well-established and trustworthy.

Reflexivity: The researcher will critically reflect on positionality and personal biases. Given the subjective nature of qualitative research, this step encouraged transparency and minimized researcher bias, thus enhancing the credibility of the findings.

With this systematic thematic analysis, the study had a clear understanding of the challenges for culinary branding of Sri Lanka, the current branding identity, and solutions for developing effective culinary tourism branding guidelines. The data were a contribution towards developing an effective branding guideline for strengthening Sri Lanka's brand as a prime culinary tourism destination.

In conclusion, the methodology employed in this study, including qualitative research, targeted data collection, careful selection of participants, and thematic analysis, provided a comprehensive approach to exploring culinary tourism branding in Sri Lanka. By capturing diverse stakeholder perspectives across demographics, geographic locations, and professional roles, the study ensured rich, in-depth, and meaningful insights. This approach enabled the identification of key challenges, existing brand identities, and informed the development of practical and knowledge-based culinary tourism branding guidelines.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study by outlining key findings derived from in-depth interviews with international tourists, Sri Lankan government and private officials, who were involved in the tourism sector, and local community members such as vendors, chefs, home food makers, and farmers. Using thematic analysis, the data were coded and iteratively refined to generate meaningful themes based on recurring ideas and challenges related to Sri Lanka's culinary brand identity. Beyond presenting these findings, the section also discusses their implications, drawing strategic insights from the integrated themes. These insights ultimately inform the development of an integrated culinary tourism branding framework tailored for Sri Lanka.

4.1 Objective 1: - Challenges in Culinary Branding

This section outlines the major challenges facing the effective branding of culinary tourism in Sri Lanka. Key issues include the absence of a unified national strategy, inconsistent representation of authentic cuisine, and a lack of integration between food experiences and broader tourism planning. Additional challenges, such as weak stakeholder collaboration, limited government support, inadequate digital and visual promotion, and underutilisation of food festivals, further hinder the development of a strong culinary brand. These challenges are compounded by minimal community participation, insufficient brand marketing skills, and fragmented efforts across regions. Collectively, they prevent Sri Lanka from fully leveraging its diverse culinary heritage as a competitive tourism asset.

4.1.1 Weak Culinary Branding Strategies

This theme highlights the absence of a cohesive national branding framework and strategic government and Private support for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka. The current environment is characterized by fragmented initiatives, weak legal and policy frameworks, insufficient support for local culinary actors, and poor infrastructure.

Together, these institutional and structural limitations hinder the development of a distinctive culinary identity and weaken Sri Lanka's potential to emerge as a competitive culinary tourism destination.

- **Lack of a National Culinary Branding Strategy**

Sri Lanka lacks a centralized culinary branding strategy, including a unifying identity, slogan, or logo to promote its cuisine both domestically and internationally. Efforts are decentralized and uncoordinated, which leads to a diluted national image. Without a strong brand narrative and visual identity, Sri Lankan cuisine struggles to distinguish itself in the global culinary tourism market, as noted by research participants.

"There isn't a proper or clear identity for Sri Lankan food that everyone follows. Everyone seems to be doing their own thing, but there's no bigger plan or national plan to bring it all together." (LCM – RP3)

"Our food promotion is all over the place. It's like each group is working separately without any shared goal." (IT – RP15)

"There isn't even a proper logo or slogan or campaign for our food. When you look at countries like Thailand or Malaysia, they're way ahead of us in promoting their cuisine." (GO – RP5)

"Different areas try to promote their own food, but nothing connects them under one image or message." (GO – RP22)

- **Lack of a Legal Framework**

This sub-theme highlights the Small-scale food vendors, who play a vital role in representing authentic culinary culture, often operate outside formal tourism policies due to the absence of legal protections and supportive regulations. Their informal status limits their access to tourism opportunities and government assistance, weakening their contribution to culinary tourism branding efforts, as noted by research participants.

"There's no official rule or policy that supports small food vendors like us." (LCM – RP24)

"We're always scared we'll be removed. There's no proper place or support for us to sell food safely." (LCM – RP10)

- **Poor Infrastructure**

The lack of basic infrastructure, such as clean water, electricity, and hygienic facilities, limits the ability of local vendors to provide safe and consistent culinary experiences. These gaps undermine both brand expectations and tourist satisfaction, as noted by research participants.

“It’s difficult to keep things clean and run a stall properly when there’s no steady water or electricity.” (LCM – RP17)

- **Economic Barriers**

High taxation, coupled with low earnings, restricts the financial capacity of small-scale culinary actors to sustain and expand their businesses. This economic strain reduces their ability to align with international culinary branding standards, as noted by research participants.

“Taxes are too much for us. Sometimes we hardly earn enough to get by.” (LCM – RP14)

- **Limited Institutional Support in Capacity-Building Programs**

Government and Private support for culinary skill development, certification, and promotional activities is notably limited. Local chefs and culinary actors remain unrecognized and excluded from tourism strategies, missing key opportunities to build reputation, trust, and capacity aligned with international culinary branding standards, as noted by research participants.

“There’s no proper system to recognize or promote people like us. Even professional chefs don’t get noticed by the tourism authorities.” (LCM – RP8)

“We’re looking for training, guidance, even help with things like promotion, but nothing is available.” (LCM – RP11)

“Most government initiatives don’t really reach small food businesses like ours.” (GO – RP16)

“If we had some kind of formal recognition, it would really help people trust and value what we do.” (LCM – RP23)

4.1.2 Commercialization of Authentic Cuisine

This theme illustrates how the lack of consistency in offering authentic Sri Lankan cuisine to tourists undermines the country's culinary identity and weakens its branding potential. Traditional dishes are often modified, diluted, or replaced with simplified versions in tourism settings, leading to a loss of cultural depth in the visitor experience. This inconsistency not only affects tourists' perceptions but also creates a challenge in positioning Sri Lanka as a destination rooted in authentic food traditions, as noted by research participants.

“What we eat every day at home isn’t the same as what tourists are served. The real, local flavor is missing.” (LCM – RP1)

“Many of our traditional recipes are slowly disappearing, and what tourists get is just a simplified version.” (IT – RP19)

4.1.3 Underrepresentation of Traditional Cuisine

This theme highlights a critical gap in Sri Lanka’s culinary branding: the limited presence of traditional cuisine in mainstream tourism experiences. Despite being a defining element of cultural identity, local food is often overshadowed by international dishes, particularly in hotels and commercial restaurants. The lack of emphasis on indigenous culinary heritage in tourism strategies restricts branding opportunities and prevents the development of a distinctive national food identity.

- **Limited local Culinary Exposure**

This theme highlights that authentic Sri Lankan dishes are rarely found in hotels or upscale restaurants, weakening efforts to create a recognizable and proud culinary brand. This limits tourists’ access to traditional food and weakens Sri Lanka’s appeal as a unique culinary destination, as noted by research participants.

“Most places serve things like pasta or burgers. Even in luxury hotels, it’s hard to find proper Sri Lankan meals.” (GO – RP6)

“Hotel menus barely reflect our local food culture. It feels like traditional dishes are being left out.” (IT – RP20)

- **Culinary Tourism Not Integrated**

This theme highlights the poor integration of traditional Sri Lankan cuisine in national tourism planning represents a missed opportunity to link food with the broader destination brand. Despite growing tourist interest, policies and marketing neglect local food, causing authentic culinary experiences to be inconsistent and under-promoted, limiting their role as Sri Lanka's tourism brand, as noted by research participants.

"Many tourists are actually looking for real Sri Lankan food, but it's not easy to find in regular restaurants." (IT – RP25)

- **Underrepresentation of Street Food**

This theme highlights that street food is a vital expression of Sri Lanka's everyday culinary identity, remains largely excluded from formal tourism promotion and branding strategies. Despite offering authentic and immersive food experiences, street vendors are often left out of official tourism events and campaigns. This exclusion limits both the visibility of grassroots culinary traditions and the potential to build a relatable, community-based culinary brand, as noted by research participants.

"Tourists really enjoy street food, but we're not part of the official tours or promoted by the tourism authorities." (LCM – RP9)

"We're never invited to food festivals or events. Even though our food is part of the culture, we're usually left out." (LCM – RP12)

"Local vendors like us should be more accessible to tourists, but the rules often keep us out." (LCM – RP21)

4.1.4 Overlooked Regional Culinary Experiences

This theme emphasizes the branding challenge caused by the lack of attention to Sri Lanka's regional culinary diversity. Unique food traditions from various provinces—such as the North, East, and Hill Country- are very rarely promoted through national tourism narratives. Failing to incorporate these localized identities into the broader brand limits Sri Lanka's appeal as a diverse and culturally rich food destination, as noted by research participants.

"The food traditions in Jaffna differ a lot from what people usually find in Galle. We really need to bring attention to these unique regional tastes." (GO – RP4)

“Different regions have their own cooking styles. Even something as familiar as hoppers can vary noticeably from district to district.” (GO – RP6)

“There are many unique tastes in the North and East that tourists rarely get a chance to enjoy.” (IT – RP26)

4.1.5 Marketing Visibility Gaps

This theme addresses the critical challenge of limited international visibility and weak marketing strategies, which hinder the formation of a strong national culinary brand. Sri Lanka’s food tourism potential remains underexploited due to outdated promotional materials, the absence of a global culinary ambassador dish, and a fragmented brand narrative. These issues contribute to an underdeveloped culinary identity and reduced global competency.

- Under-representation in culinary brand marketing

Current marketing materials fail to professionally and effectively represent Sri Lanka’s unique culinary character. Poor visual content and a lack of modern appeal weaken the emotional and cultural connection needed for strong brand storytelling, thereby diminishing Sri Lanka’s potential to stand out in the global culinary tourism landscape, as the research participants mentioned below.

“A lot of the food images we use in promotions seem outdated or poorly done. We need more professional and modern visuals.” (LCM – RP2)

“Our online promotion is very weak compared to what other countries are doing.” (GO – RP22)

- Limited culinary Global Recognition

This highlights Sri Lanka’s inability to promote a globally recognizable signature dish weakens its culinary brand. Unlike countries that have successfully branded themselves through iconic foods (e.g., Thailand with Pad Thai, Japan with sushi), Sri Lanka lacks a representative dish to serve as a culinary identity marker on the international stage, as the research participants mentioned below.

“We don’t really have a well-known dish like Pad Thai or sushi that people connect with Sri Lanka.” (GO – RP5)

“If we had a signature dish, it would help attract more international food tourists.” (IT – RP15)

4.1.6 Lack of Stakeholder Collaboration

This theme highlights the challenge of fragmented efforts among key players, such as chefs, producers, tourism authorities, and hospitality providers. The absence of coordinated action impedes the development of a unified culinary brand and limits the effectiveness of culinary tourism initiatives. Strengthening collaboration is essential to building a coherent food tourism identity and achieving long-term branding success, as noted by research participants.

“Everyone is doing their own thing—chefs, hotels, tourism officials. There’s no shared direction.” (LCM – RP7)

“If we could work together, we’d build a much stronger food identity. Right now, things are too scattered.” (LCM – RP10)

“We need better cooperation to bring all parts of culinary tourism under one umbrella.” (IT – RP19)

“Sharing knowledge and combining resources would really help us grow together.” (GO – RP27)

4.1.7 Digital - Visual Promotion Weaknesses

This theme underscores the lack of modern digital strategies and visual storytelling in culinary tourism promotion. The slow adoption of digital tools, poor-quality food imagery, and gaps in online engagement hinder the visibility and reach of Sri Lankan cuisine, especially among international and younger audiences. These weaknesses reduce the branding effectiveness of culinary experiences and contribute to the loss of cultural identity in digital spaces.

- Absence of Contemporary Digital Interfaces

This refers to the inadequate implementation of digital platforms and visually engaging materials to showcase Sri Lanka’s culinary offerings. The lack of engaging digital platforms, QR menus, mobile apps, and professionally curated content restricts tourists’ access to information and reduces the ability to present Sri Lankan cuisine as

a modern and organized experience. This affects both branding perception and destination competitiveness, as the research participants mentioned below.

“There isn’t a good app or QR code menus to help visitors learn about our food.” (LCM - RP11)

“Most places don’t have menus or nice photos available on the internet.” (LCM - RP21)

- **Knowledge - Marketing Gaps**

This highlights the shortcomings in effectively communicating and sharing Sri Lankan food stories through online marketing channels. Limited digital marketing skills, inadequate resources, and inconsistent brand messaging contribute to low global visibility and reduced engagement with potential food tourists, as the research participants mentioned below.

“We lag behind in digital marketing and don’t share our food stories well online.” (LCM - RP9)

- **Slow Adoption of Innovations**

This refers to the gradual adoption of new tools and strategies within the culinary tourism sector. Limited awareness and delayed integration of digital tools prevent culinary tourism actors from meeting the expectations of tech-savvy visitors. This reluctance to innovate creates a disconnect between local food experiences and modern branding practices, particularly with younger markets, as the research participants mentioned below.

“Using digital platforms better could bring more young tourists.” (IT - RP28)

- **Ineffective Culinary Storytelling in Brand Narratives**

This theme focuses on the inability of culinary tourism stakeholders to effectively communicate the cultural richness and stories behind Sri Lankan food. Storytelling is a key element in building emotional connection and branding, yet many local food actors lack the skills and tools, particularly digital platforms, to convey the historical and cultural depth of their cuisine. As a result, Sri Lanka’s food heritage remains under-represented in tourism narratives, weakening its brand identity in the global tourism market, as the research participants mentioned below.

“Our cuisine has rich stories, but we don’t know how to share them widely.” (GO - RP5)

“Training on digital storytelling is essential for promoting our food culture in the future.” (GO - RP23)

4.1.8 Lack of Community Participation in Branding

This theme highlights the minimal involvement of local communities in culinary tourism planning and branding processes. Decision-making processes tend to be concentrated within government bodies, often excluding meaningful participation from local community members. The exclusion of local voices leads to development initiatives that lack authenticity and community ownership factors that are essential for creating a brand identity rooted in cultural pride and sustainability. Active community engagement is critical to shaping a culinary brand that genuinely reflects regional identities and secures long-term local support, as the research participants mentioned below.

“We’re not asked for our opinions; only officials make decisions.” (LCM - RP3)

“If locals were part of the process, the development would feel more genuine instead of artificial.” (LCM - RP8)

“Community involvement would increase honesty and acceptance of the development.” (GO - RP16)

“We want to participate in deciding how our food culture is shown.” (LCM - RP24)

4.1.9 Underutilized Culinary Events

This theme explores the missed opportunity to integrate food festivals and culinary events into Sri Lanka’s national tourism branding strategies. Although local food-related festivals exist, they are often underfunded, poorly promoted, and lack the strategic planning needed to attract wider domestic and international audiences. These events hold significant potential to showcase regional food identities, create immersive tourist experiences, and strengthen culinary branding if better utilized and supported at the national level, as the research participants mentioned below.

“We don’t have large food festivals like other countries, and ours aren’t promoted well.” (LCM - RP12)

“The government should play a bigger role in supporting and developing food festivals.” (GO – RP25)

Table 4: Thematic Analysis of Challenges – Aggregated Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes

No	Aggregated theme	Sub Theme	Coding
01	Weak culinary brand Strategies	Lack of national culinary branding Strategy	Absence of unified strategy Fragmented promotion No national slogan/logo Lack of coordinated identity
		Lack of legal framework	No vendor policy support Fear of eviction Informal operations Exclusion from official plans
		Poor infrastructure	Poor food stall infrastructure No water/electricity access
		Economic barriers	High taxation burden Low-income discouragement
		Limited institutional support in capacity building programs	Lack of training programs No promotional support Low recognition from authorities Absence of certification pathways
02	Commercialization of authentic Cuisine	-	Tourist food differs from local food Authentic taste missing Traditional recipes disappearing Dishes simplified for tourists Loss of culinary heritage
03	Underrepresentation of traditional cuisine	Limited local culinary exposure	Traditional dishes missing in hotels Focus on international food Poor representation of local cuisine Low exposure to authentic meals
		Culinary tourism not integrated	No food-tourism link Few food-focused tours Poor access to local cuisine in tourist areas Few culinary trails Food missing from tour packages
		Underrepresentation of street food	Street food excluded from tourism promotion Street food not included in official tours Lack of participation in street food festivals

			Regulations limit street food vendor access Street vendors overlooked by tourism authorities
04	Overlooked regional culinary experiences	-	Regional food uniqueness ignored Poor promotion of regional tastes Overlooked dish variations Lack of regional food platforms
05	Marketing - Visibility Gaps	Underrepresentation in culinary brand marketing	Outdated food marketing Poor promotional visuals Weak online marketing Lack of professional in marketing Inconsistent and ineffective food promotion strategies
		Limited global culinary brand recognition	No global signature dish Missing culinary icon Weak international recognition Hard to attract food tourists
06	Lack of stakeholder collaboration	-	Lack of stakeholder coordination Independent, unaligned efforts No shared vision or strategy Weak cooperation among partners Scattered culinary tourism activities Need for resources and knowledge sharing
07	Digital - Visual promotion weaknesses	Absence of contemporary digital interfaces	Lack of digital platforms No QR code menus No digital images on menus
		Knowledge - Marketing gaps	Poor digital marketing skills Inadequate promotion skills Low global visibility
		Slow adoption of innovations	Low digital innovation Hesitation to adopt new tools Limited tech capacity Missed youth engagement Resistance to change
		Ineffective culinary storytelling in brand narrative	Poor food storytelling skills Weak cultural expression Lack of digital storytelling Underused food heritage stories Limited narrative promotion
08	Lack of community	-	Minimal community engagement Decisions made only by officials

	participation in branding		Low community trust and support Desire for participation in decision-making Development feels artificial
09	Underutilized culinary events	-	Limited-scale food festivals Insufficient festival funding Poor festival planning Weak promotion of events Lack of government support

Source - Created by Author

4.2 Objective 2: – Identities of Culinary Branding

This section outlines the core culinary tourism identities that can shape and strengthen Sri Lanka's identity as a distinctive culinary tourism destination. Stakeholders identified deeply rooted traditions, authentic food practices, emotional connections to cuisine, and immersive food experiences as unique branding assets. These elements not only reflect the richness of Sri Lankan culture but also hold strong potential to differentiate the nation in the competitive global tourism market. With strategic integration, elements like regional specialties, family traditions, street food culture, and cultural storytelling can serve as foundational pillars in Sri Lanka's culinary branding framework.

4.2.1 Unique Traditional Food Practices

This theme highlights the significant opportunity to leverage Sri Lanka's rich culinary traditions as a foundation for building a strong culinary brand in tourism. Participants emphasized that traditional dishes, cooking methods, and regional food identities can be powerful assets when properly integrated into tourism experiences. Promoting authenticity not only enhances the tourist experience but also supports cultural preservation and provides communities with a sense of pride and ownership in tourism development, as the research participants mentioned below

“My mother still cooks using old methods like grinding stones and clay pots. That's the real taste of Sri Lankan food, but tourists never really see that side.” (LCM – RP7)

“If we protect and promote our old cooking styles, it could really attract tourists looking for something genuine.” (GO – RP27)

4.2.2 Leveraging Key Culinary Icons

This theme highlights the potential to strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary brand by reintroducing and celebrating traditional foods that hold deep cultural significance within local communities. Participants emphasized that certain iconic dishes could act as powerful brand symbols that represent the nation's unique culinary identity. Effectively showcasing these signature meals through targeted tourism strategies and marketing efforts can reinforce Sri Lanka's distinctiveness and attract tourists who seek authentic and meaningful food experiences, as the research participants mentioned below.

"We should bring back traditional foods like "kola kenda" or jackfruit curry, they're part of who we are." (LCM – RP2)

4.2.3 Street Food Culture

This theme highlights the significant role of street food as an authentic and accessible element of Sri Lanka's culinary brand. Street food reflects the everyday culinary traditions that resonate deeply with both locals and tourists, offering unique and memorable food experiences. Despite its cultural richness and potential as a key brand asset, street food is frequently overlooked or excluded from formal tourism promotion and national branding strategies. Addressing this gap can help create a more inclusive and genuine culinary brand that embraces all levels of Sri Lankan food culture, as the research participants mentioned below.

"We make the real, traditional food, but the official stories about Sri Lankan cuisine don't include us." (LCM – RP28)

4.2.4 Embodiment of Family-Oriented Root of the Society

This theme emphasizes the deep cultural and emotional significance of food in family life and social structures in Sri Lanka. Culinary practices rooted in family traditions represent a core component of the nation's food identity. Participants highlighted how cooking and sharing meals serve as powerful expressions of heritage, community bonding, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. These family-based culinary values can be integrated into branding strategies to position Sri Lanka as a destination that offers not only authentic cuisine but also emotionally rich, culturally

grounded food experiences. Recognizing and promoting these familial traditions enhances the emotional appeal of Sri Lanka's culinary brand, as the research participants mentioned below.

"My grandmother taught me everything about cooking. When I prepare food, it reminds me of her—it's more than just eating." (LCM – RP1)

"For my family, sharing meals is an essential part of our special occasions and helps maintain our cultural practices." (LCM – RP13)

"Food connects us to our origins and the people who came before us." (IT – RP18)

"Eating together strengthens relationships and fosters pride in our culture." (LCM – RP29)

4.2.5 Potential of Regional Culinary Identity

This theme underscores the untapped potential of Sri Lanka's regional culinary diversity in shaping a distinctive national food brand. According to participant feedback, highlighting and showcasing distinctive regional cuisines, ingredients, and culinary techniques can enhance tourists' experiences and act as a strategic differentiator for positioning the destination within the competitive global culinary tourism industry. By integrating regional culinary identities into national branding strategies, Sri Lanka can promote authenticity, inclusivity, and cultural richness. This approach also supports community-based tourism and heritage preservation, allowing local communities to contribute to and benefit from tourism development, as the research participants mentioned below.

"By showcasing more regional specialties, we could strengthen the overall identity of Sri Lankan cuisine." (GO – RP30)

4.2.6 Value of Experiential Culinary Events

This theme emphasizes the branding value of food-related festivals and experiential events in showcasing Sri Lanka's culinary identity. Participants pointed out that while such events offer powerful platforms to narrate food heritage, engage tourists, and promote local culinary talents, their strategic potential remains underutilized. Culinary festivals can serve as immersive branding tools that reinforce national identity, support small food enterprises, and foster meaningful cultural

exchange. By incorporating these events into formal tourism branding strategies, Sri Lanka can better position its cuisine as a vibrant and experiential cultural asset, as the research participants mentioned below.

“Food festivals could be a great way to share stories about our cuisine but are not fully used.” (GO - RP4)

“These kinds of events can really help small food businesses and also bring in more visitors.” (IT – RP20)

4.2.7 Immersive Food Experiences

This theme highlights the branding potential of offering immersive food experiences that go beyond passive consumption. Tourists expressed a strong desire for participatory activities such as local market visits, cooking with families, and meal sharing—all of which are currently underrepresented in Sri Lanka’s culinary tourism offerings. These experiential interactions serve as powerful storytelling tools that connect visitors with the country’s culinary identity and cultural roots. Embedding such hands-on experiences into branding strategies can enhance visitor satisfaction and foster emotional connections to Sri Lanka’s food culture, as the research participants mentioned below.

“Sharing meals at home and hands-on cooking would help tourists understand our culture better.” (LCM - RP13)

“Tourists look for genuine experiences beyond just eating food.” (IT - RP18)

“Offering more cooking activities and food interactions would improve visitor satisfaction.” (LCM - RP29)

4.2.8 Enhancing Cultural Storytelling

This theme emphasizes the powerful role of cultural storytelling in shaping and promoting Sri Lanka’s culinary brand identity. Participants noted that the historical, emotional, and cultural narratives behind local dishes are often overlooked in current tourism practices. Strengthening storytelling techniques—such as sharing the origins, symbolism, and preparation methods of traditional foods—can create a more immersive and emotionally resonant tourist experience. Incorporating these narratives into branding efforts can foster deeper cultural appreciation, enhance destination

uniqueness, and strengthen Sri Lanka's positioning in the global culinary tourism market, as the research participants mentioned below.

"If locals learn to tell food stories better, it would boost food tourism." (LCM - RP14)

"Explaining the history behind dishes would enrich tourists' experiences." (GO - RP30)

Table 5: Thematic Analysis of Identities – Aggregated Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes

No	Aggregated theme	Sub Theme	Coding
01	Potential of traditional food practices (Traditional cooking methods, Family tradition, Organic food)	-	Traditional branding elements Traditional cooking tools Authentic food experiences Heritage preservation Local food identity Authenticity-driven branding Cultural pride
02	Leveraging Key Culinary Icons (Rice & curry, Hoppers, Spices, Coconut usage)	-	Iconic dish branding Reviving food heritage National food identity Emotional branding vis cuisine
03	Street Food Culture (Informal vendors, Street food experiences)	-	Street food branding Authentic local tastes Grassroots culinary culture Street vendors as cultural carriers Street food vibrancy
04	Embodiment of family-oriented root of the society (Cultural connection, Simple meals, Family ties)	-	Food rooted food identity Cultural knowledge transfer Intergenerational recipes Food bonding Ancestral culinary values Emotion based branding Social cohesion
05	Potential of Regional Culinary Identity (Regional dishes, North/South variations)	-	Regional food diversity Regional food branding Local flavor identity Local culinary voices Inclusive culinary regional identities Expanding regional tourism Community pride

06	Value of Experiential Culinary Events (Village food fairs, Specific Occasional Cooking competitions - New Year festival and Pongal festival)	-	Festivals storytelling Food events for engagement Community bonding Support for small food businesses Festival marketing Cultural Showcase Interactive experiences Event based tourism Festival based branding
07	Immersive Food Experiences (Village-style cooking classes (using firewood stoves and clay pots), Spice Garden tours (with live demonstrations), Tea estate visits (with practical experience))	-	Authentic food encounters Hands-on culinary branding Cooking with locals Cultural immersion Village market visits Tourist connection Learning through food Memorable food moments Experience based branding Food activity satisfaction
08	Enhancing Cultural Storytelling (Food history, Stories behind dishes)	-	Story driven branding Dish origins Immersive narratives Cultural storytelling Visitor engagement Food history Narrative identity Pride through food stories Memorable experiences Story based branding

Source - Created by Author

4.3 Objective 3: - Developing Culinary Branding Guidelines

This section presents a set of strategic branding guidelines developed to strengthen and formalize culinary tourism branding in Sri Lanka. These guidelines are grounded in the thematic findings discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2, which highlighted both the critical challenges currently faced by the culinary tourism sector and the potential branding opportunities rooted in Sri Lanka's diverse culinary identity. This section aims to turn these findings into a structured, comprehensive framework that can guide national and regional stakeholders in creating a cohesive, inclusive, and globally competitive culinary tourism brand. The guidelines are designed not only to address

institutional gaps but also to enhance cultural storytelling, support grassroots participation, and integrate digital tools and innovations.

Building on the conceptual definition of culinary brand identity discussed in Chapter 2, the following guidelines translate Sri Lanka's rich culinary identity into strategic branding assets. This section demonstrates how cultural and culinary themes identified from stakeholder interviews function as core and extended brand identity elements, forming the basis for practical tourism products and marketing strategies.

4.3.1 Methodological Approach to Guideline Development

The development of these guidelines followed a rigorous methodological approach informed by thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews. Two main sets of findings were central to this process:

- **Challenge-based themes:** Nine aggregated themes were identified, reflecting structural and operational barriers to culinary branding, including the absence of a national strategy, weak stakeholder collaboration, underutilization of digital tools, and inconsistent culinary representation in tourism products.
- **Identity-based themes:** Eight themes highlighted Sri Lanka's culturally rooted assets, such as traditional culinary knowledge, regional diversity, vibrant street food culture, and immersive food experiences.

To translate these insights into practical strategies, a challenge-to-solution approach was used. This method links each challenge to specific cultural or identity-based strengths, ensuring that the resulting guidelines are feasible for implementation and reflect key aspects of Sri Lanka's culinary heritage, including regional dishes, traditional preparation methods, and community culinary practices.

This approach was designed to directly connect the challenges identified in Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector with the country's authentic culinary strengths. By linking what is lacking with what is strong and distinctive, the guidelines provide actionable strategies to build a cohesive, recognizable, and effective culinary brand. Each recommendation addresses a specific challenge while drawing on local cultural knowledge, culinary practices, and community strengths. This ensures the guidelines

are practical, relevant to the local context, and achievable for stakeholders at national and regional levels. By leveraging these authentic assets, the framework not only strengthens Sri Lanka's culinary identity but also enhances its appeal as a competitive and memorable destination for culinary tourism, promoting sustainable growth and community engagement within the sector.

To systematically translate the findings from this study into actionable strategies, the next sections present a two-step process. Section 4.3.2 explains the thematic integration of challenges and identity-based strengths, showing how each identified barrier was matched with relevant cultural and culinary assets to generate practical insights. Building on this, Section 4.3.3 introduces the integrated culinary tourism guidelines framework, which consolidates these insights into a structured, strategic roadmap for strengthening Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. Together, these sections provide a clear and actionable approach to enhancing the country's competitiveness in the international culinary tourism market.

4.3.2 Thematic Integration of Challenges and Identities

To translate the findings from Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 into actionable branding strategies, a systematic thematic integration process was undertaken. This involved carefully aligning each identified challenge theme with one or more relevant identity-based themes, ensuring that the strategies developed directly respond to existing gaps while leveraging Sri Lanka's authentic culinary assets. The purpose of this process was to bridge the divide between structural or policy-related weaknesses and the country's rich cultural and culinary opportunities, producing insights that are both practical and firmly grounded in the local context.

The results of this integration are presented in Table 6, which maps each challenge to its corresponding identity-driven opportunities. For every challenge–identity pairing, a Strategic branding insight has been proposed, offering a clear, actionable solution that addresses the issue while emphasizing and strengthening the unique elements of Sri Lanka's culinary heritage. Additionally, each identity has been classified as Core, Extended, or Supportive, indicating its relative importance for national culinary branding. Core identities represent the essential pillars of Sri Lanka's

culinary brand, Extended identities enhance differentiation and appeal, and Supportive identities provide cultural depth and contextual richness. This approach ensures that the guidelines are culturally informed, strategically relevant, and capable of guiding national and regional stakeholders in developing a cohesive, competitive, and sustainable culinary tourism brand.

Table 6: Core/Extended/Supportive” between “Identities” and “Suggested Strategic Branding Insight” and classify each identity accordingly.

No	Challenges	Identities and Classifications	Suggested Strategic Branding Insight
01	Weak Culinary branding strategy	Culinary Icons, Traditional Food Practices (Classification Core)	Establish a unified national culinary brand using iconic dishes and cultural symbolism rooted in heritage, supported by government and private institutions through coordinated policies and clear institutional frameworks.
02	Commercialization of authentic cuisine	Traditional Food Practices, Immersive Food Experiences (Classification Core/Extended)	Promote authenticity through a national culinary capacity building program for regional dishes and local eateries, verified by government agencies and culinary associations, combined with regional food trails and live local cooking experiences supported by private sector partners.
03	Underrepresentation of traditional cuisine	Traditional Food Practices, Regional Culinary Identity, Street Food Culture (Classification Core/Extended)	Strengthen the presence of traditional dishes and street food across tourism menus, homestays, and food festivals, ensuring inclusion of street vendors through supportive policies and private sector collaborations.
04	Overlooked regional culinary experiences	Regional Culinary Identity (Classification Extended)	Highlight provincial food diversity through region-specific branding platforms, culinary mapping, and interactive regional food guides, implemented with support from both government tourism authorities and private stakeholders.

05	Marketing Visibility gaps	- Culinary Icons, Enhancing Cultural Storytelling, Immersive Food Experiences (Classification Core/Extended)	- Leverage iconic dishes, compelling food narratives, and rich digital visuals in coordinated international campaigns, including social media, influencer partnerships, and virtual culinary showcases, with backing from both government and private sector marketing efforts.
06	Lack of stakeholder collaboration	Family-Oriented Food Roots, (Classification Supportive)	- Establish local culinary councils to foster collaborations among chefs, tourism boards, community leaders, home cooks, and private sector partners for cohesive culinary branding initiatives.
07	Digital - Visual promotion weaknesses	Enhancing Cultural Storytelling, Immersive Food Experiences (Classification Extended)	- Develop interactive digital menus, virtual food tours, immersive storytelling formats, and visual content strategies to modernize culinary outreach, supported by government and private technology or media partners.
08	Lack of community participation in branding	Family-Oriented Food Roots, Enhancing Cultural Storytelling (Classification Supportive/ Extended)	- Involve family-run eateries, home cooks, and community-led kitchens in food storytelling, branding campaigns, and culinary workshops, with facilitation from both government programs and private institutions.
09	Underutilized Culinary Events	Value of Experiential Culinary Events (Classification Extended)	- Activate regional food festivals, culinary competitions, and seasonal celebrations to promote local culinary culture, enhance tourist engagement, and create signature events for national branding, coordinated by government and private sector organizers.

Source - Created by Author

Classification:

Core = essential for the national culinary brand (e.g., Culinary Icons, Traditional Food Practices).

Extended = enhances the brand and provides differentiation (e.g., Regional Culinary Identity, Immersive Experiences).

Supportive = important culturally but secondary in national branding (e.g., Family-Oriented Food Roots).

The Strategic Branding Insights presented in Table 6 provide a clear and practical link between identified challenges and Sri Lanka's culinary strengths, forming the foundation for actionable and sustainable branding strategies. Core identities (e.g., culinary icons, traditional food practices) form the foundation of Sri Lanka's national culinary brand, while extended identities (e.g., street food culture, immersive experiences) enrich the brand experience and provide differentiation in the global tourism market. Supportive identities, such as family-based food roots, reinforce the brand narrative and contribute cultural depth, ensuring a holistic and inclusive representation of Sri Lanka's culinary heritage.

Thematic analysis combined with tourist feedback indicates that certain identities have higher market relevance. Themes such as regional culinary identity and street food culture show high international tourist interest, suggesting they should be prioritized in branding campaigns. Other themes, such as family-based food traditions, provide emotional and cultural depth, forming extended brand identity elements. Incorporating tourist preferences ensures that branding decisions are informed not only by cultural significance but also by market demand.

Mapping the empirical themes to branding and experience theories provides a robust conceptual grounding. Core identities, such as culinary icons and traditional practices, align with destination branding principles (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride) and authenticity frameworks (Cohen, Wang). Extended identities, such as immersive experiences and street food culture, correspond to experience design theory (Pine & Gilmore), offering functional and emotional engagement that enhances the tourist experience. This alignment demonstrates how Sri Lanka's culinary brand identity can be both theoretically grounded and strategically actionable, bridging the gap between cultural assets and global tourism branding.

4.3.3 Integrated Culinary Tourism Guidelines Framework for Sri Lanka

Developing a coherent and sustainable culinary tourism brand for Sri Lanka requires a holistic guideline that captures the multifaceted nature of culinary branding. This study proposes the integrated culinary tourism guideline for Sri Lanka, which draws upon established destination branding models and adapts them to the context of cultural tourism. The guideline adopts a four-stage approach, highlighting the interconnections between cultural heritage, structural support, engagement strategies, and sustainability considerations. Together, these stages provide a systematic guide to developing an authentic, distinctive, and resilient culinary tourism brand.

The guideline integrates the strategic insights derived from the thematic analysis of challenges and culinary identities. These insights are mapped onto four stages: Inner Core (Cultural Identity), Middle Ring (Structural Enablers), Outer Ring (Engagement Mechanisms), and Encircling Layer (Sustainability and Collaboration). This structure ensures that practical strategies are directly linked to conceptual principles, providing a clear roadmap for policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders.

Table 7 - Strategic Insights into the Integrated Culinary Guideline Framework Stage

No	Stage of Guidelines	Definition / Meaning of the Stage	Challenges	Identities	Suggested Strategies
Stage - 01	Inner Core Focus: Cultural Identity (Traditional dishes, Community-based food practices)	This stage forms the heart of Sri Lanka's culinary identity . It reflects the country's authentic food heritage and unique traditions , making its cuisine distinctive in the global culinary tourism market. It protects traditional practices , prevents the culture from being commodified, and highlights the contributions of local participants such as home cooks and street vendors , ensuring that the brand remains inclusive and grounded in the community.	Weak branding (Lack of National Culinary branding strategy) Strategy, lack of legal framework, Poor Infrastructure, Economic Barriers, Limited institutional support in capacity building programs) Commercialization of authentic cuisine Underrepresentation of traditional cuisine (Limited local Culinary Exposure, Culinary Tourism Not Integrated, Underrepresentation of Street Food)	Culinary Icons (Rice & Curry, Hoppers, Spices, Coconut usage) Traditional Food Practices (Traditional cooking methods, Family tradition, Organic food) Immersive Food Experiences (Village-style cooking classes (using firewood stoves and clay pots), Spice Garden tours (with live demonstrations), Tea estate visits (with practical experience)) Regional Culinary Identity (Regional dishes, North/South variations) Street Food Culture (Informal vendors, Street food experiences)	Establish a unified national culinary brand using iconic dishes and cultural symbolism rooted in heritage , supported by government and private institutions through coordinated policies and clear institutional frameworks. Promote authenticity through a national culinary capacity building program for regional dishes and local eateries, verified by government agencies and culinary associations, combined with regional food trails and live local cooking experiences supported by private sector partners. Strengthen the presence of traditional dishes and street food across tourism menus, homestays, and food festivals, ensuring inclusion of street vendors through supportive policies and private sector collaborations.

Stage - 02	Middle Ring: <u>Focus:</u> Structural Enablers (Policy support, Institutional Support, Infrastructure development, Training for stakeholders)	Provides the institutional and backbone for branding. Structural enablers refer to the institutional, policy, and infrastructural factors that facilitate effective implementation and sustainability of culinary branding. It includes policy support, transport and food safety systems, and decentralised promotion mechanisms. These structural enablers bridge cultural resources with market readiness and address systemic gaps such as fragmented governance and insufficient coordination.	Overlooked regional culinary experiences	Regional Identity (Regional dishes, North/South variations)	Culinary (Regional North/South)	Highlight regional food diversity through region-specific branding platforms, culinary mapping, and interactive regional food guides, implemented with support from both government tourism authorities and private stakeholders.
Stage - 03	Outer Ring: <u>Focus:</u> Engagement Mechanisms (Food festivals & events, Storytelling & cultural narratives, Digital tools)	Represents promotional and interactive strategies that connect tourists with Sri Lanka's culinary heritage. It focuses on participatory experiences, enhancing visibility, and innovative storytelling to attract and retain global audiences while empowering local communities.	Marketing - Visibility gaps in culinary brand marketing, Limited Global culinary brand Recognition	Culinary Icons (Rice & curry, Hoppers, Spices, Coconut usage) Enhancing Cultural Storytelling (Food history, Stories behind dishes)	Leverage iconic dishes, compelling food narratives, and rich digital visuals in coordinated international campaigns, including social media, influencer partnerships, and virtual culinary showcases, with backing from both government and private sector marketing efforts.	Develop interactive digital menus, virtual food tours, immersive

		Contemporary Digital Interfaces, Knowledge -Marketing Gaps, Slow Adoption of Innovations, Ineffective Culinary Storytelling in brand narrative) Underutilized Culinary Events	style cooking classes (using firewood stoves and clay pots), Spice Garden tours (with live demonstrations), Tea estate visits (with practical experience)) Value of Experiential Culinary Events (Village food fairs, Specific Occasional Cooking competitions - New year festival and Pongal festival)	storytelling formats, and visual content strategies to modernize culinary outreach, supported by government and private technology or media partners. Activate regional food festivals, culinary competitions, and seasonal celebrations to promote local culinary culture, enhance tourist engagement, and create signature events for national branding, coordinated by government and private sector organizers.	
Stage - 04	Encircling Layer: Focus: Sustainability & Collaboration (Cross-sector partnerships, Innovative practices, Ecological & community sustainability)	Encompasses sustainable, collaborative practices that safeguard resources, prevent dilution, and inclusivity. This strengthens multi-stakeholder partnerships, aligns branding with sustainability agendas, and promotes long-term resilience of culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.	Lack of stakeholder collaboration Lack of community participation in branding	Family-Oriented Food Roots of the society (Cultural connection, Simple meals, Family ties) Enhancing Cultural Storytelling (Food history, Stories behind dishes)	Establish local culinary councils to foster collaborations among chefs, tourism boards, community leaders, home cooks, and private sector partners for cohesive culinary branding initiatives. Involve family-run eateries, home cooks, and community-led kitchens in food storytelling, branding campaigns, and culinary workshops, with facilitation from both government programs and private institutions.

Source: Created by Author

The table demonstrates how each challenge and identity-based opportunity converges to generate targeted strategic insights within a specific stage of the guideline. Core identities form the foundation of Sri Lanka's national culinary brand, extended identities enrich the visitor experience, and supportive identities provide additional depth and sustainability. For instance, initiatives such as certification programs, regional food trails, and street food promotion are part of the Inner Core, as they protect and highlight Sri Lanka's culinary authenticity. Policies and infrastructure development belong to the Middle Ring, providing the structural support necessary for effective branding. Engagement mechanisms like festivals, digital storytelling, and international campaigns form the Outer Ring, connecting tourists directly with the culinary experience. Finally, the Encircling Layer emphasises sustainability and collaboration, ensuring ecological responsibility, inclusivity, and long-term viability.

To provide a clear and comprehensive overview of Sri Lanka's strategic approach to culinary tourism branding, the Integrated Culinary Tourism Guidelines Framework was developed. The framework adopts a four-stage approach: the Inner Core (Cultural Identity), Middle Ring (Structural Enablers), Outer Ring (Engagement Mechanisms), and the Encircling Layer (Sustainability and Collaboration), illustrating how these interconnected elements collectively support the development of a strong, authentic, and sustainable culinary tourism brand.

To operationalize identities into tourism products, to ensure practical applicability, the identity elements are directly linked to tourism products:

- **Core:** Culinary Icons → national campaigns, signature dishes, certification programs
- **Extended:** Street Food Culture → food trails, markets, digital storytelling
- **Experiential:** Immersive Cooking Classes, Farm Visits, Spice Garden Tours
- **Family Traditions:** Homestays, Community Workshops, Storytelling
- **Festivals:** Culinary Competitions, Seasonal Events

This operationalization ensures that each identity element is not only conceptually significant but also translates into tangible tourism products, enhancing Sri Lanka's global competitiveness.

Emphasize Stakeholder Usage: SLTDA, and other tourism stakeholders can operationalize the guideline by coordinating marketing strategies, supporting regional

culinary councils, promoting community engagement, and integrating digital tools to showcase authentic experiences. This ensures that the brand identity is actionable, sustainable, and inclusive.

Highlight Identity-to-Brand Transformation: the four-stage framework demonstrates how Sri Lanka's culinary identity themes evolve into a functional brand identity. Core identities define the essence of the brand, extended identities enrich visitor experience, engagement mechanisms operationalize these identities in the marketplace, and sustainability/collaboration ensure long-term resilience.

To operationalize the Integrated Culinary Tourism Guidelines, each identified brand identity element is linked to tangible tourism products and strategic branding functions. Core identities, such as culinary icons and traditional food practices, form the foundation of Sri Lanka's national culinary brand and are translated into signature dishes, national campaigns, and certification programs. Extended identities, including street food culture, immersive experiences, and festivals, enrich the visitor experience and provide additional avenues for engagement, such as food trails, cooking classes, farm visits, and seasonal culinary events. This translation ensures that each identity element is not only conceptually significant but also practically actionable, allowing policymakers, tourism authorities, and community stakeholders to implement the guideline effectively. Table 8 presents a clear overview of the core and extended identities, their branding functions, and associated tourism products.

Table 8- Core and Extended Culinary Brand Identities Linked to Tourism Products

Brand Identity Element	Theme	Core / Extended	Branding Function	Tourism Product
Culinary Icons	Rice & Curry, Hoppers	Core	Experiential / Symbolic	National campaigns, signature dishes
Traditional Food Practices	Family cooking, Spices	Core	Experiential / Emotional	Certification programs, regional culinary trails
Street Food Culture	Night markets, Local snacks	Extended	Experiential / Functional	Street food tours, night market experiences
Immersive Experiences	Cooking classes, Spice gardens, Farm visits	Extended	Experiential	Spice garden tours, farm visits, and interactive cooking sessions
Festivals	Pongal, New Year celebrations	Extended	Symbolic / Experiential	Culinary competitions, seasonal food events

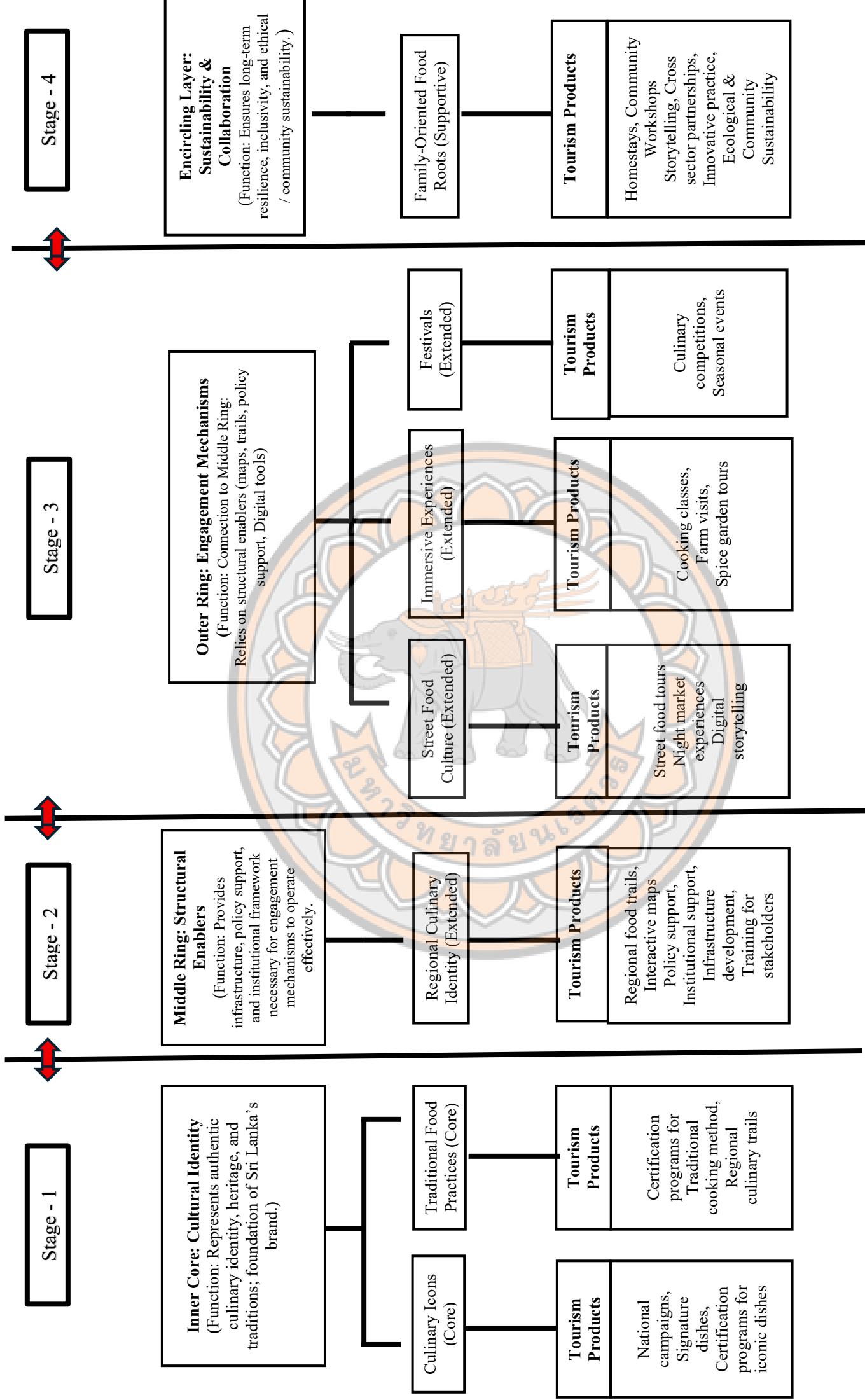


Figure-2- Integrated Culinary Guideline Framework for Sri Lanka
Source: Created by Author

4.3.4. Suggested Strategic Branding Insights

The Integrated Culinary Tourism guideline for Sri Lanka offers a structured and systemic approach to translating the nation's rich culinary heritage into a distinctive and sustainable tourism brand. By aligning strategic insights with the guideline's four stages, the model not only addresses the empirical challenges identified in this study but also provides a practical roadmap for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and community stakeholders. Each stage represents a critical dimension of culinary branding, collectively ensuring that Sri Lanka's cuisine is positioned authentically, effectively, and sustainably in the global tourism market.

4.3.4.1 Stage 1 - Inner Core: Cultural Identity

At the heart of the guideline lies Sri Lanka's cultural identity. This core encompasses traditional dishes, indigenous ingredients, and community-based food practices that define the nation's culinary uniqueness. Cultural identity forms the essence of branding, communicating authenticity, heritage, and distinctiveness to both domestic and international audiences. Protecting and safeguarding this core is crucial to preventing commodification, ensuring culinary experiences remain true to local practices, and maintaining the social and cultural integrity of communities. By engaging local stakeholders, such as home cooks, family-run eateries, and street vendors, the framework emphasizes inclusivity, allowing grassroots contributors to shape the culinary brand. This stage also reinforces the experiential aspect of tourism, offering visitors immersive encounters with the living traditions and heritage of Sri Lankan cuisine.

4.3.4.2 Stage 2 - Middle Ring: Structural Enablers

Encircling the cultural core is the stage of structural enablers, providing the institutional and infrastructural support necessary for effective culinary branding. This includes government policies, infrastructure development, food safety systems, and capacity-building programs for culinary entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Structural enablers translate cultural potential into market-ready offerings, bridging the gap between local culinary resources and global tourism demands. This stage also addresses

systemic challenges, such as fragmented governance, insufficient coordination, and limited funding, which have historically constrained Sri Lanka's culinary tourism development. By integrating policy frameworks, institutional collaboration, and strategic investment, the Middle Ring ensures that culinary heritage is supported by a strong, well-organized foundation capable of sustaining long-term growth.

4.3.4.3 Stage 3 - Outer Ring: Engagement Mechanisms

The Outer Ring focuses on engagement mechanisms that connect tourists with Sri Lanka's culinary identity in meaningful ways. This includes curated experiences such as food festivals, regional culinary competitions, and interactive storytelling, as well as modern digital interventions including virtual tours and social media campaigns. By promoting participatory experiences, this stage enhances the visibility of Sri Lanka's culinary offerings while empowering local communities to actively contribute to tourism development. Engagement mechanisms are critical not only for attracting international visitors but also for creating dynamic, culturally resonant experiences that foster loyalty, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth promotion. In essence, this stage transforms the static cultural assets of the Inner Core into vibrant, tangible, and shareable experiences for tourists.

4.3.4.4 Stage 4 - Encircling Layer: Sustainability and Collaboration

Surrounding all previous stages is the sustainability and collaboration dimension, which ensures the long-term resilience and ethical integrity of Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. This stage emphasizes cross-sector partnerships, innovative practices, ecological responsibility, and social inclusiveness. Collaboration between government agencies, private enterprises, local communities, and civil society organizations mitigates risks such as cultural dilution, overexploitation of resources, and socio-economic marginalization. By embedding sustainability at the outermost stage, the guideline aligns with global best practices in responsible tourism and guarantees that branding initiatives generate lasting benefits for both communities and the environment. This stage transforms the guideline framework from a conceptual model into a practical, resilient system capable of supporting sustainable growth and international competitiveness.

Integrating the four stages, Cultural Identity, Structural Enablers, Engagement Mechanisms, and Sustainability & Collaboration, this guideline offers a comprehensive and practical guide for developing Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. Each stage supports and reinforces the others, ensuring that cultural authenticity is preserved, structural systems are strong, visitor engagement is meaningful, and sustainability is embedded. Together, they provide strategic insights and actionable guidance for positioning Sri Lanka's culinary heritage as a unique, authentic, and globally competitive tourism offering, while also promoting economic growth, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of culinary tourism branding by integrating previously isolated factors—such as authenticity, cultural identity, stakeholder engagement, structural support, and sustainability—into a cohesive, four-stage framework. It demonstrates how the analysis of branding challenges and existing brand identity can be systematically applied to develop practical branding strategies. This integrative approach provides a novel conceptual model for culinary tourism development, advancing scholarly knowledge on how cultural, structural, and engagement elements collectively strengthen destination branding and offering a reference point for future research in similar contexts.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion on the Integrated Culinary Tourism Guideline Framework

The integrated culinary tourism guideline framework provides a four-staged approach to strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary tourism by aligning cultural identity, structural support, engagement strategies, and sustainability considerations. This guideline framework directly addresses the challenges identified in the results by leveraging identity-based strengths and translating them into actionable strategies grounded in the local context. By mapping empirical insights from stakeholder interviews to a structured model, the framework operationalizes culinary identity in ways that are both culturally authentic and strategically viable.

While destination branding models (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2002; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) emphasize institutional support, marketing, and promotion, they often underrepresent community engagement and authentic cultural assets. Similarly, culinary tourism studies in Asia (Richards, 2015; Hall & Sharples, 2008) highlight iconic dishes and food experiences but rarely integrate these with structural or policy challenges. The guideline developed in this study bridges these gaps by linking structural weaknesses with identity-based opportunities, ensuring that strategies are practical, contextually grounded, and inclusive of local stakeholders such as home cooks, street vendors, and culinary councils.

This study builds on the growing literature of culinary tourism branding to expand earlier conversations to the Sri Lankan context. Existing studies consistently acknowledge the role of authenticity and cultural identity (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Lin et al., 2011). The outcomes of this study align with these arguments while demonstrating how authenticity in Sri Lanka can be operationalized through a four-stage framework. The inner core identifies traditional foods, indigenous ingredients, and family-based food practices, highlighting how food culture can transition from symbolic cultural markers to tangible facilitators of a national brand strategy. Unlike prior frameworks that describe authenticity conceptually, this study

operationalizes it through concrete actions, showing how local culinary practices can directly support national branding.

Effective governance and supporting infrastructure, including policies, strategic planning, and stakeholder coordination, are recognized as important factors for successful tourism branding (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011; Getz et al., 2014). The Sri Lankan case presents more specific policy challenges than the literature typically addresses, including fragmented brand strategies, weak collaboration, and limited digital marketing. By addressing these structural issues within the middle ring of the framework, the study demonstrates how deficiencies in governance and infrastructure can constrain the translation of culinary identity into international competitiveness. The framework illustrates how policy reforms, stakeholder councils, and digital innovations can strengthen culinary tourism branding in practice.

Capturing tourists' attention through immersive experiences is a recurrent theme in culinary tourism literature (Richards, 2015). In line with prior research, the findings confirm the usefulness of food festivals, live cooking demonstrations, and storytelling to encourage visitor engagement. However, these activities are underutilized in Sri Lanka, particularly regarding street food and regional food distinctiveness. By positioning these practices in the outer ring of the framework, everyday culinary culture becomes a structured branding intervention that enhances visitor experiences while actively involving communities.

Sustainability and inclusivity have become increasingly important in heritage and culinary tourism, yet they are rarely integrated as a core element in branding frameworks. The encircling layer of this framework addresses this gap, positioning sustainability and ethical collaboration at the forefront of culinary branding. By embedding ecological responsibility, social inclusiveness, and community benefits, the framework ensures long-term resilience and cultural preservation. This approach distinguishes the framework from prior studies that treat sustainability as a supplementary consideration.

Collectively, the integrated culinary tourism guideline framework contributes uniquely to the literature by demonstrating how culinary authenticity can be operationalized as actionable branding strategies, integrating structural and governance considerations with cultural and experiential aspects, embedding sustainability and

inclusivity as core elements rather than supplementary components, and addressing underutilized local culinary practices and community participation to strengthen national branding.

Strategic Recommendations: Based on the findings and the Integrated Culinary Tourism Guideline Framework, several strategic recommendations can be made to strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand. Core identities, such as culinary icons and traditional food practices, should be leveraged through national campaigns, signature dishes, and certification programs, ensuring authenticity and consistency across tourism offerings. Extended identities, including street food culture, immersive experiences, and festivals, can be operationalized through food trails, interactive cooking classes, farm visits, and seasonal culinary competitions, enriching visitor experiences and providing differentiation in the global tourism market.

Tourism stakeholders, particularly SLTDA, regional tourism councils, and local community organizations, should coordinate marketing strategies, support regional culinary councils, promote community engagement, and integrate digital tools to showcase authentic culinary experiences. Collaboration among government, private sector, and community actors is essential to ensure inclusivity, sustainability, and long-term viability.

The four-stage framework demonstrates how culinary identity can be translated into a functional brand: core identities define the essence of the brand, extended identities enhance the visitor experience, engagement mechanisms operationalize these identities in the marketplace, and sustainability/collaboration ensures resilience. Implementing these strategies provides a practical roadmap for policymakers, tourism authorities, and community stakeholders, translating theoretical insights into actionable initiatives that preserve cultural heritage while enhancing Sri Lanka's international culinary competitiveness.

In summary, the strategic recommendations outlined in this chapter not only operationalize Sri Lanka's culinary identity into tangible tourism products but also provide actionable guidance for stakeholders to enhance branding, community engagement, and sustainability. These recommendations bridge theory and practice, ensuring that cultural authenticity, structural support, experiential engagement, and collaborative governance are effectively integrated. The insights gained here form a

foundation for the concluding chapter, which synthesizes the study's findings, highlights the overall contributions to culinary tourism branding, and presents final implications for policy, practice, and future research in the Sri Lankan context.



CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Summary of the Study

This research aimed to develop strategic culinary branding guidelines for Sri Lanka by investigating the challenges and culinary identities shaping the country's tourism sector. Employing a qualitative methodology, thematic analysis was conducted using data collected from key stakeholders, including international tourists, tourism officials, and local community members. The study identified key barriers such as fragmented policies, insufficient stakeholder coordination, and the underrepresentation of authentic culinary heritage. Also, it highlighted Sri Lanka's rich culinary culture, traditional foods, and community practices as foundational assets for sustainable tourism development. Based on these insights, an Integrated Culinary Framework was developed to guide the creation of guidelines that align Sri Lanka's culinary identity with effective tourism strategies. The framework further operationalizes core and extended identities into tangible tourism products and experiences, providing actionable guidance for stakeholders such as SLTDA, local councils, and community entrepreneurs. This operationalization clarifies how each identity theme can be translated into practical tourism offerings, reflecting both market demand and strategic priorities.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of culinary tourism branding by proposing a comprehensive, four-stage guideline that integrates previously distinct insights into a cohesive conceptual guideline. Previous research has focused on authenticity, cultural identity, differentiation, consistency, and sensory experience as factors that influence how tourists perceive and experience cuisine (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Anholt, 2007; Morgan et al., 2003; Getz et al., 2014; UNWTO, 2012). Previous studies have emphasised the role of regional food and culinary heritage as key drivers of destination branding and food branding, focusing on local diversity, storytelling, food festivals, and immersive

culinary experiences as important considerations in visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Structural and organisational factors, including policy, infrastructure, and stakeholder coordination, are also important enablers of successful food tourism branding (Beverland, 2006; Holt, 2004; Lin et al., 2011). However, these elements and factors are often treated in isolation from each other, and systematic approaches that connect cultural, structural, engagement, and sustainability elements into overall guidelines are still limited.

The study findings filled these gaps by providing four-stage guidelines that define culinary identity, structural support, engagement mechanisms, and sustainability in a cohesive conceptual route. By linking common themes on culinary identities and challenges across four stages, the guideline illustrates how abstract constructs such as authenticity, community participation, and regional distinctiveness can be applied systematically and measurably. It explicitly demonstrates how core identities (culinary icons, traditional practices) and extended identities (street food, immersive experiences, festivals) can be translated into tangible tourism products, linking theory with practical application. This approach ensures that identities reflect both the reality of current branding practices and potential gaps, enabling the development of a unified framework for Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand identity. The guideline clarifies the progressive relationships between cultural, structural, and engagement factors, illustrating how they progress from one stage to the next to support brand identity. The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the new knowledge generated through the creation of a structured, actionable guideline that translates complex, structural, engagement, and sustainability elements into a unified conceptual framework, providing a novel integrative perspective and advancing theoretical understanding of how culinary identity can systematically inform and strengthen destination branding.

6.3 Practical Contributions

Practically, the research delivers a set of actionable culinary branding guidelines tailored to Sri Lanka's unique socio-cultural and institutional landscape. These guidelines provide policymakers, tourism practitioners, and local communities with strategic directions to authentically and sustainably leverage culinary heritage.

The framework suggests developing a nationwide culinary brand founded on national icons, including signature dishes and cultural representations, to unify a fragmented brand at the national level. To promote balanced regional development, traditional cuisine should be incorporated alongside local food producers and street food vendors, ensuring fair representation and community benefits. From a promotional perspective, the guideline emphasizes digital storytelling, interactive food platforms, and authentic culinary excursions to enhance Sri Lanka's global visibility.

Importantly, the framework provides clear operational guidance for stakeholders, showing how each identity element can be directly linked to tourism products and experiences. SLTDA and other tourism stakeholders can coordinate marketing strategies, support regional culinary councils, promote community engagement, and integrate digital tools to showcase authentic culinary experiences. Extended identities are strategically leveraged to enhance visitor engagement, while core identities reinforce national branding. By operationalizing these elements, the guideline ensures practical applicability, aligns with tourist demand, and enables stakeholders to implement sustainable branding initiatives effectively. Sustainability is highlighted in the encircling layer of the framework, guiding long-term viability through consistent ingredient use, ecological awareness, and equitable economic benefits for local communities. Collectively, these contributions ensure that Sri Lanka's culinary brand gains global recognition while promoting socially inclusive development and environmental sustainability.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and the proposed culinary branding guideline, several strategic recommendations are suggested to strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector.

At the Inner core (Cultural Identity), it is crucial to develop a unified national culinary tourism strategy that emphasizes authentic cultural identity, signature dishes, and regional culinary traditions. Clear objectives, defined roles, and coordination mechanisms among stakeholders will strengthen Sri Lanka's culinary identity and provide a solid foundation for promoting its unique food heritage. Core identities should be operationalized into tangible products such as national campaigns, signature dishes,

and certification programs, ensuring that these elements are consistently represented in both national and regional tourism initiatives.

For the Middle Ring (supporting systems), infrastructure improvements and investment in training are necessary to ensure high standards of food quality, hygiene, and service delivery across culinary tourism sites. Fostering collaboration among government bodies, private enterprises, local communities, and NGOs will facilitate shared knowledge, effective resource utilization, and coordinated efforts to support sustainable culinary tourism development.

Regarding Outer Ring (engagement mechanisms), tourist experiences should be enriched through community-led initiatives, regional food experiences, street food culture, storytelling, festivals, and hands-on cooking opportunities. The use of digital storytelling, multimedia platforms, and interactive culinary experiences will increase global visibility and allow tourists to connect meaningfully with Sri Lanka's rich culinary narratives. Extended identities such as street food, immersive cooking classes, and festivals should be strategically leveraged to enhance visitor experiences while ensuring community participation.

Finally, for the Encircling Layer (sustainability and collaboration), long-term sustainability and equitable collaboration must underpin all branding efforts. Integrating ecological responsibility, ethical tourism, social inclusion, and support for local producers ensures the preservation of culinary heritage. Embedding these principles helps maintain authenticity, resilience, and competitiveness while generating socio-economic and environmental benefits for local communities, operationalizing the strategic recommendations in real-world contexts.

6.5 Limitations

While offering valuable insights, this study has several inherent limitations. The purely qualitative methodology provided rich contextual data but limited the generalizability of findings across all regions and stakeholder groups in Sri Lanka's culinary tourism sector. Purposive sampling focused on international tourists, tourism officials, and local community members, leaving out perspectives from domestic tourists, culinary entrepreneurs, chefs, culinary educators, and diaspora members. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, and data collection occurred over a

brief period of one month. Consequently, the study is cross-sectional and reflects a single point in time, which may not capture long-term trends, evolving dynamics, or future developments in culinary branding initiatives.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

Future research should aim to expand and diversify the participant base to include domestic travelers, culinary entrepreneurs, chefs, culinary educators, restaurant owners, cultural institutions, and diaspora members. Employing mixed-method or quantitative approaches would allow validation of the proposed framework, assessment of relationships between authenticity, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intentions, and further testing of the branding guidelines. Longitudinal studies are recommended to provide deeper insights into the implementation, practices, and long-term impacts of culinary branding initiatives. Comparative research with other emerging culinary tourism destinations could offer valuable benchmarks and best practices. Additionally, future studies could explore digital storytelling, regional culinary identities, and community-centered initiatives to enhance cultural engagement, sustainability, and socially inclusive development in culinary tourism. Future research could also test the operationalization of core and extended identities into tangible products, evaluate stakeholder usage of the guidelines, and measure the effectiveness of strategic recommendations in real-world tourism contexts.

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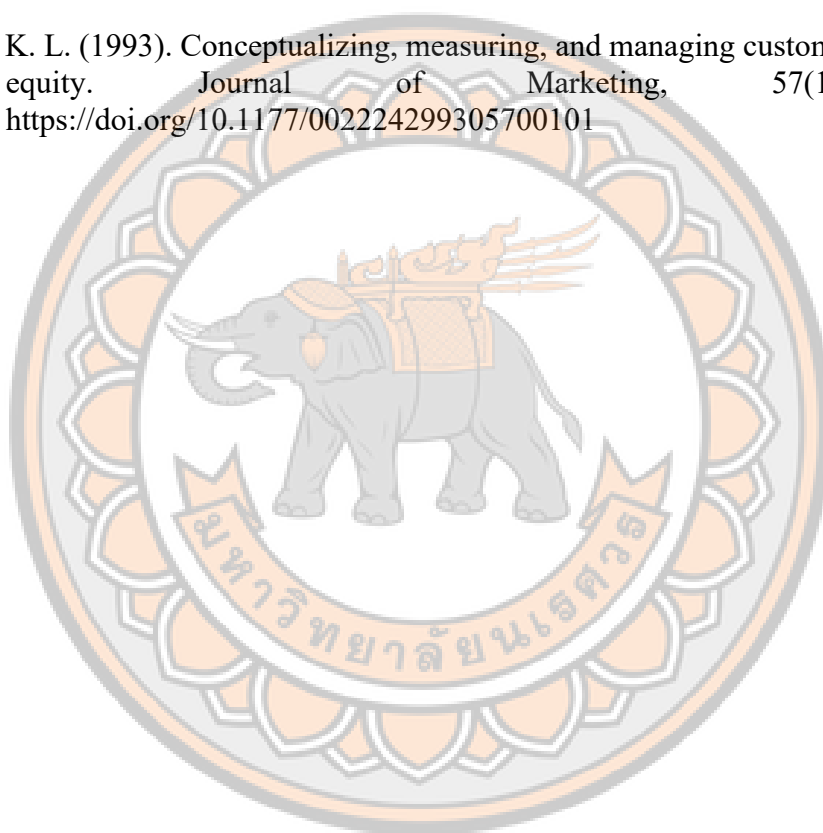
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APPENDIX A: Research Plan

Data collection		
Process 1	Method	In depth Interviews
	Participants	International tourists, Government & Private officials related to tourism and local community members including vendors, restaurant managers, local people
	Objective	Explored the challenges concerning culinary branding in Sri Lanka, examine the existing culinary tourism brand identity, and offer insight into the effective development of branding guidelines.
Data Analysis		
Process 2	Method	Thematic Analysis
	Objective	provided a comprehensive understanding of branding challenges, evaluate the current culinary brand identity, and contribute to create branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka.
Findings		
Process 3	Objective	Analyzed challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka Identified the culinary tourism branding identity Developed branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

1. For Officers Who are Working in the Tourism Sector

Objective 1 - To analysis the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka

- Is there an official plan or strategy to promote Sri Lankan food as part of tourism branding?
- What difficulties do you face in marketing our cuisine internationally? (E.g., budget issues, lack of skilled personnel, weak media campaigns, lack of collaboration with chefs or restaurants)
- Are there problems connecting local food experiences with tourism promotions? (E.g., are food vendors or regional foods visible in tourism campaigns or hidden?)
- Do you think tourists are aware of our cuisine before visiting? Why or why not?
- Is there any difficulty in uniting all regions under a single culinary identity? (E.g., North and South dishes differ, can that variety be branded clearly?)
- How involved are chefs, local food producers, or restaurants in building the tourism brand?
- Is the “authenticity” of Sri Lankan food preserved in what’s being promoted? (Sometimes, street food and homemade dishes are ignored in favor of hotel food. Does this harm the brand?)

Objective 2 - To identify the culinary tourism branding identity

- In your opinion, how is Sri Lanka’s food currently represented as part of the national tourism brand? (This refers to how cuisine is included in tourism campaigns, slogans, visuals, or experiences promoted by your organization)
- What key elements do you think make Sri Lankan cuisine unique and recognizable? (This helps uncover what aspects—such as spices, preparation, history—are considered core to the food identity)

- Are there any signature dishes officially used to represent Sri Lanka in tourism promotions? (E.g., is there a national dish or food symbol used like Thailand uses Pad Thai or Japan uses sushi?)
- How do regional food identities (e.g., North, South, East, West) fit into the national food brand?
- (This refers to whether regional diversity is included or creates confusion.)
- What symbols, slogans, or themes (if any) are used in food-related tourism promotions? (Are there any catchphrases or ideas that shape the way Sri Lankan food is advertised?)
- How are chefs, food businesses, or local communities involved in shaping the food brand? (This looks at participation from the culinary sector in building the tourism image.)
- What kind of food experiences are promoted—fine dining, street food, cooking classes, or something else?

Objective 3 - To develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka

- What do you think should be the key elements of a culinary tourism brand for Sri Lanka? (This focuses on the core features that should define Sri Lanka's culinary tourism identity.)
- How can the government or tourism board support culinary tourism better? (This explores the role of government support and collaboration in strengthening food tourism branding.)
- How would you incorporate local food experiences into the overall tourism experience in Sri Lanka? (This explores how food can be integrated into broader tourism strategies.)
- Do you think Sri Lankan cuisine should have an official symbol or signature dish to represent the brand? (This explores the idea of creating an iconic culinary symbol for Sri Lanka.)
- What challenges do you foresee in implementing a culinary tourism branding strategy in Sri Lanka? (This focuses on potential challenges that might arise during the implementation of branding guidelines.)

2. For International Tourists

Objective 1 - To analysis the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka

- Did you know much about Sri Lankan food before you came here? E.g., had you heard about dishes like rice & curry, kottu, or hoppers?
- Did food influence your decision to visit Sri Lanka? Or did you come mainly for beaches, culture, or nature?
- Did you see much about Sri Lankan food in travel brochures, websites, or social media before your trip? Were food images, local dishes, or street food highlighted in promotions?
- Once you arrived, was it easy to find and try authentic local food? Did you know where to go? Were food experiences visible or hidden?
- Did you find any food-related tours, cooking classes, or events? Were these promoted online or by tour guides?
- Did you feel the food experience was connected to the culture and identity of Sri Lanka? Or did it feel generic, like hotel buffets or fusion menus?
- Would you recommend Sri Lankan food to other travelers after your trip? Why or why not?

Objective 2 - To identify the culinary tourism branding identity

- How did you first learn about Sri Lankan food? (This refers to how tourists discover Sri Lankan food before and during their visit.)
- What dishes or food experiences were you most excited to try when visiting Sri Lanka? (This focuses on the excitement or expectations tourists have about Sri Lankan cuisine.)
- How would you describe the overall food experience of Sri Lanka? (This helps understand how tourists perceive the entire culinary tourism experience.)
- Do you think Sri Lankan food is unique compared to other countries you've visited? (This helps understand if tourists see Sri Lankan food as having a distinct identity.)
- How well is Sri Lankan food showcased in tourism-related materials like websites, brochures, or tours? (This refers to the visibility of Sri Lankan food in tourism marketing.)

Objective 3 - To develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka

- How would you describe the ideal culinary tourism experience in Sri Lanka? (This asks tourists what they would expect from a culinary tourism experience.)
- If Sri Lanka had to promote one dish as the signature dish of the country, which one would you suggest? (This helps identify what dish tourists consider iconic or memorable.)
- How easy was it to discover local food during your visit to Sri Lanka? (This refers to how accessible and visible Sri Lankan food is to tourists.)
- How would you improve how Sri Lankan food is presented to international tourists? (This asks for suggestions on how to improve the presentation of Sri Lankan food globally.)
- How do you feel about food festivals or culinary tours to promote Sri Lankan food? (This focuses on tourists' opinions about food-related events.)

3. For Local Community

Objective 1 - To analysis the challenges of culinary branding in Sri Lanka

- Do you feel Sri Lankan food is well-known among tourists? Why or why not?
- Are there enough programs or support from the government to promote local food in tourism? E.g., do you get help joining food festivals, street food tours, or media promotions?
- Do you think the traditional food you cook, or sell is seen in tourism advertisements? Example: Are dishes like string hoppers or jackfruit curry shown in brochures or videos?
- Is it difficult for small food businesses or vendors to take part in food tourism promotions? E.g., too expensive, no contacts, no platform to join.
- Do you think our food is presented in a way that shows its real value and tradition? E.g., Do tourists only see hotel buffet versions, not how locals cook and eat?
- Is there a clear “identity” for Sri Lankan food that we show to the world? Do we have signature dishes like how Japan has sushi or India has curry?

- Do you think regional foods (like Jaffna crab curry or Kandyan sweets) are included in tourism branding? Or are only a few southern or western dishes shown to tourists?
- What challenges do you face in presenting your food to tourists? E.g., language barriers, lack of clean spaces, no signage or menu in English.

Objective 2 - To identify the culinary tourism branding identity

- How do you think Sri Lankan food is represented in tourism or advertisements about the country?
- What are the most important dishes or food traditions that should represent Sri Lanka's cuisine to the world?
- How do you feel about regional food differences—do you think each region should have its own food identity, or should there be a single “Sri Lankan food identity”?
- Do you think tourists recognize Sri Lankan food as unique before they arrive here?
- Do you think there are enough food-related events, festivals, or experiences that showcase Sri Lankan food?

Objective 3 - To develop branding guidelines for culinary tourism in Sri Lanka

- What do you think are the most important aspects of Sri Lankan food that should be part of the tourism brand?
- How can local restaurants and food vendors contribute to Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand?
- How can Sri Lanka's food be better promoted to international tourists?
- What role should the government or tourism department play in promoting Sri Lanka's culinary tourism brand?
- Do you think Sri Lanka's food can stand out among other countries' culinary tourism offerings?

APPENDIX C: Certificate of Research Ethics (GCP)



APPENDIX D: Approval of Institutional Review Board (IRB)

COA No. 201/2025	AF 11/6.0
IRB No. P2-0196/2568	



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD, NARESUAN UNIVERSITY

99 Moo 9, Tha Pho Subdistrict, Mueang Phitsanulok District, Phitsanulok Province 65000, Tel 66 5596 8721

Certificate of Approval (Initial Submission)

The Institutional Review Board of the Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand, has approved the following study which is to be carried out in compliance with the International guidelines for human research protection as Declaration of Helsinki, The Belmont Report, CIOMS Guideline and International Conference on Harmonization in Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP)

Study Title	: Developing Culinary Tourism Branding guidelines in Sri Lanka
Principal Investigator	: Ms. Kodeswaranathan Sathiyabbriya
Faculty	: Faculty of Business Economics and Communication
Advisor	: ดร.มณฑิรา อินท๊ะสอน
Review Method	: Expedited Review
Continuing Report	: Submit a progress report at least once a year.

Document Reviewed :

1. IF 01 Research Ethical Application for Non-intervention Study Version 3.0 Date 20 June 2025
2. IF 02 Conflict of Interest and Funding Form Version 1.0 Date 12 December 2024
3. IF 03 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
4. IF 03 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Tamil Language Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
5. IF 04 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
6. IF 04 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Tamil Language Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
7. IF 04 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Sinhala Language Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
8. IF 04 For Participants Aged 18 and Above Chinese Language Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
9. IF 05 CV (Ms. Kodeswaranathan Sathiyabbriya) Version 1.0 Date 12 December 2024
10. IF 05 CV (ดร.มณฑิรา อินท๊ะสอน) Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
11. IF 06 Budget Version 1.0 Date 12 December 2024
12. Full Protocol Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025
13. Interview Questions Brand Version 2.0 Date 25 May 2025



Signature:

(รองศาสตราจารย์ ดร.สุทัศน์ เขียววัฒนา)

Acting Chairperson of The Institutional Review Board

Naresuan University

Date of Approval : 24 June 2025

Approval Expired Date : 24 June 2026

Approval is granted subject to the following conditions: (see back of this Certificate)



APPENDIX E: Approval of Thesis Proposal to Conduct Research by The Graduate School



Announcement

The Graduate School, Naresuan University
Approval of Thesis Proposal to Conduct Research
No.139/2025

The Graduate School approved **Ms.Sathiyabbriya Kodeswaranathan**, student ID: 67062568; Master of Arts Program in Tourism and Hospitality Management, to conduct research. The approved thesis proposal entitled: **“DEVELOPING CULINARY TOURISM BRANDING GUIDELINES IN SRI LANKA”** with Dr.Montira Intason as the thesis advisor.

When conducting research involving Research Ethics for Human Subjects, Research Ethics for the Use of Laboratory Animals, or Research Ethics on Biosafety, it is mandatory to obtain approval from the relevant committee. Research activities in these areas may commence only after receiving the necessary approvals.

Announced date: July 15, 2025

Krongkarn Chootip

(Associate Professor Dr.Krongkarn Chootip)

Dean of the Graduate School, Naresuan University