

Determinants of Street Food Consumption in Low Income Residential Suburbs: The Perspectives of Patrons of KwaMereki in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract: *The study sought to investigate the determinants of street food consumption in low income residential areas in Harare, Zimbabwe. This study was motivated by an observation that open eating spots in the low income residential townships are popular with patrons of seemingly high social standing. The study also sought to establish strategies for improving such places, from the perspective of both the clients and the vendors. The study was carried out using qualitative methods of collecting data, namely interviews and observations. The data was analyzed using a thematic approach. The major findings were that the high consumption of street-prepared food was due to the quest for cultural identity expressed in consuming traditional dishes, the desire to fulfill psychological needs such as self esteem, love and sense of belonging, social recognition as expressed in material possessions and the relaxation provided by the setting, flexibility and convenience. With regards to strategies on improving the facility, vendors suggested that the practice of food vending be legalized, while patrons suggested that the general hygiene and cleanliness of the place should be enhanced. Since food is a key component of the tourism industry, the findings of the study were used to design a framework which can be used to guide the development of street food vending, so that mutual benefits could accrue to the vendors as well as the tourism and hospitality industry at large.*

Keywords: *street food, open eating spots, indigenous, Low income residential areas.*

I. Introduction

The world over, street food vending is widespread and complex. [1] averred that street food is sold in almost every country in the world. In Zimbabwe, street food vending is common in all urban areas. While most street food vendors appear to provide food largely to the urban poor [2], simple observation of the patrons that frequent some of these places in Zimbabwe reveals that some of the clients are of a high socio-economic standing, as shown by the number and types of cars that get parked on these spots.

KwaMereki is a shopping centre in Warren Park D, which is a high density suburb in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. The residential area is one of the suburbs that were established before the country's independence. The shopping centre comprises of retail shops, butcheries and bottle stores. Vendors erected stalls on the open space in front of the shops. A variety of food is prepared and sold at this place. Vendors either prepare food for sale, or patrons buy raw food which they request vendors to prepare for them.

The informal food sector is normally regarded as a health risk because it is generally unregulated and is associated with poor hygiene practices [3]. In Zimbabwe, street food eating spots were banned in 2012, when the country was experiencing recurring cases of food borne diseases such as typhoid. All possible sources for the diseases were targeted, resulting in the closure of open eating spots (including KwaMereki). However, these open eating spots were later reopened, following a public outcry coming mainly from vendors, who had lost their source of livelihood.

Most studies on street food consumption have been primarily based on health and hygiene issues as well as concerns of vendors [4]. Apparently, there are no studies which have been done specifically on the determinants of street food consumption from the perspective of the patrons. In addition, there is a gap in literature in the hospitality and tourism industry in Zimbabwe, in terms of factors which determine choice of food outlets. Therefore, this study will add valuable knowledge in that respect.

The study therefore seeks to answer the following two questions: Why do people seek food in these places? What strategies do patrons and vendors suggest on improving street food vending? The information obtained will be used to design a framework for maximizing the commercial benefits of street food vending and how the tourism industry can benefit from such activities.

II. Literature Review

Street food has been defined by FAO 1996 as cited in [5] as ‘ready to eat foods and beverages prepared and or sold by vendors on the streets from push carts or buckets or balanced poles or stalls or from shops which have fewer than four permanent walls’. McGee (1973) as cited in [7] classified street food vending into three types according to the location of vendors. Firstly, there are those who sell from street pavements. Secondly, some of the vendors sell at places where people assemble. Thirdly, there are those who sell in a bazaar. A bazaar is equivalent to a seasonal or periodic market, where vendors sell from a piece of public or private land. [8] noted that the ubiquitous nature of street food indicates that these activities are responding to real societal needs. As a result, one can infer that the high prevalence of the informal food is an indication that the formal food industry is failing to fully cater for the needs of some of the urban population. Low income urban populations depend more heavily on street food as a source of relatively in-expensive foods [1, 2]. However, studies carried out by [9, 10, 11, 12] indicated that people of different economic profiles consume street food. In Zimbabwe, however, no study has investigated the determinants of street food consumption from the customer’s point of view.

There are a variety of reasons why people seek street food. These include ethnic tastes, nostalgia, the opportunity to eat quickly, as well as obtaining flavorful reasonably priced food in sociable settings, [13]. In view of the cultural capital theory, which was put forward by Bourdieu (1984), food can be regarded as a cultural resource and eating as a cultural act that facilitates interaction and social differentiation among people, [11]. Thus, food consumption is an essential physical cultural practice that can define social identity. In the context of the world culture theory of globalization [12], consumption of ethnic foods can be seen as an attempt by indigenous people to resist the forces of globalization which are threatening local foods. According to this theory, there is a constant struggle between the homogenizing forces of globalization dynamics and the resistant local ideals.

Food, as a cultural resource has the potential to attract tourists. In fact, Wickware (1998), as cited in [4], posits that food reflects people’s lifestyles and religion and it is the very essence of a country or a region. In that regard, food can be an important cultural resource that can be exploited for tourism purposes.

III. Methodology

The study used qualitative methodology, which enabled the researcher to study the events as they occur in human life, allowing the influence of contextual variables to be established and factored in. Qualitative research helps to establish why people behave the way they do, their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, fears and perceptions, [14]. In-depth interviews were carried out with the patrons and the vendors. In-depth interview guides were used to collect information from the participants. The in-depth interviews with clients were carried out during weekends because this was the time when most patrons visited the place. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents. The interviews with vendors were carried out during the week in the morning at a time when the vendors were not very busy. A total of 30 interviews were carried out with patrons. On average, the place hosts around 330 patrons; therefore, 30 patrons were considered a sample that is representative enough. Meanwhile, 10 food vendors were interviewed.

IV. Findings and Discussion

The research sought to establish the determinants of street food consumption from the point of view of the patrons and the possible measures which can be implemented to improve the street food vending facilities. The study also came up with a framework that can be used as a guideline to reduce perceived risks of vended foods and to maximize benefits for both the vendors and the Hospitality and Tourism Industry.

4.1 The socio-economic characteristics of patrons

The customers, who patronize kwaMereki, had mixed socio- economic backgrounds, though patrons from high income residential areas (57%) had a slight edge over those from low income residential areas (43%). Most of the respondents’ minimum academic qualification was a Bachelor’s degree.

The socio-demographic characteristics of patrons at KwaMereki N=30

College	Percentage distribution %
Gender	
Females	62
Males	38
Age	
16-25	17
26-35	40
36-45	17
46-55	20
55+	6

Highest Educational Levels	
Primary education	16
Secondary education	15
Certificate	14
Diploma	40
Degree	15
Place of residence	
Low income residential areas	43
High income residential areas	57
Frequency of visits	
Once a week	14
Twice a week	50
Daily	7
Purpose of visit	
Eating	40
Drinking	32
social networking	13
entertainment	10
all of above	10

Source: interview data

The cars observed at this place were ranging from simple to posh cars; some of the expensive cars were 4 by 4s, BMWs, Mercedes Benz, Range Rovers, and Jeep etc.

“It is where you get to know the latest cars and the best car radios.....”

Most of the respondents indicated that they drove personal cars, though it is most likely that some of these executive cars were company cars. However, one may argue that even if the cars were company owned, to a great extent they still reflect on the economic and social status of the patrons. Executive cars are normally issued to employees in managerial positions.

It appears one of the reasons why people drive from far suburbs to kwaMereki is that the place provides a platform for patrons to achieve their psychological and emotional needs, such as self esteem that is expressed through showing off their latest car acquisitions. The dominance of educated people from high income residential areas clearly reveals that street food vending in the developing countries is not only for the urban poor, [17]. The informal food sector has evolved and is now appealing to all people, regardless of their economic and social standing. The fact that places like kwaMereki are being patronized by people from high socio economic backgrounds is an indication that street food has unique attributes that are lacking in the formal food and hospitality industry.

4.2 Determinants of Street Food Consumption at KwaMereki, Zimbabwe: The Customer Perspectives

There are various factors which contribute to the popularity of kwaMereki. The major themes which emerged from this study were: the availability of traditional food, the flexibility to choose own quality and quantity of meat, the ability to select the food providers who meet personal expectations, the reasonable prices, the freedom to play music of own choice and the opportunity to hang around with friends (ostensibly, for some, the friends tend to be extra-marital partners).

4.2.1 Availability of Ethnic Dishes

A variety of food is available at kwaMereki. The food includes sadza served with mazondo, chicken feet, free range chicken stew, braaied pork chops, beef and sausages. However, the popular dishes are sadza with mazondo, and fire roasted meat (braaied beef or pork) accompanied by salads. The popularity of these dishes was confirmed by the vendors. Past researches indicated that street food vending provides meals that are regarded as tasty and varied in terms of menus and ingredients, [17, 18, 19, 1].

“We come here because of the food sold here. The food does not have western spices and other additives which alter the original taste.”

“The food sold here is highly nutritional, the vendors sell food that is not refined and that is cooked using traditional methods. The aroma of the smoke adds flavor to the food.”

The patrons mentioned that they preferred unrefined foods which are free from additives. They also expressed satisfaction with the use of traditional cooking methods such as the use of fire and earth-made pots.

Most of the dishes sold at kwaMereki are more of traditional foods. Thus, the place is providing an opportunity for urban people to access traditional dishes, which have been to a greater extent replaced by western dishes in most homes. According to [20, 21, and 22], in the Western countries local communities are making extensive efforts to protect their endangered gastronomic traditions. Notably, it appears there is a trend in Zimbabwe, which is occurring either deliberate or not, to re-establish cultural food identity. Street food consumption seems to be enabling people to identify with their culture or to relive the past that is under threat from globalization. In addition, the environment provides an opportunity for patrons to re-live their past and re-

unite with kinsmen. Most of the indigenous people, who now reside in low density areas earlier on lived in the so called ghettos, the high density suburbs, which were traditionally reserved for blacks during the colonial era.

Most of the women, who prepare the food, are not so modern in terms of appearance and disposition. However, that lack of modernity does not in any way detract the patrons, most of whom are in their middle ages. In fact, those vendors remind some of the patrons of their mothers and aunts, who used to cook for them whilst they were still young, back then in the rural areas. The statement below illustrates that view,

“.....and have it done by Mai Gringo there, according to the way I like it.”

The availability of food spots that have an inclination towards traditional foods and the desire for cultural identity are important developments towards the establishment of food and township tourism destinations. For instance, street food is one of Bangkok’s main attractions. Food vending in this city is not seen as a cause of disorder and nuisance to modern city life, [7]. In fact, the city is regarded as the country’s cultural capital.

4.2.2 Price factor

The respondents interviewed revealed that the fair price of the food was one of the reasons why customers seek services from kwaMereki. Most of the customers highlighted that what they were offered at kwaMereki meets the value of their money, both in terms of quality and quantity.

“Food sold here justifies the value for my money. The food which you would buy at a high price elsewhere, you can get it very cheap here. Besides, it is of superior quality and taste”.

The findings of the research concur with those of a study carried out by [23] in South Africa, where it was established that those customers of street foods save considerable amounts of money by eating in the streets, especially regarding traditional dishes.

[3] noted that the inexpensive to moderate prices attract consumers to the street eating spots.

4.2.3 Freedom and convenience

The patrons indicated that at kwaMereki there is freedom of buying meat from the retailers of their choice. They also have the liberty to choose the vendors who prepare food according to their specifications and desires.

“I don’t like the environment of hotels and restaurants where you have to be quiet when eating and where there are standards of atiquette. I enjoy it here where I can talk to my friends and even shout to someone passing by without someone staring at me”

“Here I eat what I want, I can go and buy my meat there (pointing to a butchery) and have it done by Mai Gringo there according to the way I like it. I really like it, it is not like the cases of other food outlets where you are just served with food that you cannot even imagine what it looked like when it was still raw”

“I come here because there is a lot of fun, it is where you get to know the latest songs and dances, even those from abroad. It is where you see the best car radios and the latest cars...”

The above statements show that the western style restaurant confines and puts restrictions on patrons. One of the attractions provided by the setting of kwaMereki is flexibility in terms of the preparation of the food, especially its freshness and the ability to determine its quantity. The freedom to play loud own choice music from the car was also cited as another reason which influences patrons to visit this place. One can argue that kwaMereki provides an opportunity to control the food sharing process, which is a preserve of women in the home set up. Men with great appetite for meat take street food consumption as an opportunity for such cravings to be satisfied. The kwaMereki environment enables patrons to buy their own meat from any of the various butcheries at the place. The butcheries compete to provide the best braai meat. Thus, the patrons control the purchasing process, including the prices. The patrons also have the flexibility of choosing to buy beverages from bottle stores of their choice, while some even bring them in cooler boxes from their homes.

4.2.4 Superior Service

Most of the patrons indicated that, despite the fact that the food is prepared in the open, one of the reasons why they prefer food from this place is because of the exceptionally high quality of service the vendors provide.

4.3 Strategies for improving the facility

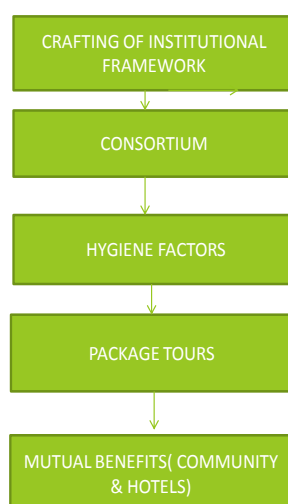
The patrons were asked to give their own assessment of the general outlook of the place before they were asked to suggest possible measures for improving the place. Half of the respondents (50%) rated the general outlook as poor, (33%) considered it as being average while only a few (17%) rated it as good. The poor rating of kwaMereki’s general outlook is a result of the poor structures from which vendors sell their food as well as the absence of adequate waste disposal systems, which result in littering of the place. [24] describes

the outlook of informal vending sites as poor. He added that the vending booths are often crude structures, and running water may not be readily available.

Toilets and washing facilities at the place are inadequate, and the washing of hands, utensils and dishes is often done in buckets and bowls. Both the vendors and the patrons concurred on the need to put adequate running water taps. Most of the patrons usually do not have other options besides getting water from the vendors. These conditions at kwaMereki are common in areas where food vending occurs. [23] indicated that street food is usually prepared in conditions which are unsafe, due to the limited access to safe water and other important services. The other measures suggested by the vendors were the provision of more ablution facilities, refuse bins and the granting of trade licenses so as to avoid running battles with the police.

Below is a framework which can be used as a guideline in order to maximize economic benefits from street food vending for both the vendors and the hospitality and tourism industry in Zimbabwe. This arises from the realization that the wide-ranging street foods have become cultural icons and are increasingly attracting tourists, [25, 26, 27, 19]. The simple, yet unique framework has been devised to act as a blueprint for other open space food vendors to adopt. The crafting of the institutional framework is meant to solve the inherent challenges that are associated with street food consumption.

Community Beneficiation Model



The model is underpinned by the notion of capacitating small enterprises with business and hygiene skills for immediate and continuous benefits. In order to strengthen and enhance street food vending and make it a commercially viable sector, the food vendors, who are the suppliers of indigenous foods, must come together to form a consortium that is guided by non stringent by-laws. According to [28], in some countries food vendors are more regulated and commercialized, though the sector should not be overregulated. There is need to have a balance between regulatory framework and flexibility in order for the sector to continue appealing to its niche market.

The proposed consortium is set to transform the face of kwaMereki and other similar places so that they would offer much more to the customers. Prefixed by the need for hygiene at kwaMereki, the model also focuses on equipping the vendors with basic principles and guidelines on hygienic food handling practices. This is because street food vending has been largely perceived as a public health risk, [29]. Ultimately, the improved services could then be augmented to become a complete package that hotels, tour operators and travel agents can include in tourist itineraries, in the form of township tourism tours. This would inevitably result in more consumption of indigenous foods, an increase in vendors' sales and increased length of stay by tourists in the destination. Improved tourist flows to low income residential areas can enhance the livelihoods of the community members, among a host of other seen and unseen benefits.

V. Conclusion

The study revealed that street food consumption at kwaMereki is attracting an increasing number of affluent people from high income residential areas. There is a growing niche market for traditionally related foods, which are prepared and sold in the low income suburb. This setting is especially important to the customers in that it tends to foster cultural identity, social interaction and recognition. Policy makers should

recognize the existence of the informal food vending sector, whose potential to become a competitive and viable economic activity is undisputed because of the availability of a growing market. Street food vending is serving a clientele, whose needs are not being fully met by the formal hospitality industry. There is need for the formal tourism and hospitality industry to partner with this informal food sector with a view to create mutual benefits. An inherent advantage for the entrepreneurs in the informal sector is that the system is rather difficult for the formal industry to replicate because of the complexities involved. It appears any slight modification of the system, especially in terms of its structure and operations, is likely to compromise on the perceived 'value for money' by clients. As a result, this subsector needs to be regulated and fostered in its natural setting. The existence of this viable sector, which is able to attract people from various socio- economic backgrounds, should be used as a basis for promoting township tourism which was recently launched in Zimbabwe.

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