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Nyanga's Culinary Heritage: An Untapped Resource for Destination Branding

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Abstract

This study investigates how local cuisine may serve as a catalyst for revitalising the image of tourist destinations, with a particular focus on Nyanga, Zimbabwe. The aim is to determine whether promoting Nyanga's unique food culture may be an effective destination branding strategy. The research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining a comprehensive review of literature on local gastronomy and destination branding with a case study of Nyanga. Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews, then analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that Nyanga has a rich but underutilised culinary heritage, supported by basic food-related infrastructure. Although various gastronomic elements are present, there is significant potential for development and strategic positioning. The study suggests a decentralised marketing approach that emphasises Nyanga's culinary identity, along with systematic assessment and improvement of existing infrastructure. It highlights the importance of continuously adapting branding strategies for destinations looking to leverage local gastronomy to enhance their competitiveness. The research contributes to tourism scholarship by positioning local cuisine as a valuable yet underused branding asset for Nyanga. Additionally, it advocates for further research into tourists' perceptions of local food to better understand gastronomy's role in shaping destination image and appeal.

Keywords: Branding, cuisine, destination, gastronomy

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Introduction

The role of regional cuisine in tourism branding has gained traction, especially in destinations aiming to create a distinct identity in a competitive market (Chugh, 2025). This study explores how tourism destinations such as Nyanga may leverage their unique gastronomy (Chigora et al., 2023) to revitalise the local tourism industry. Nyanga was chosen as a case study because of its rich cultural diversity and unique culinary heritage (Mahohoma, 2022), its strong economic potential for sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship (Chirenje, 2017), accessible infrastructure (Dikeni, 2023), and its representation of rural areas in developing countries facing similar challenges (Mushore et al., 2021). Gastronomy encompasses food preparation, presentation, and cultural significance, making it vital for enhancing destination branding (Long, 2013; Çoban & Süer, 2018). According to Tsai & Wang (2017), gastronomy serves as both a compelling product and a strategic marketing tool that attracts visitors to leisure destinations. Research (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Kim et al., 2018) shows that local cuisines significantly shape tourists' perceptions, experiences and are key in promoting brand identity. The classification of gastronomic tourists into categories such as gourmet and experiential illustrates diverse motivations behind culinary travel (Kim & Hwang, 2022). Despite this recognition, there is a dearth of studies on the role of local cuisine in destination, particularly in developing countries such as Zimbabwe (Mahachi-Chatibura, 2016; Ndlovu, 2023). This has resulted in limited frameworks for destination branding using local cuisine, potentially hindering effective branding and tourism development (Du Rand et al., 2013). There is evidence that under-studied local gastronomy may lead to misalignments between culinary offerings and tourist expectations, missed cultural exchange opportunities, and failure to leverage local food for economic development (Ekerim & Tanrisever, 2020; Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). In developing countries, a lack of knowledge on how to leverage local gastronomy as a tourism branding strategy may result in the loss of cultural heritage as traditional recipes and practices disappear (Kirschenbaum, 2022; Mhlanga, 2020). Limited economic opportunities may hinder sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship initiatives, while a lack of understanding of traditional food systems may lead to nutritional deficiencies, thereby jeopardising public health (Tichaawa, 2022; Fanzo, 2020; Mushita, 2022). Additionally, the dominance of international cuisine may lead to cultural homogenisation and the erosion of local culinary traditions (Stalmirska, 2023). A lack of research on local gastronomy has contributed to several challenges, including a weakening connection to cultural heritage and increased reliance on external food systems, both of which pose risks to food security (Dixon & Richards, 2016). Limited innovation may retard the growth of the culinary industry, hindering the development of new products (Lee et al., 2019). This paper explores the intersection of local gastronomy and entrepreneurship to understand how culinary traditions may act as catalysts for economic development (Katnoriya et al., 2024). The main research question guiding this study is: To what extent does local gastronomy contribute to the branding of Nyanga? The following questions further articulate this purpose: 1) How does local cuisine serve as a branding tool for Nyanga, and how does its effectiveness compare to other destination branding strategies? 2) What unique traditional foods are available in Nyanga, and how may they be utilised to promote local gastronomy within the branding strategy? 3) What are the perceived

benefits and challenges of incorporating local produce into restaurant menus in Nyanga, and how do these factors affect the promotion of local gastronomy? and 4) What types of gastronomy-centred souvenirs could be created to enhance the destination's branding?

Literature review

Local gastronomy and destination branding in Nyanga

Local gastronomy has emerged as a crucial element in destination branding, particularly in areas like Nyanga, which enriches culinary heritage and offers unique food experiences that reflect local culture (Recuero-Virto & Arróspide, 2024; Tendani et al., 2022). However, there is a noticeable gap in studies focusing on the sustainability and authenticity of gastronomy as a branding tool (Kaur & Kaur, 2024). Sustainable tourism encompasses economic, social, and environmental impacts, aiming to meet the needs of current tourists while ensuring the preservation of resources for future generations (Mohan, 2022). Gastronomy, by exploring the intricate relationship between food and culture, significantly enhances travel experiences through insights into local traditions (Singh, 2024). The image of a food destination plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist perceptions and experiences (Zhu et al., 2024; Park & Widyanta, 2022). Factors such as quality, authenticity, and diversity within local cuisine are instrumental in influencing how destinations are perceived (Yasami et al., 2020). In Nyanga, the promotion of traditional foods may significantly enhance its image and attract tourists in search of authentic culinary experiences. Moreover, favourable perceptions of local cuisine are likely to encourage repeat visits and generate positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Baker & Kim, 2019). Both cognitive and emotional dimensions are essential in forging connections between tourists and a destination (Woosnam et al., 2020). This research aims to highlight these dimensions within the context of Nyanga's local gastronomy, demonstrating how the authenticity and sustainability of culinary offerings may serve as effective branding tools. By addressing the gaps in existing literature, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how local gastronomy may be leveraged for sustainable tourism development.

Role of gastronomy in sustainable tourism

Gastronomy is a powerful tool in sustainable tourism, contributing to cultural preservation and local economic support (Rinaldi, 2017; Xie, 2021). Promoting local culinary traditions may generate income while fostering community pride (Visković & Komac, 2021). Engaging tourists in local food experiences, such as cooking classes and market visits, enriches their understanding of culture and promotes sustainability by emphasising local production (Mhlanga, 2020; Tichaawa, 2022). Such activities may serve as effective marketing strategies that highlight local gastronomy with the potential to significantly enhance a destination's appeal (Baysal & Bilici, 2024). By positioning gastronomy as a core attraction, Nyanga may create a distinctive identity and attract tourists (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). This may be achieved through a marketing strategy that focuses on unique culinary experiences, such as local food festivals and farm-to-table dining, to create memorable experiences (Baysal & Bilici, 2024). This approach enhances the destination's brand image while showcasing the richness of local culinary offerings (Baysal & Bilici, 2024). Successful examples of sustainable gastronomy tourism are found in Cornwall, the southwestern part of England, and Tuscany, in Central Italy. Cornwall’s initiatives, such as Cornish Pasty Week, demonstrate how local food production may enhance tourism and support regional identity (Everett, 2024). Similarly, Tuscany’s emphasis on local and organic products illustrates the positive impact of sustainable culinary practices on tourism and the local economy. Understanding the motivations behind food tourism is essential for enhancing tourist experiences. Tourists increasingly seek immersive cultural experiences that allow them to engage with local traditions through food (Ellis et al., 2018). Factors such as food quality and sensory enjoyment significantly influence destination choices (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019). By catering to these motivations, destinations may create enriching experiences that promote a deeper appreciation of local culture. Promoting and celebrating Nyanga's unique culinary heritage could enhance its tourist appeal, foster local pride, and contribute to the development of sustainable tourism.

Theoretical framework

Destination branding theory

Destination branding theory is central to crafting a distinctive identity for tourism locations to amplify their attractiveness (Kladou et al., 2017). Foundational figures in this field, Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), highlight the importance of brand equity and customer-based brand equity, respectively. Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service. Keller (1993) describes customer-based brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand. Local gastronomy is a crucial element, integrating stakeholder collaboration, social media, and consumer co-creation to shape perceptions and foster brand loyalty (Buhalis & Park, 2021). Destination branding theory posits several key tenets. These include identifying and promoting unique selling propositions (USPs) that differentiate the destination from competitors, ensuring that the brand reflects the true essence of the destination, including its culture and heritage, collaborating with local businesses, government entities, and community members to deliver a consistent brand message (Waligo et al., 2013), and creating an emotional appeal that resonates with potential visitors through storytelling and imagery (Kladou et al., 2017). The relevance of destination branding theory to this paper lies in its emphasis on creating a strong, memorable image that differentiates Nyanga from other destinations (Kladou et al., 2017). Social media significantly influences destination branding by facilitating interactions between brands and consumers (Murtza & Rasheed, 2025). For Nyanga, leveraging social media could effectively showcase local culinary offerings to attract gastro-tourists seeking authentic experiences. The concept of brand gestalt highlights the

importance of stakeholder co-creation in enriching Nyanga's culinary narrative (Mandagi & Centeno, 2024). Stakeholder engagement is vital for effective branding, relying on collaboration to present consistent values and enhance visitor experiences (Waligo et al., 2013). However, conflicting interests necessitate structured engagement strategies (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014). Aligning local businesses and government entities with branding goals is essential for conveying a cohesive message about culinary offerings. Adapting to market changes, especially post-pandemic, is crucial as traveller preferences shift towards safety and authenticity (Abashidze, 2024). Emphasising the authenticity and quality of local cuisine is vital to resonate with these evolving preferences (Richards, 2024). By applying destination branding theory, this study aims to provide a framework for Nyanga to leverage its local gastronomy in order to create a compelling and sustainable destination brand.

Culinary tourism framework

Culinary tourism is essential for destination branding as it enhances tourist locations through distinctive food experiences that embody regional identity (Recuero-Virto & Arróspide, 2024). This strategy promotes economic development and cultural interchange (Hall & Gössling, 2016), with local cuisine acting as a unique selling proposition (Giamporcaro et al., 2025). Gastronomic experiences not only improve visitor involvement and satisfaction (Nematzadeh et al., 2024) but also invigorate local economies by fostering entrepreneurship (Baysal & Bilici, 2024). Nevertheless, culinary tourism is occasionally viewed as a form of superficial branding (Brownlie et al., 2005), which may create a façade of authenticity without real cultural integration (Montes-Guerra et al., 2024). To guarantee success in destination branding, culinary tourism must be rooted in authentic, local culture.

Sustainability in tourism

Sustainability in tourism, particularly through local gastronomy, integrates cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions (Rinaldi, 2017; Baysal & Bilici, 2024). Research in Nyanga explores whether local gastronomy genuinely enhances branding or serves as an illusion, emphasising the importance of cultural tourism and place branding (Aidoo et al., 2024). Environmental and economic sustainability involves using local ingredients, reducing waste, and conserving biodiversity (Kumar et al., 2024). The Menorca Biosphere Reserve exemplifies the successful integration of local resources with sustainability principles (Carvajal-Aparicio et al., 2024). Navigating challenges and opportunities in destination branding is crucial for maintaining competitiveness. Innovative branding strategies are essential to addressing environmental concerns and adapting to changing visitor preferences (Aman et al., 2024). Opportunities include promoting authenticity, cultural festivals, and responsible tourism practices, aligning with sustainability goals. While local gastronomy holds significant potential for enhancing sustainable tourism and branding, it is vital to address challenges such as environmental issues and ineffective branding strategies. Integrating local culinary practices with sustainability principles offers a promising path for enriching tourism experiences and achieving long-term goals. Local gastronomy serves as a powerful tool for destination branding in Nyanga, enriching the tourist experience through its vibrant culinary heritage. By integrating sustainable practices and strategic marketing, Nyanga has the potential to attract more visitors while strengthening community pride. The intersecting frameworks of destination branding and culinary tourism underscore the importance of stakeholder collaboration, effective use of social media, and genuine cultural representation. As tourist preferences increasingly favour authenticity and meaningful experiences, Nyanga must prioritise the quality and cultural integrity of its local cuisine to support sustainable tourism. Additionally, addressing environmental sustainability challenges will enhance Nyanga's position as a gastro-tourism destination, paving the way for long-term economic and cultural development.

Study context

Located in eastern Zimbabwe, Nyanga District is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and stunning landscapes, covering approximately 2,582 square kilometres with elevations from 1,500 to 2,500 metres (Mhlanga, 2020). It borders Mozambique to the east and is near Zambia, fostering vibrant trade and tourism exchanges. Towns like Nyanga Town and Juliasdale offer various amenities for visitors. The local population primarily comprises the Manyika tribe, who speak a variant of the Shona language. The district is celebrated for its traditional cuisine, featuring dishes like sadza (maize meal) and braai (barbecued meat), along with local beverages such as mwana wakuru (sorghum beer) and mahewu (fermented maize drink) (Chigora et al., 2023). The region is also known for its trout, making it a sought-after delicacy (Fanzo, 2020). Visitors may explore attractions like Mtarazi Falls, one of Zimbabwe's highest waterfalls, and Nyanga National Park, which offers stunning views and diverse wildlife (Kanokanga et al., 2019). The park is home to kudu, impala, and wildebeest, sustainably hunted to support local communities. Nyanga is also known for traditional vegetables, including tsamba (leafy greens) and nyemba (beans). Outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and horse riding are popular in this picturesque setting. With its mild climate, featuring temperatures between 15°C and 25°C, Nyanga is an ideal destination for tourists seeking a serene getaway. Its rich cultural tapestry, breathtaking landscapes, and welcoming locals make it a must-visit for those looking to experience authentic African charm. Below is a map illustrating key features of the district.

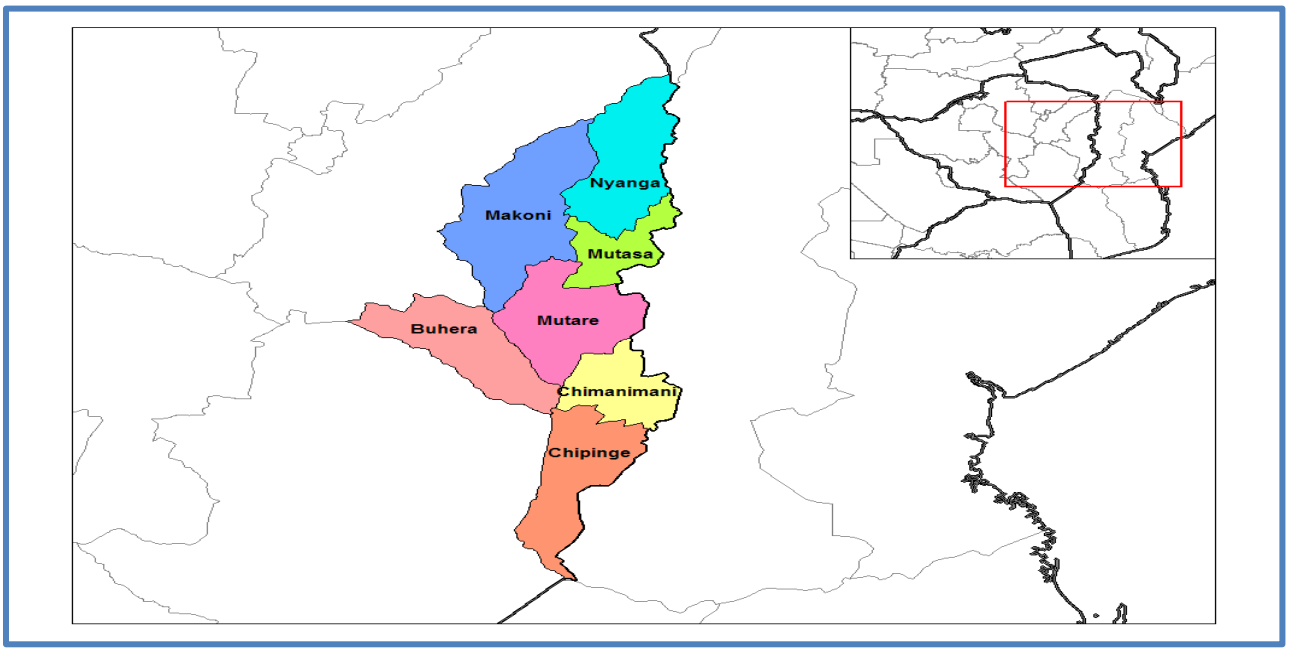

Figure 1: Map of Nyanga (Source: Google Maps)

Research methodology

This study employed a case study methodology to facilitate an in-depth exploration of local gastronomy in Nyanga as a tool for destination branding. The case study approach was particularly suitable for examining the complex interactions between local cuisine and tourism branding in Nyanga. A mixed-methods approach was utilised to gather data, incorporating both surveys and interviews to enrich the findings. Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered to a sample of 50 respondents, providing generalisable insights into visitor perceptions of Nyanga's gastronomy. In contrast, qualitative data from interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by local chefs, restaurateurs, and suppliers in promoting local cuisine. The development of research instruments was informed by established theories, notably the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which guided the formulation of survey questions regarding visitors' intentions and preferences. Interviews explored themes related to local culinary practices and branding challenges, based on Creswell's qualitative research frameworks (2014). Both methods were applied concurrently, allowing for data triangulation. Quantitative survey findings were enriched by qualitative insights from interviews. For instance, while surveys revealed trends in tourist preferences for local foods, interviews uncovered specific challenges faced by stakeholders, offering a comprehensive view of local gastronomy as a branding tool. Information about Nyanga was sourced from Muchenje et al. (2025), Mahohoma (2022), and Shenjere-Nyabezi (2021). The quantitative data were analysed using statistical analysis tools, including descriptive statistics to summarise visitor perceptions and inferential statistics to identify significant relationships. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to derive meaningful insights. Understanding the dynamics of local gastronomy in Nyanga may enhance its appeal as a travel destination, benefiting stakeholders and authorities (Kanokanga et al., 2019) and contributing to Nyanga's sustainability and success in tourism development (Mahohoma, 2022).

The research employed judgmental sampling to select respondents with significant knowledge and experience in local gastronomy, thereby ensuring the collection of relevant qualitative data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). The sample comprised 50 respondents, with 80% from the local gastronomy sector and 20% food tourists. This distribution was strategically chosen to emphasise insights from local stakeholders while incorporating perspectives from gastronomic tourists, facilitating a nuanced understanding of how local gastronomy may be leveraged in destination branding. Respondents included hotel managers, chefs, local producers, and officials from the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, ensuring comprehensive representation of the local gastronomy sector (Hsu, 2015). The demographic mix of local professionals and international tourists enriched the data. Two primary data collection methods were employed: a structured questionnaire was administered to 24 local gastronomy respondents, including chefs and restaurateurs, featuring both closed- and open-ended questions about their experiences and practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 respondents, including local officials and food tourists, focusing on local gastronomy's contribution to branding, traditional foods, the benefits and challenges of using local produce, and the supporting infrastructure. Data were analysed using a combination of content and thematic analysis. Quantitative data were processed through statistical software to conduct descriptive and inferential analyses, while qualitative data were coded and categorised thematically to identify patterns relevant to the research questions, utilising a coding framework derived from the literature review. To ensure credibility, the study employed multiple data collection methods and sources to triangulate findings. Member checking was conducted with a subset of respondents to verify the accuracy of interpretations, and peer debriefing was used to discuss findings and refine the analysis. The researchers ensured that all participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study, and all respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Although complete anonymity could not be guaranteed during interviews, every effort was made to preserve confidentiality in the analysis and

presentation of the findings. The study adhered to established ethical standards, thereby supporting the credibility and integrity of the data. This approach contributed to the robustness and trustworthiness of the research, offering valuable insights into culinary tourism and destination branding. By maintaining these standards, the study enables a comprehensive exploration of the role of local gastronomy in positioning Nyanga as a distinctive tourist destination.

Findings

Findings from the questionnaires

The results from questionnaires highlight the critical role of local gastronomy in branding Nyanga as a tourist destination, serving as a unique selling proposition that enhances the authenticity sought by travellers (Mhlanga, 2020). Unlike traditional branding strategies that focus on historical sites and natural attractions, local gastronomy offers dynamic, sensory experiences that create lasting, memorable connections with visitors (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Traditional foods reflect the region's agricultural practices and attract food enthusiasts and cultural tourists. Incorporating local produce into restaurant menus supports farmers and improves food quality, aligning with consumer interest in food provenance (Mhlanga, 2020). Additionally, gastronomy-centred souvenirs, such as artisanal jams and traditional snacks, reinforce Nyanga's culinary identity and foster emotional connections with tourists, encouraging repeat visits.

Elements of local gastronomy in Nyanga

Respondents identified various elements that collectively define the local gastronomy of Nyanga, each embodying the region's rich heritage and cultural significance.

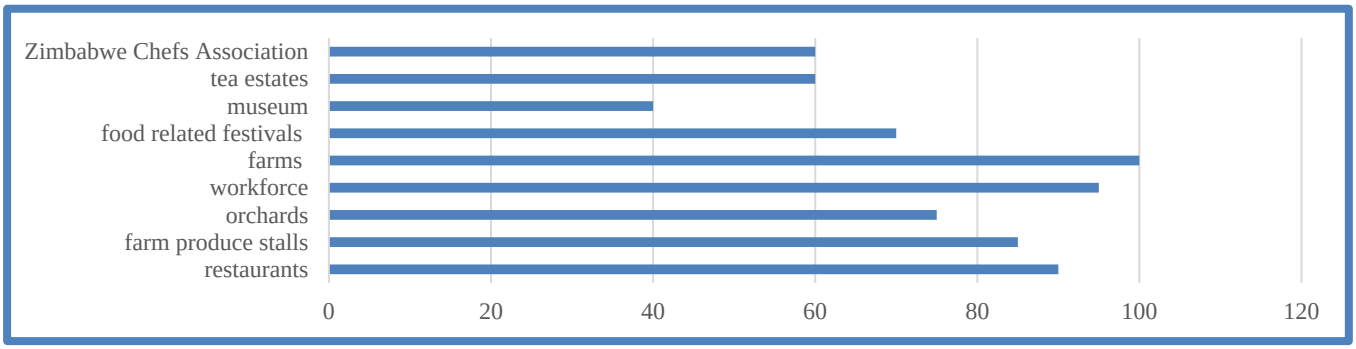

Figure 2: Key local gastronomy elements and their contributions to Nyanga's culinary landscape

Figure 2 illustrates the components contributing to Nyanga's culinary identity, each playing a vital role in shaping local gastronomy and enhancing the region's appeal as a tourist destination. For instance, 90% of respondents identified local restaurants as crucial to Nyanga's culinary landscape. Among seven restaurants rated by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA), two specialise in regional and traditional cuisines, effectively conveying Nyanga's culinary narrative through local ingredients. The findings align with Kivela and Crotts (2006), emphasising the significance of local dining experiences in shaping tourist perceptions. Results show that 85% of respondents recognised farms as essential to regional cuisine, showcasing diverse agricultural practices from dairy to fruit cultivation. The direct supply of fresh produce from farms to markets contributes to sustainability, reinforcing Ekerim & Tanrisever's (2020) insights on local sourcing in tourism.

Orchards were identified by 75% of respondents as key in enhancing flavour profiles and supporting sustainable practices. They provide fresh fruits and invite tourists to explore local products, strengthening the link between agriculture and culinary tourism (Tsai & Wang, 2017). The Zimbabwe Chefs Association (ZCA), mentioned by 60% of respondents, fosters collaboration among chefs and helps preserve indigenous cuisines, aligning with Mahachi-Chatibura's (2016) findings on the role of culinary associations in promoting innovation. Food festivals were identified by 70% of the respondents as significant attractions showcase the region's culture and traditions. Events like the Troutbeck Hunting, Fishing and Shooting Festival exemplify the intersection of gastronomy and local heritage. The Rhodes Museum and local tea estates bolster Nyanga's tourism appeal. While the museum's connection to gastronomy may seem unconventional, it serves as a repository of historical context surrounding local culinary practices and could attract more visitors (Makura, 2022). This study highlights the potential for local gastronomy to significantly influence Nyanga's branding and sustainability as a tourist destination.

Effectiveness of local gastronomy in branding the destination, compared to other tools

This section examines the effectiveness of local gastronomy as a branding tool for destinations, especially in relation to other branding strategies. The insights are illustrated in Figure 3, which is based on primary research conducted in 2024. This research highlights the diverse ways in which local cuisine enhances both the appeal and identity of a destination. The results above highlight the effectiveness of local gastronomy in branding destinations, aligning with literature that underscores the importance of food in tourism. Kivela and Crotts (2006) emphasise that local dining experiences significantly shape tourist perceptions, reinforcing gastronomy as a crucial component of a destination's identity. Kovalenko et al. (2023) add that food traditions are vital indicators of a destination's heritage. The focus on sustainability in local cuisine resonates with Ekerim & Tanrisever's

(2020) advocacy for local sourcing to enhance tourism sustainability. By prioritising local cuisine, destinations may create economic synergies, benefiting both communities and tourism. About 95% of respondents said local cuisines leave lasting impressions, aligning with experiential tourism, where engaging with local culture fosters deeper connections between visitors and destinations (Richards, 2015). This connection enhances visitor satisfaction and encourages repeat visits, essential for long-term tourism sustainability. These findings underscore the multifaceted role of local gastronomy in branding. By integrating local cuisine into tourism strategies, destinations may enhance their appeal, convey authentic cultural narratives, and promote sustainable economic practices.

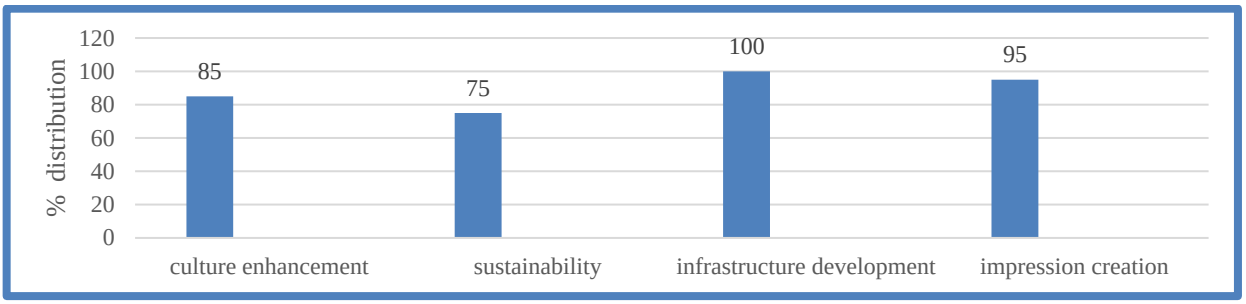

Figure 3: Effectiveness of local gastronomy

Nyanga cuisine

This section analyses foods that constitute Nyanga cuisine, encapsulating the rich culinary diversity of the region. The figure below highlights the key ingredients and signature dishes that define the local culinary identity.

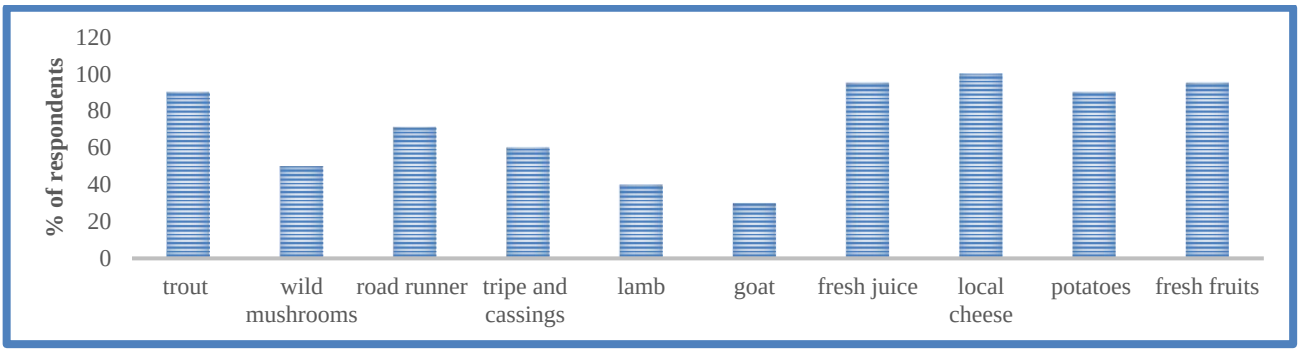

Figure 4: Nyanga cuisine

The findings reveal a diverse array of foods linked to local agricultural practices and cultural traditions. Data show that 90% of respondents identified Nyanga trout as a signature dish, highlighting its status as a sought-after protein source. This aligns with broader themes in African culinary practices, where local fishes are valued for both nutritional benefits and cultural significance (Fisher & Du Rand, 2022). Traditional fish dishes often serve as focal points for communal meals and celebrations (Fieldhouse, 2013). The study found that protein sources, including dried wild beast meat (40%), traditional road runner fowl (71%), and goat meat (30%), are essential offerings. This reliance on diverse protein offerings echoes trends in African cuisines, reflecting adaptability to seasonal changes and resource availability (Akinola et al., 2020). Moreover, 90% of respondents acknowledged the prominence of Nyanga potato as a staple, underscoring its foundational role in daily meals. Starchy staples like potatoes, cassava, and yams provide necessary carbohydrates and reinforce cultural practices surrounding meal preparation (Akinola et al., 2020). Fruits such as apples, peaches, and litchis are integral to Nyanga's culinary identity, with more than 95% of respondents affirming their consistent presence on local menus. This focus on fresh, locally sourced produce is in line with global trends towards health-conscious and sustainable eating (Mena et al., 2024). The tradition of presenting fruit as a welcome gift further exemplifies the region's robust culture of hospitality (Lin & Mao, 2015; Everett, 2016). Creative applications of local ingredients—such as apple-based liquors, vhinyu, and freshly squeezed juices—illustrate the area's innovative approach to food and beverage development. The popularity of these beverages among tourists indicates significant potential for agritourism and economic advancement through the promotion of local food and drink offerings. Additionally, the widespread acknowledgment of locally produced cheese from Nyamoro Dairy (noted by 100% of respondents) highlights the importance of dairy products in Nyanga's cuisine, reflecting broader culinary practices found across many African cultures. Together, these insights emphasize the richness of Nyanga's culinary landscape and place it within the broader context of African food traditions. The incorporation of the reviewer's feedback on figure presentation has improved the clarity and accessibility of the data for a broader audience.

The perceived benefits of using local produce in menu engineering

The use of local produce in menu engineering promotes sustainable tourism and supports local economic development. By sourcing ingredients from local suppliers, restaurants and food establishments reduce their carbon footprint, support the local economy provide their customers with fresh, seasonal ingredients. Figure 5 below illustrates the perceived benefits of using local produce in menu engineering.

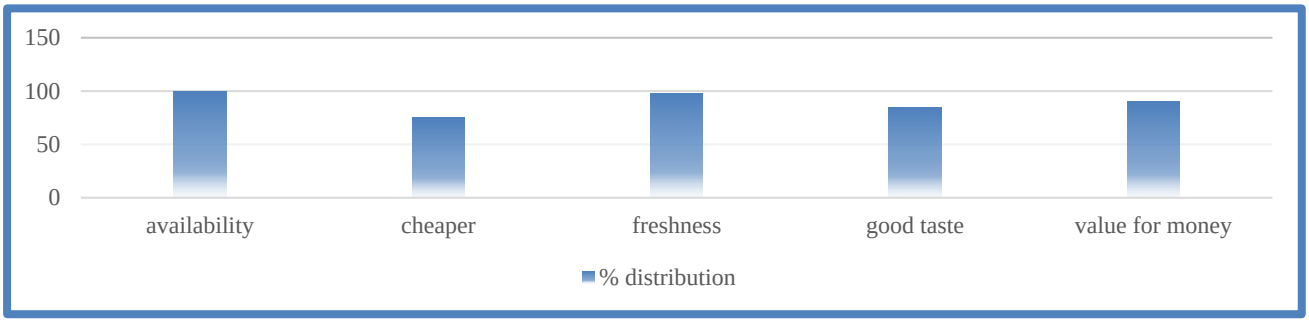

Figure 5: Benefits of local produce on menu engineering

As illustrated in Figure 5, participants identified numerous benefits of local produce compared to imported goods. Importantly, all respondents concurred that local produce is readily available, underscoring its importance for foodservice operations that prioritize fresh ingredients. This observation is consistent with existing literature (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015), which suggests that local produce is typically more accessible than its imported counterparts. Makoni (2022) points out that local produce is frequently fresher and of higher quality due to reduced transportation times. Furthermore, 75% of respondents perceived local produce as being less expensive than imported alternatives, indicating a financial incentive for restaurants to procure locally. This is corroborated by literature that suggests local sourcing may decrease transportation costs, benefiting both consumers and businesses (Mhlanga, 2020). Tichaawa (2022) highlights that local sourcing may diminish the carbon footprint of foodservice operations, appealing to environmentally aware consumers. Additionally, 98% of respondents affirmed that local produce is consistently fresh, while 85% emphasized its superior taste and quality, which enhances the dining experience and customer satisfaction—elements that are vital for the success of restaurants (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). According to Makoni (2022), the freshness and quality of local produce arise from shorter transportation times. Up to 90% of respondents indicated that buying local produce provides the best value for money, reinforcing the notion that local sourcing is both environmentally beneficial and economically advantageous. This conclusion aligns with literature that outlines the benefits of local sourcing, including reduced transportation costs and improved quality and freshness (Cohen, 2018; Mhlanga, 2020). The findings of this study support existing literature, indicating that local produce is often more accessible, cost-effective, and of superior quality compared to imports (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015; Mhlanga, 2020). Makoni (2022) further affirms that local produce is likely to be fresher and of higher quality due to shorter transportation times.

Recommended local gastronomy-centered souvenirs

Local gastronomy-centred souvenirs are vital to the tourist experience, offering visitors a tangible memento of their time at a destination (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). As noted by Makoni (2022), these souvenirs could significantly enhance the promotion of a region's culture and culinary heritage. Figure 6 below illustrates the findings of a survey regarding recommended local gastronomy-centred souvenirs.

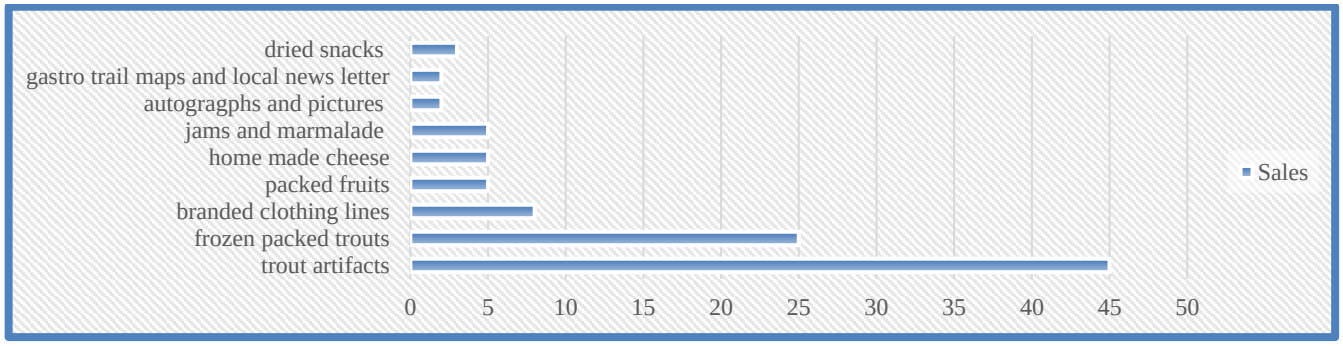

Figure 6: Local gastronomy-centered souvenirs

From the above illustration, respondents highlighted various options for souvenirs, including carved trout key holders and trout-themed artefacts (45%), frozen trout (25%), branded clothing (8%), packed fruits (5%), homemade cheese (5%), jams and marmalades (5%), dried snacks (3%), and autographs and photographs (2%). Gastronomic trail maps and local newsletters were also mentioned by 2 % of respondents. These findings align with earlier studies (Mhlanga, 2020; Tichaawa, 2022), indicating that tourists seek souvenirs reflecting local cuisine and culture. Souvenirs play a crucial role in promoting a

destination's culture and culinary heritage (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). According to Makoni (2022), they serve as lasting mementos of visitors' experiences while fostering cultural appreciation. The global importance of such souvenirs is well established, particularly in their ability to preserve and showcase local food traditions (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). In Zimbabwe, gastronomy-focused souvenirs are increasingly recognised as a strategic avenue for tourism development (Mhlanga, 2020; Tichaawa, 2022). As Mupunga (2022) notes, these items provide tourists with distinctive insights into the country's culinary practices and cultural identity.

Challenges of promoting the usage of local produce

Figure 7 illustrates the main challenges identified by respondents in promoting local produce within menu engineering. The data highlight that a significant majority of respondents (90%) perceive the high cost and fluctuating prices of essential commodities as major barriers to marketing indigenous goods. Additionally, the figure reflects the impact of human-induced shortages and inconsistent product supply, further complicating efforts to integrate local ingredients into menu offerings. This visual representation provides a clear overview of the challenges faced in the promotion of local produce, setting the stage for a deeper discussion on their implications and potential solutions.

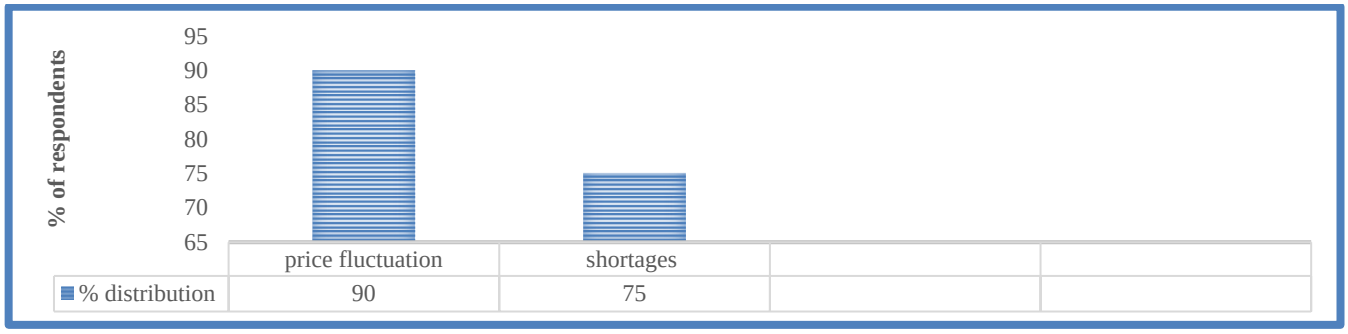

Figure 7: Challenges of promoting the usage of local produce

One primary challenge in promoting local produce within menu engineering is the high cost and fluctuating prices of essential commodities. As shown in Figure 7, 90% of respondents identified this as a significant barrier to marketing indigenous goods, aligning with literature indicating that cost may hinder the adoption of local produce (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). Additionally, 75% of respondents noted that human-induced shortages and inconsistent product supply complicate the promotion of local produce. Literature supports this observation, suggesting that supply chain disruptions and variability in availability pose challenges to incorporating local ingredients (Mhlanga, 2020). Makoni (2022) highlights that the high cost of local produce is particularly challenging for its adoption in Zimbabwe. Tichaawa (2022) also emphasises that shortages and inconsistent supply are significant barriers in the region. Kivela & Crotts (2006) indicate that these issues are prevalent in the United States, while Mhlanga (2020) notes similar obstacles in South Africa**.** In short, promoting local produce in menu engineering faces substantial challenges, including high costs and supply inconsistencies. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the marketability of local ingredients, ultimately benefiting the foodservice industry and local economies.

Findings from face-to-face interviews

Data from face-to-face interviews in this study provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and benefits associated with promoting local cuisine in menu engineering, particularly within the context of local gastronomy as a tool for destination branding. While earlier sections presented quantitative data on obstacles such as high costs, fluctuating prices, and inconsistent supply, the interviews provide qualitative insights that capture the nuances of stakeholders' experiences in the Nyanga tourist area. Engaging directly with respondents uncovers motivations and contextual factors that surveys may overlook, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes the value of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015). The interviews reaffirm challenges such as high costs and unreliable supply chains, but also underscore key benefits of using local produce, including its freshness, superior quality, and its role in fostering sustainable tourism and local economic development. Respondents highlighted that sourcing ingredients from local suppliers not only enhances the culinary experience but also supports economic resilience, an essential component of effective destination branding. These insights align with previous research suggesting that local produce plays a significant role in promoting both sustainable tourism and regional economic growth (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015; Mhlanga, 2020). By integrating these qualitative findings, this section provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in leveraging local gastronomy for destination branding in Nyanga, offering a more holistic perspective on its potential.

Discussion

The findings highlight the vital role of local gastronomy in branding Nyanga as a tourist destination. Local cuisine enhances the authenticity sought by travellers, as noted by Mhlanga (2020). Key elements of Nyanga's culinary scene include restaurants, farms, orchards, experienced staff, farm produce markets, the Zimbabwe Chefs Association, food festivals, the Rhodes Museum, and tea estates. Restaurants are considered the most important aspect, with 90% of respondents recognizing their significance. This aligns with literature suggesting that local dining experiences greatly influence tourist perceptions (Kivela &

Crotts, 2006). Farms are also crucial, with 85% of respondents emphasizing their importance. Orchards offer unique flavours and support sustainable farming practices, connecting agriculture to culinary tourism (Tsai & Wang, 2017). Nyanga's culinary variety is exemplified by signature dishes like Nyanga trout, reflecting local agricultural practices and cultural traditions. Respondents view local produce as accessible, affordable, and of higher quality compared to imports. These insights support literature indicating that local produce reduces carbon footprints and strengthens local economies (Mhlanga, 2020). Challenges remain, including high costs, fluctuating prices, human-induced shortages, and inconsistent supply. These issues align with literature highlighting financial barriers and supply chain disruptions in adopting local produce (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Smith, 2015; Cohen, 2018; Mhlanga, 2020). Makoni (2022) and Tichaawa (2022) emphasize the importance of health facilities and marketing infrastructure in promoting local gastronomy. Additionally, Kivela & Crotts (2006) and Mhlanga (2020) underline the significance of dining establishments, transportation networks, and retail infrastructure in advancing local cuisine. This study showcases the importance of local gastronomy in branding Nyanga. Key components such as restaurants, farms, and orchards shape Nyanga's distinct culinary identity. Despite ongoing challenges, these findings offer valuable insights for stakeholders and destination authorities aiming to promote local gastronomy and boost Nyanga's tourism appeal.

Conclusions

This study concludes that local gastronomy is a critical component of destination branding in Nyanga, transcending the perception of being a peripheral or illusory aspect of tourism. The findings highlight several key elements that shape Nyanga's culinary identity, including restaurants, farms, orchards, skilled personnel, farm produce markets, and food festivals. Furthermore, supporting infrastructure—such as dining facilities, transportation networks, marketing systems, retail outlets, and healthcare services—plays a pivotal role in the effective delivery of local gastronomy experiences. Local gastronomy not only contributes to the authenticity of Nyanga's tourism offering but also enhances its attractiveness and competitiveness as a destination. As such, it holds significant potential for both destination branding and sustainable tourism development. The study recommends that destination authorities and relevant stakeholders prioritise the development of local gastronomy as a strategic branding tool. This involves investment in local restaurants, agricultural enterprises (including farms and orchards), and the training and retention of skilled culinary personnel. Farm support, produce markets, and professional bodies, such as the Zimbabwe Chefs Association, are also essential. In addition, initiatives should promote gastronomy-themed souvenirs—such as carved trout key holders—and organise food festivals that celebrate the region's culinary traditions. Infrastructure improvements, particularly in transport, marketing, retail, and health services, are also necessary to facilitate the delivery and accessibility of gastronomic experiences. Finally, fostering strong collaboration among stakeholders—including farmers, chefs, tourism operators, and policymakers—is vital for the successful promotion of local gastronomy and the enhancement of Nyanga's overall tourist experience.

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