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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the global tourism industry to a standstill and had an immediate adverse impact, with a decline of international tourist arrivals by almost 74% in 2020 compared to pre-pandemic levels (Volgger et al., 2020). With global lockdowns in place and uncertainty on the horizon, revamped strategies focused on growing domestic tourism emerged (Nyaupane, Paris, & Li, 2020). Tourism is a fundamental part of the development, economic diversification, and soft power strategy of the United Arab Emirates, which has established itself as a leading international destination (Saber, Paris, & Marochi, 2018). Prior to the pandemic, there were existing efforts across the seven Emirates of the UAE to promote domestic tourism (Mehdi, Paris, & Balasubramanian, 2019). Then, in December 2020, the UAE Government launched the 'UAE Strategy for Domestic Tourism' across the seven Emirates to *"unify local and federal efforts to harness the UAE's tourism resources and reinforce the role of domestic tourism in the national economy"* (UAE, 2023). In 2019, the UAE's domestic tourism sector contributed AED 41.2 billion (USD 11.22 billion) to the national economy. The new strategy aims to double the revenue from domestic tourism by 2030 and to bring more balance with the revenue from international tourism. As part of the strategy launch, the UAE announced the country's first federal tourism campaign ('World's Coolest Winter'), which invited the public *"to explore the hidden gems of the seven emirates, rediscover the UAE's landmarks, reconnect with nature and share their experiences on social media platforms"* (UAE, 2023). The campaign was considered a major success, with 1.3 million domestic tourists generating more than \$408 million in revenue (Cabral, 2022). In 2021, of the 19 million hotel guests, domestic tourists accounted for 58 percent (Cabral, 2022); however, domestic tourists accounted for a much smaller percentage of the total 75 million hotel nights booked.

Gastronomy tourism is increasingly a core feature for tourism destinations' marketing and branding efforts (Lai, Khoo-Lattimore & Wang, 2019; UNWTO, 2022) and can be a major motivation for travelers (Su, 2020). Food commonly contributes to the formulation of destination image perception of visitors (Chen & Peng, 2018; Hsu & Scott, 2020) and has been featured as a means of communicating a destination's identity (Stano, 2016). Visitors' gastronomic perceptions of a destination are often shaped through user-generated content (Lin et al., 2022). Tourists often seek out opportunities to experience the authentic and traditional local foods in the destinations and have memorable food-related experiences, such as visiting the local producers, participating in food festivals, attending cooking classes, or dining at a Michelin-star restaurant (Mariani & Okumus, 2022; Sormaz et al., 2016; UNWTO, 2022).

The food and beverage sector has been a core focus of many domestic tourism strategies to rebound from the pandemic. In the UAE, the sector has had some recent shifts with the growth of cloud kitchens and food delivery apps, the opening of many new luxury hotels and restaurants, and the launch of the inaugural Michelin Guide Dubai. In the UAE, a recent study suggests that luxury hotels in the UAE are increasingly placing special attention on marketing luxury gastronomic experiences. Michael and Fuste-Forne's (2022) analysis of the Instagram posts of four iconic luxury hotels (Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace, St. Regis Saadiyat Island and Atlantis) found that there was a substantial increase in the proportion of Instagram posts featuring luxury gastronomic experiences in the Post-COVID period (after March 2020) and also recommend further studies on a 'demand' perspective.

While there has been a growing body of literature on gastronomic tourism in emerging countries, there have been calls for further investigations that leverage 'small data' to understand the motivations and drivers of food tourism consumption (Mariani & Okumus, 2022). This study aimed to explore the drivers of domestic gastronomy tourism in the United Arab Emirates during COVID-19 through the 'consumer lens' using a netnographic approach.

## **Methodology**

This study employed an overt passive netnographic approach to explore the drivers of domestic gastronomy tourism through the content shared by a small group of UAE residents through Instagram. The protocol for the study was similar to the approach by Jeffrey, Ashraf, and Paris (2021) in their critique of passive covert netnography. One of the researchers 'hung out' on Instagram with 23 participants over eight months (November 2020 to July 2021). All participants were fully informed of the study, and their informed consent to participate was secured before the observations began. During the study period, the observations were primarily passive and non-participatory. The overt nature of the approach allowed for continued and extended presence with the participants (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015) and addresses some of the key ethical critiques of the often employed 'lurker' approach (covert non-participant online 'observations') that is little more than downloading of past conversations without presence required to observe the complexities and the context of those conversations (Jeffrey et al., 2021; Kozinets, 2015). The 23 participants were purposefully selected for this study based on several criteria (regular posting on Instagram, UAE resident, willingness to participate, and a self-identified likely hood to 'travel' or take a 'staycation' soon). All participants were known to one of the researchers (family, friend, or friend-of-a-friend) and purposefully included participants from different generations (generation Z, millennials, and baby boomers). As argued in previous studies (Jeffrey et al., 2021), we viewed a familiar sample as both necessary and advantageous due to the extended study period and the level of intimacy required in the approach.

Instagram was selected as the platform for the observations as it is among the UAE's most popular social media platforms, with over 7 million active Instagram users (Statista, 2022). During the eight-month study period, each participant's Instagram posts and stories were downloaded weekly, and observational notes were made of their posts, stories, interactions, and comments. Once a month, the emerging observations were discussed among the research team. At the end of the study period, NVIVO software was used to analyze the data – notes, text, images, audio, and videos. The research team identified four themes related to the drivers of gastronomy tourism. These themes were used as a basis for an in-depth focus group with one-third of the participants to provide further richness to the identified thematic areas. The following section briefly summarizes the four themes: *Aesthetics, Popular and Cultural Food, Mobility, and Participation in Food-related Activities*.

## **Results**

This section presents a brief summary of our initial insights. While our full study focused more broadly on understanding domestic tourism behavior during the pandemic in the UAE, for this extended abstract, we have started to look more deeply at our data with a focus on gastronomy tourism. Given the visual nature of the data, we look forward to sharing more rich illustrations and analyses of these findings at the TTRA Ideas fair.

### *Aesthetics- The “Instagram-able”*

Our observations and focus group revealed that participants preferred to travel to destinations that provided ‘aesthetic food’ and an ‘aesthetic’ setting. A total of 17 distinct posts were related to 'Aesthetic food posts,' suggesting that the participants are inclined toward visually appealing food. This result echoes previous studies highlighting the tourists' fascination with aesthetic food – i.e., a cuisine decorated to look appealing visually (Privitera et al., 2018). However, this may also suggest that local tourists in UAE are not genuinely attracted by the food per se. Instead, it is more of a ceremonial act to post food-based content on Instagram (Oliveira et al., 2020).

### *Popular and Cultural Food*

Domestic tourists are attracted to destinations across the seven emirates to experience popular food from diverse cultures. We identified 13 distinct posts from 12 participants tagged to Instagram's ‘popular food’ category. In the words of one of the focus group participants, "*Yes, I am a food enthusiast. Whenever I see that there is a food popular on Instagram or online, I will try to visit the place to try the food*". The participants sought out opportunities to try novel foods. The UAE is a melting pot of the world's different cultures and global cuisines due to its large and diverse expatriate population. More than 85% of the UAE population comprises expatriates from over 200 countries who live, study and work there (UAE, 2022). Previous studies have shown that tourists are increasingly willing to try different cuisines as part of their food adventures (Mkono et al., 2013). This is not surprising given that food is seen as a marker of cultural identity, and consuming food is seen as an exercise in acquiring cultural capital. According to Sormaz et al. (2016), most gastronomy tourists simultaneously are culture tourists. Moreover, the urge to try out cuisine of diverse cultures was heightened during the pandemic as some participants sought to fulfill these fundamental drivers of international tourism in the domestic UAE setting.

### *Mobility*

Mobility (ability and ease of travel) are critical factors affecting domestic tourism. The UAE has a well-connected and well-equipped road infrastructure and public transport connecting all seven Emirates. Moreover, the UAE has one of the highest cars per capita in the world (540 cars per 1,000 Dubai residents). It was evident from our observations of the location tags that domestic tourists travel to different emirates (other than their own) and that, in many instances, the main driver was to experience different food and cuisine. For instance, tourists from Dubai were found to travel in the comfort of their cars to Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah based on their local tags and photos.

### *Participation in Food-related Activities*

Participating in fun food-related activities was found to be an integral component of gastronomy tourism in the UAE. We observed nearly all of the participants engaging in fun food-related activities throughout the study period. For instance, 12 references have been recorded from 8 participants who posted stories about attending/organizing barbecues. Several other participants shared images of attending food-related events, lavish weekend brunches, or other food-related activities. Many activities were in outdoor areas, which could be attributed to the time of year and

the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the posts categorized taking place during a ‘Staycation’ featured videos and images relating to unique food experiences/activities at the destination. Our observations suggest that a memorable gastronomic experience is critical for tourists during their hotel and resort stays in the UAE. Finally, the uniqueness of the restaurant's location is also a key driving factor influencing domestic tourists.

## Conclusion

This study explored domestic gastronomy tourism in the UAE during the COVID-19 pandemic and the launch of a new national domestic tourism strategy. The abstract presents some of our early insights emerging from our deeper exploration of the gastronomy tourism domain within our larger study focused on domestic tourism behavior during the pandemic. Eventually, some of our insights from this and our larger study will provide the basis for future studies and useful insights for promoting gastronomy tourism in the UAE.

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