

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-4643

E-ISSN: 2581-9402

Citation:

Ganguly, Surjya, and Sherry Abraham. "From Awadhi Traditions to Global Recognition: Analyzing the Multi-Dimensional Impact of UNESCO Gastronomy Status on Lucknow's Tourism Ecosystem." *Shanlax International Journal of Management*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2026, pp. 136–45.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v13iS1-i2-Feb.10398>

From Awadhi Traditions to Global Recognition: Analyzing the Multi-Dimensional Impact of UNESCO Gastronomy Status on Lucknow's Tourism Ecosystem

Surjya Ganguly

Junior Research Scholar

Department of Tourism Studies, Pondicherry University

Dr. Sherry Abraham

Associate Professor

Department of Tourism Studies, Pondicherry University

Abstract

This paper examines the multidimensional impact of UNESCO's international designation on Lucknow's tourism ecosystem. Lucknow has recently been designated a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy to promote Awadh's culinary traditions. Awadhi cuisine, which reached its peak during the Nawabi era (18th century), is representative of Lucknow's cultural identity. Dishes like Dum Phuket, Galawat, and Bhunao are famous and used all over the world. The study will help to understand how this international designation by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network will serve as a marketing and promotional tool for sustainable urban development, along with positioning Lucknow as a top destination for gastronomic tourism. The paper highlights three critical dimensions: economic inclusion, heritage preservation, and strategic branding. While the UNESCO designation brings with it respect and the tag of authenticity, it also carries the potential for rural gentrification, staged authenticity, and the trend towards convenience food. These problems can lead to the loss of property for locals, replacing slowly cooked, authentic recipes with dishes that are easy to make and appeal to global audiences. To preserve Awadh cuisine and adapt to a globalised world, Gastronomic Tourism Experiences (GTE) should be created, rather than simply offering dishes from the cuisine. The integrated strategic approach should combine storytelling about the dishes, food events that will generate curiosity and hygienic quality street foods made from local ingredients. All these factors will combine to form GTE, making it a powerful driver of revisit intention.

Keywords: Awadhi Cuisine, UNESCO Creative Cities Network, Gastronomy Tourism, Heritage Preservation, Destination Branding

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical Context

From the ancient Kingdom of Awadh comes the unique and historically significant cuisine known as Awadhi cuisine. In modern times, the best place to get authentic Awadhi cuisine is Lucknow, the

capital of Uttar Pradesh. During the early 18th to mid-19th century, specifically known as the Nawabi era, the culinary style of Awadhi cuisine reached its zenith (Kundu et al., 2024). The Nawabs of Lucknow had developed a love for a cuisine that was a fusion of Mughal, Persian, Central Asian and local Indian traditions. The city of Lucknow has been the birthplace of many of the finest chefs of Mughal cuisine, so Lucknow is widely regarded as the birthplace of much of India's culinary heritage. The ancient culinary traditions like the Dum Pukht (slow sealed cooking), bhunao (sauteing), and galawat (meat tenderisation) show the integrated balance of flavour and Aroma (Taneja, 2023). Iconic dishes like the Galouti Kabab, Dum Biryani, and Sheermal proudly represent the cultural artefacts and the historical traditions of Awadhi cuisine all over the world. The Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb- a culture which is an amalgamation of religious harmony and mutual respect between diverse communities (Singh, 2021). The Awadhi cuisine is not only preserves the traditional knowledge of all ancestors but also highlights the city's unique syncretic culture

1.2. THE UNESCO Designation

To recognise cities that identify creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable development and to foster international cooperation among those cities, the UN has created the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) (Guimaraes et al., 2021). When a city has a unique cuisine with its own indigenous ingredients, a vibrant food community, and a rich cultural history, the UN awards the designation of "Creative City of Gastronomy" to that particular city. Lucknow is the second city of India to get the prestigious label of "Creative City of Gastronomy". This will not only be a major boost to its culinary heritage but will also act as a powerful agent of branding and marketing tool to attract international tourists (Vogel et al., 2024). The tag acts as proof of the authenticity and cultural prestige to its visitors. After becoming a part of this prestigious network, Lucknow will now become a major hub for international tourists in India. Furthermore, the TAG also acts as a platform for intercultural exchange among cities all over the world that will support the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It fosters a tradition of international partnership among these cities. This recognition will help in the preservation of the local traditions and the indigenous ingredients of the Awadhi cuisine, and also act as an active driver of modern economic growth and global cultural influence (Vogel et al., 2024)

1.3. The "Third Place" Concept

The new concept of Third Place has developed in the modern landscape of gastronomic tourism. Third Place refers to all eateries that function as essential venues for cultural exchange, where people meet and share their everyday lives, rather than being merely places for food consumption. These third places act as little embassies in which people are introduced to the different decor and atmosphere of different types of cuisines from different cultures. Where there is a combination of modernised, yet authentic versions of local culture (Chero Osorio et al., 2022). Dining out is now not seen as an activity reserved only for special occasions. It has become an activity where the tourist can get a holistic immersion into the local way of life. This allows the tourists to engage meaningfully with the authentic culture, and the tourist feels a part of the social-cultural identity of that particular Place (Sio et al., 2024). Gastronomic events, such as traditional bazaar stalls and food festivals, generate an environment that fosters social interactions, developing a sense of togetherness and belonging among visitors (Widjaja et al., 2024). Ultimately, the restaurants and the local events generate a sense of belongingness in the tourist and also provide knowledge about the local food history; these practices help in preserving the age-old traditions of the cuisine.

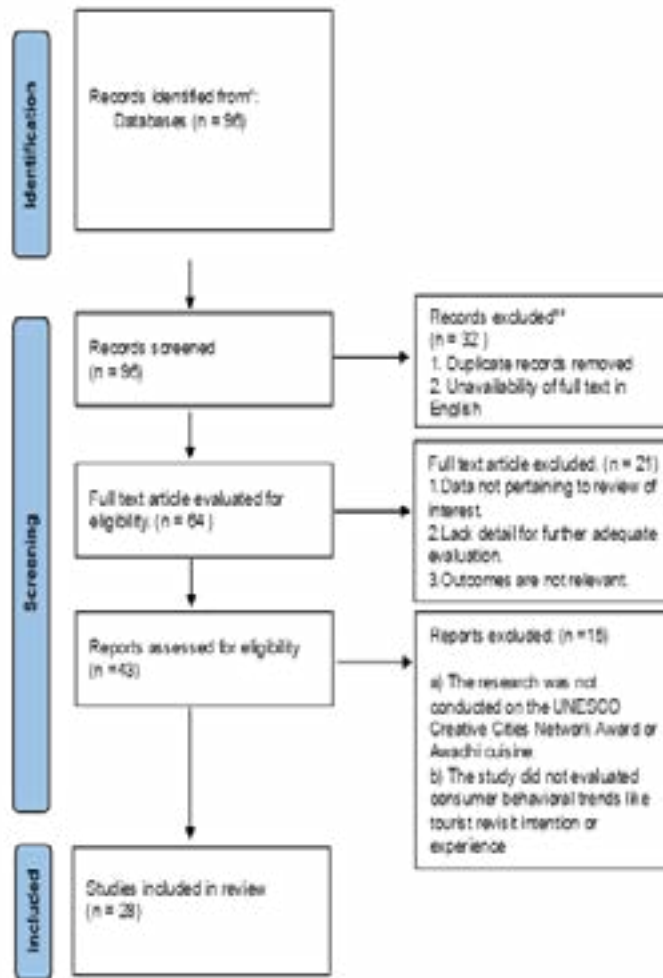
1.4. Problem Statement

Along with the prestigious designation as a UNESCO Creative Cities Network, it also presents challenges in light of local consumer behaviour and the evolving ecosystem. Authentic Awadh cuisine is mainly focused on slow-cooking methods (such as Dum Pukht and galawat). But because of the huge influx of tourists from all over the world and the demand for convenient food, the food market prioritises time-saving dishes over authentic preparation (Nabeesa & Prasanna, 2023). This influx of tourists, combined with market competition to attract the largest number of customers and generate the highest profits, leads to the dilution and commercialisation of recipes. Where authentic cooking traditions are replaced by mass-market taste (Kundu & Malik, 2024), this situation often arises from the lack of awareness and ignorance among local stakeholders who prioritise their own profit over the strategic value of Global Titles. This, in turn, leads to the erosion of the cuisine's cultural uniqueness that the UNESCO designation had sought to celebrate (Tastan et al., 2018). Moreover, it leads to rural gentrification, forcing local residents to leave their homes as property values rise. This disintegrates the authentic age-old cultural practices of that particular place (Demiroz et al., 2025). The city must develop an integrated public policy to maximise the benefits of the UNESCO designation for preserving the authenticity of the cuisine and benefiting the local community's livelihoods.

2. Methodology

A systematic review of literature was conducted to recognise the impact of the UNESCO designation on Lucknow and specifically on Awadh cuisine. The studies published in various databases, such as ResearchGate, Taylor and Franc, were used for this paper and examined for appropriate literature on the topic. These were searched using keywords like UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), destination branding and competitiveness, gastronomic heritage, tourist revisit intention, experience economy in gastronomy, Awadh cuisine, and urban food culture transformation. The available literature was vast, so articles relevant to the study were screened. To keep the study relevant, the articles published in the last 10 years, that i.e 2015-2025, were selected. The articles were selected if they met the following inclusion criteria: a) The research was conducted on the UNESCO Creative Cities Network Award or Awadh cuisine, b) The study evaluated consumer behavioural trends like tourist revisit intention or experience economy in gastronomy. c) Accessibility of the full-text article in English.

Ninety-six articles were downloaded, and after the thorough screening process, sixty were excluded as they did not meet the research inclusion criteria. Thus, 28 articles were selected that fulfilled the research criteria. The research articles were categorised into themes like Economic vitality and community empowerment, Social culture identity and heritage preservation, destination image and strategy branding. After the extraction and organisation of data, they were summarised under the designated sub-topic.



3. Results

3.1. Economic Viability And Community Empowerment

During the Nawabi era (early 18th to mid-19th century), the royal cooks who were known as rakabdars, were the exclusive guardians of the recipes that form the core of Awadi cuisine. In modern times, after the end of the Nawabi era and the end of the Zamindari system started by the British colonial powers, many of these families have started their own restaurants and catering businesses that serve the age-old authentic Awadhi cuisine made with indigenous ingredients (Kundu & Malik, 2024). Today, the designation of the city as a UNESCO “City of Gastronomy” has given a major boost to this restaurant and catering businesses. This has created jobs for the local people and a path for the preservation of their ancient traditions, which is one of the primary drivers for sustainable economic growth (Vogel et al., 2024). The regional officials of Lucknow should recognise the potential of this new designation and try to market their destination with specialised gastronomic tours and itineraries, which will increase the length of stay for visitors and thereby maximise income generation for the local people (Kareem & Venugopal, 2024).

The benefit of this UNESCO designation should reach to the small-scale producers and street vendors who are the backbone of the Awadi cuisine, as they are the ones who form a crucial part of the supply chain for the indigenous ingredients (Singh & Sivastav, 2023). Use of local raw ingredients

is a vital component of the overall perceived food service quality and authenticity (Tagmanov et al., 2025). Most of the dishes that are prepared by the street food vendors are usually made from the fresh raw ingredients of the local places, which are often seasonal. This is the primary reason that tourists perceive a destination's unique culinary image with the food that is being offered by the street food vendors of that particular place (Singh, 2023). A backward linkage is developed by the demand for locally sourced ingredients, which supports both rural development, agricultural communities and the urban catering sector (Tagmanov et al., 2025). Street food vending functions act as an entry point into the economic sphere for many migrant workers and women, who play a crucial role in helping them to gain social respect and help their families with better economic opportunities (Heinrich et al., 2024).

The designation has brought back to life historic urban centres like Chowk and Aminabad in Lucknow. These areas act as an epicentre for getting the authentic delicacies of Awadh cuisine, and as they are well connected to the different parts of Lucknow, it is easier for tourists to come here. These places have acted as a growth centre, which has also helped the peripheral destinations with strong culinary traditions. But limited mass tourism infrastructure (Park et al., 2023). These places haven't been explored much by tourists, and hence help to give tourists an experience through which they can have a sense of the locality and immersion in the local way of life. Public-private collaborations that leverage the designation of UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy should add the historical architectural backdrop to the cuisine, which enhances the gastronomical appeal (Demiroz et al., 2025). This will help the local communities become the main drivers in promoting their own culture and place identity, thereby retaining the authenticity of that place (Demiroz et al., 2025).

3.2. Socio-Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation

3.2.1. Authenticity and the Transmission of Cultural Values

Authenticity is the primary factor that is considered when cities are judged for their designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. It is authenticity that transforms the simple act of eating to a meaningful experience of preserving and celebrating age-old traditional heritage (Baidu-Baiden et al., 2022; Masmoudi, 2025). The authentic Awadhi cuisine is not merely a collection of recipes, but it acts as a bridge of heritage that joins the royal past of the Nawabs and today's modern, globalised world. It is a symbol of historical continuity and also a symbol of evolution to adjust to modern times (Kundu & Malik, 2024). The constant recreation of these age-old practices and the skills used by the local chefs to remaster these heritage recipes, with a sense of identity and cultural pride, makes this heritage a living heritage. The tasting of the food has to be an amalgamation of two important experiences first is the 'Naked pleasure' - It is the immediate reception of the physical sensation when the guest has the food and the second one is 'dressed taste' - It is the sense of belongingness and authenticity that the surrounding environment gives to that particular tourist (Paek et al., 2023). Dishes like the galouti kabab are used to explain the social norms and the luxurious lifestyle that was followed during the Nawabi era. These values are usually transferred from the elders to their younger ones through storytelling and informal teaching (Kundu & Malik, 2024; Park et al., 2023). The preservation of these traditional recipes is mainly credited to the women of the families, who act as guardians of culinary expertise. They ensure that the traditional knowledge and the secret recipes of Awadhi cuisine are passed down across generations of their household (Kundu & Malik, 2024).

3.2.2. Traditional Techniques vs. Modern Commercialization

There is the age-old fight between the preservation of traditional techniques in their most authentic form and the forces of modern-day commercialisation that give priority to speed and mass market appeal. (Kundu & Malik, 2024; Masmoudi, 2025). Most of the famous dishes of the Awadhi cuisine, for example, Dum Phuket (slow sealed cooking), which is the hallmark of Awadhi dishes, are dishes in which the ingredients are sealed in a heavy handi and kept on fire for a long time to cook in their own juices (Kundu & Malik, 2024). In this modern world of globalisation, and the adoption of the city to the recent influx of tourists, these time-consuming methods are frequently replaced by the convenient food trends (Kundu & Malik, 2024; Nabeesa Prasana, 2023). Modernisation has led to changes in the authentic recipes. For instance, the complex, slowly cooked flavours of the traditional biryani are often lost when it is not given the due amount of time it needs to be cooked through tenderised chicken and rice, through pressure cooking, from which the dish gets its name: Dum Biryani. Apart from this, the restaurants and the food bloggers simplify the real recipes to make them visually appealing to their large audience, replacing the authentic method with a quick, ready-to-eat meal. This creates the phenomenon of ‘staged authenticity’ (Ramirez-Gutierrez et al., 2021). While digital branding and YouTube channels have marketed the cuisine to a large audience, especially the younger generation, they have also risked the process of standardising taste profiles. This has diluted the purpose for which the UNESCO designation has been given to the city, which is the protection of the authenticity (Kundu & Malik, 2024). The local authority has a major role to play in this ecosystem. They need to find a balance between the overuse of this cuisine purely for commercial purposes and a moral responsibility to keep the culinary traditions of Lucknow intact, for which the city received this UNESCO designation (Kundu & Malik, 2024; Masmoudi, 2025).

3.3 Destination Image and Strategic Branding

The destination image will include the information the tourists have about that particular place and their knowledge that they have gained from other tourists about the location’s attributes (Li et al., 2025). While in most of the traditional destinations, the USP is often concentrated around the historical architecture of that particular city, Gastronomy has shifted from a position of being a marginal interest to a core motivation (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). The attributes of gastronomic tourism include Culinary history, Food culture, the use of local ingredients, authentic taste, and traditional environment.

These core elements, alongside the authentic and traditional environment, will give them a sense of belongingness (Li et al., 2025).

International recognition, such as UNESCO’s designation as the City of Gastronomy, acts as a powerful tool for sustainable destination development and an appeal to the global market. Lucknow needs to validate this designation from being just a region for experiencing authentic cuisine to a destination that will provide the tourist with an experience that will generate a sense of belongingness. This will ensure the revisit intentions, which is critical for maintaining high tourist influx in any place. The experience should be an amalgamation of the authentic cuisines and the rich heritage-based experiences for the tourist (Hossain et al., 2024). These positive experiences will lead to positive word-of-mouth marketing for the destination, which in turn will lead to tourist delight, which is very much different from the mere state of satisfaction (Widjaja et al., 2020). This process will be further amplified by the satisfied tourists who develop an empathy for the local people and their traditions and want to play an active role in safeguarding the heritage (Hossain et al., 2024; Widjaja et al., 2020).

Centres of Lucknow, such as Chowk and Aminabad, serve as ‘little embassies’ of the region, facilitating social interaction among the residents and the tourists. This develops a much-needed

sense of togetherness and sense of belonging, which are critical factors for revisit intentions among the tourists (Cherro Osorio et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023). Shared consumption practices of the delicacies that were once exclusive to the royal courts of the Nawab, these clusters generate a sense of togetherness among residents and visitors. This will lead to the preservation of the local and authentic cuisine of Awadh, along with the adaptation required to fit in the modern foodscapes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Global Recognition vs. Local Identity

The pursuit of global recognition in tourism through international branding, such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), creates a tension between prioritising modernisation and preserving local authenticity. Global recognition, such as UNESCO City of Gastronomy, gives the place a quality seal that recognises a destination's authenticity, cultural assets, and heritage. This makes the place much more attractive and real to the international travellers and investors (Vogel et al., 2024). In cities like Florianopolis or Phuket, the UNESCO tag has been used to mark the destination as a place of cultural distinction. This has, in turn, changed the place's mere local food into a much more sophisticated brand (Vogel et al., 2024; Park et al., 2023).

However, research suggests that this new reglobal consciousness can compromise local identity or authenticity. It happens when a destination brands itself for the mass tourist and deviates from its authenticity. There is a risk that the age-old culinary traditions are modified to suit the influx of tourists from all over the world, having different palates or aesthetic expectations, which leads to a 'museumification' of food (Park et al., 2023). In Florence, for example, cultural heritage policies designed to enhance global appeal have been linked to gentrification. The creative city priority is to create tourism-friendly aesthetics over the actual reality and authenticity, and maintain the authenticity of the local residents (Meloni, 2025). So, a balance needed to be maintained between creating global appeal for the destination and preserving its authenticity and cultural traditions, for which it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the first place.

4.2. Impact on Tourism Ecosystem

Food has evolved from a 'secondary support' service to a major priority when the tourist makes a destination choice. Historically, food was never considered a factor in tourists' destination selection. However, with the changing times and in this era of globalisation, where tourists seek authenticity and heterogenisation, Gastronomy has become a primary pull factor that dictates destination choice (Lima et al., 2024). This has given due importance to gastronomic experience quality (GEQ), which is no longer overlooked but is considered a critical factor while creating an integrated ecosystem for the tourist, with other tourism components, such as accommodation and transportation (Hossain et al., 2024).

In today's modern ecosystem, gastronomy serves as a symbol of a place's authenticity, which, in turn, shapes the overall cognitive image of that destination (Lima et al., 2025). This has led tourists to seek a memorable local gastronomic experience that offers authenticity, cultural immersion, and social interaction, giving them a sense of belonging (Badu-Baiden et al., 2022). To elevate the experience of the tourist, the tourism stakeholders, ranging from the local street food vendors to the luxury hotel operators, must collaborate to give the tourist an authentic, unforgettable experience. The ecosystem is no longer just about the food, but also about the overall gastronomic atmosphere the cuisine creates. It includes the cleanliness of the place, the hospitality of the staff, and the authenticity of the setting (Hossain et al., 2024).

4.3. Consumer Revisit Intentions

Food service is multidimensional and includes: food quality, service quality, and physical ambience. All of them become important factors of consumer retention in gastronomic tourism. Research indicates that the satisfaction of the tourist alone is not sufficient to guarantee a return visit. Instead, it has to achieve the highest level of emotional state, tourist delight, which will ensure revisit intentions (Widjaja et al., 2020). This can only be achieved when the destination provides the tourist with a holistic experience across multiple touchpoints, particularly the sensory dimensions like taste, aroma, and visual representation (Kareem & Venugopal, 2024).

To create a memorable experience, integrating all the factors of tourism is crucial. For instance, the quality of the gastronomic experience will be enhanced when combined with a positive accommodation experience, creating a combination that will significantly boost the tourist's satisfaction. In return, it will generate positive word of mouth (WOM), acting as marketing agents for that destination. (Hossain et al., 2024). One step further than this will be the concept of 'Destination Brand Love'. In this, the tourists develop an emotional attachment to the destination brand. It can be through authentic food experiences or through the desire to preserve the destination's age-old traditions. This kind of tourist is far more likely to revisit and exhibit long-term loyalty (Kareem & Venugopal, 2024). In this, it is also important to take note of personal traits, such as Food neophobia (a love for trying new foods), the tourist choice for a highly adventurous spirit who is more open to trying the new and authentic dishes of a destination's gastronomy. These factors also play a crucial role in their desire to return (Baadu-Baiden et al., 2022). Thus, the branding of the place must be strategic and focus on the multiple dimensions of tourism to build a positive image that will foster repeat visitations.

4.4. Socio-Economic Shift

The transformation of dining outside from an exclusive event to an occasional activity, and now in modern times to just a routine leisure practice for the global middle class, has changed the way that restaurants operate. A globalised world has primarily driven this change and the democratisation of culture and knowledge of authentic cuisines, which has been driven by digital branding and social media influencers (Widjaja et al., 2020). Social media, and especially platforms like Instagram and YouTube, have turned heritage dishes into visual content that is appealing to the masses. They have made the consumption of authentic food a marker of social status and a routine part of modern lifestyle (Kareem & Venugopal).

The shift has profound socio-economic implications as heritage dining becomes a routine activity for the global middle class. It has created a surge in demand for the local agricultural products and traditional culinary skills. However, the risk of 'commodification' of local food still remains, where cultural traditions are modified to suit the palate of a large number of consumers. This also leads to the fear that consumers prioritise Destination Review, Instagrammability, and their favourite influencers' presentation style over the destination's real historical depth. There is a need to maintain socio-cultural vigilance to prevent the erosion of the faery heritage that the tourists seek to experience.

5. Conclusion

To maximise the benefits of the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy designation, stakeholders—especially restaurant owners and hotel managers—must align their work with the core values of the global brand, which prioritise authenticity and creativity. This alignment will start with the dishes that will be served to the guests, where the owner should emphasise the use of local ingredients and traditional cooking techniques, such as dum phuket, which creates the effect

of heterogeneity between their offering and the globalised food culture (Kundu & Malik, 2024). To generate the feeling of belongingness in the tourist that will ensure their loyalty to the destination, it is critical to utilise storytelling with the dishes that will be offered, the sharing of historical and cultural narratives of the dishes, and the experience with the locals will give the tourists a feeling of authenticity and in-depth knowledge about the culture.

Integration of the local people into the development plans of the city is a critical factor. Tourists with high disposable income prioritise authenticity, which can come only from locals. This will also make the niche audiences increasingly willing to pay a premium for the experience (Kinkaid & Platts, 2024; Singh, 2023). The dishes should be presented keeping in mind the hygiene, quality, and presentation. These factors become critical for the younger generations, especially millennials and Gen Z, for whom the 'Instagrammability' of heritage foods is their top priority (Li et al., 2025).

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