



## Research Paper

# Why do domestic tourists choose to consume local food? The differential and non-monotonic moderating effects of subjective knowledge<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines factors that influence Chinese domestic tourists' intentions regarding local food consumption based on an extension of the planned behavior theory. The conceptual model is tested on 645 respondents living in the Confucian Temple Historic District of Nanjing, China. The results suggest that the three antecedents of the original theory of the planned behavior model (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) have positive effects on domestic tourists' behavioral intentions to consume local food. Moreover, benefit perceptions are found to be a significant positive predictor of attitudes and behavioral intentions, whereas risk perceptions are negatively associated with behavioral intentions. Attitudes play a partial mediating role in the relationship between benefit perceptions and intentions. In particular, in extending previous findings to local food consumption behaviors, we uncover differential and non-monotonic effects of subjective knowledge as a moderator between benefit perceptions and attitudes/intentions.

## 1. Introduction

As an indispensable aspect of travel, local food consumption is essential to fulfilling tourists' dining needs and their demand for authentic local experiences. With globalization and tourists' expanded levels of mobility, food demand serves much more than a simple function. Tourists are becoming increasingly interested in and enthusiastic about local cuisine offered at destinations (Okumus & Cetin, 2018). In fact, the opportunity to engage in food-related experiences largely shapes travelers' decision-making processes surrounding destination selection and subsequent itinerary planning upon their arrival at a destination (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Stewart, Bramble, & Ziraldo, 2008). A recent survey conducted by Hilton Worldwide found that roughly 36% of tourists visiting the Asia-Pacific region referred to food as a critical factor shaping destinations to which they would travel. According to this survey, food also heavily influences tourists' travel behaviors while at a destination; 90% reported that they would dine out to try famous local dishes, 87% said that they would seek out local street food, and 79% would seek out culturally unique food experiences such as culinary festivals and food markets upon visiting a destination (Hilton Worldwide, 2014). However, Cohen and Avieli (2004, p755) have

argued that “the common perception of food as a mere attraction in tourism is challenged by stressing the complications and impediments experienced by tourists in the local culinary sphere in unfamiliar destination, even when attracted to the local cuisine”, revealing a food-related paradox related to tourism contexts.

On the one hand, some tourists visit familiar destinations and enjoy diverse cuisines; others even travel to new places in search of unique and locally featured fare. Both past experiences and knowledge play critical roles in the selection of destinations and local food experiences. For instance, travelers may schedule an experiential trip to a gastronomic hub that involves paying visits to primary and secondary food producers; attending gastronomic festivals, food fairs, and food-related events; visiting farmers' markets; and attending cooking shows and demonstrations, food tastings, or other tourist events related to food (Johns & Pine, 2002; Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2013; Mkono, 2012; Quan & Wang, 2004; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Even a seemingly normal meal can be etched in tourists' minds given unique experiences that such meals contribute to travel. Tasting local food at a tourist destination can be perceived as experiencing a different cultural tradition in a unique environment (Hall, Mitchell, et al., 2003; Kim & Eves, 2012). Thus, food is considered a cornerstone of the entire tourist experience (Kim, Eves,

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& Scarles, 2009; Nield, Kozak, & LeGrys, 2000). In this sense, food-related experiences become sensuous and sensual and symbolic and ritualistic and can embed significance and meaning into an entire trip. Therefore, cuisines and other foods a destination offers are of paramount importance to the overall quality of tourists' experiences (Hall & Sharples, 2003) and hence to tourists' benefit perceptions of local foods. On the other hand, travelers are concerned with external threats related to food and especially with those related to hygiene. These threats can spoil a trip or even endanger tourists' lives. Such perceptions of external threats also shape tourists' risk perceptions of local food. Moreover, travelers' existing knowledge of local food helps inform corresponding benefit and risk evaluations, which in turn can shape their food consumption behaviors.

Some previous research has been devoted to understanding local food consumption in the tourism and hospitality field. Tourists' food consumption behaviors are complex and determined by factors related to the individual tourist, to food available at a destination and to the destination environment (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012). Among these three broad categories, tourist-related factors have been thoroughly investigated in the tourism and hospitality literature and are widely accepted as central (Mak et al., 2012). Various studies have addressed the plethora of individual factors that affect local food consumption such as cultural features (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010, 2011), demographic features (Kim et al., 2009, 2013), patterns of food neophobia and neophilia (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), past visitation patterns and experiences (Ryu & Jang, 2006), risk perceptions (Choi, Lee, & Ok, 2013), familiarity levels (Seo, Kim, Oh, & Yun, 2013), and motivations (Kim & Eves, 2012, 2014; Kim et al., 2013; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2013). Thus, studies have aimed to examine various factors that influence tourists' local food consumption such as religious cultural influences, socio-demographic factors, food-related personality traits, exposure effects and motivating factors. However, knowledge of local food is often not considered in models or frameworks of local food consumption.

This study explores and extends the theory of planned behavior (TPB) by incorporating the three key factors of risk perception, benefit perception, and subjective knowledge into the main TPB framework. A causal model is in turn proposed to identify salient factors that help explain Chinese domestic tourists' local food consumption patterns and relationships between these factors. Accordingly, the aims of this study are threefold. First, the study seeks to examine how antecedents of the TPB model (the basic TPB model) influence tourists' intentions to purchase local food. Second, the study uses two more constructs, risk and benefit perceptions, to investigate the effects of these two constructs on tourists' attitudes regarding and intentions to consume local food by extending the TPB to the context of local food consumption. Third and most importantly, subjective knowledge is used as a moderating variable and its differential effects on local food consumption behavior are investigated.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The basic theory of planned behavior

Predicting how attitudes affect tourist behavior is one of the most important concerns of tourism and hospitality research. Over the past four decades, several theoretical behavioral models have been proposed and investigated, including the theory of reasoned action (Han, Meng, & Kim, 2017), the technology acceptance model (Escobar-Rodríguez & Carvajal-Trujillo, 2014), etc. The TPB, among others, is one of the most widely utilized rational-choice models (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). The theory states that attitudes toward behaviors, subjective norms, and perceived levels of behavioral control shape an individual's behavioral intentions and behaviors.

More specifically, according to the TPB, the proximal predictor of one's behavior is his or her intentions to engage in a given behavior.

Intentions are determined by three antecedents: attitudes toward a behavior (an individual's evaluations), subjective norms (an individual's perceptions regarding a particular behavior that are influenced by the judgments of significant others), and perceived levels of behavioral control (an individual's perceived ease or difficulty of engaging in a particular behavior). The TPB's efficacy in explaining a variety of behaviors observed in tourism and hospitality has been validated across many previous empirical studies, including those related to destination choice (Lam & Hsu, 2006), wine tourism (Sparks, 2007), intentions to visit world cultural heritage sites (Shen, Schüttemeyer, & Braun, 2009), intentions to visit museums (Yamada & Fu, 2012), medical tourism (Lee, Han, & Lockyer, 2012), and pro-environmental behaviors (Han, 2015).

Several studies have adopted the TPB framework to predict daily food consumption behaviors such as those of sustainable food consumption (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008), organic food consumption (Arvola et al., 2008), and genetically modified food consumption (Kim, Jang, & Kim, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have applied the TPB model to examine tourists' local food consumption habits while traveling. The present study builds on a hypothesized behavioral framework with the TPB at its core. In the TPB model, positive attitudes, favorable subjective norms, and higher levels of perceived behavioral control to engage in certain behaviors lead to stronger intentions to act (Ajzen, 1991). In particular, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1.** Attitudes toward behavior have a positive effect on behavioral intentions to consume local food.

**H2.** Subjective norms have a positive effect on behavioral intentions to consume local food.

**H3.** Perceived behavioral control has a positive effect on behavioral intentions to consume local food.

### 2.2. Effects of risk and benefit perceptions on attitude and behavioral intentions

Risk is ubiquitous in all areas of life. Thus, risk perceptions and management have become routine. Tourism, as an activity that largely occurs in unfamiliar environments away from one's place of residence, inherently involves a wide spectrum of risks ranging from life-threatening (e.g. natural disasters and terrorist attacks) to moderately inconvenient (e.g. lost luggage, flight delays/cancellations, and bed bugs). In reference to tourism contexts, risk perceptions can be defined as the likelihood of negative, unfavorable, and harmful consequences manifesting upon purchasing and consuming certain travel-related services and products (Tsaour, Tzeng, & Wang, 1997). Such risks include being exposed to travel-related diseases, natural disasters, crime, hygienic issues, unfamiliar means of transportation, culture/language barriers, and uncertainties regarding destination-specific regulations and laws (Weiermair & Maser, 1998). Risks related to tourists' food consumption habits at a destination can be broadly classified into hygienic, health-related, environmental, and socio-psychological risks (Choi et al., 2013).

From a subjective judgment perspective, risk perceptions can have a negative effect on individuals' beliefs and attitudes toward specific behaviors. Rather, the more danger or harm an individual anticipates, the less likely he/she is to positively evaluate and act. Previous studies have demonstrated that risk perceptions have a negative impact on individuals' attitudes and intentions regarding street food consumption and tourism (Choi et al., 2013; Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). Based on earlier studies we expect risk perceptions and their sub-dimensions to negatively influence tourists' attitudes about and intentions to consume local food at tourist destinations. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

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