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Marketing Istanbul as a culinary destination

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether and how Istanbul, Turkey is marketed and promoted as a culinary destination. Based on a critical literature review, a research framework was developed, and official brochures and websites for Istanbul, Turkey, were content-analyzed. The research findings suggest that although Istanbul has rich culinary resources and offers many domestic and international cuisines, the city is not well marketed and promoted as a culinary destination. This is one of the first studies discussing how far a leading urban destination in a developing country is not successfully marketed and promoted as a culinary destination. Based on the research findings, this study offers specific theoretical and practical implications on how Istanbul and similar destinations can better utilize their unique culinary resources.

1. Introduction

The attractiveness of a destination is often related to its capacity to satisfy tourists' needs and expectations. Alongside climate, accommodation, and scenery, experiencing foods (including beverages) is among the most important features when tourists evaluate a destination's attractiveness (Henderson, 2016; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Sotiriadis, 2015). Consumption of foods is not only a way of satisfying tourists' physical needs but also an opportunity to learn about different cuisines, people, culture, and traditions. While visiting a destination, tourists' food choices may vary (Almeida & Garrod, 2017). However, trying authentic foods can be one of the most desired activities for tourists (du Rand & Heath, 2006; Henderson, 2016; Kivela & Crotts, 2006; McKercher, Okumus & Okumus, 2008; Sotiriadis, 2015).

As an important element of tourism experiences, local foods, food experiences, and food tourism have received more attention in recent years (Kim & Jang, 2016; Lee & Scott, 2015; Ottenbacher, Harrington, Fauser, & Loewenhagen, 2016). Utilizing local cuisines has been an effective strategy for destination marketing (Okumus, Kock, Scantlebury, & Okumus, 2013; Robinson & Getz, 2014; Silkes, Cai, & Lehto, 2013). This is because food purchases constitute about one-third of overall tourist spending (Telfer & Wall, 2000; World Health Organization, 2015). Given this, local, regional and international cuisines available in a destination play a crucial role in destination selection and marketing efforts (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Getz, 2000; Okumus et al., 2013; Seo, Yun, & Kim, 2017; Silkes et al., 2013; Tellstrom, Gustafsson, & Mossberg, 2005). The reason for this is that tourists often spend considerable time searching, planning and

consuming foods in a destination (Robinson & Getz, 2014; Sotiriadis, 2015). Availability of local, regional and international foods is not only one of the main motivations for tourists to travel but also complements their travel experiences (Boyne, Williams, & Hall, 2002; Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Gyimothy, Rassing, & Wanhill, 2000; Henderson, 2016; Joppe, Martin, & Waalen, 2001; Sanchez-Cañizares & Castillo-Canalejo, 2015; Yolal, Chi, & Pesämaa, 2017).

With many scenic and historical landmarks, Istanbul is a leading destination for tourists globally. With a population of 17 million, Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey, containing 20% of the country's population (Turkstat, 2016). According to recent statistics, 22% of the country's GDP and 40% of tax revenues in 2016 came from Istanbul (Turkstat, 2016). In relation to tourism, 11.6 million international tourists visited Istanbul in 2016, making it the world's ninth most-visited city (McCarthy, 2017). Of this total, about a quarter of the nation's international tourists are concentrated on the European side, with 90% of the city's hotels also situated there (Multicity, 2017).

Istanbul is well known for its sophisticated culture and cuisine due to its rich historical background. Turkish cuisine is among the most popular global cuisines, enjoying a solid reputation alongside Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian, Greek, French and Italian cuisines (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007). Yet there is still limited empirical evidence and discussions on how far Turkey integrates local foods and gastronomic experiences into its marketing efforts. In particular, there has been no empirical study on whether and how Istanbul is marketed as a culinary destination. This is because it is the leading urban destination in Turkey and one of the

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leading destinations in Europe with its rich historical, cultural and culinary resources. Given this, this study aims to investigate whether and how far Istanbul, Turkey is being marketed and promoted as a culinary destination in official materials and websites from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (TMOCT), which culinary resources are utilized in promoting Istanbul. The paper also aims to discuss how Istanbul can better utilize local, regional and international culinary resources in its marketing efforts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food tourism

Food tourism refers to traveling to taste local and authentic foods, join food festivals and experience local and international cuisines (Hall & Sharples, 2003). It is also referred to culinary, gastronomy and gourmet tourism (Okumus et al., 2007). Food tourists are profiled under different groups ranging from those who are not interested in food to those who travel exclusively to taste local and unique cuisines (Andersson & Mossberg, 2017; Boyne et al., 2002; McKercher, Okumus, & Okumus, 2008). For example, previous studies have found that the majority of travelers recognize local cuisines as a major factor that effect their destination selection, travel experience and decision to return to the same destination (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Silkes et al., 2013).

The culinary products, services and food culture at a destination can be seen unique strategic resources, with few substitutes that cannot be easily imitated by other destinations (Hornig & Tsai, 2010; Okumus et al., 2007). First, food as a defining social marker represents the region and its local citizens (Anderson, 2005; Gillespie, 2002). Second, tourists may seek indigenous, ethnic and local foods. Although some travelers may avoid eating local foods (i.e. food neophobia), they may still be curious about the local foods and food experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Tangible elements of local and international foods (e.g. taste and ingredients) can contribute to cognitive and affective elements (e.g. emotions and experiences) of the destination image (Silkes et al., 2013).

There are different levels of interest in local and authentic cuisines. For tourists, local foods carry social, psychological, cultural and experiential meanings (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Williams, 1997). According to Frochot (2003), by consuming local foods, tourists can satisfy their needs, such as relaxation, excitement, escapism, status, education, and lifestyle. While the reasons for consuming local and international foods may vary (e.g. satisfying hunger, experiencing local cultures, social interaction), the availability of local and international foods can affect tourists' travel experiences and intention to return (Henderson, 2009).

Experiencing local foods can be a cultural experience and form of entertainment since it involves trying new things and experiencing the local traditions (Fields, 2002; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ryu & Jang, 2006; Sparks, Bowen, & Klag, 2003). Foods associated with a particular region can attract tourists to this destination if strategically marketed at periodical events, festivals or on the right social media platforms (Viljoen, Kruger, & Saayman, 2017). While some food enthusiasts may not believe they possess the qualities of a gourmet, they may still consider local foods as an important factor in their decisions to visit and revisit that destination. Therefore, the food tourism segment should be more than just an elite niche segment (Boniface, 2003; McKercher et al., 2008).

2.2. Using local cuisines in destination marketing

Foods at a destination reflect a sense of place (Bessiere, 1998; Jolliffe, 2016; Sims, 2009). The culinary resources and culture (e.g. ingredients, cooking styles and presentation) are location-specific and can play an important role in destination image formation (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Silkes et al., 2013). Foods represent

geography, climate, authenticity, history, culture, and nostalgia (Lee & Scott, 2015). Given this, identifying and promoting traditional foods and culinary experiences related to a specific destination can be influential in destination marketing efforts (Hornig, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012; Okumus et al., 2013; Sims, 2009).

With an increasing interest in authentic foods, leveraging local cuisines is recognized as an effective tool in destination marketing, differentiation and branding (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Choe, Kim, & Cho, 2017; Hornig & Hu, 2009; Kim, Choe, & Lee, 2016; Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009; Kivela & Crofts, 2005; Lee, Sung, Suh, & Zhao, 2017; Okumus et al., 2013; Tsai & Wang, 2017). Even basic foods can be a major attraction if marketed well, as with truffles in Alba, Italy, and Napa Valley, California. Reflecting this, many destinations now focus on local foods as a tool to promote their destination and develop various events and festivals to highlight their cuisines (Jalis, Che, & Markwell, 2014; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; TanSiew & Hashim, 2013; Viljoen et al., 2017). Cooperation among public and private stakeholders in creating and sustaining a consistent image of a destination is also important when promoting local and regional foods (Ottenbacher et al., 2016)

Destination images are formed by various sources and considered a salient aspect of tourist decision making process (Gursoy, Chen & Chi, 2014; Nelson, 2016). Based on this, it is suggested that destinations should not include food and food experiences as part of destination experience but position local cuisines as a key aspect of destination image and advertising themes (Henderson, 2009). Jalis Che and Markwell (2014) particularly suggest that a destination should build up and strengthen a clear and distinct cuisine image to differentiate itself from its competitors. Local foods and beverages as place-based distinct assets are also considered sources of competitive advantage for destinations (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Truong, Lenglet, & Mothe, in press). Consistent with the above discussions, du Rand and Heath (2006) proposed a framework to promote a culinary destination. These authors suggest that each destination should particularly identify its unique culinary resources and images and focus on such food tourism enhancers. Their framework includes four main tasks, which are: (1) prioritizing culinary products and markets, (2) positioning and branding the destination, (3) theming, packaging and routing, and (4) promoting the culinary destination.

Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam (Henderson, 2009; Hornig & Tsai, 2010) are countries that highlight their culinary resources and clearly position their destinations alongside more established culinary destinations such as France, Italy and Spain. Moreover, destination management organizations (DMOs) such as the Australian Tourist Commission, Canadian Tourism Commission and Hong Kong Tourism Board concentrate on culinary resources in their destination marketing efforts (Hornig & Tsai, 2012). There are specific examples of destinations developing gastronomy clubs and tours and use them as promotional materials for their destinations. For example, the Catalan Tourist Board developed 'Gastronomic Club' and the 'Gastroteca' initiatives and promoted them as tourist routes for visitors aiming to test local foods and drinks (Londoño, 2011).

2.3. Promoting culinary tourism through published materials and websites

Tourists' decision making to travel a destination and trying local cuisines would be greatly influenced by information sources (Pawaskar & Goel, 2016). Given this, food-related content on websites and in brochures have gained in importance. Marketers and DMOs value and utilize images and a textual description of food in their destination marketing efforts (Dieck, Fountoulaki, & Jung, 2018; Jalis et al., 2014). When integrated into marketing a destination, such promotional materials are effective in informing and attracting culinary tourists (Silkes et al., 2013). Local foods are often featured in text and images in promotional materials. Distributing promotional materials (e.g. brochures, booklets, maps, video clips, and flyers) is a traditional method of

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