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Research paper

Experiential value in branding food tourism

Chen-Tsang (Simon) Tsai^a, Yao-Chin Wang^{b,*}^a Department of Food and Beverage Services, Tainan University of Technology, Tainan 710, Taiwan^b Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, School of Management, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, China

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ABSTRACT

Although food tourism has been characterized as an emerging industry, studies of branding in food tourism are limited. This work applies a novel, value-driven approach to evaluate experiential value as the antecedent for branding food tourism. The research setting is Tainan: a Taiwanese historical city with many street vendors selling traditional foods. Data were collected only from Taiwanese residents. Empirical results reveal that one type of experiential value, consumer return on investment (CROI), can significantly enhance a place's food image. Place food image then, in turn, significantly affects a tourist's behavioral intentions toward food tourism. Based on the findings, the study makes a theoretical contribution to examining experiential values in food tourism by identifying CROI as a key antecedent of place food image. The study also makes practical recommendations for branding food tourism in a given destination.

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1. Introduction

Food has historically been considered a key attraction for tourists, with many destinations attempting to provide tourists with culinary experiences (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). During travel, tourists typically spend approximately 40% of their budgets on food (Boyne, Williams, & Hall, 2002). According to Hall and Mitchell (2001), food tourism is characterized as tourists visiting 'primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food and tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a specialist food production region are the primary motivating factors for travel' (p. 308). As food tourism is gaining importance, food is now a key element in destination marketing strategies (du Rand & Heath, 2006).

To elucidate the role of food at various destinations, researchers have analyzed food attractions at sophisticated urban destinations (McKercher, Okumus, & Okumus, 2008), food experiences at festivals (Silkes, Cai, & Lehto, 2013), and the ways in which local cuisines are promoted on islands (Okumus, Kock, Scantlebury, & Okumus, 2013). This study focuses on food tourism related to a destination (such as a city, region, or nation) that is well known for its food tourism. For example, Texas is a place famous for barbecue, the city of Boston attracts tourists who enjoy fresh seafood, and Shanghai city is recognized for its unique Shanghai cuisine.

Recent studies have found that food also can enhance the identity of destinations because it is strongly related to ways of life, local production, cultural celebration, and heritage (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Hence, this study specifically investigates the importance of food tourism for place branding. Boyne, Hall and Williams (2003) argued that policy makers should cooperate with practitioners and developers to promote food-related tourism initiatives as a means of regional development, demonstrating that the role of food in tourism can be extended from a tourist's attraction to a destination into the tourist's major attraction to a destination. Recently, Horng, Liu, Chiu and Tsai (2012) shed light on the concept of branding in culinary tourism in Taiwan, studying brand loyalty to identify significant, yet indirect influences of brand image and perceived value on travel intention. As shown by Horng, Liu, Chiu et al. (2012), food tourism benefits from the stable translation of image to intention. However, a knowledge gap exists in clarifying the key value of a food experience when forming an image. Because food experiences have been found to strongly evoke people's behavioral intentions in tourism (Sims, 2009), the lack of understanding about the perceived value of food experiences should be addressed to contribute valuable findings.

Value has long been applied by scholars to examine tourist participation in food-related consumption (Kim, Kim, & Goh, 2011; Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008; Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012). As determined by Holbrook (1986), value is the key outcome that concerns customers about their consumption. Service providers who can create desired value to target customers are able to maintain long-term success in the market (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). A customer's

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tm0010@mail.tut.edu.tw (C.-T. (Simon) Tsai), yaochin.wang@okstate.edu (Y.-C. Wang).

value-driven behavior in consumption has been proven in neuroscience by testing a brain's responses to brands (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012). Mc Kercher et al. (2008) also argued that the roles of value and the benefits of food tourism should gain increased attention. In line with the above literature, value can be considered a major influence on a tourist's overall perception of food tourism.

Traditionally, quality value, emotional value, and price value are the three types of perceived value examined by tourism scholars (Chen & Tsai, 2008; Ryu et al., 2008; Sánchez, Callarisa, Rodríguez, & Moliner, 2006). With the trend of studying sensory experience, the importance of experience in tourism has been widely discussed (Kim, 2014; Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Recently, this trend has motivated scholars to explore the effectiveness of experiential value of tourism (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014; Jin, Line, & Goh, 2013; Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Frost, 2014; Wu & Liang, 2009). Mathwick, Malhotra & Rigdon (2001) proposed the concept of experiential value, defining it as benefits gained from subjective perceptions of four experiences: (1) consumer return on investment (CROI), (2) service excellence, (3) aesthetics, and (4) playfulness. Although food tourism prioritizes sensory experiences (Long, 1998), when studying food tourism, experiential value should be another focus. Therefore, experiential value was selected by this study as the antecedent to branding in food tourism, and its effects on food tourism were assessed.

Taken together, the primary goal of this work is to elucidate the role of experiential value as the antecedent of branding in food tourism. Tainan, a historical city famous for traditional Taiwanese foods, was selected as the research setting. Empirical results gained from analyzing the perceptions of food tourists who visited Tainan yield valuable theoretical and practical implications. With regard to its theoretical implications, this work adds valuable knowledge to the literature on branding in food tourism. In terms of its practical implications, the findings provide useful information for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) that seek to brand their cities as food tourism destinations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food tourism

Food tourism can be narrowly defined as tourists visiting food producers, restaurants, food-related festivals, and other places where special foods and their ingredients are produced, sometimes by professional chefs (Hall & Mitchell, 2001). Food tourism can be broadly defined as the participation of tourists in food-related activities during a trip, such as purchasing local foods and consuming local cuisine (Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Shenoy, 2005). Enjoying delicious food, eating special meals and experiencing food-related cultural traditions are experiences that are often sought after by modern tourists (Horng & Tsai, 2012a,b). Compared with other travel activities, food often can be consumed outside the limitations of seasons (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). One should also note that food tourism differs from normal food consumption, as it offers many possibilities to develop food and beverage-related narratives that address important dimensions of a local culture, including its history and local attractions (Ignatov & Smith, 2006). Through food tourism, tourists often have the opportunity to have authentic experiences (Sims, 2009).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, Hall and Sharples (2003) established levels of interest in food when traveling: (1) high interest, such as gourmet tourism, gastronomic tourism, and cuisine tourism, each of which consider food to be the primary motivation for traveling; (2) moderate interest, such as culinary tourism, where tourists view food-related activities as essential to understanding a

destination's local lifestyle; (3) low interest, such as rural/urban tourism, through which tourists participate in food-related activities because they want different experiences; and (4) low interest/no interest, where tourists consider food and eating as simply satisfying needs. The food tourism mentioned in this study covers the range from high interest, moderate interest, to low interest. That is, this study focuses on tourists who visit a place with the purpose of participating in food-related activities, including those who consider food to be the primary plan or purpose for their travels.

The three categories of food tourism, including high, moderate and low interest, have been examined in previous studies. Tourists with a high interest in food tourism arrange all or nearly all of their activities to be related to food during a trip (Hall and Sharples, 2003). As demonstrated in the study by Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán (2012), the core travel motive for culinary tourists who visited Córdoba, Spain was food. To attract tourists with high interest in food tourism, Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán (2012) further suggested strategic initiatives such as providing culinary tours or promoting integrated perspectives of gastronomy in Córdoba, by synergizing local food and wine resources. Tourists with moderate interest in food tourism can choose to attend food-related activities to understand the local lifestyle at a destination (Hall & Sharples, 2003). As described in the work of Mason and Paggiaro (2012), tourists attended the food event called 'Friuli Doc' in northeast Italy to discover the foods, handicrafts, wines, and folk traditions of the region. By attending this food festival, tourists gained a deeper understanding of the lifestyle of local residents. Tourists with low interest in food tourism tend to join food-related activities because they offer something different (Hall & Sharples, 2003). As in the case proposed by Sims (2009), local food can enhance the tourists' perceived authenticity of heritage by making them familiar with the historical and cultural features of the destination. Tourists who consume these local foods would consider this consumption to be a means of gaining different experiences, rather than the mere satisfaction of physiological needs.

2.2. Experiential value as the antecedent

Kelly (1987) argued that experience is a perception, an explanatory ideology of action, and a conceptual process linking time and space. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that a positive experience is perceived as good when one's emotional, intellectual, and/or spiritual response exceeds a certain threshold. Schmitt (1999) identified five dimensions of experiential marketing: sense, feel, think, act, and relation. In their brand study, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) conceptualized brand experiences as 'subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments' (p. 53). They also identified four dimensions of a brand experience: sensory experience, affective experience, intellectual experience, and behavioral experience. In their tourism study, Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) defined memorable tourism as 'a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred' (p. 13). They developed seven dimensions of the tourism experience: hedonism, involvement, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, knowledge, and novelty. Kim and Ritchie (2014) then assessed the cross-cultural validity of the seven dimensions.

Experiential value may be interactive, relative, preferred, personalized, and it may dynamically change as experiences accumulate (Holbrook, 1994). Two dimensions of experiential value have been proposed by Holbrook (1994). The first dimension is the extrinsic-intrinsic value of an experience. Extrinsic value is the

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