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Research paper

Food and image on the official visitor site of Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

Destination image, referring to the beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and impressions that potential tourists hold about a destination, plays an important role in tourists' decision-making process. Images of a destination come from various sources that target different audiences and serve different purposes. Media sources aimed at a general audience can generate interest in a destination. Non-visitors become potential first-time visitors when they actively seek information from destination-marketing organizations intended to persuade potential visitors in their decision-making process. Thus, media attention represents an opportunity for destinations to develop their image. In recent years, Houston, Texas has gained national recognition in popular media as a food destination. The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau (GHCVB) expands upon this image through the content of the official visitors website. In this research, content and narrative analyses are used to examine the 16 webpages featured under the website's 'restaurants' header. In addition to providing logistical information about eating and drinking in Houston, narratives of local loyalty to an area's restaurants are used to create an attraction for visitors looking for a distinctive local experience, certify the quality of the experience, and offer insight into the nature of the destination. This local perspective has potential applications for other destinations seeking to re-create their image in light of the increased media attention on food.

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1. Introduction

In March 2015, Travel+Leisure named Houston, Texas first among America's food cities. The article's author acknowledged that Houston's ranking was considered a 'Texas-sized upset', as the city surpassed well-known American food destinations like Chicago, New Orleans, New York, and San Francisco (Hunt, 2015, para. 1). Yet in recent years, Houston's restaurant scene has gained increased national recognition with similar designations in the media, such as 'America's newest capital of great food' (Krader, 2013, para. 1) and 'one of the most dynamic dining destinations in the country' (Tasting Table – Anon., 2013, para. 1). Such popular media representations can play an important role in shaping, or reshaping, the destination image.

Destination image has long been recognized for its role in tourists' decision-making processes (Crompton, 1979; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Phelps, 1986). Images of a destination come from numerous sources that may have different target audiences and/or goals: however, such images do not exist independently. For Houston, these representations of the city as a food destination in the media are a form of organic (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) image, as they help to raise the profile of the city and encourage general audiences to think about it in a new way.

This creates an opportunity for the city to build upon the new image and to give it greater depth. The depth of the induced (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) image produced by the city's primary marketing organization is intended to persuade potential first-time visitors to choose Houston as a destination.

This paper discusses the induced image of Houston, Texas, through the restaurant pages of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau's (GHCVB) official website. In particular, the research examines narratives of local loyalty to Houston's restaurants in the absence of a clear idea that would provide the foundation for both the city's image and its food style. The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 introduces destination image, food tourism, and the context of Houston, Texas. Section 3 presents the content and narrative analyses used to examine the restaurant pages of the official visitors (*sic.*) site for Houston. Section 4 reviews the organization of the data resulting from the content analysis and explores key themes highlighted in the narrative analysis. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings, and Section 6 concludes with directions for further research.

2. Background

2.1. Destination image

Destination image refers to the beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and

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impressions that a potential tourist holds about a destination (Crompton, 1979). The image of a destination is influential in the decision-making process, especially for those tourists who have not previously visited (Özdemir, 2010). This image results from processing information about the destination from various sources over time (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Gunn (1972) is credited with the earliest conceptualization of image formation. In his work, he suggests that organic images are formed from a variety of information sources, such as television, newspapers, magazines, and other media. Although this information may be acquired passively, it contributes to the destination image nonetheless (Hughes, 2008). In contrast, induced images are generated by the marketing efforts of destination stakeholders (Gunn, 1972). In Phelps' (1986) terminology, both are secondary images in that they are based on external sources rather than direct experience.

Building on these works, Fakeye and Crompton (1991) conceptualize image formation as a sequential process. In particular, they recognize a relationship between organic and induced images. According to these authors, organic images are informative for a general, or non-visiting, audience. However, these images can also generate interest in a destination. In this case, non-visitors become potential first-time visitors who actively seek information about the destination. The organic image evolves with exposure to the induced images produced by the destination and intended to persuade potential visitors in their decision-making process. Then, the complex image forms for visitors, upon direct experience of the destination. Gartner's (1993) subsequent typology focuses more specifically on identifying image formation agents.

Destination images can be persistent, even in light of changes at the destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Attempting to change a negative image can be especially difficult and time consuming (Avraham, 2015). Induced image agents have a direct stake in changing the image, but as agents of the destination, potential visitors may not regard their messages as credible. Moreover, potential visitors may not even consider a destination with a negative image, in which case, they would not seek out induced images. Exposure to organic images (produced by autonomous image change agents in Gartner's typology) has greater potential to effectively change peoples' perception of the destination (Gartner, 1993).

Because destination-marketing organizations (DMOs) were traditionally responsible for creating the destination image (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2012), tourism research has paid particular attention to these induced images (Smith, 2005). For example, Govers and Go (2005) and Choi, Lehto, and Morrison (2007) demonstrate that the primary objective of official tourism websites (Gartner's overt induced I) is to promote a distinctive destination image. The primary objective of websites produced by other tourism stakeholders, such as resorts and tour operators (Gartner's overt induced II), meanwhile, is to promote their products. However, studies focusing on induced images should not disregard the influence of organic images (Smith, 2005). Some studies have sought to examine the extent to which organic images challenge induced images (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2012; Nelson, 2014), but few have considered the potential for induced images to evolve from organic images.

2.2. Food, tourism, and image

In the past, food has played a supporting role in tourism; however, it has recently been brought to the foreground (Hall & Mitchell, 2000; Mykletun & Gyimóthy, 2010). Although some tourists remain fearful of trying new foods while traveling due to neophobia or concerns about quality controls or hygienic preparation conditions (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Shaw, 2014), interest in trying unique local foods and having distinctive eating experiences

has been growing (Hall & Mitchell, 2000). The popularity of food in the media, and the expansion of ethnic restaurants, has exposed more people to the foods of places they have not yet had the opportunity to visit (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012). This creates a demand for the experience of both the foods and the places.

Food, culinary, or gastronomic tourism is considered a relatively recent development that has become a significant segment of the tourism industry (Chuang, 2009; Fox, 2007; Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012; Karim & Chi, 2010; Santich, 2004). This term describes travel motivated by an interest in learning about and experiencing the food (and drink) in a place. It can include the experience of everyday foods served by street vendors and local restaurants or elaborate tasting menus served by restaurants with a Michelin star (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014) or featured on the S.Pellegrino and Acqua Panna World's 50 Best Restaurants list. For some, food tourism has become the primary motivation for travel to a destination, but for many tourists today, enjoying the food of a destination is simply one part of the expectations they have for their trip. Regardless of this, research indicates that food and drink has become a significant 'pull factor' (Okumus, Okumus, & Mc Kercher, 2007; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2011) that influences tourists' destination choice (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009; Karim & Chi, 2010; Kim, Yuan, Goh, & Antun, 2009; Mak et al., 2012; Mykletun & Gyimóthy, 2010).

Food tourism may be considered a subset of cultural tourism (Horng & Tsai, 2010), in which tourists can observe, participate in, and gain an understanding of other peoples and places through food and eating experiences (Santich, 2004; Okumus et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2011; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011). Food is a fundamental aspect of culture for a place (Mak et al., 2012) and is increasingly recognized to represent cultural identities and values (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Karim & Chi, 2010; Mykletun & Gyimóthy, 2010). Food tourists 'consume' this culture (Chuang, 2009).

The increased exposure to, and interest in, other food cultures in the media contributes to the image of the places with which these foods are associated (Mak et al., 2012). At the same time, places around the world recognize that food is both an attraction for tourism and a tool used in tourism promotion (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Henderson, 2004; Horng et al., 2012; Karim & Chi, 2010; Lin et al., 2011). Representations of food in the media can thus shape (or reshape) the organic image of a destination for a general audience. When these representations are sufficient to generate interest in the destination, potential visitors seek more information from induced-image agents such as the DMO. For example, Chuang (2009) argues that the growth of culinary tourism in Taiwan has been a product of attention in the mass media and promotional efforts by the government and tourism industry.

While some destinations have the advantage of appealing to a well-known reputation for quality food and eating experiences, many are currently engaging in the process of defining (or re-defining) a food culture that will provide the basis for an identity and the corresponding image to be communicated to external audiences (Henderson, 2004). For example, Fox (2007) calls for a transformation in the 'gastronomic identity' in Croatia from internationalized foods to one that better reflects the country's distinctive food culture. Further, Shaw (2014) notes that food can play a vital role in the transformation of places. This is particularly applied to traditionally industrial cities, such as Manchester. The development of unique restaurants and vibrant restaurant districts is often part of urban renewal strategies, but it is the promotion of these developments that holds the potential to change the city's image.

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