Understanding gastronomic image from tourists' perspective: A repertory grid approach

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study explores the salient attributes and dimensions of gastronomic image through the repertory grid method.
- Seven gastronomic image dimensions were identified.
- International tourists considered Taiwanese foods as distinctive, familiar, attractive, and unique.
- Gastronomic image may be perceived based on the "common-unique" dimension.

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomic image (GI) has increasingly been recognized as a valuable and inimitable source of competitive advantage by many destinations. However, little is known as to what attributes constitute GI, especially from tourists' perspective. This study attempts to explore the salient attributes and dimensions of GI through the repertory grid method and generalized Procrustes analysis. Based on 50 repertory grid interviews with international tourists visiting Taiwan, a total of 46 GI attributes were identified. These attributes were classified into seven categories, namely, attractiveness, flavor profile, familiarity, cooking method and ingredients, distinctiveness, convenience and price, and health and safety. The findings provide useful insights for practice and serve as the basis for future research in the field of GI.

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1. Introduction

Tourists' consumption of food and gastronomy has increasingly been turned into an "attractionized" experience that provides high contrast and symbolic values (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2013). The trend is further fueled by the growth of the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), whereby tourists actively search for a broad range of cultural experiences that are original and authentic to enrich their cultural capital (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010). Food and gastronomy befittingly serve as the ideal means for tourists to experience the foodways of the host culture through their palates (Scarpato, 2002a).

To capitalize on this trend, many destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and national tourism organizations (NTOs) have attempted to create a unique and appealing gastronomic image (hereinafter abbreviated as GI) to enhance the distinctiveness and competitiveness of their destinations (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2011; Chang et al., 2010; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Given the rising popularity of the Internet, official tourism website has become one of the most utilized channels for promoting the gastronomic offerings in a destination (Horng & Tsai, 2009; Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2010; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007). The information, photos and graphics on the official tourism website are particularly important in creating a vicarious experience for tourists, and thus, can directly influence the perceived GI of a destination (Horng & Tsai, 2009).

In recent years, a growing attention has been paid to the importance of GI and its relationship to the overall destination image. For example, Lin, Pearson, and Cai (2011) contend that food serves as a crucial form of destination identity and can be considered an essential element in building a destination brand. They emphasize that food is often intertwined with the social, cultural and natural characteristics of a destination, and thus, carries significant symbolic meanings. Accordingly, GI can play a significant

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role in shaping the image of a destination. A few studies have provided evidence on the relationship among destination image, GI and visit intention to a destination. For example, Karim and Chi's (2010) findings indicate a significant positive relationship between GI and tourists' visit intention. Lertputtarak (2011) further found that destination image and GI can both positively affect tourists' revisit intention. In this light, GI can be turned into a pull factor to attract tourists to the unique food culture and foodways of a destination and also be utilized to induce an overall favorable and attractive destination image.

Although destination image has been extensively studied for its various dimensions and significance in influencing tourists' perception, behavior and destination choice (Chon, 1990; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002), studies pertaining to GI are relatively scarce, revealing a gap in understanding this important constituent of destination image. Hence, DMOs and NTOs are often faced with the challenge of deciding which crucial components should be included in their GI promotion in order to effectively encapsulate the salient attributes and the distinct "flavors" of their destinations.

In response to this challenge, a number of studies have attempted to conceptualize the GI construct. For example, Harrington (2007) contends that GI can be manifested in multiple dimensions including ingredients, cooking methods, recipes, and culinary etiquette. Fox (2007) further proposes five approaches in presenting GI, namely, differentiation, aestheticization, authentication, symbolization, and rejuvenation. While these initial conceptualization efforts have provided useful conceptual schemes for constructing GI, they were predominantly focused on the destination side, and more empirical evidence is needed to validate their efficacy.

Another challenge faced by DMOs and NTOs is that the GI formation process is not one-way, only percolating from the destination side to the tourist side. The process is in fact dynamic and reciprocal, and tourists' perceived GI is of paramount importance and should be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, only a few isolated efforts have been devoted to understand the GI construct from tourists' perspective. For example, Lertputtarak (2011) found that tourists perceived Thai food image based on two key dimensions: food image and restaurant image. Seo, Yun, and Kim (2014) identified five cognitive Korean food image dimensions, namely, quality and safety, attractiveness, promotion of health, family-oriented, and cooking methods. Both of these two studies adopted a positivist approach and respondents' responses were based on pre-specified food image dimensions derived from the literature. As a result, subtle nuances might not have been fully captured. Considering that investigations on GI are still in their infancy, more exploratory work is needed to examine the essential constituents of perceived GI.

It is in the above context that this study sets out to generate an in-depth understanding of the GI construct from tourists' perspective. In an attempt to capture the nuances of the construct, a repertory grid approach was adopted to elicit salient GI attributes from tourists. This approach allows the elicitation of GI attributes based on participants' own "vocabulary" (Jankowicz, 2004) instead of responding to items pre-specified *a priori* by the researcher. Taiwan was selected as the research site for this study. The Taiwan Tourism Bureau (TTB), the NTO in Taiwan, has been creating and utilizing GI as one of the major competitive advantages in promoting inbound tourism. However, the lack of knowledge with respect to tourists' perceived GI has restricted the effective use of GI. The findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for TTB in discerning perceived GI from tourists' perspective and serve as the basis for future research in the field of GI.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gastronomy and tourism

Gastronomy is etymologically derived from two Greek words: *gastros*, meaning stomach, and *nomos*, meaning rule or regulation (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Santich, 2004). Accordingly, gastronomy refers to rules or norms in respect of eating and drinking, and can be extrapolated to include advice and guidance on what to eat and drink, how, where, when, in which combinations, and in what manner (Santich, 2004). Contemporary gastronomy can be defined as "reflective eating and cooking as well as food preparation, production and presentation in general, maintaining the association with excellence" (Scarpato, 2002b, p. 139). Unlike other forms of travel activities and attractions, gastronomy can be regarded as an art form that gratifies all of the five human senses — vision, tactile, auditory, taste, and olfaction (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). With such an idiosyncratic nature, gastronomic experience is considered a sensory pleasure activity that fulfils the experiential part of a holiday experience (Boyne, Williams, & Hall, 2002).

Furthermore, as gastronomy is an essential aspect in understanding the culture of a society (Fieldhouse, 1986), it comprises a substantial part of the cultural appeal a destination offers. Scarpato (2002a, p. 65) contends that gastronomy satisfies the conventional requirements of cultural tourism products. For example, it significantly adds value to the tourist experience; it fits into the contemporary pattern of consumption tourism where the quest of new experiences yield a high level of satisfaction; and it offers answers to the increasing demand for relatively shorter breaks with added value. Hence, gastronomy can be a major conduit for tourists to appreciate the local culture of a destination. Long (2004) further adds that tourists can experience five aspects of "Otherness" through gastronomy, namely, culture, time, ethos/religion, region and socio-economic class.

Previous research also confirms that gastronomy can be the primary (or one of the primary) motivation to visit a destination (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). In fact, gastronomy is generally accepted as an "attraction" in tourism (Richards, 2002). Mak et al. (2013) further identified four food consumption experiences in the context of tourism, namely, supporting consumer experience, peak touristic experience (contrast), peak touristic experience (symbolic), and "attractionized" experience. In particular, "attractionized" experience refers to gastronomic or dining experiences that are perceived to have a high degree of contrast and bear significant symbolic meanings.

2.2. From destination image to gastronomic image

Destination image is widely acknowledged as an important factor that affects potential tourists' perception, behavior and destination choice (Chon, 1990; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002). It can be defined as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). Destination image is generally recognized as multidimensional, comprising of both "symbolic" and "tangible" features. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) contend that destination image comprises two components: the holistic and attributes specific to the destination. Furthermore, each of these components comprises functional (or tangible) and psychological (or symbolic/intangible) aspects. Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002) echo that destination image and identity comprise both "functional" and "non-functional" attributes. Functional attributes include more tangible aspects of a destination such as location and services, whereas non-functional attributes include intangible and emotional aspects such as landscape and atmosphere.