



A perception gap investigation into food and cuisine image attributes for destination branding from the host perspective: The case of Australia



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Destination food image
Destination branding
Cognitive food image
Attributes
Projected image
Perception gap
Food tourism

ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study into food images and the relationship with the overall perceptions of a destination. In doing so it also examines the degree to which congruence exists between the promotional images created by Tourism Australia and those images held by 18 major industry stakeholders. The measures are based on 40 attributes of food imagery clustered into 6 dimensions. Data derived from informants were also supported by an analysis of videos used by Tourism Australia. It was concluded a lack of consensus exists with the consequence of fragmented marketing strategies result.

1. Introduction

Gastronomic tourism is a growing trend in travel, because food experience is a path to discovering the local culture and traditions of a destination (Boniface, 2003; Long, 2004). Studies have shown that there is a significant relationship between the food image of a place and the intention to visit the place (Karim & Chi, 2010; Kim, Kim, Agrusa, & Lee, 2012; Kivela & Crofts, 2006). People generally associate good food and authentic culinary experiences with well-known gastronomic countries such as Italy, France, Japan and Hong Kong, whose brand images are intrinsically connected with their national identity and intangible cultural heritage (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2012). Consequently, many destinations have begun to brand and promote local food as an attraction. It is therefore crucial to define the attributes of local food and cuisine identity in the process of creating a distinctive and attractive food image in destinations. Although the concept of destination image has been widely applied in a tourism context, destination food image is a relatively new phenomenon. Globally, various tourism campaigns typically initiated by national tourism boards have intended to build a successful destination food image through their branding strategies (OECD, 2012; UNWTO, 2012). However, empirical evidence for how effective food image attributes are constructed to represent the local food culture and identity is still scarce. Therefore understanding of the effectiveness of this strategy is still limited.

In the case of Australia's destination branding, Tourism Australia's slogan to 'throw a shrimp on the barbie (barbecue a shrimp)' in the

tourism campaign, 'Come and Say G'day', caused controversy in the 1980s as a misrepresentation of Australian food. Although the food image was successfully instilled in the minds of Americans, it was not popular with locals who 'throw prawns' rather than shrimps. Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain (2013) claimed that the tourism campaign tended to under-promote Australia's quality attributes and value offered, and this suggests that many more opportunities exist that could be developed further. At the end of 2013, Australia has identified opportunities and challenges in its food tourism through a major tourism research project undertaken by Tourism Australia (Tourism Australia, 2014a). On the one hand, it was identified that excellent food, wine, and local cuisine were key drivers in a consumer's choice of destination, ranking third (38%), ahead of world-class beauty and natural environments (37%). On the other hand, there was a perception gap about the appeal of Australian food. The research was carried out across key markets, including China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, the UK and the USA. Results showed that 60% of the tourists who had visited Australia and experienced its food ranked it as the number two food destination in the world, behind France and ahead of Italy. However, in a similar report, 74% of the people who had never been to the country perceived Australian food as not attractive. Tourism Australia recognised that this image disparity was a matter of perception. In an attempt to improve the appeal and reputation of Australian food, and strengthen Australia's position as an internationally recognised food and wine destination, Tourism Australia launched a food tourism campaign in May 2014 - Restaurant Australia - which was to be part of an ongoing project called

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Tourism 2020. With a goal to change misconceptions about Australian food and wine and attract food tourists into the country, Restaurant Australia focuses on three key food-related dimensions that are people, produce and place. Aimed at reducing stereotypes and reinforcing a broader Australian culinary landscape and quality food experiences (O'Sullivan, 2016), the campaign involves food, wine and tourism industry stakeholders, such as farmers, chefs, winemakers and tourism operators, in developing stories or narratives of Australian food and wine which focus on creating a distinctive brand image through a wide range of cognitive attributes of food and cuisine.

While the campaign may have created a more consistent brand image for Australian food, the effectiveness of food image marketing in destination branding is not yet known. There is also no consensus amongst researchers and marketers in defining the brand image of a food destination as a set of cognitive attributes (brand attributes), which depict the intangible and tangible elements of food and cuisine that represent a place. This study therefore aims to identify the cognitive images used in branding and promoting Australian food to international tourists. Based specifically on the Restaurant Australia campaign, this study seeks to identify cognitive food image attributes as conceived, perceived and defined by industry stakeholders. These attributes are then contrasted against those projected by the national destination marketing organisation (DMO), which is represented by Tourism Australia, in order to identify any incongruence between industry stakeholders and the DMO. This study is guided by three main research questions:

- (1) What are the cognitive images of food perceived as important by industry stakeholders?
- (2) What are the cognitive images of food projected by a host destination?
- (3) Does Tourism Australia project the images of food that are perceived to be important by industry stakeholders?

Theoretically, this study makes a contribution by providing future scholars with a comprehensive cognitive food image framework to examine the perception from the host perspective.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination food image

In the tourism literature, food image research has been investigated from two perspectives. The first perspective is food image perceived by tourists, which reflects their opinion of and aspiration for the destination. The second is food image projected by destination marketers and tourism providers through advertisements, media and information sources. In the 1970s, the study of destination image started with the perceived image of a destination. The notion of image was embraced as a reflection of the distinct perceptions and evaluation of destinations. It encompasses a mental or psychological construct and can be described as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination' (Crompton, 1979, p.18). At the early stage, research on how destination image is measured was developed by Hunt (1971), and how destination image is formed was introduced by Gunn (1972). The model of brand image formation consists of all three brand associations; namely, (1) a cognitive attitude component that refers to a person's knowledge, intellect, beliefs and perceptions; (2) an affective attitude component involving a person's feelings, emotions, motivation and evaluations; and (3) a conative component that is also termed a behavioural component interpreting how attitude influences the way a person acts or behaves (Gartner, 1993; O'Shaughnessy, 1992). This model has been extensively applied in research that investigates food destination image from the perspective of tourists (Karim & Chi, 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek &

Cinjarevic, 2014). However, the discussion on local food dimension and attributes of destination image from the host perspective has not received much attention (Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011). Thus far, much uncertainty still exists about the different perspectives held by destination marketers and industry stakeholders and their perceived image of local cuisine and food attributes in destinations. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to map a comprehensive list of cognitive food image attributes and to evaluate them as the underpinning of the projected image of a destination, from the stakeholder perspective.

2.2. Tourist and host perspectives of destination food image

In the past, the food image of a destination was not explicitly examined in the context of branding. It was integrated as one of the several constructs of destination branding, as a component that adds value to the overall destination image. For instance, in their study to identify the image of Auckland in New Zealand, Pike and Ryan (2004) treated food as one of the 20 determinants of brand image. Other determinants included accommodation, transport, natural scenery, and a range of tourism-related activities. Recently, research in destination branding has focused more explicitly on food image as a core tourism product in its own right, and as an intangible cultural heritage of a destination, particularly for tourists who purposely travel to a given destination because of its food image (Folgado-Fernández, Hernández-Mogollón, & Duarte, 2016; Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek & Cinjarevic, 2014; Seo, Yun, & Kim, 2014).

In many tourist image studies, the cognitive image of food in a destination is associated with different characteristics of food attributes, as a reflection of the perceived attractiveness of food image. A diverse range of cognitive attributes has been identified in relation to the local food and cuisine image of a destination. The most prominent image dimensions that researchers have studied have been concerned with local food cultural attractiveness, functional consumer benefits and values (as indicators of quality), and variety of local dining places and restaurant environments (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Karim & Chi, 2010; Lertputtarak, 2012; Peštek & Cinjarevic, 2014; Seo & Yun, 2015). From the host perspective, cognitive image was investigated as a set of brand attributes, and as a reflection of the role cuisine plays in the formation of destination brand image, with a specific emphasis on dimensions such as place and geographic environment, people, heritage, food quality, local food and related activities, that are deemed significant to the local industry stakeholders (Che, 2006; Frochot, 2003; Lin et al., 2011; Sims, 2009; Tellström, Gustafsson, & Mossberg, 2006).

2.3. Dimensions of food image in destinations

In tourist image studies, food at a destination contains both functional and symbolic value for tourists, as a source to satisfy hunger, and a way of experiencing local food culture, regional cuisine and activities relating to food festivals, events, tours and cooking classes (Hall, 2003; Long, 2004). To the host, however, the local food culture is a means to express a destination's culinary identity, cultural heritage, shared gastronomy value, and lifestyle of a place (Beer, 2015; Bessièrè, 2013; Ignatov & Smith, 2006). Despite the differences in tourists' and hosts' value creation, food image needs a set of precise dimensions to provide a platform for measurement to inform research and industry practice. This understanding is critical to a host country, and provides the basis for understanding if the product offerings match what is being valued and perceived as attractive by the target tourists. Furthermore, the mainstream literature of food image neglects the complex roles and characteristics of local food attributes used in developing a brand campaign, which work to increase potential tourists' awareness of destination reputations. To explore these issues, the literature on both host and tourist food image studies was consulted and 40 food image

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