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INTERNATIONAL VISITOR ENCOUNTERS WITH LOCAL FOOD: A PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Visitors are increasingly travelling to destinations for culinary experiences. Many destination marketing organisations have capitalised on the appeal of local food and associated dining opportunities to stimulate visitation. Such initiatives require a thorough understanding of visitor responses to their travel-related dining experiences. The present paper, which forms part of a doctoral investigation, aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework of international visitor dining experiences with local food by analysing the pre, during and post experience stages. The framework incorporates the influence of internal and external factors on visitor experiences. It is anticipated that the proposed framework will provide a more holistic understanding of visitor dining experiences in destination settings.

KEYWORDS: International visitor, travel dining experience, local food

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century may be viewed as a milestone for the so-called "experience economy" in which the tourism industry is being transformed by the evolving shape, scope, and nature of visitor activities (Marson, 2011). The focus has shifted from visiting typical 'must see' sights, to visiting places where visitors can discover, participate, and learn about everyday life (Robinson & Novelli, 2005). Visitors are searching for and expecting new, unique and more meaningful travel experiences; and one way to offer such experiences is through consuming the local cuisines of the places being visited. Since eating forms an integral part of travelling, visitors anticipate that the experience will be enjoyable and memorable (Kivela & Crotts, 2006), regardless of whether culinary experience is or is not the primary reason for travel. From the visitor perspective, food functions not merely as a physiological sustenance, but enhances the overall destination experience (Henderson, Yun, Poon, & Biwei, 2012; Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Using local food as a means of luring visitors to one destination rather than another requires a deep understanding of visitor food consumption and experiences (Mitchell & Hall, 2003). Larsen (2007) has suggested that to explore visitor experiences meticulously, any examination should concern at least: 1) the planning process prior to the actual experience (i.e., visitor's expectation); 2) the actual experience; and 3) the individual's memory or recall of the experience. However, few researchers have analysed the visitor experience as a whole (Ryan, 2003). In the culinary tourism context, there has been an absence of conceptual models that undertake systematic analysis of the three stages of tourism experience. Though a number of studies have investigated food-related visitor experiences, the research base for understanding such experiences has not yet been addressed comprehensively from the perspective of the three stages of visitor experience (pre-, during, and post-). Whilst Kim, Eves, and Scarles' (2009) empirical work explored tourist motivations to consume local food in

destination settings, they focused exclusively on the pre-experience stage. Ryu and Jang (2006) proposed a survey instrument to measure tourist perceptions of their experiences of local cuisine encountered during holidays. Correia, Moital, da Costa, and Peres (2008), and Yuksel (2003) have measured the determinants of tourist dining satisfaction, while Namkung and Jang (2007) have examined the effect of dining satisfaction on behavioural intentions. However these various studies have looked exclusively at the post-experience stage of dining. Further research is therefore needed to substantiate a more comprehensive framework which may provide an understanding of visitor dining experiences with local food prior to, during and after food consumption.

The main purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework for visitor dining experiences. This undertaking is based on a review of the literature on the concept of tourism experiences generally and in the tourism dining context in particular, and on an analysis of existing conceptual models of tourist experience. The proposed framework outlines international visitor dining experiences on the basis of three key stages of tourism experience, namely: 1) the pre-consumption stage (shortly after arrival in the visited destination and before any significant consumption of local food has occurred); 2) the during-consumption stage (while in the destination and some meals are consumed during the course of travel); and 3) the after consumption stage.

The framework represents a significant contribution to the literature in two ways. First, it enriches the literature on visitor experiences by investigating the full spectrum of experience. Visitor psychological outcomes that are examined at each stage of the experiences indicate whether dining experiences incorporating the local food of the destination will be unique and memorable. Second, since culinary experience can offer a means of enhancing destination experiences and engaging visitors more actively with the destination, this study should contribute to an improved understanding of food-oriented visitor behaviours. On this basis, the framework expands the literature on culinary tourism by providing insights into the creation of dining experiences that are specific to international visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visitor Experience – Conceptual Foundations

Highmore (2002) views "experience" as relevant to two different states: the moment-by-moment lived experience, and the after experience which is subject to reflection and prescribed meaning. Consistent with this approach, Larsen (2007) asserts that experiences can be categorised into two general types. One focuses on what happens here and now in a specific situation, whilst the other one highlights an accumulation over a period of time. Given the growing importance of the experiential aspect of consuming products, the concept of experience has become a key element in understanding consumer buying behaviour (Caru & Cova, 2003). For researchers of consumer behaviour, an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, based on interactions with the products or services consumed acting as stimuli (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Knutson and Beck (2003) state that there are two major elements underpinning the consumption experience. First, direct involvement or participation is needed for the consumption of quality of products and services to be a true experience. Secondly, the consumption experience may be viewed as internal and individualised (Knutson, Beck, Kim, & Cha, 2006). No two persons will have an identical experience (Moosberg, 2007) because of the complex network of interactions connecting the consumer, the environment, and the provider (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998).

The theoretical foundations of the concept of experience can be traced to Mittal, Kumar, and Tsiros' "Consumption System Theory", which consists of three constitutive elements: attribute-level evaluation, satisfaction, and behavioural intention. According to this theory, the consumption experience occurs when a bundle of goods and services are consumed over time in multiple

consumption episodes (Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). The consumption experience is viewed as encompassing a series of activities within the wider process of consumer decision-making, ranging from consumer pre-purchase activities such as need recognition and information search, to post-purchase activities such as satisfaction and future behaviour (Caru & Cova, 2003).

The discussion about consumption experiences in tourism emerged in the early 1960s in a study by Clawson and Knetsch (1963) on experience in the context of outdoor recreation, followed by Cohen's (1979) reference to the term tourist experience. Since then, the construct has become a popular topic amongst tourism academics, and a growing literature on the visitor experience has followed. Despite this, the conceptual structure of experience and its central meaning remain elusive (Jennings, et al., 2009; Jurowski, 2009). The complexity of understanding and analysing tourism experience has been widely acknowledged within the literature (Ooi, 2003). Adapting Mittal et al.'s Consumption System Theory (1999), Woodside and Dubelaar (2002) introduce the theory of the "Tourism Consumption System" (TCS) which attempts to achieve a deep understanding of the multiple immediate and downstream relationships amongst events experienced by a visitor prior to, during and following a tourism trip. Along these stages of consuming tourism-related products, a set of related travel thoughts, decisions, and behaviours will evolve. The central proposition of the theory of TCS is that the thoughts, decisions, and behaviours regarding one activity at one stage of tourism consumption experience influence the thoughts, decisions, and behaviours for activities occurring at other stages of the consumption of tourism experience (Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002).

From the visitor perspective, destinations are comprehensive bundles of tourism experiential products and services (Zouni & Kouremenos, 2008). Delivering a quality tourism experience for visitors is complex since it involves mobilising a variety of tourism stakeholders to deliver quality tourism experiences (Jennings & Nickerson, 2006). Ryan (2002) asserts that experience quality involves not only the attributes provided by tourism suppliers, but also the attributes brought by the visitor. It is shaped by internal factors such as motives, past experience, knowledge of the destination, and individual personalities, as well as external factors such as persons with whom the destination is shared, patterns of change at the place, and the marketing images induced about the destination and activities (Ryan, 2011).

Supporting Ryan's proposition, Nickerson (2006) points out three major factors influencing the quality of the experience: the traveller, the product or destination, and the local population. The traveller visits a destination with ideas or expectations about prospective experiences. These ideas or expectations are formed by factors as diverse as individual social constructions, perceptions derived from media, product images, preconception knowledge, and visitor past experiences. The tourism product is the second influential factor and generally refers to experiences with products or services offered by tourism and hospitality business operators (e.g. tour operators, accommodation, food service, transportation and attractions) as well as experiences with public sector (government) services like information about public services (Nickerson, 2006). Activities undertaken during travel are also described as the "traveller factor" since different activities undertaken by the visitors will determine the quality of the experience. Lastly, the attitude toward tourism and the sense of place fostered by the local population (e.g., host-guest social contacts) is the third influential factor which affects the quality of the tourism experience (Nickerson, 2006).

Existing Visitor Experience Models

According to Ryan (2011), the visitor experience involves a variety of phases, influences, and outcomes. The literature has shown that attempts to understand visitor experiences have resulted in the development of various theoretical models by scholars (Aho, 2001; Clawson & Knetsch, 1963; Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Knutson, Beck, Kim, & Cha, 2010; Yuan, 2009). The models proposed by Clawson and Knetsch (1963) and by Craig-Smith and French (1994) have recognised that tourist

engagement occurs at different stages of experience, though both appear deficient in information about psychological dimensions such as what consumers think, feel, and perceive at each stage of the experience.

The inclusion of the psychological dimension has been addressed in a doctoral thesis by Yuan (2009) where she depicts the structural relationships between major components of hospitality experience, service, and customer satisfaction. Considering that physical products, services, and environments are important influences on experience, it may be expected that the psychological components – perception, emotion, cognition, involvement, and consumer-service provider interactions – will lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the experience. However, a limitation of Yuan's (2009) model is that no consideration is given to pre- experiences (i.e. expectation) nor future behavioural intentions.

The conceptual model proposed by Knutson and Beck (2003) and Knutson, et al. (2006; 2009; 2010) provides a better indication of occurrences during each stage of the experience as well as the relationships between the stages. Adopting O'Sullivan and Spangler (1998) three-phases of experience – the pre-experience stage, the participation stage, and the post-experience stage – the model incorporates four major constructs of guest hospitality buying experiences: service quality, value, satisfaction, and consumer experiences. Nevertheless, it appears to emphasise the dimensions that are internal to the consumer and hence, it lacks any examination of the external factors which may shape the experience.

Recognising the complexities of investigating visitor experience, Cutler and Carmichael (2010) has attempted to incorporate the multi-phased, multi-influential, and multi-outcome nature of the tourist experience into one conceptual model. Adopting Clawson and Knetsch's (1963) five phases of tourist experience, their proposed model is distinct in dividing the influential factors of visitor experience into two: the influential and the personal realms. Three influential factors are evident outside the individual during the experience: physical aspects, social aspects, and products and services aspects (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). The personal realm involves elements occurring within an individual tourist and consists of knowledge, memories, perceptions, emotions, and self-identity. These elements shape the experience since tourists arrive at a destination with individual memories, perceptions of the place and people, knowledge about the world and understandings of self-identity. The outcomes of experience relate to overall evaluations of a trip, which may be determined through satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The overall evaluation can influence and is influenced by individual elements and by the experience itself (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010).

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that the existing conceptual models which have addressed the three stages of visitor experience have been applied to general tourism contexts and not the specific settings of culinary tourism. The present study proposes to provide a more systematic examination of how international visitors encounter local food in destination contexts.

A PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper investigates the dining experiences of international visitors in destination settings by analysing the pre, during, and post experiences stages. The proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 1) is based on a review of tourist experience models within the tourism literature generally, as well as in specific tourism-related dining contexts.
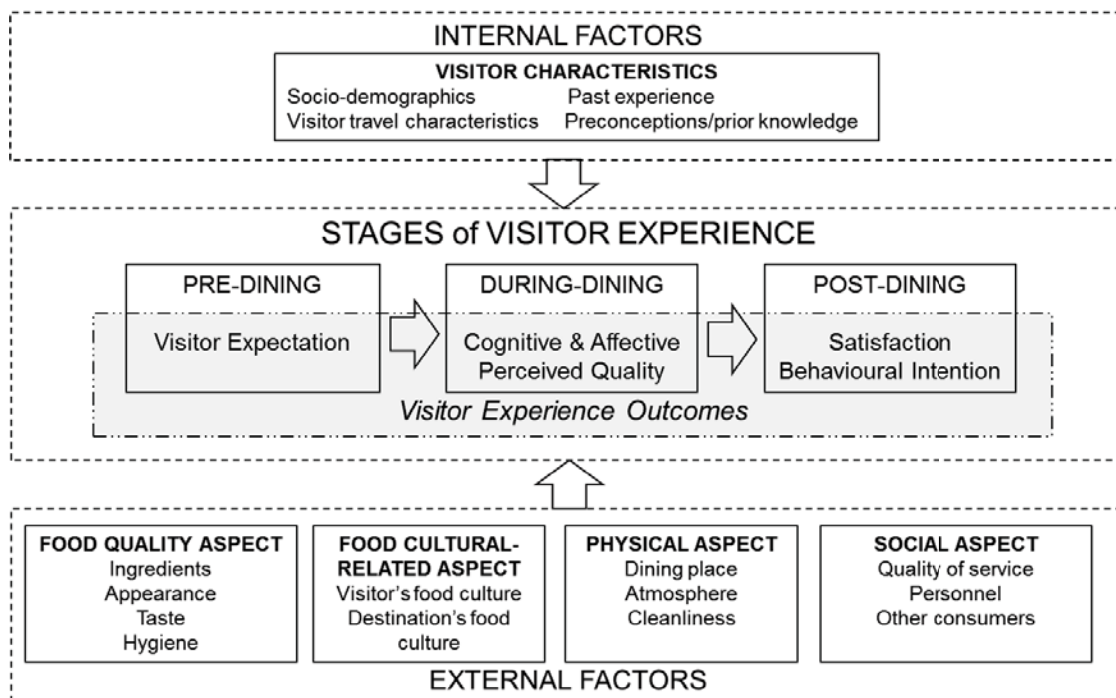
Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework of International Visitor Dining Experiences with Local Food

According to Mittal, et al. (1999), the consumption experience can be measured longitudinally to gain a process view of the system. On this basis, the examination of the visitor dining experience that is proposed in the current framework adopts O'Sullivan and Spangler's (1998) three phases of experience: the pre-experience stage, participation (during) stage, and post-experience stage. The pre-dining stage investigates visitor experiences that relate to local food shortly after their arrival in the visited destination yet before any significant consumption of local food has occurred. The during-dining stage refers to all international visitor encounters with local food during the travel that occurs within the destination. Finally the post-dining stage refers to all experiences after undertaking local food dining. The experiences encountered during the previous stage influence the experiences prevailing at subsequent stages. The central proposition of the theory of the "Tourism Consumption System" (Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002) has been adopted with a view to developing the sequential relationships amongst the three stages of dining. Each thought, decision, and behaviour of the visitor that evolves from one stage of the dining experience with local food will affect the thoughts, decisions, and behaviours that emerge at subsequent stages of the dining experience.

The visitor dining experience is framed by examining the internal and external factors influencing the consumption of local food. The categorisation of these influential factors is adapted from Cutler and Carmichael's (2010) model which distinguishes the role of the influential and personal realms in shaping the quality of the visitor experience. Previous research has indicated the role of the individual characteristics of visitors in tourism dining experiences. For instance, in their research on the local food dining experiences of UK holidaymakers, Kim, et al. (2009) revealed that one of the three influential factors on visitor consumption of local food is demographic factors such as gender, age, and education. However, Mak, Lumbers, Eves, and Chang (2012) have argued that socio-demographic characteristics alone will not provide an adequate explanation to understand the factors which affect visitor dining experiences with local food. Their proposed model advocated the incorporation of past experiences and the gastronomic images held by visitors influencing the internal factors of food consumption at a destination. In this paper, the internal factors refer to the following

visitor characteristics: 1) socio-demographics; 2) visitor travel characteristics (i.e. purpose of travel, length of stay, and travel party); 3) past travel experiences; and 4) preconceptions or prior knowledge about the local food endemic to the destination.

In the present framework, the external factors affecting international visitor dining experiences have been categorised into four: 1) food quality; 2) food cultural aspect; 3) physical aspects; and 4) social aspects. Eating local food while travelling can provide a gateway to experiencing a new culture through coming into contact with local residents, eating like the locals, and exploring new cuisines that visitors are unlikely to encounter at home (Fields, 2002). In many instances it is the stories behind the food, such as, the origins of a particular ethnic food, which has greater appeal than the food itself (Morgan, Watson, & Hemmington, 2008). However, Cohen and Avieli (2004) argued that from the perspective of some visitors, eating local food can be an impediment when traveling, especially when the destination has a culinary culture that is distinct from what is familiar to tourists in their home environments. From the visitor perspective, issues such as food hygiene, "strange" food ingredients, unfamiliar tastes, or dealing with different food culture (foodways) can be complex (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). This said, the current framework recognises the roles played by food quality and food cultural-related aspects in the visitor dining experience. Since the framework examines how international visitors encounter local food, the inclusion of the aspects related to the quality of the local food being consumed is inevitable. It refers to the variety of ingredients used in local dishes consumed by visitors, the taste of the food, its appearance, and food hygiene. On the one hand, food cultural-related aspects involve the visitor food culture and the prevailing food culture in the destination, such as methods of cooking and preparing the food and ways of eating the food (Mak, et al., 2012).

All visitors engage in some forms of dining (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010): from eating food which is familiar at home to seeking novel and different local dishes (Cohen & Avieli, 2004); and from dining exclusively in hotels or restaurants to consuming food at street stalls or food hawker centres (Henderson, et al., 2012). Dining experiences within these places can stimulate feelings of involvement and place attachment, whether positively or negatively depending upon the quality of food and service that is provided (Pendergast, 2006). These aspects are showcases for the culture and consequently influence overall destination experiences by forming a connection with the host culture (Sparks, Bowen, & Klag, 2004). Chang, et al.'s (2010) research has shown that contextual factors of the dining experience, such as, the authenticity of the local food consumed, and other physical built environment in the dining places, are amongst six attributes that influence how Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong tourists evaluated their travel dining experiences while holidaying in Australia. It is therefore crucial to incorporate physical and social aspects into the investigation of visitor dining experiences with local food. According to Cutler and Carmichael (2010), physical aspects involve spatial and place-based elements of the destination. In the service context, this often refers to the concept of servicescape – the physical environment that influences perceptions of the service – (Bitner, 1992), and to the atmosphere of the foodservice, defined as the "individual emotional total experience throughout the entire meal including social experience, comfort, and intimacy" (Hansen, Jensen, & Gustafsson, 2005, p. 145). For the purposes of the present study, physical aspects refer to the dining atmosphere, types of dining place where the local food is encountered (e.g. restaurants or street food stalls), and the cleanliness of the dining establishment.

Several authors have claimed that the provision of memorable dining experiences is not determined solely by the food and the setting in which the dining occurs, but by the capacity of the staff who provide the service and deliver the food (Gibbs & Ritchie, 2010), and most importantly, the consumers (Morgan, et al., 2008). In the travel dining context, Ignatov and Smith's (2006) study illustrated that spending time with family and friends was a significant reason for choosing to eat local food in a destination setting. Based on this review, social aspects are incorporated within the present framework as a factor affecting visitor dining experiences. It relates to interactions between the visitor

and the service personnel as well as to interactions between the visitor and other visitors (i.e. friends, family, and other customers) within the dining establishment.

The influential factors, both internal and external, described earlier, generate different psychological outcomes at each stage of the dining experience, ranging from visitor expectations of dining, perceptions, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. At the pre- dining stage, it is hoped that the psychological expectations of visitors will be revealed prior to the consumption of local food. As argued by Gnoth (1997), managing the dining expectations of visitors is particularly important at this point since expectations significantly influence visitor decision-making and perceptions of experience. These in turn, affect their level of satisfaction with the overall dining experience. The during-dining stage focuses on the perceived quality of the dining experience amongst international visitors. Adapted from Yuan (2009), the perceived experiential quality is measured on the basis of two dimensions of visitor cognition and emotions when eating local food. In this context, visitor perceptions receive and filter the stimuli from the food that is seen, smelt, tasted, and touched. Perceptions are a connection between external stimuli and the internal responses of visitors; and perceptions are a result of visitor's emotions and cognitions. Cognition is generated from the information sent to the conscious mind through the senses, while emotion involves visitor affective responses evoked during food consumption experiences, such as excitement, joy, surprise, disappointment (Yuan, 2009). Emotions and cognitions are viewed as the values that the visitor obtains from the dining experience. Consumers get involved and have interactions with service personnel as well as with other visitors during the dining experience process in the dining establishment.

Finally, in the case of the post-dining stage, the satisfaction and behavioural intentions of visitors are examined following dining experiences with local food. Satisfaction is commonly examined as the outcome of tourism experiences. A satisfactory experience may be defined as the similarity between expectations and performance, whereas dissatisfaction is the gap between expectations and perceived quality of the tourism consumption experience (Ryan, 2002). At the post-dining stage within the framework, visitor satisfaction also links with post-purchase behaviours such as behavioural intentions and with customer loyalty (i.e. repeat purchase in future visits to the destination as well as positive word-of mouth about the local food).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature review undertaken in this paper has indicated that the visitor experience is complex because it involves multiple phases, is influenced by multiple factors, and has multiple outcomes. The preceding discussion of the various phases, influences and outcomes of the visitor experience has been based on a summary of aspects that have been identified in the literature as most closely associated with the visitor experience.

The paper has recognized the growing importance of studying visitor dining experiences with local food, regardless of the purpose of travel. The conceptual framework that has been presented adds a holistic approach to the established literature on the visitor dining experiences. However, the preliminary framework is not all-encompassing. Further investigations will be needed into the visitor dining experiences to explain the complexities and relationships of the various elements. Further examination is also required of the proposed framework and of how internal and external influential factors shape the visitor dining experiences. The researchers are now undertaking empirical assessment of the framework with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the model as an explanation of the visitor dining experiences with local food.

The empirical work will involve the examination of various experiences that the international visitors encounter when consuming local food at each dining stage in the visited destination. In addition, the

relationships amongst constructs within the proposed conceptual framework such as dining expectations, perceptions, satisfactions and behavioural intentions as well as factors influencing visitor dining experiences will also become the focus of the empirical testing work.

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