LINKING IMAGE AND SATISFACTION OF FOOD TOURISM IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Abstract – Food has gained enormous potential to become tourism attraction in a destination. Through food, people has the opportunity to experience culture and connects with the locals. Furthermore, it enhances travel experience and helps to strengthen other tourism products. Malaysia brands itself as the melting pot of Asia, with dishes from different races mix in harmonize and complement each other. While this brand may induce tourists’ visits, it is critically important that the correct images of food are being positioned to enhance tourists’ satisfaction. It is undeniable that satisfaction can affect tourists’ visitation to the destination and can encourage spreading of a positive word of mouth. Therefore, the main objectives of this paper is first; to identify the image of food tourism in Penang and secondly to examine how these images affect satisfaction of tourists in Penang. A correctional analysis was also conducted to determine the relationship between image of food and satisfaction. Data was collected through a structured survey among tourists in popular food spots around Penang Island. Results indicate that dining atmosphere, food features and food palate are all contributing factors to the satisfaction of the tourists. Significant positive relationships were found between food image and tourists’ satisfaction. Overall, this study contributes by providing vital information on the images of food tourism. This information would be useful to enhance the development and promotion of food tourism in Malaysia.

Field of Research: Food tourism, gastronomy tourism, local food, satisfaction, food image

1. Introduction

Culinary, gourmet and gastronomic tourism are similar definitions for food tourism (Boniface, 2003; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Long, 2004) where “food tourism” can be defined as visiting food exhibitions, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and experiencing food are the primary factors for travel (Hall & Mitchell, 2000). This definition entails that food is being recognized as one of main destination’s attribute in tourism industry. Food tourism express the idea of experiencing other cultures through food (Wolf, 2002). Traditional cuisine and warm hospitality
coupled with mouth-watering cuisine forms the perfect ingredient to produce a positive image to tourists. Food can relates to tourism in many ways. Previous studies had showed that food played an important role in touristic experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2006) and as a means to attract tourists to destinations (Smith & Costello, 2009; Tikkanen, 2007a; Enright & Newton, 2004; Yuksel, 2001).

But past studies have also stated that people might be confused between food tourism and the consumption of food during travel. The difference between these two is food tourism is the act of people go to a particular destination mainly for the food and the food had become the pull factors (Boniface, 2003; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall & Sharples, 2003; Hjalager, 2002). This is what they called as food or culinary tourist. This type of tourist do some research or information gathering of what they want to eat and where is the best place for them to eat. Whilst for consumption of food during travel is the tourist had other motivation for them to travel to a certain place and food is not a salient factors for them. They also eat because they have to survive and they do not usually put emphasis or being choosy of what they have to eat.

Besides, Rimmington and Yuksel (1998) showed that food service was the most important factor influencing tourists’ revisit intention in Turkey. The ability of foods served as both a cultural activity and an entertainment is recognized (Hjalager, 2002; Jalis, Zahari and Othman, 2007). Local food can be seen as a mean to explore a country’s culture, because it represent the geography, history, and people of a country. It also represents the identity of a destination, like a symbol of a place (Okech, 2014) and as the status and cultural identity that makes it unique from any other place (Frochot, 2003). In a simple way, food had become the image of that particular destination. When someone mentioned about that particular place, there will be a food that automatically came to our mind. For example, Pizza and Pasta for Italy, Sushi for Japan and Hotdog and Sausages for Germany. All of these food had become the symbol of those countries.

Jalis et al., (2007) had found that food is one of the new tourism product and the most relevant to the Malaysian context. Malaysia is like a melting pot of several races that harmonize and complement each other especially in terms of the gastronomy products. As Wolf (2002) had stated that food tourism express the idea of experiencing other cultures through food. Malaysia served a variety of local delicacies. From the authentic dish of a race such as Nasi Lemak and Rendang by the Malay community to a fusion dish that served at the Indian-Muslim (who are called as Mamak) restaurant. State like Kelantan is very famous with its traditional desserts, Perak with the mixture of Chinese and Malay food at one spots and especially Penang with the significant Nasi Kandar and many more. Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) works hard to promote Malaysia cuisines all around the world through their Malaysia Food Promotion campaigns aiming to introduce local cuisines and promote visiting Malaysia as food heaven destination. These campaigns were held in various cities in the world including London and Moscow.

2. Food Tourism and Food Image

A lot of destinations around the world are currently assigning certain local foods as pull factor in marketing and some of them are worldly recognized as the ‘must visit’ destination for their iconic food. This makes it important to ensure that the expectations and acceptable standards for food provided by restaurant and the staff is met. The provision of service providers to be reliable and responsive can enhance a destination’s competitive advantage as a marketing tool (Dwyer, 2003) and safeguarding customer satisfaction.

Even though Malaysia has a lot to offer in terms of food, the identity of Malaysian local food is rather unclear and uncommon (Mohamed, 1994) compared to that in its neighbors especially Thailand and Indonesia. Despite food is regard as important element in tourism industry alongside other tourism products such as ecotourism and culture tourism (Zainal, Zali & Kasim, 2010), there are still insufficient
consideration on the tourists’ food experience, especially in Malaysia. Recent research by Mohamad, Omar and Mohamed (2015) had studied about aspects of holiday satisfaction in Penang for both international and domestic tourists. Their study concluded that 4 aspects; accessibility, accommodation, tourist amenities and food can affect tourists’ satisfaction in Penang. The inclusion of food reflects it’s important in overall image of Penang as popular tourism destination in Malaysia. Since food was one of the aspects that can affect the traveling experience, it is crucial for the destination management organizations to constantly make effort to improve and enhance dining experiences in Penang. Another past study had looked into the acceptance and perception specifically from the western tourists towards the local food (Jalis, Zahari and Othman, 2009), which was conducted in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. The study revealed that the majority of western tourists perceived that Malaysia offered great choices of tasty and freshly prepared food, snacks and beverages. They perceived that Malaysia owned a unique and exquisite identity of food culture. In addition, the findings also demonstrated that the local gastronomic products can be a catalyst for boosting the local economy. However, they did not looked into tourists’ satisfaction and this element is lacking to conclude the relationship between perceptions and satisfaction.

3. Food Tourism and Tourist Satisfaction

Satisfaction is critical as it reflects subjective client assessments of the characteristic execution connected with the consumption experience (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Ziethaml, Berry & Parasuraman, (1996) mentioned that overall satisfaction is a post-purchase attitude determined by the expectation of the customer, the quality of the product or service and also the price. The product or service must be at least as good as it is supposed to be. This shows that in order to make the customers feel satisfied, the producer needs to ensure that their service or product delivered well in every aspect. In terms of travel experience, according to Crompton and Love (1995), it is also might be affected by the social-psychological state of a person. For example the mood at that particular time and also incidental occasions that cannot be control by the service provider like the weather. This proved that satisfaction is mainly comes from what had been experienced and also the interaction with the destination. As a result of being satisfied, according to Mattila and Wirtz (2001) and Evanschitzky, Iyer, Plassmann, Niessing and Meffert (2006), customers will show a positive behavioral intention which can be in terms of revisit intention, positive word-of-mouth and also willingness to recommend. Customers who had a good experience with one particular product or services had a great tendency to being loyal to it.

Tourist satisfaction is a very important factor to be evaluated in order to improve any services or product in tourism industry and also to evaluate whether the marketing strategy is successful or not. Most of the service providers in the industry are willing to invest in doing evaluation and improvement of their services in order to enhance the satisfaction level of their customers (Fishbein & Manfredo, 1992). This is because they are aware that improvement will increased visitation, revenues and also enhanced reputation. Researchers has identified that food experience can represent an important source of satisfaction for visitors (Ryan, 1997; Getz, 2000). Food also could affect the whole traveling experience. Travellers will end up discussing and judged their experience mainly based on the food even if food is not their initial consideration at first (Ardabili et. al, 2011). It can be concluded that the main factors that should be concerned with when measuring food image are food itself and place where food is sold which can demonstrate the uniqueness of food and food serving style with value for money (Lertputtarak, 2012).

Satisfaction is important especially in the business where one’s perception matters and may have significant impact on the overall portray of the food as attraction in Malaysia. Roozbeh, Ng and Boo (2013) on the other hand studied the food experience between first timer and repeated visitors to Malaysia. They found out that food experience contributes to the overall satisfaction among visitors to
Malaysia. The positive perception of food experience among first-time and repeat visitors to Malaysia shows that local food can be used in addition to other tourism products. Ironically, both researchers suggest similar researches to take place at other location such as airport in Penang, Langkawi and Kota Kinabalu in order to gain more colorful insights on the issue.

Responding to this suggestion and previous findings from literature mentioned, this study seeks to study the satisfaction level of tourists’ towards local food in another popular destination for food in Malaysia. Penang which is a state in Malaysia that is worldly known as one of the UNESCO World Heritage Site was chosen as the food tourism destination for the study. The Minister of Tourism and Culture, Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz in Malaymail Online (2012) said that some of Malaysia's traditional dishes had been recognized internationally. He was quoted to mention that Penang Laksa which had been voted as the seventh most delicious food (out of 50) in the world under the CNNGo International Food Survey in 2012. Penang had been called as a food heaven by the local foodie but from the perspective of international tourist, it is not yet to be confirmed. This study took a slight different view to measure satisfaction by assessing food images which comprises of atmosphere, features and palate.

3. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The framework for the study was developed with modification based on previous studies by Ab Karim, Chua, Aman, Othman and Salleh (2011) and Jalis, Zahari, Zulkifly, and Othman (2009). Food image as independent variable is consists of 3 aspects; food dining and atmosphere, food taste and appreciation and food features (Figure 1). Food dining and atmosphere is to measure the place, environment and experiences during dining while food taste and appreciation consists of items to measure food palate and it sense of appealing to the respondents. The third aspect is food features which consists of food presentation, cooking methods and varieties. It is hypothesized that if the image of the Penang local food is good, the tourists’ is satisfied. Based on previous study by Leong, Othman, Adzahan and Karim (2012) had shown that the image of the food had a direct effect on the tourist satisfaction.
4. Methodology

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed to tourists at several tourists’ spots such as Gurney Drive, Padang Kota, Batu Feringghi, various streets in Georgetown and Penang International Airport. This sample was derived from the latest available record of international tourist arrival to Penang in 2016 (Mok, 2016). Instead of distributing questionnaires in A4 size paper that can be tedious to respondents, this study used electronic questionnaire designed by using Google form which were more convenient. When respondent was found, a tablet consisting of questionnaire was given for it to be completed. The instrument was developed and adapted based on previous studies by Ab Karim et al., (2011) and Jalis et al., (2009). Selection of respondents were done by first observing their physical features such as being tall, different skin color compare to locals, blonde or brunette that represents common international tourists features. Then they were asked two screening questions. The first question was “Where are you from?” and “Have you consumed any local food in Penang?” Measures of central tendency and other descriptive analyses were used to identify food image and satisfaction of the tourists. A Pearson correlation coefficient was performed to determine the relationship between food image and satisfaction.

5. Finding & Discussion

5.1 Reliability analysis

The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value for all variables in the study revealed a range of coefficient value from .78 to .82 accordingly. The dependent variable of subsequent career intentions scale had a high reliability coefficient of .82 as compared to the independent variables. The independent variables of workplace bullying and emotional dissonance had coefficient values of .78 and .79 respectively.

5.2 Descriptive statistics & analysis

The findings showed that the distribution of gender was higher for females with a total of 157 female respondents (67.7%). On the other hand, there were 75 male respondents or 32.3 percent out of the total respondents. The age of the respondents showed that most of them were 21 years old, 13.4% were 20 years old and the rest (15.1%) were above 21 years old.

5.2.1 The image of food tourism in Penang

The image of food tourism in Penang were measured using three aspects; food dining and atmosphere, food taste and appreciation and food features. The table below presents the aspects and its statements.

Table 1.0: Mean score for attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food Dining And Atmosphere</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The food are clean and safe to consume</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The food are well presented</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable eating surrounding</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food spots are located in convenient places</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of food and dining atmosphere, the highest mean score was represented by the item of “Food spots are located in convenient places” and “food providers are friendly”. The lowest mean score was represented by the item of “The food are clean and safe to consume”. For food taste and appreciation, the highest mean score was represented by the item of “The food are rich in flavors” and “food are appealing to human sense”. For food features, highest score were “There are variety of local specialities” and “high availability”, which basically refers to easy accessible of food in Penang. There were no alarming score for items in each of the aspects measured. It is interesting to find out that majority of respondents whom are foreigners have a positive perception of local food in Penang. Nonetheless, some low scores compares to others are still valuable findings and might be helpful to further enhance dining experiences in Penang. For example, in terms of availability of information on food in Penang, the score is just borderline which calls for some thoughtful consideration by the authority. This shows that the majority of the respondents agreed that Penang offers a variety of local specialities and apparently there is not enough information available regarding the local food or maybe it is hard for them to find it.
5.2.2 Satisfaction of food tourism in Penang

Respondents were tested on the level of satisfaction of food tourism in Penang. The table below presents the statements used to measure their satisfaction level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penang’s local food contributes to the quality of my visiting experience</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penang’s local food contributes to my eating pleasure</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Penang’s local food adds to my visiting enjoyment</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The food experience in Penang meets my expectation</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experienced the culture of Penang through its local food</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will recommend Penang’s local food to my friends and family</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a good impression on Penang’s local food</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I strongly remember my food experiences in Penang</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a whole, Penang is a good food tourism destination</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will revisit Penang for its local food</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid (N)</td>
<td>384</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Highest mean score was represented by the item of “As a whole, Penang is a good food tourism destination” and “I will revisit Penang for its local food” respectively. This shows that the most of the respondents agreed that Penang is a good food tourism destination. Overall, the scores observed for satisfaction level is relieving, as it describe an appropriate level of satisfaction among the tourists visiting Penang.

5.3 Correlation analysis

A correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between image and satisfaction. The analysis revealed that all three aspects of food image has a positive relationship with satisfaction. Food and dining atmosphere has the highest value (0.421). Thus, proved that it has moderate positive relationship with tourists’ satisfaction level towards Penang’s local food.
Penang’s food image. The second highest value is (0.418) contributed by the food features. Last least value is food taste and appreciation that granted (0.416) value of the correlation coefficient.

6. Discussions and Future Recommendation

6.1 Image of food tourism in Penang

Food tourism in Penang has gained popularity not only among the locals but also among the foreigners. In Penang, local food is easily accessible with good and friendly food service providers. Food is mostly well presented and comfortable dining places added a value to the overall dining experiences. This is supported by previous findings by Thew (2015) which stated that Malaysian hawker’s food possessed clear and positive images on price, taste, accessible and well-presented. Aside from that, the varieties and specialties of food in Penang is another pull factor that allure tourists to sample the local delicacies. As a foodie destination, Penang is the labelled heaven of hawkers style street food served a lot of famous and authentic food (Mohamad, Mohamed & Omar, 2015) which become one of the major attraction in the island. The study also found that local food in Penang is found to be spicy but rich in flavors. It is acknowledged that the food in Malaysia is known to be very rich in taste as they used a lot of herbs and spices in the cooking. McKechnie (2011) stated the unique fusion of cultures and flavors in the local Malaysian food is a proof of a harmony mix between different races in Malaysia. Different state’s background and the fact that Malaysia is a multi-racial country, has absolutely some degree of effects on the cooking and becoming the trademark of local delicacies in Penang.

Apart from the positive review on the image, there were some areas that worth examining based on the results. Thew (2015) stressed that the element of cleanliness and food safety are of concerns and the same finding is inflicted in this study. Cleanliness and safety issues score lesser compare to other attributes. Recommendation can be made based on the findings that is to take control of this situation by putting more emphasize and action in ensuring hygienic issues are well addressed in food preparation and the surrounding environment. Another subject to take consideration is the variety and availability of information of food in Penang. It is very important to have correct and adequate information in order to promote food tourism and create awareness among the tourist. Whilst they might have already information available on the internet or social media, it is imperative that authority to be alert of the type and contents of these information. It is suggested that information to be updated regularly, include interesting facts such as the ingredients used, originality, authenticity and some history of the dishes.

6.2 Image and satisfaction of food tourism in Penang

The findings from this study revealed that image does have a relationship with satisfaction of food tourism in Penang. This is supported by previous scholars who have empirically tested the relationship between image and satisfaction. Leong et al. (2010) claimed that images are personal values that consumers attach to a product or service characteristics. Image plays a vital role in influencing satisfaction and many previous studies have indicated that favorable image would lead to greater satisfaction (Lee, Lee & Lee, 2005; Karim & Chi, 2010; Lertputtarak, 2012; Thew, 2015).
Food in Penang is found to be an excellent tourism product to cater the needs of tourists. The advantage of multi-racial country and the fact that Penang is one of the iconic destination in Malaysia gives it a leverage to be known as melting pot of Malaysia. Thus, it is important that favorable images must be created and materialized to capitulate to this demand.

Three important aspects have been identified in this study which can pilot the authority to create successful actions. Dining and atmosphere are important considerations, as people like to be in comfortable place and in desirable environment to enjoy food. Food presentation and good service matters among all to ensure satisfaction to overall experience. How food taste and appeal to the tourists also determines satisfaction. Penang food is stated to be spicy and full of taste and yet still appealing to the tourists. This is clear indication that the local food is pleasurable to the taste bud of foreign tourists. In addition, variety and specialty are another important points to enhance quality of experience and overall satisfaction.

It is recommended that Penang authorities to pay attention to improve the local food’s image and tourists’ satisfaction with their food experience. This could enhance their perception of visiting quality and promote positive behavioral intentions among them. More actions are needed to ensure that the hygiene issues are tackled in food service industry from the small hawker style up to the high-end restaurant. Food hygiene is something that should not be neglected because it can tarnish the image of the destination. It is also suggested to focus on promoting the distinctiveness and diversity of the food in Penang especially highlighting the uniqueness of every dish available.

6.3 Limitations

The results presented in this study is subject to the following limitations. First, the respondents were foreigners and are grouped as westerner. Therefore, the results basically resemble this particular group of tourists and may not be able to be generalize to other nationality. Second, the timing and places chosen for data collection may have some effect on the overall findings. It is necessary to take into account seasonal changes over tourists’ profiles and the level of satisfaction.

6.4 Conclusions

Food and travel have become a symbiotic relationship in many countries around world, and destinations are capitalizing their potential to promote their cuisine as a unique product. Penang has managed to put the name of Malaysia in the tourism map as one of the food tourism destination. However the image of the local food here is still remains a great challenge to be at par with other popular gastronomy destination around the world. This study has able to provide some insights into food tourism management in Penang. Thus is gives the destination managers better understanding on the aspects that contribute to satisfaction mainly from the perspective of foreign tourists. It is hopeful the findings will be able to justify some required actions to further enhance food tourism in Penang.

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