

Shoot, Taste and Post: An Exploratory Study of Food and Tourism Experiences in an Online Image-Share Community

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Abstract

This paper presents the results from an exploratory study of food and tourism experiences in the online image-share community Flickr.comTM. The purpose of this research was to provide a description of Flickr food group members' behaviour of taking pictures of food, as well as to better understand the role of food pictures in their travel experiences. The study found that members' travel experiences were recorded and shared socially through food photography. While food images could be regarded as a trip motivator, it is hard to regard it as the primary trip purpose.

Keywords: digital photos; food photography; tourism experiences; Flickr.comTM.

1 Introduction

According to Larsen (2006), "tourism and photography are modern twins" (p. 241). A number of scholars (Urry, 1990; Larsen, 2006; Garrod, 2009; Lo, McKercher, Cheung & Law, 2011) have attempted to understand the relationship between tourism and photography. It has been observed that people are more willing to share their travel experience with each other (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Recent research by Moed, Rosner and Van House (2007) on the image-sharing website Flickr.comTM found that food is one of the most popular themes among all those public published pictures. As a result, food items could be interpreted as "perspective tourist attraction and actual impediment" (Cohen & Avieli, 2004, p.760), "a special kind of tourism experience" (Quan & Wang, 2004), and "a primary or secondary trip motivator" (Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007, p. 253).

Image-based methods in tourism studies are still not used as mainstream research activities (Rakic & Chambers, 2010), and additional efforts need to be devoted to better understand how technologies of digital media affect and mediating tourism experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). It is suggested by Lo et al. (2011) that the diverse nature of online media travel communities are still under examined, and issues such as

profile users of these communities need more research focus. Despite the increasing popularity of gastronomic tourism and online image-sharing community, very few studies have connected the two together. The purpose of this research was to provide a description of Flickr food group members' behaviour of taking pictures of food, as well as to better understand the role of food pictures in their travel experiences.

2 Literature Review

Tourism experiences have become one of the core elements that are widely addressed in tourism studies (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010). Urry (1990) introduced the idea of tourist gaze to reflect the interactive relationship how tourism is socially produced and reproduced through a "way of seeing". Garrod (2009) concluded that tourist photography makes up the main foundation to tourist gaze. Technological change has resulted in sharing tourism experiences through social media (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). From this perspective, tourism photography is not merely a way to transform intangible experiences into tangible evidences, self-expression or self-representation, but a means to share one's own experiences to others, as well as a maintainer and creator of social relationship (Van House, et al., 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; Lo et al., 2011). Due to the rise of Web2.0 technology, photo sharing is no longer limited to physical photos within one's acquaintances. Instead, it allows strangers access to images and has resulted in new photo related interactive practices (Miller & Edward, 2010). Van House (2007) argued that the new technology has extended and enriched the social use of personal photographs and he identified four kinds of social use on personal photography in their Flickr user studies: 1) Memory, narrative and identity; 2) Relationships; 3) Self-representation and; 4) Self-expression (Van House, 2007,p.2719).

3 Method

This exploratory study addressed the following research questions: 1) Do people take pictures of food? 2) Where do they photograph food? 3) Do they look at food pictures online? Why? 4) Do they post food pictures online? What online tools do they use? 5) Do they take pictures of food on vacation? Why? 6) What is the role of food pictures in their travel planning process? 7) Is there a relationship between level of online activity and the importance of food pictures in their travel planning process? To answer these questions, an online survey (based on the survey monkey service) has been conducted on Flickr.comTM since March 15, 2011. Flickr.comTM is a public website that is designed for image storing and sharing. It allows users to form a group under certain themes. Within the group, users are able to share their images and have discussions on the forum. With the key word "food" in their themes, there are 26525 food groups on Flickr.comTM. Nine of them contain more than 5,000 members and were included in our study. Short invite notes were posted on the discussion boards of each food group, along with a link to the online survey. Thank-you notes have been updated weekly. As of August 24, 2011, 108 members have participated in the online survey.

4 Results

Six out of ten (61.9%) respondents were female while 38.1% were male. The mean age was 33.7 years (median was 31 years). The majority (84.2%) had a college/university or higher degree. Four out of ten (41.5%) respondents were employed full time, 17.1% were students and 6.1% were unemployed. Over one-half (51.2%) of the respondents had never married, while 37.8% were married. When requested to judge their photography skill level, 74.5% respondents categorized themselves as either “intermediate” or “advanced”.

Nearly all (93.5%) of the respondents indicated that they practiced the activity of taking pictures of food. The main locations where they took pictures of food were home (86.0%), restaurants (64.0%), vacation destinations (51.0%) and friend’s homes (36.0%). Nine out of ten (91.9%) of the respondents indicated that they also looked at food pictures online, and the main reason is to enjoy the pictures of food (89.8%), to learn about different foods (69.1%), to learn about different recipes (68.5%), to learn about different restaurants (39.8%) and 18.5% looked for diet options. One-fifth (19.6%) of the respondents reported other purposes such as to learn new techniques of food photography, to analyze the food photography arts and to inspire future trips. Nearly all (93.1%) of the respondents also post their food pictures online. Flickr was used by the majority (93.7%) to upload the food pictures, 56.8% also used Facebook to share food images. Over a quarter (26.3%) posted food pictures in either their food blogs or their own blogs (25.3%).

Eight out of ten (81.8%) respondents that take pictures of food indicated that they also take pictures of food while on vacation. The main motivations were to share their experience with others (79.2%), to record special foods (72.7%), to help them remember meals (61.0%) and to record special events (58.4%). About one fifth (20.8%) of the respondents reported other reasons, such as to create colourful, expressive photos, and to record local cuisine. A series of statements were presented to assess the role of food pictures in the travel planning process based on a 5-point liker-style scale (*1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree*). It is found that 75.3% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I like to first decide the vacation destination, and then look for local food and restaurants”; 64.6% agreed or strongly agreed that “I like to go to new places to try new food and take pictures of them”; 52.1% agreed or strongly agreed that “food pictures motivate me to go to new place”, 49.5% agreed or strongly agreed that “if I know of new places through food pictures, I will go there and try the food”, 42.5% agreed or strongly agreed that “I never look at food pictures when planning on a trip”, and only 14.1% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “I like to look up information on some new food, and then choose a vacation destination where I can find the food”.

Respondents who take pictures of food, view and post food pictures online were categorized as active members (n=86), and the others were labelled as non-as-active members (n=22). A series of chi-square and independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine if significant relationships existed between respondents' level of activity (i.e. active and non-as-active) and demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, education). No

significant relationships were found at the $p \leq .05$ level. To determine if there were significant differences between active and non-as-active members and the role of food pictures in their travel planning process, a series of independent sample t-tests were conducted. Two out of six statements were found significant. The active members were significantly more likely to go to new places and try some new foods and take pictures of them ($t=2.064$, $p=.042$) and if they know places from food pictures, they will go there and try the food ($t= 3.267$, $p=.0002$).

5 Discussion

It can be concluded these respondents were well educated, either fully employed or a student, in their mid 30s, and a large proportion of who have never married. Respondents indicated that they took and posted pictures of food to share their gastronomic experiences with others on Flickr as well as other social media sites such as Facebook. A large proportion of Flickr food group members are active members who not only take pictures of food, but also post them and look at other food pictures online. Some of them even have their own food blogs. In this case, they not only act as a photographer taking pictures of food or a image sharer who mediating their own experiences through food pictures, but also audience viewing other people's food photography works.

When it comes to the vacation experience, there exists an inconsistency between the number of respondents who take food pictures on vacation destinations and the number who take food pictures while on vacation. This finding seems to imply that some of the food pictures might be taken during the trip in different locations other than the destination itself. This differentiation might suggest a potential use of food photography as tangible evidence of their intangible travel experiences, rather than a sole record of destinations. Finally, the study found that although food pictures could be regarded as trip motivator, it is hard to regard it as the primary trip purpose. Despite that most respondents take pictures of food to record their travel experiences, and to obtain or share the destination information, seldom did they plan a trip merely because of certain food images. Food itself could act as a pull factor in tourism industry, but the food image here acts as a kind of information deliver, rather than a trip initiator. Finally, the study found if Flickr food group members were active in online food photography (take, view and post pictures), they were more likely to seek out new places to travel for food experiences and that that food photography had a greater influence on where they consider travelling. Future research is needed on food photography involvement and leisure travel attitudes, intentions and behaviour.

6 Limitations

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, there are a number of limitations. First, the relatively small sample size is a concern. With only 108 members participating in this survey, it is difficult to generalize the heterogeneous nature of all the food group Flickr members. More rigorous survey procedures should be implemented in future research to

increase the sample size. Second, the results presented are mainly descriptive. Additional analysis is needed to examine relationships between taking, viewing and posting food pictures and leisure travel. However, it is hoped that these preliminary results could inspire further research in this interesting area of food tourism.

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