

Effect of food experience on overall satisfaction: comparison between first-time and repeat visitors to Malaysia

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Abstract

The attractiveness of food as tourism product has partly derived from the gastronomic aspect. The ingredients, the preparations, the end products, and the eating circumstances are cultural, educational, and entertaining. However, there is little research empirically demonstrates if there is a difference between first-time and repeat visitors in terms of food experience at destination, or how the various food experience attributes influence visitors' overall satisfaction while visiting a destination. Hence, this study was undertaken to address the gap. Data were collected via on-site survey questionnaire administered to a random sample of visitors at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and various touristic areas around Kuala Lumpur. The results indicated significant differences between first-time and repeat visitors in terms of their food experience. In addition, multiple regression analysis revealed that traditional food preparation was an important factor to tourists' overall satisfaction for both first-time and repeat visitors. In sum, the study is the first to examine the effect of food experience attributes on first time and repeat visitors separately.

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Introduction

Tourism has become an important economic income to many countries. To attract tourists, the satisfaction of their particular travel experience is important to generate both word of mouth and repeat visiting intention (Tam, 2000; Choi and Chu, 2001; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Satisfied tourists were found to have higher tendency to revisit the same destination and provide positive comments to friends and families (Chen and Tsai, 2007) which could be translated into higher income generation to a country. As a result, many tourism products, ranging from tangible to experiential, have been introduced to attract the tourists.

To determine the drivers to tourist satisfaction, Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez-Canizares (2012) pointed out that modern tourists are increasingly motivated by the search for new experiences and sensations from visiting traditions and cultures of a particular destination. This is consistent with the intensive tourism marketing activities focusing on local food or cuisine (Hall *et al.*, 2003; Kivela and Crofts, 2009). Indeed, researchers have identified that food experience can represent an important

source of satisfaction for visitors (Smith, 1983; Ryan, 1997; Getz, 2000; Hall and Mitchell, 2001; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Ignatov and Smith, 2006). 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 and Richards, 2002; Zahari *et al.*, 2009). From the cultural perspective, Frochot (2003) suggested that food experience portrays the images of cultural experience, status, and cultural identity. Such cultural aspect is usually developed from the unique aspects of gastronomy that can only be found in that particular destination. The seminal work by Mitchell and Hall (2006) pointed out that gastronomy forms the social, cultural, economic, and environmental history of towns and the people live in there. Hence, food is something that is ingrained in its own culture and traditions. It reflects the specific way of life in the different geographical areas and underpins the tradition in rural areas and modernity in urban areas.

On the other hand, foods also offer pleasurable sensory experience that fulfills an experiential part (pleasure) of vacation that pulls tourists to a destination

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(Smith, 1983; Kivela and Crofts, 2006). For instance, Smith (1983) commented that food experience at a destination not only satisfied the physiological needs of tourists but also their psychological aspect. More specifically, visitors were found enjoy the pleasure aroused from a complete sensory experience of taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing (Getz, 2000).

Because of an increase in competition for gaining market share and a leveling off of demand, it is in need for better understanding of the underlying causes and determinants of those variables that may affect visitor retention. Finding ways to add value to the food experience in order to make it memorable for visitors is paramount. Drawing from the findings by Getz (2000), it is logically to infer that food experience emphasizing the using local culinary resources and ingredients, the preservation and teaching of traditional cooking methods, the enjoyment of the end product, and the authentic experience in a given environment are imperative attributes (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez-Canizares, 2012). Unfortunately, there have been limited studies examining the effect of various food experience attributes on tourists' satisfaction. More so, the differences in the influence of food experience attributes between first-time and repeat visitors was also overlooked.

Past research has documented the differences in perception, motivation, and behavior between the two groups of tourists (Opperman, 1997; Lau and McKercher, 2004; Petrick, 2004; Okamura and Fukushima, 2010). For example, Opperman (1997) found that first-time visitors seemed to have much more active time while in New Zealand than their counterparts. Likewise, Lau and McKercher (2004) echoed the findings of Opperman (1997). They documented that first-time visitors to Hong Kong were motivated to explore and hence, participated in wide range of activities. On the contrary, repeat visitors have more specific objectives, such as shop, dine, and spend time with family and friends.

In view of the increasing significance of food as a tourism product, and its multidimensional aspects, the current study intended to bridge the gap by examining the food experience influence for first-time and repeat visitors in Malaysia. Specifically, the research addressed the following research questions:

- 1) How do food experience attributes influence tourists satisfaction in Malaysia?
- 2) Are there significant differences between the first-time and repeat visitors in terms of their food experience?

Method

To measure the food experience of visitors during their vacation in Malaysia, self-administrated questionnaires with three sections (food experience attributes, satisfaction and socio-demographic factors) were distributed randomly to tourists at popular touristic areas around Kuala Lumpur or tourists waiting for their departure in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). The instrument was developed from a review of literature. The first section measured the food experience attributes with six questions (enjoy traditional preparation, using hand/chopsticks, enjoy most of the local foods, unique experience, enrich food knowledge, and add to personal experience) using 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). The measurement was adopted from past studies (Locker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995; Yuksel, 2001; Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Yu and Goulden, 2006; McKercher et al., 2008; Jalis et al., 2009; Yang and Wall, 2009). The second section with three questions (enjoyment, satisfaction, and happiness) measured the overall satisfaction of visitors extracted from previous studies (Yu and Goulden, 2006; Budruk et al., 2008; Jails et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2010; Sirgy et al., 2011). The third section asked about socio-demographic of visitors (gender, marital status, country of origin, age) and their travel pattern (frequency of travelling). Survey questionnaire was prepared in English, Chinese, and Arabic.

The data collection was conducted from June to August 2011. After removing incomplete responses, 263 (79.95%) valid questionnaires were used in subsequent analysis to examine the visitors' food experience and its effect on their overall satisfaction. A t-test analysis was undertaken to understand whether there was any statistically significant difference between the rating of first-time and repeat visitors on food experience attributes. Multiple linear regression was conducted to approximate the variation of satisfaction explained by different attributes of food experience for first-time and repeat visitors.

Results and Discussion

Respondents profile

Table 1 present the respondents' profiles. For the frequency of visit, 55.1% (n=145) of the respondents visited Malaysia for the first-time and 44.9% (n=118) of respondents were repeat visitors. In terms of gender proportion, there was no significant difference between first-time and repeat visitors ($\chi^2(1)=.015$, $p=.902$). Specifically, male visitors were slightly higher for both first-timer (55.2%) and repeater

Table 1. Socio-demographic of respondents and comparison of first-time and repeat visitors

Socio-demographic attributes		First-time visitor (N=145)	Repeat visitor (N=118)	χ^2/F	p
Gender	Male	80 (55.2%)	66 (55.9%)	0.15	.902
	Female	65 (44.8%)	52 (44.1%)		
Marital status	Single	67 (46.2%)	54 (45.8%)	.324	.851
	Married	67 (46.2%)	57 (48.3%)		
	Separated/widow	11 (7.6%)	7 (5.9%)		
Age		31.45	33.69	.735	.392
Country of origin	Africa	9 (6.2%)	7 (5.9%)	16.785	.032
	North Asia	5 (3.4%)	2 (1.7%)		
	East Asia	15 (10.3%)	13 (11%)		
	South East Asia	3 (2.1%)	15 (12.7%)		
	Middle East	20 (13.8%)	15 (12.7%)		
	Europe	79 (54.5%)	48 (40.7%)		
	Oceania	9 (6.2%)	14 (11.9%)		
	North America	3 (2.1%)	3 (2.5%)		
	South America	2 (1.4%)	1 (0.8%)		

N(%)
Age: mean

Table 2. Means of food experience attributes for first-time and repeat visitors

Food experience attributes	First-time visitor	Repeat visitor	t-value	p
enjoy traditional preparation	4.75	4.87	-.816	.415
using hand/chopsticks	4.86	4.85	.081	.936
enjoy most of the local foods	4.86	4.93	-.390	.697
unique experience	5.28	4.82	2.583	.010
enrich food knowledge	5.32	5.10	1.392	.165
add to personal experience	5.36	5.05	2.059	.041
overall satisfaction	5.77	5.77	-.006	.052

(55.9%). This result is not surprising as previous studies (Jianakoplos and Bernasek, 1998; Sunden and Surette, 1998) have confirmed that the propensity of males travelling overseas is higher than the females.

Results of marital status analysis revealed insignificant differences ($\chi^2(2)=.324, p=.851$). Single and married visitors were equal for both first-timer (46.2% single, 46.2% married, and 7.6% separated/widowed) and repeater (45.8% single, 48.3% married, and 5.9% separated/widowed). In terms of age, two sample t-test indicated significant difference ($t(235)=-2.023, p=.392$) between first-time and repeat visitors. First-time visitors tend to be younger ($M=31.54$ years old) than the repeat visitors ($M=33.69$ years old). It is in line with the findings by Lau and Mc Kercher (2004) and Gitelson and Crompton (1984) who also found that first-time visitors are more likely to be

younger than repeat visitors.

Most of the first-time and repeat visitors were from Europe, 54.5% and 40.7% respectively. The number of tourists arriving from European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom has marked growing pattern (Euromonitor, 2010). As the currency becomes stronger, European tourists often found Malaysia an ideal vacation destination for budget travelling (Euromonitor, 2010).

There was a significant difference between first-time and repeat visitors in terms of country of origin ($\chi^2(8)=16.785, p=.032$). In particular, visitors from South-East Asia and Oceania were more likely to be repeat visitors. One possible explanation could be attributed to the short distance and similar culture and language between Malaysia and the South East Asian countries. As for tourists from Oceania, Ng *et al.* (2007) has pointed out that Malaysia is one of the popular destinations for Australian tourists partly due to the migration of the older and younger generations of Malaysians to the continent.

Food experience attributes differences between first-time and repeat visitors

Table 2 shows the mean of food experience attributes for first-time visitors in descending order: add to personal experience ($M=5.36$), enrich food knowledge ($M=5.32$), unique experience ($M=5.28$), enjoy most of local foods ($M=4.86$), using hands/chopsticks ($M=4.86$), and enjoy traditional preparation ($M=4.75$). On the other hand, the order for repeat visitors is: enrich food knowledge ($M=5.10$), add to personal experience ($M=5.05$), enjoy most of the local foods ($M=4.93$), enjoy traditional preparation ($M=4.87$), using hands/chopsticks ($M=4.85$), and unique experience ($M=4.82$).

Of the six food experience attributes, a series of two sample t-tests revealed that only two showed significant differences between the first-time and repeat visitors: unique experience ($t(230)=2.583, p=.010$) and add to personal experiences ($t(229)=2.059, p=.041$). In particular, first-time visitors exhibited higher scores in the above two attributes.

Effect of food experience on overall satisfaction

In addition, multiple linear regression analysis was also performed separately for first-time and repeat visitors to determine the relationship between the various food experience attributes and the tourists' overall satisfaction (Table 3). The regression analyses showed that enjoy traditional preparation was the only significant aspect positively contributing to the overall satisfaction of first-time visitors ($\beta=.212,$

Table 3. Regression model of food experience on overall satisfaction

Food experience attributes	First-time visitors		Repeat visitors	
	β	p	β	p
enjoy traditional preparation	.212	.029	.271	.019
using hand/chopsticks	-.115	.197	.218	.037
enjoy most of the local foods	.136	.182	-.034	.784
unique experience	.060	.578	-.129	.319
enrich food knowledge	.182	.158	-.014	.924
add to personal experience	-.014	.904	.156	.245

$p=.029$). The overall model explained almost one fifth of the total variance ($R^2=.175$). In view of food experience was the only aspect examined in this study on the overall tourist satisfaction, while other aspects such as transportation and lodging were excluded, the coefficient of covariance was deemed acceptable (Du Rand *et al.*, 2003).

As for repeat visitors, result of the multiple regression analysis revealed that enjoy traditional preparation ($\beta=.271$, $p=.019$) and using hands/chopsticks ($\beta=.218$, $p=.037$) were the two significant food experience attributes positively related to their overall satisfaction. Similar to the first-timers, the overall model explained approximately one fifth ($R^2=.177$) of total variance.

Taken together, the study demonstrated several important findings. First, food experience is indeed an important aspect to the overall satisfaction of a tourist. It is responsible for almost one fifth of the total satisfactory experience. The role of food in tourism has increasing received recognition (Hall *et al.*, 2003). The result of this study further substantiates the effort of Malaysian Tourism Board in promoting the local food and cuisine via a wide range of activities, including food events and festivals, cooking classes and food trips.

Second, both first-time and repeat visitors have noticeably different perspectives towards their visit to Malaysia. First-timers would find the food experience more unique and adding value to their personal experience. This is in agreement with the suggestion by Gitelson and Crompton (1984) who argued that first-time visitors are more likely to seek variety and new cultural experiences while they are in destination. Thus, the array of different ethnic foods available in Malaysia is not surprisingly something unique to them and adds to their experience.

Third, the satisfaction of first-time and repeat visitors was insignificant but for different reason. Overall, the satisfaction level of tourists was high. Both first-timer and repeat visitors were fascinated watching how the traditional foods were prepared.

Since traditional food preparation is commonly a ritual process (Cusak, 2000), it may reveal different elements each time it is performed and hence inflict different experience to repeat visitors. Furthermore, Cohen and Avieli (2004) suggested that the mode of preparation may sometimes be a recent invention intended to impress or attract the visitors. Thus, different food operators may exhibit different food preparation processes, resulting in different experience even to repeat visitors.

Using chopsticks may be viewed as a more authentic way to eat food, or a playful experiment or to demonstrate one's dexterity with them (Cohen and Avieli, 2004). It is recognized as a challenging task (Kivela and Crofts, 2009). Hence, the ability to perform such skill may bring a sense of success and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This research showed how food experience contributes to the overall satisfaction among visitors to Malaysia. In line with the studies by Kivela and Crofts (2005) and Kim *et al.* (2010), the results suggest that food is an increasingly important and effective way to attract tourists. 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. More advertising materials, such as brochures, catalogues and websites, should be made available for visitors to access information about the diverse food experience in Malaysia. While the ritual of traditional food preparation may be underscored, the Malaysian Tourism Board should also note the different aspects of food experience appealing to first-time and repeat visitors when develop its tourism campaign instead of using one size fits all strategy.

In terms of socio-demographic factors, first-time visitors tend to be younger and come from countries other than South East Asia and Oceania. The socio-demographic information is critical for destination managers to identify the first-time and repeat visitors so that appropriate customized subsequent marketing activities could be performed.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

However, the current study is not without limitation. First, respondents were surveyed in Kuala Lumpur international airport (KLIA) and some touristic area in Kuala Lumpur. While it may be valid, the procedure may not capture some tourists who made transit to other domestic destinations such

as Sabah and Sarawak. Future research may consider carrying out survey at those sites. Second, the current study only investigated the differences between first-time and repeat visitors. However, a more effective tourism promotion should be customized as different cultures have different perception and evaluation frameworks for food (Nield *et al.*, 2000; Riley, 2000). Thus, another avenue of future work would be conducting extensive studies in each country to identify the motivating factors. In addition, future research could be performed to examine the relative importance of food experience to other factors in tourists' satisfaction.

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