

Digital marketing and food tourism: towards a better understanding of food tourists' engagement

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Abstract

Having considered the importance of food in a destination's development, its key role in the tourist experience, marketing and enhancing the existing tourism 'product-service' offering, it is not surprising that food tourism is a growing sector. Moreover, food has become a major theme across various digital communication channels. With this in mind, tourism businesses must maximise the potential of various new digital technologies which, enable tourists to engage with a destination, especially since consumers' reliance on social networks is increasing due to the advances in technology and media communications. Subsequently, the purpose of this research is to examine the role of digital marketing communications within the food tourism context. To gain an in-depth insight into the industry outlook and a better understanding of tourists' behaviour, a qualitative two stage multiple method research design has been proposed.

Keywords: digital marketing communications; food tourism; food tourist engagement; experience co-creation; virtual communities

1 Introduction

Food tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors within the tourism market which has grown in popularity over the past decade (Intel, 2014). Food is a vital part of the tourist experience, while regional cuisine contributes to regional development and diversifies the existing tourism 'product-service' offering (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; McKercher et al., 2008). Nevertheless, to maximise the potential of food tourism development and gain a competitive advantage, destinations must reach and engage with tourists to attract them. Today's tourists are empowered by digital media communications throughout all stages of travel, which have a significant impact on their overall visitor experience and provide tourists with the opportunity to co-create travel related content (Hudson and Thal, 2013).

To date little is known about the use and role of digital media communications within the food tourism context therefore this study will contribute to new knowledge in gaining a better understanding of the how digital marketing communications can be used to attract, engage and build a relationship with food tourists.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Food tourism

Food tourism is a form of niche, alternative tourism, often referred to as culinary, cuisine or gastronomy tourism (Hall and Mitchell, 2005). To date there is no universal definition of food tourism, however an attempt has been made to define the term while focusing on various aspects of the tourist behaviour and experience such as: importance of tourist's motivation, the experiential component, range of food tourism products, importance of food networks and value of a learning process that food tourists go through (Hall and Mitchell, 2001; Smith and Xiao, 2008; Young et al., 2010).

2.2 The food tourist

Research emphasises that food tourists can be classified based on their attitude to food and drink, importance of food and gastronomy in the destination decision-making processes as well as the level of interest, participation and engagement in food tourism related activities (Hjalager, 2004; Yeoman, 2008; Yun et al., 2011). The primary motivation of typical food tourists is the consumption of food and drink or participation in food and drink related activities. However, food consumption is a basic need and an integral part of everyday life and tourists' experience, hence it can be argued that there is a potential for further development and enhancement of food tourism marketing strategies to target and engage the wider market of food tourists.

2.3 Marketing to the food tourist and the importance of online engagement

Digital marketing communications is a significant component of the tourists' decision-making process and enables tourists to participate in the co-creation of the experience, thus creating and adding value to their visit (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Neuhofer et al., 2014). Moreover, recent studies have highlighted the importance of web marketing, social media and blogs in tourism related information search; trip planning, networking and destination branding (Kim et al. 2009; Wang, 2011; Hays et al., 2013). However, according to WTO (2012) only a small number of the food tourism organisations engaged with digital communications such as blogs or social networks, thus highlighting an area for improvement.

The online engagement is of a vital importance and according to Dessart et al. (2015) it relates to an interaction amongst the community member and with the brand. The literature suggests that online engagement can have many benefits for consumers and businesses alike as consumers are involved in sharing, learning, endorsing, socialising, co-developing and networking (2015; Brodie et al., 2013). Numerous studies highlighted that online engagement contributes to consumer loyalty, increased satisfaction, commitment, trust, word of mouth and value co-creation (Vivek et al. 2012; So et al., 2012). On the other hand, businesses may take an advantage of shared ideas for improved products or services, enhanced brand image and relationships with consumers, often resulting in improved financial outcomes (Wirtz et al, 2013).

2.4 Development of food tourism communities

Communities can be perceived as a “third generation” of experiences and are led by the advances in technology (Richards, 2012). Online communities such as blogospheres, TripAdvisor, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter are social structures which have a major impact on tourists’ decision making process and are used not only for information sharing, but can also be used to encourage discussion or feedback (Brodie et al., 2013; Hede and Kellet, 2012). According to Liu et al. (2013) and Wang (2015) online food photography, electronic word of mouth and the image of gastronomy tourism shared across various online communities have a significant impact on food tourist intentions to visit a destination and participate in food tourism related activities. Nevertheless, to date little is known about virtual communities within the context of food tourism, thus highlighting a research opportunity.

2.5 Co-creation of the food tourist experience

Studies highlight that the ‘co-creation experience’ enables consumers to personalise their experience thus providing added value, while interactions and dialogue between consumers and organisations ensure quality and can be perceived as a source of competitive advantage (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). It can be argued that an increase in the use of technology empowers modern consumers by facilitating the co-creation of tourism experiences enabling tourists to actively participate in destination’s branding process (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). A study by Neuhofer et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of co-creation and technology in the creation of enhanced experiences and higher value for the tourist as digital marketing communication channels enable food tourists to customise their food travel packages, engage in self-guided food trails, interact with food tourism businesses and share their experiences through social networking. Nevertheless, Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) highlighted that the application and research on the concept of co-creation within tourism context are limited.

2.6 Towards a conceptual model

A critical literature review in the area of food tourism, digital marketing communications, the concept of co-creation as well as virtual communities have led to a development of a conceptual model of the study (Figure 1). Digital marketing not only helps to promote a business or destination but is also a commonly used tool which helps to acquire, retain and build deeper relationships with tourists. To date, the findings highlight that food tourism businesses and destination marketing organisations (DMO) adopt various digital marketing strategies to engage with tourists, nevertheless the potential of digital marketing communications is not fully maximised. On the other hand, food tourists’ reliance on technology is increasing, while digital media has a significant impact on their decision-making process, travel the behaviour and the overall experience. It can be argued that digital marketing communication channels provide food tourism businesses, DMO’s and food tourists with the opportunity to co-create the experience and share travel related content. Moreover, digital marketing communications can be also perceived as a platform for

development of food tourism communities. Thus, it is believed that digital marketing communications is a key driver of the food tourist engagement.

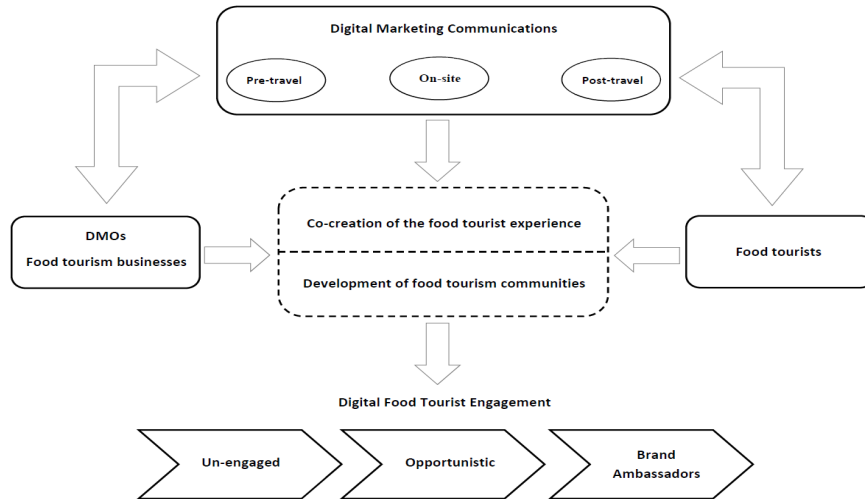


Fig. 1. The conceptual model

3 Methodology

The research aims to critically examine the role of digital marketing communications within a food tourism context. To meet the objectives of the study a multiple method approach will be used. A two stage research design has been proposed to gain an insight into the industry outlook and a better understanding of tourists' behaviour. *Stage 1* will involve industry research. A series of one to one interviews with key informants in tourism organisations (i.e. destination management organisations, tourism marketing bodies) and food tourism providers (i.e. food tour businesses, restaurants, cookery schools) will be conducted to obtain in-depth information on the food tourism market and the use of digital marketing communication. This phase will inform a design of the second stage of research. *Stage 2* will consist of consumer research and will be based on netnography and focus groups. For the purpose of the research, comments and posts from two online communities: (1) Facebook, and (2) Twitter have been chosen for an in-depth analysis. In the context of this study, it will help to gain a better understanding of the use of social networks by food tourist, hence the role of digital marketing communication channels in the process of experience co-creation. Moreover, it is proposed to conduct five to eight focus groups (total of 30–50 participants). Participants with low and high involvement in the food tourism activities will be selected in the study to gain a better understanding of the market. Participants will be recruited and assigned to a specific focus group based on results obtained from a screening questionnaire and according to the food tourist typology: (1) un-engaged; (2) opportunistic and; (3) the foodies - brand & destination ambassadors. This phase of the study will help to gather information regarding demographics of the studied population as well as gain insights into tourists'

behaviour, their attitudes, preferences and engagement with digital marketing communication channels within the context of food tourism related travel and activities.

4 Expected Research Findings

It is expected that the proposed research will provide an understanding of the characteristics and motivations of food tourists, and explore their usage of digital marketing communications throughout their decision making process. These insights will be used to contribute to a development of the digital food tourist typology. Furthermore, the research will help to gain a better understanding of the use of social networks by food tourists, hence the role of digital marketing communication channels in the process of experience co-creation and provide an insight into food tourism online communities.

5 Conclusions and Research Contribution

The importance of food in regional development, destination marketing and its vital role in tourists' experience has been acknowledged by numerous authors. However, to date little is known about the food tourist within the context of digital marketing communications. Consequently, the research will contribute to new knowledge within the literature and help to gain a better understanding of the digital food tourist. It is believed that the study will provide valuable insights into the food tourist and help tourism industry stakeholders to gain a better understanding of how to engage with digital food tourists, as well as contribute to the development of food tourism policies and encourage the improvement of marketing strategies.

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