Destination attribute preferences influence food photograph viewing

Abstract:
Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), we investigated the influence of food destination attributes on food photograph viewing behaviour from the perspective of food day-trippers in Dorset and Hampshire, UK. Through mixed-methods research, interviews with 20 foodies revealed five perceived benefits of viewing food photographs on social media and identified food destination attribute preferences. A survey with 582 residents from the same regions further confirmed that food day-trippers who value hedonic attributes of a food destination are more engaged in viewing food photographs on social media. These photographs, shared by like-minded individuals, are seen as useful and enjoyable, conveniently aiding in future food travel plans. Our findings demonstrate how consumers' destination attribute preferences affect food photograph viewing behaviour, offering valuable insights for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) targeting domestic visitors to their food destinations.

Keywords: food tourism; food photographs; destination attributes

Introduction and Research Aim

In food destination branding, food photographs play a crucial role in giving consumers the opportunity to 'pre-taste' a destination through visuals (Liu et al., 2013). This 'pre-taste' destination effect is evidenced to shape prospective visitors' attitudes towards the destination and their desire to visit. Despite the critical role of food photographs in facilitating the decision-making process, research on the drivers of consumer engagement with food photograph viewing on social media remains scarce (Manimont et al., 2022; Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2017). Understanding these drivers will help Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) develop more effective appeals that leverage consumer engagement on social media. This is particularly relevant for food day-trippers, a growing market segment comprising individuals who travel locally on a day trip for food experiences (Manimont et al., 2022) This paper examines the effect of consumer-valued food destination attributes on food photograph viewing behaviour on social media and explores the underlying mechanisms. By examining this relationship, we aim to enhance our understanding of how destination marketing strategies can effectively utilise food-related content to attract and engage target consumers online.

Theoretical Background

Food day-trippers serve as catalysts in the tourism landscape, driven by their passion for capturing food photographs while exploring food destinations (Manimont et al., 2022). By engaging and sharing their culinary experiences on social media, food day-trippers make valuable contributions to the promotion and reputation of the destinations. In the context of food destinations, food photographs play a crucial role. They have the ability to capture the essence of culinary experiences and create a visual narrative that deeply resonates with potential visitors (Liu et al., 2013).

While the important role of food photographs in shaping the image of food destinations is widely recognised, there is a noticeable gap in research when it comes to understanding the factors that drive consumer engagement and viewing behaviours towards food photographs, as well as the underlying mechanisms (Manimont et al., 2022; Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2017) Prior studies have employed the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to understand the motivations, gratifications, and consequences associated with viewing food photographs (Liu et al., 2013; Manimont et al., 2022). Their findings indicate that the antecedents of viewing food photographs are related to the gratifications sought by individuals. These gratifications encompass various perceived benefits, including perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, affective gratification, and source credibility, which align with earlier studies on user-generated content (UGC) adoption for travel planning and engaging with brands (Ayeh, 2015; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Lee et al., 2012; VanMeter et al., 2015). Additionally, these benefits are connected to the concept of homophily, which indicates that individuals are more likely to engage with food photographs shared by others who have similar tastes and preferences (Filieri et al., 2021).

Prior research highlights the importance of further exploring the role of perceived benefits and finding ways to connect with consumers and enhance their engagement with visual food content on social media (Manimont et al., 2022; Wang, 2011). One promising approach is to explore the effect of destination attributes that hold significance for them (Pike, 2012). This approach aligns with the concept of the tourist gaze, where consumers selectively view photographs that resonate with their desired travel experiences (Urry, 1990). Understanding whether consumer attribute preferences influence food photograph viewing behaviour is crucial for DMOs to effectively tailor their promotional efforts and visual content (Manimont

et al., 2022). Therefore, in the present study, we examined consumer preferences regarding food destination attributes and their impact on food photograph viewing behaviour. Additionally, we explored whether travellers' perception of the benefits derived from viewing food photographs mediates this relationship.

Methodology

Adopting a mixed-methods research approach, this study comprised two stages. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 residents from Dorset and Hampshire in the UK who were foodies or food enthusiasts and had previous experience in local food travel. The interviews aimed to uncover the perceived benefits of viewing food photographs on social media and identify food destination attribute preferences.

In the second stage, we examined the relationship between the identified food destination attribute preferences and the intensity and engagement in viewing food photographs on social media. We identified three categories of destination attributes: functional, hedonic, and local attributes, which are in line with the earlier study by Ashton (2014). Functional attributes refer to the tangible and practical aspects of a destination that contribute to its overall appeal. Hedonic attributes focus on the emotional and perceptual aspects of a destination, while local attributes capture the local distinctiveness of a destination. Intensity and engagement were our dependent measures. To achieve this, an online survey was administered to 582 residents from the same regions. The survey responses were then analysed using multiple regression and Hayes' Process Model 4 (Hayes, 2017).

Results and/or Discussion and Contributions

In our study, we observed that gender and age positively influenced the intensity and engagement of food photograph viewing behaviour. Therefore, we included these two variables as control variables in all our analyses. The multiple regression results revealed that psychological attribute preference had a positive association with both intensity (b = .147, SE = .03, p < .001) and engagement (b = .183, SE = .04, p < .001) of food photograph viewing behaviour. This means that individuals who value psychological destination attributes are more likely to view food photographs more intensely and frequently on social media platforms. Conversely, we found no significant association between functional and local attributes and food photograph viewing behaviour.

Furthermore, mediation analyses suggest that all dimensions of perceived benefits (i.e., perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, affective gratification, source credibility, and homophily) mediate the relationship between hedonic attribute preference and the intensity and engagement of viewing food photographs. Food day-trippers who prioritise psychological destination attributes, such as high-end restaurants, popular cafes, and family-friendly environments, find greater benefits in viewing food photographs on social media when making food travel decisions.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Our findings make valuable contributions both theoretically and practically. Firstly, it enriches existing theoretical models such as the UGT and the TAM by identifying an alternative motivation and mechanism that influences food photograph viewing behaviour on social media. This expands our understanding of the factors that drive consumer engagement with food visual content and provides a more comprehensive view of the underlying processes involved. Secondly, our findings have practical implications for DMOs aiming to attract domestic visitors to their food destinations. By identifying the destination attributes that are

highly valued by food day-trippers and understanding their impact on photograph viewing behaviour, DMOs can tailor their marketing strategies and social media campaigns to effectively engage with their target audience. This knowledge can help DMOs promote their destinations by highlighting the specific attributes that resonate with food day-trippers, ultimately enhancing their attractiveness and driving visitation.

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