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19 July 2018

PolyU Study Finds Food Tells Stories on Social Media

Understanding what motivates travellers to share their food-related experiences through social media is important because that information influences others' behaviour and acts as a form of destination marketing, according to Dr Ksenia Kirillova of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and her co-researchers. Having conducted interviews with South Korean social media users, the researchers identified various patterns of food-sharing behaviour, revealing that the motives for sharing were related to both psychological and functional benefits, and to self-focused and altruistic benefits.

Word-of-mouth is especially important in tourism because it is a reliable source of information about the quality of products and services, which can otherwise be difficult for people to access before consumption. In particular, user-generated content on social media is considered trustworthy, argue the researchers, because it is created by "members of one's own network" who have firsthand experience of the tourism destination or product.

Indeed, destination marketers value user-generated content because it raises awareness of a destination and "helps make the travel experience tangible", the researchers note. It should not be surprising then that food, which represents the identity and culture of a place and thus "adds uniqueness" to a tourist's experience, is increasingly often being used on social media to represent the emotional attachment tourists feel to their destinations.

Yet the most common approach to analysing tourists' social media use is to focus on how people use and respond to the information provided by user-generated content rather than ask why the content was posted in the first place. To remedy that oversight, the researchers set out to determine what motivates people to post food-related content on their favourite social media platforms.

Turning to South Korea because the country is ranked "first in the world in terms of social media usage" – particularly on global platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and local platforms such as KakaoStory and Cyworld – the researchers interviewed 33 people online and face-to-face, with more than 60% being women and with around the same percentage being in their twenties and thirties.

During the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their food-related experiences while travelling, describe the content they had shared on social media during or after their trips, and their motivations for doing so. The participants were also asked to provide one or two of the digital images they had posted as examples.

Many of the participants said that they posted their food-related experiences after they returned home. Some said that they preferred to wait until they had time to organise the content before sharing it, which the researchers suggest indicates "impression management", whereas others

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enjoyed sharing after they got home because doing so served as a “reminder of the happy moments” during the trip. The posts generally consisted of a photo or a photo accompanied by text, and the photos were usually of a dish or food item taken at a food market, street vendor site or restaurant. The food often featured an “aesthetic” or “exotic” touch.

The researchers identified 17 themes among the reasons that participants gave for sharing their food experiences, categorising them into social and relational, self-image projection, emotion articulation, archiving self and information sharing domains. Given the nature of social media, it is perhaps unsurprising that social and relational motives for sharing were particularly important.

The participants seemed to use their travel food experiences as “a ‘hook’ for initiating and engaging the audience in a virtual conversation”, perhaps because food is regarded as a comfortable topic that can safely be shared with family, friends and even strangers. Some participants enjoyed sharing their travel food experiences because it helped them to gain social support and to feel validated by others. As one participant put it, “I feel really good if I get lots of comments and likes. I feel like I am the popular one”.

Sharing food experiences also helped the participants to manage their self-image, as the selection of particular images could “steer others towards perceiving them in a desired way”, the researchers suggest. A “luxurious dining experience”, for instance, could be used to affirm the poster’s social status, and some participants would only consider sharing food experiences that projected an image of “an upscale lifestyle”. Others, however, were keen to be perceived as “food experts” and enjoyed receiving requests for restaurant recommendations and other food-related information.

Expressing emotion was identified as another motivation for posting food-related experiences. The participants tended to describe food as a “happy part of a trip” and posting their experiences on social-networking sites gave them a “sense of self-gratification, happiness and joy”. However, they also had more altruistic motives, and were motivated to make their friends happy through sharing content that they would appreciate. One participant explained that her friends were “really curious” about the amount of sweet food sold in the US, so while on a trip there she shared pictures to make her friends happy.

The participants were also motivated to post their experiences as a way of “archiving” their memories. Many of them considered social media sites to be a secure way of storing their travel data, and editing and sharing the content gave them opportunities to reflect on their experiences. The desire to share information with others was regarded as another altruistic motive, because sharing recommendations and providing “unique insights” into the local cuisine is valuable in helping friends and others to decide whether to visit a destination.

The study revealed that travellers’ food experiences help them to understand the destination by two means: “cultural dissimilarity and emotional connection”. Some participants discussed how they enjoyed exploring the local markets and stores to discover the kind of food the locals ate,

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and then sharing these experiences on social media. Observing the locals' food experiences helped them to "understand and appreciate the unique values of a destination".

One participant described how during a trip to Spain, he was so surprised to discover that the locals enjoyed spending two or three hours eating a meal, rather than rushing to eat as fast as possible, that he wanted to "share this culturally shocking story" with his friends.

Apart from the contrast with their own culture, the participants commented on the emotional connection that they felt with the destination through experiencing the local food. As the researchers note, "distinct foods and flavours tell the story of a destination and its history, culture and people", so immersing themselves in the local food helps travellers to understand the place better, while "local exotic flavours add a thrill and a sense of adventure".

Travellers post their food-related experiences on social-networking sites for numerous reasons, yet such user-generated content can also promote the destination and "influence the decision making of others", argue the researchers. Hence, there is a "natural alliance" between destination marketers and tourists: information posted online helps to market the destination while also educating the public about the "local culture, heritage and social norms". This seems to be a win-win situation for both travellers and destination marketers, who should be able to take the findings of the study to "strategically harness" the willingness and energy of travellers to promote the destination and attract more visitors.

Wang, Saerom, Kirillova, Ksenia and Lehto, Xinran. (2017). Travelers' Food Experience Sharing on Social Network Sites. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 34(5), 680-693.

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