

Research Paper

An Investigation into Official Tourism Websites for Promoting Food Tourism in ASEAN Countries

Tan Siew Tze & Noor Hazarina Hashim
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract: This study evaluated all ten ASEAN countries' official website related to food tourism information. Four dimensions - food culture, featured foods and recipes, culinary tourism marketing strategies, and restaurant guides - and 23 websites features were investigated in a web content analysis session. This study found that the ASEAN National Tourism Organisations had minimal information about food tourism on their websites. This study concludes by providing insights on how national tourism organisations could use their websites to promote food tourism in their respective countries.

Key words: ASEAN, culinary tourism, cuisine, food tourism, web content analysis

Suggested citation: Tan, S.T. & Hashim, N.H. (2013). An investigation into official tourism websites for promoting food tourism in ASEAN countries. *Asia Pacific Journal of Innovation in Hospitality and Tourism*, 2(2), 171-182

Introduction

For human beings, food is a critical contributor to physical well-being. It is not only a major source of pleasure, worry, and stress, but also a major occupant of time. For tourists, food plays many roles. It is partaken of in celebrations and social and entertainment events; food is both sensuous and sensual. Consuming different foods is also a way of experiencing new cultures and countries. Although food seldom becomes the main reason for visiting a destination, local food adds to the range of attractions and represents a culture that contributes to the overall travel experience.

Interestingly, despite being an important element in travel activities, research on food tourism began to receive academic attention only in the early 1980s. After 30

Correspondence: Tan Siew Tze, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Email: siewtze.tst@gmail.com
Noor Hazarina Hashim, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Email: m-hazarina@gmail.com

years, food tourism as a form of tourism made its appearance as gastronomic tourism (Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Zelinsky, 1985), culinary tourism (Long, 2004), and food tourism (Hall *et al.*, 2003). Despite the extensive and diverse definitions, concepts and dimensions proposed, these terms, used interchangeably (Beer, Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2012) connote almost the same notion - the quest for a memorable and unique food and drink experience, both near and far.

In an increasingly competitive world of destination marketing, countries are constantly seeking a unique selling proposition. Undoubtedly, local food with distinct and unique features may be used as a marketing tool to attract visitors (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Au & Law, 2002). The attractiveness of local cuisine to tourists is demonstrated in a survey of visitors to Yucatan Peninsula, where 46% of the meals consumed were local cuisine (Torres, 2002). From an economic perspective, any tourist would spend money on food during their travel, and studies suggest that among all traveling expenditure, tourists are least likely to cut their food budget (Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2013). Countries like Australia, New Zealand, and France had begun to target food tourism as one of the segments of tourism in their marketing strategy. Tourism Victoria, for instance, proposed a year-round integrated marketing plan to promote the state wine and food experiences, events, and activities - all aiming to increase visitors' length of stay and spending (Tourism Victoria, 2011-2012).

Even with the assortment of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, there is a loud call for empirical studies with respect to the marketing of food tourism (Beer, Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2013). Research seems to focus on developed countries or countries with a strong food tourism milieu, and very little has been published related to the potential of food tourism in developing countries (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Kim, Yuan, Goh & Antun, 2009). Most noticeably, there are very limited studies that investigate the promotion of food tourism in online environments (see Horng & Tsai, 2010; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Surenkok, Baggio & Corigliano, 2010).

As tourists shift in their information-search behaviour from off-line to online media (Jordan, Norman & Vogt, 2013), investigating online information quality and marketing strategies becomes an imperative. A search on leading research databases - including EBSCOhost, Emerald, Google Scholar, Proquest, and ScienceDirect - found research related to the online promotion of food tourism to be a relatively new domain. As mentioned earlier, research tends to focus on countries with a strong food tourism background (Horng & Tsai, 2010) or on a specific industry, such as the restaurant industry (Gregory, Youcheng & DiPietro, 2010).

The recent ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy 2012-2015 meeting acknowledged that food tourism has emerged as one of the key contributors to the development of tourism in ASEAN countries (Bernama, 11 July 2013). The governments of

ASEAN countries also acknowledge the potential of marketing food tourism as one of their tourism products. Compared with other ASEAN countries, Singapore and Thailand are already extending serious efforts into the promotion of food tourism. For instance, in 2012, Singapore launched its year-long integrated culinary campaign called the Singapore International Culinary Exchange (SPICE) programme to promote Singaporean food products via two initiatives: Singapore Takeout and Global Chef Exchange (Timo, 2011).

Besides off-line campaigns, the ASEAN National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) are adding on information related to food tourism on their tourism websites. This section of the website provides information on food tourism, such as local food specialties and restaurant information. Nonetheless, this study argues that online presence is not the only factor of importance - tourism NTOs should also ensure that the information provided is useful such that it becomes a worthy investment. This study attempts to address the limited research on food tourism in the online environment. More specifically, this study will investigate website dimensions and features used to promote food tourism among the official ASEAN tourism websites.

A review of the role of IT in travel activities and marketing food tourism is found in Section 2. Section 3 describes the methodology while Section 4 discusses the findings. Section 5 provides the conclusion and implications of the study to the academe and tourism industry.

Literature Review

Tourism and Information Technology

With growing interest in Web marketing, the effective usage of a business's website is becoming an important part of its success (Kim *et al.*, 2009). This applies to the tourism industry as well. Travelers can obtain information, compare costs, and make reservations easily if online access is available. Tourists use the Web as a tool to search for potential tourist destinations, activities, and services (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Xiang & Pan, 2011). The design of a tourism website must be both adequate and eye-catching to attract consumers to visit or surf their websites. More importantly, the content of a website is one of the main factors contributing to repeated visits (Rosen & Purinton, 2004).

Besides offering information, interactive designs allow tourism organisations to identify consumers' interests and encourage their participation. The way a website presents information, graphics, and photos influences how these messages are received by the viewer (Rosen & Purinton, 2004). Thus, the content of government tourism websites is very important in promoting the country as it directly influences the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience of the country.

Marketing Food Tourism

Food consumption is one of the important factors in destination marketing, and there are many ways to instill food as part of the travel experience. Food is promoted to advertise the identity and culture of the destination. It is also a great opportunity for local food producers to add value to their products by creating a special experience for tourists (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

One of the factors that contribute to the growth of the food tourism is the changing pattern in the twenty-first century society leisure lifestyle (Douglas, Douglas & Derrett, 2001). Moving away from the traditional 4S of 'Tourism' (sun, sand, sex, and surf), people choose to pursue their interest in food as a part of a leisure experience such as watching cooking shows and dining out.

Hall & Sharples (2003) divided food tourism into three major categories: gourmet (gastronomic/ cuisine tourism), cuisine tourism and rural/urban tourism, based on the interest and number of tourists. In gourmet tourism, tourists visit expensive and luxury restaurants to experience special, unique and personalised service related to food, service and atmosphere. In culinary tourism, tourists eat out in local and reasonable priced restaurants that offer good quality and quantity of food. Finally, rural/urban tourism is the most common. For these tourists, food is part of the travel experience rather than a focus.

When looking for ways to develop food tourism, a destination should make sure that it possesses the key elements to support food tourism, which means it must establish what unique food assets it has and identify what its strengths and weaknesses are in terms of food tourism development (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Hjalager & Richards (2002) suggest that destinations developing food tourism need to have short-term, intermediate, and long-term strategic plans based on their resources, the status quo, and the special needs and expectations of the target market in order to make food tourism sustainable.

Most of Asia's National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) have developed their own marketing strategies for food tourism in their national tourism policy plans (Horng & Tsai, 2010). Nonetheless, policies and strategies must work together to allow a destination's organisations to develop food tourism more actively. For instance, to encourage tourists to purchase local food, specific marketing strategies are needed to attract potential and targeted tourists, such as forming strategic alliances with food producers, handlers, sellers, hotels, restaurants, wine sellers, and cooks. This will also improve the image of local cuisine (Du Rand & Heath, 2006). A successful marketing strategy for food tourism needs to maintain good public relations and media control as well as create authentic experiences and gain support from the government and international marketing organisations. Marketing campaigns should integrate food and cuisine heritages to attract more tourists. Finally, local governments should

encourage the development of tourism, including the development of food and beverage industries, to boost the economy, create job opportunities, and enhance the sustainability of tourism (Du Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003).

Methods

This study used web content analysis as the data-collection method to identify the presence of texts and photos related to food tourism on government tourism websites. Content analysis is a research tool that focuses on the actual content and internal features of media. It is used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner (Krippendorf, 1980). This study has adopted the framework from the study of Horng & Tsai (2010) on government websites promoting East Asian culinary tourism to evaluate all 10 official ASEAN¹ countries' tourism websites. The evaluation investigated four dimensions—food culture, featured foods and recipes, culinary tourism marketing strategies, restaurant guides—and over 23 features. The 23 features include text descriptions and photo related to the dimension (see Table 1 for a detailed description).

A pretest conducted on a Taiwanese tourism website helped to ensure the suitability of the dimensions. The pretest led to minor changes in the dimensions and their elements. Following the pretest, a pilot study was conducted on three ASEAN countries' food tourism websites²—Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei—to test the reliability and validity of the coding scheme and to finalise the features for content analysis. The pilot study also led to minor changes in the dimensions and features of the coding scheme.

In order to ensure the reliability of the content analysis procedure, this study used the intra-coder reliability, which coded the data by visiting the official ASEAN tourism websites in two periods: one in the morning and one at night. Face validity and content validity sought expert opinion from lecturers in the tourism industry to check the dimensions and features used in this study.

Data collection took place for a week, from February 20–27, 2012. Since some websites allocate information after their home page, the web content analysis was conducted until the fourth layer of the 10 official tourism websites.

¹ The 10 ASEAN countries are Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

² There are 3 ASEAN countries food tourism websites involved in the pilot study, which are Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

Discussion

The websites were examined twice in a day but no differences were found in the websites' design and content. Table 1 shows data collected from the official ASEAN tourism websites' frameworks for promoting food tourism.

Food Culture

In the food culture dimension, the feature with the highest presence rate is the *Introduction to food culture*, with nine out of 10 (90%) ASEAN countries having this feature in their official tourism websites. Most websites provide a description of the local foods and signature dishes of the country. However, only 4 out of the 10 countries highlighted their respective countries' local cuisine despite 50% of the websites being furnished with *photos of the local cuisine*. Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and Cambodia have both information and photos of local cuisine. On the other hand, Malaysia only has photos, while Brunei also shares recipes of its local cuisine. Only two countries, Singapore and Indonesia, provide a *map guide* to the cities offering local cuisine. Figures 1 and 2 show an example of an *Introduction to food culture* page and a *Map of local cuisine spots* on the Tourism Singapore site.

Featured Foods and Recipes

The featured foods and recipes dimension describe a country's signature dishes. These signature dishes are unique and considered as 'must-try' dishes for tourists. Four out of 10 (40%) countries include information about *country signature dishes*, but only two countries provide *recipes*. Half of the countries have *photos of the dishes* but only two countries, Brunei and Thailand, offer detailed recipes for representative cuisine. Finally, only two countries offer information on signature *snacks and desserts* on their website, and none share *recipes*.

Culinary Tourism Marketing Strategies

Almost 50% of the sites provide information on *restaurants and spots* where local dishes can be enjoyed. Only two countries, Singapore and Laos, provide *links to the restaurants' websites*. Three countries offer information on *vegetarian restaurants*. Four countries—Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Cambodia—promote their *country's cooking classes/schools* as one of the attractions for tourists. Further, six countries suggest a gastronomy tour as one of their activities. Nonetheless, despite the suggestion, none of the countries includes *gastronomy tours in their itinerary*. Three countries mention *food festivals*. Finally, only Indonesia recommends food as a *travel souvenir*.

Table 1. Data collected from ASEAN official tourism websites' frameworks for promoting food tourism

Dimensions	Official Tourism Organisations									
	TM	STB	BT	MTCE	TAT	VNA	MTC	LNTA	DTP	MHT
Food Culture										
1. Introduction to food culture	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2. Introduction to local cuisines	-	√	√	√	-	-	√	-	-	-
3. Photos of local cuisines	√	√	√	√	-	-	√	-	-	-
4. Show recipes of local cuisines	-	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Map guide to the cities offering local cuisines	-	√	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	-
Signature Foods and Recipes										
1. Introduction to signature foods	-	√	√	-	√	-	-	-	√	-
2. Detailed recipes for signature cuisines	-	-	√	-	√	-	-	-	-	-
3. Photos of signature cuisines	-	√	√	-	√	-	-	-	√	√
4. Introduction for signature snacks and desserts	-	√	-	-	√	-	-	-	-	-
5. Detailed recipes for signature snacks and desserts	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Culinary Tourism Marketing Strategies										
1. Introduction to selected restaurants	-	√	√	√	-	-	-	√	√	-
2. Introduction to cuisines in major cities and tourist spots	-	√	-	√	√	-	√	-	-	-
3. Links to local cuisines restaurant websites	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	√	-	-
4. Mention about vegetarian food restaurant	-	√	-	-	√	-	√	-	-	-
5. Introduction to cooking school/class	√	√	-	-	√	-	√	-	-	-
6. Recommend gastronomy tours	√	√	√	√	√	-	-	√	-	-
7. Introduction to gastronomy tour itinerary	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8. Introduction to food festivals	√	√	-	-	√	-	-	-	-	-
9. Recommend foods for souvenirs	-	-	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	-
Restaurant Guide										
1. Search function – by cuisine category	-	√	-	-	√	-	√	-	-	-
2. Search function – by area	√	-	-	√	√	-	√	√	-	-
3. Search function – by restaurant	√	√	-	√	-	-	√	-	-	-
4. Search function – by specific dish	√	-	-	-	√	-	-	-	-	-

Note: √ = Presence; - = Absence; TM – Tourism Malaysia (<http://www.tourism.gov.my/>); STB – Singapore Tourism Board (<http://www.yoursingapore.com/>); BT – Brunei Tourism (<http://www.bruneitourism.travel/>); MTCE – Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Republic of Indonesia (<http://www.indonesia.travel/>); TAT – Tourism Authority of Thailand (<http://www.tourismthailand.org/>); VNA – Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (<http://www.vietnamtourism.gov.vn/english/>); MTC – Ministry of tourism of Cambodia (<http://www.tourismcambodia.org/>); LNTA – Lao National Tourism Administration (<http://www.tourismlaos.org/>); DTP – Department Of Tourism Philippines (<http://www.tourism.gov.ph/>); MHT – Ministry of Hotel and Tourism, Myanmar (<http://www.myanmar-tourism.org/>)



Figure 1. Introduction to Food Culture of Singapore



Figure 2. Map Guide to Cities Offering Local Cuisines in Indonesia

Restaurant Guides

The restaurant guides dimension investigates the search facilities provided by restaurant. Half of the countries use the search function *by area* to search the restaurant. Three out of 10 (30%) countries provide the search function *by specific dish* and *by cuisine category*. Finally, only four (40%) countries provide the search function *by restaurant*.

Search For Place to Eat
 By Destination: All
 By Category: All
 By Type of Cuisine: All
 Price per Head: All
 Keywords
 Search

Figure 3. Search function for restaurants in Thailand

Conclusion

This study has shed some light on food tourism with major emphasis on two major contributions: theoretical and managerial implications. This study evaluated food tourism information on the ten official tourism website of the ASEAN countries. The websites were evaluated based on four dimensions: food culture, featured foods and recipes, culinary tourism marketing strategies, and restaurant guides. The *Introduction to food culture* feature in the food culture dimension is important in introducing a country's cuisine and food culture to current and potential tourists. Compared to other Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan (Horng & Tsai, 2010), this study found that ASEAN NTOs failed to maximise their websites to promote food tourism.

In terms of the theoretical contributions, this study has enriched the body of literature on food tourism particularly on marketing food tourism online. As Internet becomes an increasingly important travel information source, having complete and useful information is an advantage to any service provider. The results of this study could provide a foundation for future research in this topic. In addition, this study is perhaps the first to investigate the marketing of food tourism in ASEAN countries.

From the managerial perspectives, this study provides information that should assist NTOs managers in planning and utilising tourism resources more efficiently. In planning an online marketing plan, NTO managers need to focus on targeting the food tourism market. The results suggest ample room for improvement in each ASEAN country's food tourism section on its official website. NTOs should include food culture and local cuisine information on their websites, as food is essential to tourists' needs and experience. Features like search functions, ingredients, and photos help tourists make decisions on whether they should patronise a particular restaurant or to try the food. In addition, NTOs should highlight their gastronomy tour's itinerary by including unique and 'must-try; eating-places during the travels.

Similarly, the NTOs should give attention to the website design. A website must be user-friendly, and content must always be updated (Tan & Wei, 2006). A large number of photos and written descriptions can enhance marketing. English and local-language versions of the websites also need to be identical and updated synchronously.

The scope of this research is limited to the ten official ASEAN tourism websites. Therefore, future research could extend this study to other Asian countries (e.g., India), the former Russian Federation states, Scandinavia, and the Middle East, which possess a diverse food culture (Thiele & Weiss, 2003). In addition, these 10 websites were analysed using their English versions only. Ideally, the presentations, interfaces, and marketing strategies used in other language versions should be similar with those in the English versions. In addition, the main limitation of this study is the application of the binary scale (yes/no) in content analysis. Future research could use a Likert scale to show information quality or presence. Finally, future research could add to the existing dimensions, for example, the restaurant certification dimension.

In conclusion, food tourism involving the cuisine and food culture of the locale, region, or country can be a powerful tool for a country's tourism strategy. Official ASEAN tourism websites need to combine the local culinary culture with the key aspects of culture and society in general. A holistic, humane, and interactive design will reinforce a country's image.

References

- Ab Karim, S. & Chi, C. G.-Q. (2010). Culinary tourism as a destination attraction: An empirical examination of destinations' food image *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management* 19(6), 531-555.
- Au, L. & Law, R. (2002). Categorical classification of tourism dining. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29(3), 819-833.
- Beer, C.L., Ottenbacher, M.C. & Harrington, R. J. (2012). Food tourism implementation in the Black Forest destination. *Journal of Culinary Science & Technology*, 10(2), 106-128.

- Bernama (2013). ASEAN promotes six creative travel themes to tourists in region. Retrieved 13 July 2013 from http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v7/bu_newsbusiness.php?id=962646
- Douglas, N., Douglas, G. & Derrett, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Special interest groups: context and cases*. Brisbane, Queensland: John Wiley & Sons.
- Du Rand, G. E. & Heath, E. (2006). Towards framework for food tourism as an element of destination marketing. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 9(3), 206-234.
- Du Rand, G. E., Heath, E. & Alberts, N. (2003). The role of local and regional food in destination marketing: a South African situation analysis. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 14(3/4), 97-112.
- Gregory, A., Youcheng, W. & DiPietro, R. B. (2010). Towards a functional model of website evaluation: A case study of casual dining restaurants. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 2(1), 68-85.
- Hall, C. M. & Sharples, L. (2003). The consumption of experiences or the experiences of consumption? an introduction to the tourism of taste. In C. M. Hall, L. Sharples, R. Mitchell, N. Macionis & B. Cambourne (Eds.), *Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Hall, C. M., Sharples, L., Mitchell, R., Macionis, N. & Cambourne, B. (2003). *Food tourism around the world: Development, management and markets* (1st ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Hjalager, A.-M. & Richards, G. (2002). *Tourism and gastronomy* (1st ed.). London: Routledge.
- Horng, J.S. & Tsai, S.C.T. (2010). Government websites for promoting East Asian culinary tourism: a cross-national analysis. *Tourism Management*, 31(1), 74-85.
- Hudson, S. & Thal, K. (2013). The impact of social media on the consumer decision process: implications for tourism marketing. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 156-160.
- Jordan, E.J., Norman, W.C. & Vogt, C.A. (2013). A cross-cultural comparison of online travel information search behaviors. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 6(April), 15-22.
- Kim, Y. G., Eves, A. & Scarles, C. (2013). Empirical verification of a conceptual model of local food consumption at a tourist destination. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 33(June), 484-489.
- Kim, Y.H., Yuan, J.J.X., Goh, B.K. & Antun, J.M. (2009). Web marketing in food tourism: A content analysis of web sites in West Texas. *Journal of Culinary Science & Technology*, 7(1), 52-64.
- Kivela, J. & Crotts, J. C. (2006). Tourism and gastronomy: Gastronomy's influence on how tourists experience a destination. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 30(3), 354-377.

- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.
- Long, L. (2004). *Culinary tourism* (1st ed.). Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Rosen, D.E. & Purinton, E. (2004). Website design: Viewing the web as a cognitive landscape. *Journal of Business Research*, 57(7), 787-794.
- Surenkok, A., Baggio, R. & Corigliano, M.A. (2010). *Gastronomy and tourism in Turkey: The role of ICTs*. Vienna: Springer-Verlag Wien.
- Tan, G. W. & Wei, K. K. (2006). An empirical study of web browsing behaviour: Towards an effective website design. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 5(4), 261-271.
- Thiele, S. & Weiss, C. (2003). Consumer demand for food diversity: evidence for Germany. *Food Policy*, 28(2), 99-115.
- Timo, C. (2011). Presenting SPICE: Singapore takeout & global chef exchange. Retrieved 13 July 2013 from <http://www.calvintimo.com/2011/05/01/presenting-spice-singapore-takeout-global-chef-exchange/>.
- Torres, R. (2002). Toward a better understanding of the tourist and agricultural linkages in the yucatan: tourist food consumption and preferences. *Tourism Geographies*, 4(3), 282-306.
- Tourism Victoria. (2011-2012). Tourism Victoria's regional Marketing and Development Plan, 2011-2012. Retrieved 8 March 2013 from <http://www.tourism.vic.gov.au/images/stories/Final%20Yarra%20Valley%20and%20Dandenong%20Ranges%20Marketing%20and%20Development%20Plan%202011-2012.pdf>.
- Xiang, Z. & Pan, B. (2011). Travel queries on cities in the United States: Implications for search engine marketing for tourist destinations. *Tourism Management*, 32(1), 88-97.
- Zelinsky, W. (1985). The roving palate: North America's ethnic restaurant cuisines. *Geoforum*, 16(1), 71-72.