

Thai street food and brand image development: An investigation from tourists' perspective

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Abstract

The main aim of this research was to develop street food destination brand image by conducting an investigation from a tourist perspective. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study: an investigation of international tourists at China Town, Yaowarat, Thailand. Face-to-face interview was used for the data collecting process while content analysis technique was used to analyze data. A total of 64 participants were interviewed from July to November 2018. The findings revealed that the tourists received information about Yaowarat street food from social media such as TripAdvisor, word of mouth, advertisement, and travel guidebook. The most important things for developing street food destination brand image are: the uniqueness of Thai dishes; the worthiness of the price paid; and the attraction of the food, especially deliciousness. Their main activities are eating and taking photos, sightseeing (walking/seeing interesting things around the street food area), and shopping. The study's contributions and future research are also provided.

Keywords:

Street food; food destination image development; food tourism; tourist behavior

1 Introduction

Tourism is one of the most growing industries in the world and is called a vital gold mine for a national economic system (Kruja & Hasaj, 2010). For example, Thailand is one of the ASEAN countries succeeding in tourism due to a gradually higher number of tourists and income caused by tourists' expenses. In B.E.2558 (2015), Thailand earned 1,857,010.98 million Baht from the tourism of which 252,769.85 million Baht or 15.76% was an increase from the previous year (Department of Tourism, 2017). According to the statistical data of domestic tourists, the growth rate of the tourists' overall expenses has increased, while the expense on food and beverages ranked second after the expense on accommodation and continues to increase every year (Department of Tourism, 2017). Focused on food tourism alone, 456,000 million Baht or 20% of tourism overall income was found. Such income from domestic and international travellers are 174,000 million Baht and 282,000 million Baht, respectively. The first 3-ranked foreigners who mostly pay for food and beverages are Chinese, English and Russian (Online Thairath, 2017). Therefore, food tourism should be considered as one of the should-be-developed important industries (Guzel & Apaydin, 2016).

One important aspect of food tourism is street food, due to its convenience; some being pre-cooked and ready-to-eat (FAO, 1997). Especially, it is an eating-out style atmosphere (Buscemi et al., 2012) with a reasonably cheap price that all tourist age groups can afford. Street food gives a true experience of eating local and authentic food for both locals and tourists (UNWTO, 2012; Privitera & Nesci, 2015). This style of eating shows identity and culture via food communication and is an indispensable part of tourism (Gheorghe et al., 2014). Street food exists in many countries, such as Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Africa and Thailand (Chukuezi, 2010).

A most important fact about Bangkok is that it has many street vendors. Almost every street in the city has street vendors who sell items in a particular way, especially a variety of food (Bhowmik, 2005). For instance, in Thailand, street food has been a long-term business providing income and jobs for the society, representing Thai culture through different types of food (Nirathorn, 2014), and plays an important role for tourism, connecting all resources, not only cultural but also biodiversity, both tangible and intangible (UNWTO, 2016). The increase in food vendors in Bangkok is due to several reasons as food vendors want to attract tourists who are on the lookout for the local varieties of food. And street food is the main option to access a variety of local food cultures (Bhowmik, 2005)

The literature review has shown that many studies have explored the street food context, with scholars investigating such areas as food safety and risk factors of street food (Omemu & Aderoju, 2008; Muyanja, Nayiga, Brenda, & Nasinyama, 2011). It was found that there were a few studies on brand image development for street food enhancement, especially within the Yaowarat famous street food in Thailand. Hence, this study aims to bridge this gap and focuses on exploring the development of a destination brand image, by investigating the tourist perspective. It is important to know

their opinions on street food in order to respond to tourist needs and the current trends which may have changed over time; and to learn/manage an appropriate way to increase a creative experience for street food tourism (Gajic, 2015), consequently helping to improve good brand image and increase tourism potential (Ashton, 2014). Once the street food and destination brand image development increases and gains a good reputation, by word of mouth to family and friends, especially for great quality and safety, tourist intention to return will increase, in turn helping all relevant stakeholders gain higher income and increase jobs at local destinations (Dawson et al., 1996).

Thus, questions arise. Can the tourism potential of authentic street food domestically and internally support international acceptance and the expectations of tourists and food lovers? In the case of development needs for higher potential, what should be done in order to have the government sector, other agencies including private sectors and people pay attention to the potential development of street food and tourism in Yaowarat through cooperation?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Street Food Tourism Destination

Tourism behaviour during the past few years has not only been about taking photos of the destinations but also accessing the local experience, resulting in the importance of food and tastes in tourism (UNWTO, 2012). Food is praised as a symbol of each nationality which can indicate the backgrounds of each ethnic group (Padolsky, 2005), and represents the beliefs, values, and knowledge of each society. It is both food science and art affecting personal eating (Tantaweewong, 2013). It comes from experiences and practices of the customs and traditions that each family or community has abided by and is transferred down the generations. Food cultures in each region are a beautiful invention and reflect the local consumers' ideas in each area (Tellström, Gustafsson & Mossberg, 2006). Street food is recommended as a "must-do" experience while travelling in Thailand. Street food is unique, with the origins of ingredients, the preparation, different tastes and cooking ease. Thai street food has impressed a lot of tourists with these experiences (Makanukhrao & Bussracompakorn, 2012).

2.2 The Concept of Destination Dimensions

The essential characteristics, components of tourist destination and resources to attract tourists can be classified into 5A (5 dimensions of tourism) by the reference of Dickman (1997) as follows:

Attraction. It is considered as an essential factor to persuade and urge tourists to visit. It is one of the first factors that tourists use as a guideline whether to travel or not. It might acknowledge or entertain tourists. It is usually different depending on tourists' personal demands and interests. Examples of attractions are natural scenery or landscapes; sea, waterfall, forest etc. Examples of cultural-valued attractions are

archaeological parks, temples, ancient communities, ways of life and unique livelihood of each community etc.

Accessibility. Even though many attractions are interesting and attract tourists to visit, tourists still cannot visit if the accessibility is difficult or not provided.

Amenity. Provision of fundamental facilities and public utilities for tourists are also important in tourism such as toilets, water supply, electricity, hospital, bank and emergency service etc.

Accommodation. Attractions should provide accommodation and appropriate facilities in order to support tourists' demand.

Activity. Activities that tourists can do during their travel in order to have more interest and fun should be various and suitable for tourists' demands.

According to the review of components of tourism, it is known that the development of good tourism destination requires an understanding of important tourism components, which are: Attraction, Amenity and Accessibility. Moreover, there are additional other components like Activity (Cooper & Boniface, 2009; Dickman, 1997; Jittangwattana, 2005; Chaiya, 2015; Pongnirundorn, Buatham, & Yodsuwan, 2016).

2.3 Concept of Destination Brand Image Development

This study aimed at understanding the tourism destination and destination branding. In the literature review, the researcher tried to understand the ideas of a tourism destination and brand image from the meaning, ideas, researches and the process of brand image. Destination brand image is one of the important elements of a tourist destination due to be a part of the critical factors for the failure or success of tourism destination management (Lopes, 2011). Destination brand image can be defined as an individual's overall perception or the overview opinions about the place and can be developed based on the understanding of a place's characteristics (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini & Manzari, 2012).

Charupongsopon (2014) explained that brand image is an image in the consumer's mind caused by perceiving and remembering the unique identity of the brand which is then connected to the consumer's mind. Such image is derived from the consumer's direct experience. Implanting such image in the consumer's mind needs 3 components: i) strength of brand associations; the quality of transferring data like characteristics and advantages of the brand especially by using word of mouth, ii) favorability of brand associations; the ability to ensure the consumers are satisfied and respond to their needs satisfactorily, and iii) uniqueness of brand associations; the unique brand is different from the other brands in the same group in a way of characteristics or mentality, which makes consumers realise and perceive such difference.

According to the Echtner and Ritchie (2003) study, the brand image of a destination is evaluated from such destination environments by tourists. The image affects the

travelling decision. Normally, tourists decide to travel to good-imaged destinations such as well-known places, beautiful environment, and clean and safe areas. On the other hand, tourists often avoid travelling to uncivilized or dangerous destinations experiencing political-crisis, civil unrest, and chaos. Tourists need to have image management because it is an important stage for making decisions and deciding to travel.

From the study of brand image development, it was found that Echtner and Ritchie (1991) confirmed that brand image should be based on 3 fundamental components: attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique. The first one, attribute-holistic, means overall product specifications and information that tourists perceive and are impressed by. The image of destination includes scenery, attraction, facilities in the accommodation, price, the local friendliness, and natural components like weather and geological components.

The second is functional-psychological, which means specifications that can be observed or directly measured. It consists of surrounding scenery, trees, forest, rivers, villages, attractions and price, including less-feeling or intangible specifications such as destination atmosphere or mood (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; 1993). The last is common-unique, which means the personal perception of the different specifications of destinations. It can be classified since the levels are common to unique. The image of destinations includes unique features and events (functional characteristics) or auras (psychological characteristics) (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; 1993). In addition, food and beverage are used as one of the factors to attract tourists to visit. Food image is similar to the idea of destination image which consists of functional, psychological and unique components (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; 1993).

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Qualitative Research should be used in a study of this type of research as it enables received words or information to be used in the explanation of direct experiences or events (Ponterotto, 2005), and helps the researcher to better understand the complications of such phenomena or events (Williams, 2007). Interviewing is used as one of the tools for data collection in this qualitative research. Data were collected by In-Depth Interview, which is a semi-structured interview allowing in-depth information, and easier than interviewing by obvious-defined questions (Babbie, 2007). It gives a chance to interview responders to show their opinions and amiably clarify more details with no information limitations. There are only open-ended questions in order to guide the interview for data collection from tourists who travel and experience street food in Yaowarat. The interviews took place during July-November 2018 and were recorded and transcribed.

3.2 Data Analysis

This study is qualitative research with data collected by using a semi-structured interview. The researcher examined the data and carried out the content analysis by interpreting the data into interesting categories. Then, they were analyzed, synthesized and interpreted. Next, such data were compiled for being presented in a form of descriptive approach corresponding to questions in each section covering the research objectives and scopes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sangpikul, 2013). The researcher classified the interesting categories by using coloured markers. After that, data components were classified to organize coding and match with the objectives. Due to the analysis of the result based on the literature review, the findings will develop the street food destination brand image of Yaowarat.

3.3 Study Area

The study focused on the development of a destination brand image for Yaowarat from a tourist perspective. Moreover, Yaowarat was chosen as the study area owing to being in the World's Top 10 Cities for Street Food, ranked by Forbes website in the previous year. The city with superb Street Food was Bangkok (Bender, 2012). Even though time has flown by for many years, Yaowarat stills stand up to its potential for food readiness, environment, the Chinese way of life which has played an integral part ever since, buildings, and historical stories connecting to food and consumption (Ongthun & Siriwong, 2017). In addition, many international mass media have also praised Yaowarat, Bangkok for being the best place for street food (Bender, 2012; Shea, 2017). During nighttime, Yaowarat street is crowded and full of the aura of various types of cuisine along the street which is so attractive that tourists like to visit and experience the atmosphere (Larbarporn, 2013).

3.4 Participants of this Study

The sample group of the population in this study are foreign tourists who travelled to and experience street food in Yaowarat, Bangkok. The group was chosen by using Nonprobability Sampling with Purposive Sampling method. The size of the group to be interviewed for qualitative research should range from 20 to 30 people, or interviewing continued until repeated information is provided (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2017). In this study, the sample group consists of 64 participants. Most of the participants were female (41) and the remaining male (23). It can be said that they are essential for this study as they could provide in-depth information, especially when the results have involved in the experiences of street food. The participants were foreigners who travelled to their target destinations and experienced street food in Yaowarat.

4 Findings

4.1 Participant profiles

Regarding the data collected using in-depth interviews of the participants' general information about gender, age, nationality and travelling backgrounds to Yaowarat, it was found that the 64 participants from all over the world can be divided into 23 males (35.94%) and 41 females (64.06%). The interviewed samples were in the range from 18-57 years old. The most found nationalities of foreign tourists who travelled to and joined in activities in Yaowarat in this study was 20 Chinese (31.25%), followed by 12 Japanese (18.75%), 4 German (6.25%), 4 Korean (6.25%), 3 Singaporean (4.69%), 3 Indonesian (4.69%), 3 Australian (4.69%), 3 American (4.69%), 2 English (3.13%), 2 Taiwanese (3.13%), 2 Malaysian (3.13%), 2 Russian (3.13%), 1 French (1.56%), 1 Danish (1.56%), 1 Spanish (1.56%) and 1 Vietnamese (1.56%), respectively as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Participants' profile

No. (FT)	Gender	Age	Nationality	No. (FT)	Gender	Age	Nationality
1	Male	53	English	33	Female	35	American
2	Female	42	Singaporean	34	Male	32	Japanese
3	Male	22	Indonesian	35	Female	30	Chinese
4	Male	28	Japanese	36	Female	30	Chinese
5	Female	20	Indonesian	37	Male	30	Chinese
6	Female	26	Japanese	38	Female	28	Russian
7	Female	26	Japanese	39	Male	51	Japanese
8	Female	25	Taiwanese	40	Female	31	Chinese
9	Female	26	Japanese	41	Female	48	Chinese
10	Female	24	Japanese	42	Male	29	Russian
11	Female	23	Taiwanese	43	Female	45	Japanese
12	Female	25	Chinese	44	Male	35	Japanese
13	Female	26	Chinese	45	Female	24	Korean
14	Male	27	Indonesian	46	Female	38	Korean
15	Male	37	Malaysian	47	Female	32	American
16	Female	31	German	48	Female	36	Chinese
17	Female	30	Chinese	49	Male	32	Chinese
18	Male	35	French	50	Female	40	Chinese
19	Male	35	Chinese	51	Female	47	Vietnamese
20	Male	21	Singaporean	52	Female	35	Chinese
21	Male	29	German	53	Male	47	Australian
22	Male	18	German	54	Female	29	Chinese
23	Male	18	German	55	Female	28	Chinese
24	Female	19	Danish	56	Female	29	Chinese
25	Female	31	Australian	57	Female	32	Chinese
26	Female	36	Japanese	58	Male	57	Chinese

No. (FT)	Gender	Age	Nationality	No. (FT)	Gender	Age	Nationality
27	Female	25	Japanese	59	Female	25	Chinese
28	Female	28	Chinese	60	Female	24	Japanese
29	Female	22	Korean	61	Male	35	American
30	Female	30	Spanish	62	Female	30	English
31	Female	25	Malaysian	63	Male	33	Australian
32	Male	36	Singaporean	64	Male	18	Korean

Most of the tourists (43 participants (67.19%)) have travelled and joined activities in Yaowarat for the first time, while 21 participants (32.81%) have done so more than 1 time. Moreover, there were 33 participants (51.56%) who have tried Thai street food before more than the number of tourists (31 participants (48.44%)) who have not tasted Thai street food.

4.2 Information about street food in Yaowarat

According to the data collected from foreign tourists who travelled to and joined in activities in Yaowarat, the perception was that the foreign tourists perceive or know about Yaowarat in various ways. Most of them got to know Yaowarat because of their friends' suggestions. Such friends can be classified as friends who have been in Yaowarat before and told the stories as shown in this sample of an interview: *"I asked about it and it was recommended by friends who have visited before; a friend told that there are many kinds of delicious food."* (FT40; FT48; FT63). Thai friends also give information and recommend them to visit Yaowarat. Some tourists expressed: *"My Thai friend recommended me to visit this place and introduced many Thai restaurants. Every meal in Yaowarat is tasty, not spicy, and still a reasonable price."* (FT4; FT28; FT38).

Additionally are the foreign tourists who search for Yaowarat information themselves via online media like the Internet, websites and TripAdvisor by seeing the recommendations and tourists' previous opinions, reviews and scores. Several tourists said that: *"The Internet is the source for searching for the popular places in Bangkok. I found information from TripAdvisor and I feel really amazed as there are many street food surroundings"* (FT23; FT28; FT61). Lastly is regarding the perception via social media like Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram. A participant highlighted: *"I'm following VLOG on Youtube that Youtubers travel in popular places, and they recommended the street food in Yaowarat."* (FT9). Moreover, some tourists searched for Yaowarat information from printed media such as guidebooks for destinations in Thailand and magazines. Some got information from what they have been told by word of mouth.

4.3 Major attractions do you like when travelling to Yaowarat

According to the data collection from foreign tourists who join the activities in Yaowarat, the major attraction that foreign tourists like the most are food, due to the fact that some tourists were previously interested in the local food of each country. Therefore, when they travel to places, they like to try such local foods.

A participant highlighted that: *"...Yaowarat is the center of street food in Thailand where many people can find delicious kinds of food, I think food is the most important attraction in Yaowarat. When I think of Yaowarat street, food is the first thing..."* (FT41).

The tourists also claimed that Yaowarat is always crowded, giving a picture of people standing in line to buy stuff and extend their friendliness. A tourist expressed: *"The attraction in Yaowarat that I like the most is people, and I like when people line up to buy food. Everyone looks happy and enjoys it here."* (FT63). Another attraction is temples and shrines. The foreign tourists said that there are so many temples and shrines in Yaowarat that they can be considered as Yaowarat important landmarks. Examples of such temples and shrines are Wat Traimitr Withayaram, and Goddess of Mercy shrine including the Tien Fah foundation. However, besides the attractions that tourists like when visiting Yaowarat, there are still differences for some tourists. Such attractions in Yaowarat might not be special or attractive for them.

4.4 Main activities you like to do when travelling to Yaowarat

According to the data collection, the activity that tourists like to do the most is eating food, walking around, trying various types of food including the requirement to eat as much as they can, taking food photos, and finding the cheapest and most delicious food in Yaowarat.

A tourist highlighted: *"I've been here at night. Activities, when I travel here, are eating and taking photos around Yaowarat,"* (FT11). Aside from buying food, buying souvenirs, herbs or jewellery is also one of the most fancied activities that tourists like when travelling to Yaowarat.

4.5 Important facilities while visiting Yaowarat

The most important and insufficient facilities while they visit Yaowarat is tables and chairs, as street food restaurants or shops are cramped with limited seats resulting in an uncomfortable feeling during their meals and some shops provide only take-away services. Another important facility is toilet access. Sometimes tourists want to wash their hands or do their personal business, but they just cannot do that because there are no toilets, or they are difficult to access. In addition, other needed facilities are napkins, queuing systems, footpaths and food menus in English.

4.6 Transportation in Yaowarat

Most foreign tourists said the same thing; it's very convenient to visit Yaowarat as there is a lot of various public transportation and even though they need to have multimodal transport sometimes, it is still convenient. Moreover, Yaowarat is in the middle of the city where traffic always goes through. However, some tourists disagreed

by saying that travelling to Yaowarat is inconvenient. It costs higher journey fares and there is no parking space.

4.7 Security in Yaowarat

Most foreign tourists claimed that Yaowarat is very safe as police officers are patrolling around the corners making them feel safe. Also, pedestrian footpaths are allocated by placing barriers so that cars cannot enter in the area where tourists are walking. However, some tourists said that Yaowarat is insecure as tourists need to walk on the street during their visit which is risky for accidents. They suggested that security cameras should be installed all along the street for security purposes and that tourists should take care of themselves and their belongings.

4.8 Food safety in Yaowarat

Most tourists gave their opinions about food safety in Yaowarat that food from Yaowarat is safe as afterwards they did not get sick, have diarrhoea, or stomachache after the meals. They also mentioned that many restaurants work on customers' order resulting in freshness and heat. Moreover, buying food from clean restaurants with food or ingredients in storing cabinets to prevent flies is such an important factor to ensure tourist confidence. However, some restaurants still have no closed ingredients containers. Some seem to be clean, but some do not. Also, selling food on the street is not safe since air pollution can cause dirtiness. According to the information from foreign tourists' opinions collected by the researcher about the worthiness of the price they pay for street food in Yaowarat, most of the tourists said the same thing: that in the overall image, it's worth spending on street food in Yaowarat.

A tourist said: *"It's worth the money as it's not very expensive and one can taste many new foods in that area."* (FT33). In addition, another respondent claimed that *"Yes, it's quite a reasonable price with good quality, for example, for only 1,000 Baht you can taste many kinds of food, especially seafood."* (FT35).

4.9 Attributes that help to create a good image for street food tourism in Yaowarat

The component of destination imagery in Yaowarat that can bring about a good image or what people mostly think of when talking about Yaowarat is food unique identity. However, additional development of food like food safety, cleanliness of food and restaurants and storing ingredients in closed containers is still needed in order to improve destination brand image of street food in Yaowarat from the tourists' perspectives, so as to be better. It also helps make more money from tourism in Yaowarat as it was found that if the street food and destination brand image in Yaowarat was developed, the number of tourists would be higher resulting in greater income. Moreover, word of mouth and reviewing on websites help publicise and attract other tourists to come to Yaowarat.

5 Conclusion

The contributions of this study can be divided into two parts: firstly, managerial contribution and secondly, academic contribution. For the academic sector, researchers can apply this study to develop future research about street food destination brand image development in another region, or study on both entrepreneurs and tourists to make the information more reliable; or research other tourism products as theory is the basic foundation for researchers or persons who are interested. Moreover, the information could be used for learning in class when teaching destination brand image development. In terms of the managerial sector for businesses related to food, street food destination brand image development will help develop the image of street food destination by increasing value, improving transportation and food quality to support tourist needs and adding more value to the image of the destination. In addition, other businesses can use the result as a guideline to develop a brand image with their resources for serving tourists.

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