

A STUDY OF FOOD FESTIVAL LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

Food festivals are growing in popularity and warrant in-depth studies of festival visitors. The study of food festivals is now an important and prolific area of tourism research enquiry. The aim of this study is to fill the conceptual gap by examining the interrelationships between festival loyalty and its related constructs, in order to gain an improved understanding of visitors' loyalty towards food festivals in Macau. The proposed hypothetical modelling the food festival would facilitate further researches into the dynamics of tourism and offer guidelines for practitioners as they constantly strive to provide the best experience for visitors to return or revisit the food festival.

Keywords: *food festival; festival loyalty; festival quality; festival satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Food festivals always provide an opportunity or a stage for visitors to enjoy cuisine and experience local culture at the same time (Zhang, 2009). Cohen and Avieli (2004) indicate that food festivals play a key role in promoting a destination and attracting visitors. Lewis (1997) defines food festivals as “popular festivals that purport to center on and revolve around, food are a social phenomenon encountered in virtually all human cultures, from the ritual banquets of ancient Rome to the chili cook-offs of Texas today” (p. 73). In Macau, the food festival is an annual event, with more than 100 stalls offering tasty morsels from Europe, Malaysia, Mainland China, Taiwan, and other parts of Asia on every November (Kennedy, 2012). The live music performances, game booths, and rides are included in the Macau Food Festival (MFF) (Chen, 2011). The MFF has been attracting visitors because of its scenic venues and scrumptious dishes that can stimulate even the most discriminating taste buds. Despite the growth and popularity of food festivals in both practical and theoretical studies, there has been a little research focusing on festival loyalty. In the tourism studies, loyalty remains an important indicator of successful development of destinations (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). An understanding of the antecedents of festival loyalty, therefore, may offer service providers, practitioners and marketers additional opportunities to improve festival quality, emotion, festival image and festival satisfaction (Chen, Lee, & Lin, 2012; Drengner, Jahn, & Gaus, 2010; Huang, Li, & Cai, 2010; Kozak, 2001; Razavi, Safari, Shafie, & Rezaei Vandchali, 2012; Wong & Wu, 2013; Yang, Gu, & Cen, 2011; Yoon, Lee, & Lee, 2010). Still, little research focusing on festival loyalty has been compiled to enhance the understanding of how festival quality, emotion, festival image and festival satisfaction affect festival loyalty from the perspective of food festival attendees (Yoon et al., 2010).

There are two objectives in this study. The first objective is to identify the dimensions of festival quality and their relative importance as perceived by visitors in the MFF. The second one is to examine the interrelationships among festival quality, emotion, festival image, festival satisfaction, and festival loyalty as perceived by visitors in the MFF.

This study contributes to the theoretical advancement in the field of festival management by empirically testing the interrelationships among festival quality, emotion, festival image, festival satisfaction, and festival loyalty. This study can also provide further insight for food festival organizers and exhibitors to better understand festival loyalty and provide useful information to marketing managers who are promoting festival products.

CONCEPTS AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

2.1 Festival loyalty

Behavioral intentions and (attitudinal) loyalty have been used interchangeably in the literature of marketing and tourism (Yoon et al., 2010). Loyalty has been a crucial objective of service providers since the high retention of customers or a low defection rate determines long-term profit levels (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Loyalty or behavioral intention has been measured by (1) positive word-of-mouth, (2) recommendation to others, (3) repurchase intention, and (4) high tolerance for price premium (Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Understanding festival loyalty is all the more important for cultivating the establishment of a critical mass of loyal repeat visitors in the food festival. According to (2010), the first three scales have been considered to be adopted to depict the traits of festival loyalty.

2.2 Festival quality

Service quality in tourism has been largely measured through a range of techniques that have been developed from the supplier's viewpoint (Briggs, Sutherland, & Drummond, 2007). From a provider's perspective, service quality is seen as "a global judgment or attitude relating to the superiority of the service" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988, p. 16). Specifically, festival quality is used as predictors of satisfaction and behavioral intentions, rather than, for example, the gap between expected and perceived service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The assumption is that if a festival main-

tains a high level of quality, there will be more satisfied visitors. For example, Baker and Crompton (2000) capture four dimensions of festival quality: generic features (festival characteristics), specific entertainment features, information sources (e.g. printed programs and information booths), and comfort amenities for festival visitors. They find that information sources and comfort amenities are hygiene factors, or a basic set of conditions, and that generic features and entertainment features strongly predict behavioral intentions. Based on the aforementioned review, festival quality has been identified to be multi-dimensional (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chen et al., 2012; Cole & Chancellor, 2009; Lee, Lee, Lee, & Babin, 2008; Ralston, Ellis, Compton, & Lee, 2007; Yoon et al., 2010).

2.3 Emotion

According to Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) emotion can be defined as a psychological state of preparation that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts. For example, a visitor becomes excited when he or she is amazed by an entertainment show held in the festival. As the role of customer emotions is of high importance in such services, previous studies have demonstrated the importance of emotions experienced in defining consumption experiences and consumer reactions (Babin, Darden, & Babin, 1998; Dubé & Menon, 2000; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Lee et al., 2008).

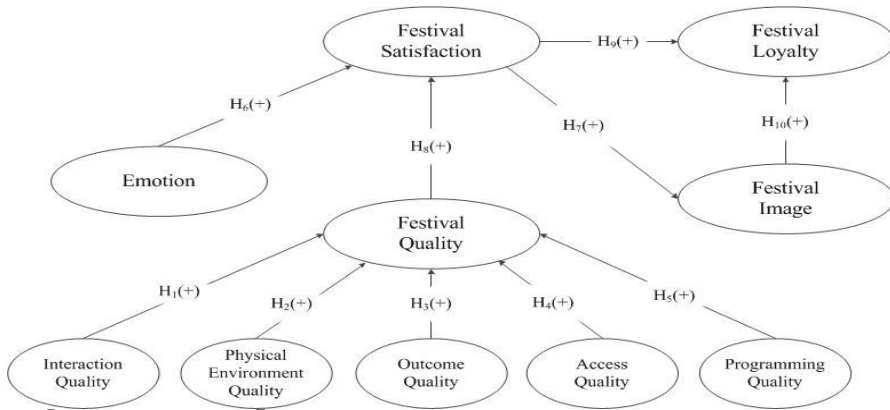
2.4 Festival image

Keller (1993) refers to image as perceptions of an organization reflected in the associations held in customers' memories. A festival having social and cultural meaning holds a powerful attraction and appeal for visitors and has a major significance on creating or enhancing an image. The concept of festival image remains ambiguous and unexplored (Huang et al., 2010). According to several researchers (Alireza, Ali, & Aram, 2011; Clemes, Gan, & Kao, 2008; Clemes, Wu, Hu, & Gan, 2009; Wu, Lin, & Hsu, 2011), image is generally measured by reputation, prestige, and reputation comparison with other competitors. Therefore, those scales were adopted in this study to describe the traits of festival image.

2.5 Festival satisfaction

Anderson, Anderson, Fornell, and Lehmann (1994, p. 54) define overall satisfaction as “an overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with a good or service over time”. Kim, Suh, and Eves (2010) maintain that satisfaction is based on the feeling of fulfilment that a visitor receives from a festival or event. It is hoped that visitor satisfaction with the food offered will result in the increased chance of that visitor recommending the food festival, as well as the increased chance that her or she will return to the food festival next time after the initial exposure. Festival satisfaction as operationalized as overall satisfaction since satisfaction in this study was based on overall emotions and the composite of festival quality dimensions.

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES



The conceptual research model shown in Figure 1 suggests that visitors form their overall perceptions of festival quality based on five dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, access quality and programming quality. The festival quality and emotion perceived by visitors are expected to influence their overall festival satisfaction, which, in turn, results to festival image and festival loyalty respectively. A total of 10 hypotheses are formulated to test each path in the model.

Several researchers have indicated that overall perceived quality is influenced by five dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, access quality and programming quality (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Chen et al., 2012; Clemes, Brush, & Collins, 2011; Clemes, Gan, & Ren, 2011; Clemes et al., 2008; Clemes et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2010; Ko & Pastore, 2005; Shonk, Chelladurai, Dwyer, & Fredline, 2008; Wu & Hsu, 2011). The following hypotheses have been formulated to examine the effects of the dimensions on overall perceived quality based on the visitors' experiences in a food festival.

H1: Interaction quality positively affects festival quality.

H2: Physical environment quality positively affects festival quality.

H3: Outcome quality positively affects festival quality.

H4: Access quality positively affects festival quality.

H5: Programming quality positively affects festival quality.

Whereas the early models of satisfaction were centred mainly on the cognitive processes in order to understand and explain consumer satisfaction (Oliver, 1980), there is also theoretical support for linking emotions with satisfaction (Erevelles, 1998; Liljander & Strandvik, 1997; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Phillips & Baumgartner, 2002; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). In line with previous research, the proposed model points out that, together with the cognitive component, the emotions positively impact satisfaction. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Emotions positively affect festival satisfaction.

Since customer satisfaction is depicted as a judgment made on the basis of a specific service encounter (Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992), satisfaction levels derived from each service encounter are believed to have an effect on image assessments (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 1998). Moreover, the relationship between satisfaction and image has been reported in the previous studies (Kandampully & Hu, 2007; Lai, Griffin, & Babin, 2009; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Festival satisfaction positively affects festival image.

Several researchers (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Lee et al., 2008), indicate that festival quality has been used as a precursor to festival satisfaction. Furthermore, visitors' overall satisfaction level positively affects the possibility of revisiting the destinations in the future (Hui, Wan, & Ho, 2007; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Yoon et al. (2010) assert that the effect of festival satisfaction on festival loyalty is strong and positive. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H8: Festival quality positively affects festival satisfaction.

H9: Festival satisfaction positively affects festival loyalty.

Image has been considered to be important factors in establishing and maintaining loyalty among people (Raj, 1985). Nguyen and Leblanc (2001) indicate that the direct of image in one organization on loyalty. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H10: Festival image positively affects festival loyalty.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the theoretical concepts of festival loyalty, festival quality, emotion, festival image and festival satisfaction and their interacting relations in the food festival. The proposed conceptual model is developed for the further research on the Macau Food Festival (MFF) in 2013. MFF has been attracting visitors from all around the world by its various tastes and dishes of different Asian countries, scenic venues and good reputations due to successful experiences. A better understanding of the mechanism among festival loyalty, festival quality, emotion, festival image and festival satisfaction in the food festival may help the MFF to retain its success and hence get more contributions to the tourism industry in Macau. In this study, the literatures of the key factors in the food festival in relation to festival quality are reviewed and one proposed model is recommended based on our hypotheses.

This proposed conceptual model is still on the early developmental stage and needs to be enriched. In order to revise and apply this model in the MFF, further qualitative and quantitative research will be performed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the model. Specifically, a focus group interview focusing on visitors will be formed to generate items related to the dimensions of festival quality. Afterwards, the next step is to develop the scales by modifying the existing items and generate new items if necessary. In addition, this study will start to identify the dimensions of festival quality and their relative importance as perceived by visitors in the MFF using exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. This study will then examine the interrelationships among festival quality, emotion, festival image, festival satisfaction, and festival loyalty as perceived by visitors in the MFF using structural equation modeling.

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