Utilising local cuisine to market Malaysia as a tourist destination

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Abstract

Travelling to a tourism destination can be made more exciting by experiencing the local cuisine. The variety of cooking methods and colourful ingredients blend together in a hot wok to create signature dishes of particular cuisines. Nevertheless, a cuisine needs to be clearly defined by definite individual characteristics so it is recognised. The primary objective of this study is to understand how Malaysian cuisine is used in marketing Malaysia as a tourist destination. Content analysis is used on selected Malaysian cuisine promotional materials such as brochures, travel guides, and webpages to extract relevant data. Results show that “close-up meal” had the highest image count from among the eight categories identified. As for text, ten categories were identified. “Creating desire” topped the list, followed by “sensory appeal”. The Malaysian Government is particular in the details selected for images of and narrative on the local cuisine. As a result, the marketing collateral could provide excitement and help tourists to anticipate the type of food experience that they can find when travelling in Malaysia. Additionally, it could help understanding what Malaysian cuisine is and develop the brand image.

1. Introduction

Ideas and images about local food and cuisine are increasingly embedded in the marketing collateral of tourist destinations. Local food has been found to be an important element of the tourist experience which adds value to a holiday at a destination (Quan & Wang, 2004). Serious attention has been given by respective marketers and governments to the presentation of images and textual description of local cuisine in advertising materials (for
example travel guides, brochures and websites) to market tourist destinations. In recent years, there has also been a spectacular growth in television programs, and indeed, entire television channels, that are devoted to cooking and food-related programs such as the Carlton Food Network in the United Kingdom and the Asian Food Channel (AFC) in Malaysia.

In the case of Malaysia, “multiracial” or “multi-ethnic” characterises the local cuisine, which has also been described as a ‘fusion cuisine’ formed out of the influences of the predominant ethnic populations of Malay, Chinese and Indian. This quality has contributed to the emergence of various types of food and cuisine available throughout the country. For that reason, the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC, formerly known as Ministry of Tourism or MOTOUR) has developed a “Promotional Plan” that includes promoting local cuisine as part of the tourist experience (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2013).

The MTPB has recently collaborated with the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and developed joint campaigns and annual events specifically promoting Malaysian cuisine as one of the country’s tourist attractions. “Malaysian Kitchen Programme” is an international promotional cuisine program strategised by MATRADE as a platform introducing Malaysian cuisine and local commodities worldwide. On the other hand, the “Fabulous Food 1Malaysia” campaign was launched by MOTAC in 2009 and organises the three Malaysian cuisine annual promotional events; “Malaysia International Gourmet Festival” (MIGF), “ASEAN Heritage Food Trail with Chef Wan”, and “Street and Restaurant Food Festival” (MOTOUR, 2011). In addition, the Department of Heritage Malaysia (DHM) released its 100 Malaysian Heritage Foods List in December 2009. This list was expanded to 151 in October 2013 (Department of Heritage Malaysia, 2013). Clearly, food and cuisine have become very important components of Malaysia’s approach to destination marketing.

Even though the Malaysian Government has invested considerably in selling local food and cuisine as locally-defining experiences, issues arise especially regarding the contested notions of authenticity as well as understandings of its own identity. Several studies have found tourists’ overall perceptions, acceptance and enjoyment towards Malaysian food and cuisine are positive (Jalis, Zahari, Zulkifly, & Othman, 2009; Karim, Chua, & Salleh, 2010; Roozbeh, Ng, & Boo, 2013; Chi, Chua, Othman, & Karim, 2013). Nevertheless, the extent to what tourists really recognise and distinguish Malaysian cuisine remains questionable.

Given the status of Malaysian food and cuisine globally, the aim of the study presented in this paper was to gain an understanding of how Malaysian food and cuisine is used to market Malaysia as a tourist destination. In particular, this study, through analytical techniques of content analysis, explores the dimensions of cuisine used to promote a destination which is characterised by a multi-ethnic citizenry.

2. Literature Review

Local cuisine, which contributes to a destination’s identity, is an integral part of the travel experience for many travellers. Bessiere (1998) believes local produce and cuisine can be considered as part of a territorial construction whereby a distinctive “terroir” or specific area or destination develops which reflects local culture and identity. For example, rice is a staple food in most Asian countries, particularly Japan in making “sushi” and it is reported that 25 percent of the Japanese agricultural production is rice crop (Takahashi & Honma, 2009). Within this “terroir”, the environmental and landscape values, history, culture, and traditions are strongly highlighted in the marketing of the cuisine which is represented as part of Japan’s destination identity (World Tourism Organisation, 2012). Furthermore, the unique cuisines of western European countries of France, Italy, and Spain, are well recognised worldwide, and have become an attraction to visitors. This success has inspired other countries including those within the Asian continent (Henderson, 2009), for example Thailand, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, to integrate and promote their local cuisine as part of their distinctive cultures. As such, the utilisation of local cuisine as part of a destination image and diversity of products and experiences may help to strengthen the identity and competitiveness of a tourist destination.

In a study undertaken by Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez-Canizares (2012) that looked at the motivations of tourists visiting Cordoba, Spain, it was found that local cuisine was either the first or second most important motivation for visiting. Blakey (2012) explains that there is a newfound appreciation and demand for local cuisine that provides historical context and a story of the place, which tourists are willing to travel to experience. Thus harnessing the “story of food” by connecting local cuisine to cultural and historical contexts is an important consideration in
destination marketing strategies. As proposed by Su and Horng, (2012), infusing culture and reducing impediments to experiencing local cuisine has been seen as critical in the drafting of many destination marketing strategies. In addition, using consistent and authentic images of local foods and cuisine appears important.

The tourism industry has become more inclusive in seeing these dimensions of culture as the “motor” that serves to reanimate a tourist destination that has suffered a decline in its appeal and subsequent visitation rates. For example, in Catalonia, Spain, Londono (2011) found the Catalan Tourist Board created the “Gastronomic Club” and the “Gastroteca” as tourist routes for those who were interested in tasting the local food and food related products that make up Catalan cuisine. To date, both strategies have successfully highlighted the establishments where the tourists can sample, purchase and enjoy the local products of various provinces and districts of Catalonia. In fact, many programs and food businesses now frequently include among their components the promotion of “typical” and “traditional” local food and cuisine in order to market a destination (du Rand & Heath, 2006). We will now turn to how Malaysia utilises food in its destination marketing.

From Malaysian perspective, there are strong linkages between the local food and tourism, as these two sectors have a mutually beneficial relationship. The promotion of local cuisine may represent the nation, and in the same time strengthen the country’s image and identity (Zainal, Zali, & Kassim, 2010). According to Zainal et al., (2010), the Malaysian Government has planned to come out with the food trails initiative based on the distinct specialties of states, regions and communities to draw tourist attention to experience local cuisine. This shows the seriousness of the Malaysian Government to embrace the existence of cuisine as part of tourism industry experience.

The Malaysian Government incorporates local cuisine as part of its national multicultural identity by utilising the term “fusion cuisine” as the destination’s food tourism theme. However identifying and defining local cuisine is more difficult in multicultural nations having a broad range of ethnic and cultural groups. Malaysia faces challenges in marketing its cuisine which is largely derived from migrant traditions. True enough, Yoshino (2010) found that the Malaysian cuisine has lack of distinctive identity, and some food sharing similar cuisine characteristics to other countries such as China and India.

3. Methodology

The sample comprised two travel guides and sixteen brochures published by MTPB, MOTAC, and the MATRADE which were collected during January and February 2013. In addition to that, this study analysed the presentation of Malaysian cuisine images and information in nine relevant government websites (see Table 1).

According to Kassarjian and Kassarjian (1988), content analysis is the most commonly used method for examining the ways in marketing materials represent aspects of culture or place research. This analysis allows the researcher to explore the conceptual and theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data (Krippendorff, 2004). It is essential to keep in mind that content is always constructed within a context and, as argued by Vespestad (2010), there is no “right” way to understand the content.

Content analysis was performed on both photographic and textual material. A total of 726 photographs were coded by first describing what the photograph depicted and then allocating it to a category that appeared to best represent that photograph. Eight major categories were derived from this analysis. Textual material was examined line-by-line in order to track and count the frequency of words used to describe Malaysian cuisine. A total of 1074 descriptors were identified and grouped into ten categories. The findings are summarised in Figures 1 and 2.

4. Findings

4.1. Photographic Analysis

The findings revealed that half of the total photographs used in Malaysian government printed and electronic marketing materials and official websites were allocated to the category “close-up of meal”. These photographs depicted a close up image of single meal on a plate usually devoid of any social or cultural context. Clearly, marketers have determined that the completed meal itself, isolated from any cultural signifiers, is sufficient to generate interest in the cuisine and, by extension, the destination. Isolating the meal from its setting means that the
attention of the viewer is focused only on the meal and that no other visual “noise” competes for the attention of the reader.

Table 1. Content analysis materials

| Brochures                                      | P   | e | Publication |
|------------------------------------------------|-----|---|-------------|
| Kuala Lumpur - Malaysia Dazzling Capital City | X   | - | Sept 2012   |
| Customs and Etiquette: Tips For Tourists To Malaysia | -   | X | -           |
| Malaysia A World of Luxury                     | -   | X | -           |
| Heritage and Crafts                             | -   | X | -           |
| Penang Street Food - Food Paradise of Asia      | X   | - | 2012        |
| Vegetarian Delights                             | X   | - | Apr 2010    |
| Malaysia Homestay Experience                    | -   | X | Mac 2012    |
| AgroTourism in Malaysia                         | -   | X | Apr 2012    |
| Sarawak Borneo                                  | X   | - | 2009        |
| Shopping Malaysia                               | -   | X | 2012        |
| Culinary Delights                               | X   | - | Jul 2012    |

| Travel Guides                                   | P   | e | Publication |
|------------------------------------------------|-----|---|-------------|
| Malaysia Travel Manual                          | X   | - | Nov 2012    |
| Malaysia Travel Guide                           | X   | - |             |

| Official websites                                | MOTAC | MATRADE | MTPB |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|---------|------|
| http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/my                 | -     | -       | X    |
| http://www.virtualmalaysia.com/destination/nacht%20market-cat.html | -     | -       | X    |
| http://www.tourismmalaysia.com.au/guides/cuisine| -     | -       | X    |
| http://www.labfoodlmalaysia.com/                | X     | -       |      |
| http://www.malaysiakitchen.com.au/             | -     | X       |      |
| http://www.malaysiakitchen.co.uk/              | -     | X       |      |
| http://www.malaysiakitchennewyork.com/         | -     | X       |      |
| http://www.malaysianfood.net/                  | -     | X       |      |
| http://www.mychefwan.com/home.html             | -     | X       |      |

* P = Printed, e = Electronic, MOTAC = Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, MATRADE = Ministry of Trade Malaysia, MTPB = Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board

Photographs, which are in part the outcome of professional “food styling”, are able to communicate the aesthetic values of the meal and its distinct characteristics through shape, colour, and texture. The photographs hope to convey the various food sensory experiences tourists will have when consuming Malaysian food and cuisine (Leong et al., 2012). For example, the interaction of fresh ingredients in every single close-up meal with condiments and accompaniments are highlighted through a range of green colour tones on vegetables displayed to stimulate the
tourists’ appetite for Malaysian food and cuisine. The appearance of “red chilies” either as part of the dishes’ ingredients or as garnishing items have strongly affirmed the “hot and spicy” character of the local food and cuisine.

The diverse, fresh produce used in Malaysian cuisine also was featured. Tropical “local fruits” were the second most frequent images, appearing in 78 photos, or 10.75% of the total. The diverse range of “local ingredients” such as fresh chilies, lemongrass, ginger and a variety of leafy vegetables followed with 70 images or 9.64% of the total. Meanwhile, “food market” photographs of the fresh markets, fruit farms, vegetable farms and fruit shops where fresh supplies can be purchased daily were found in 35 photographs or 4.82% of the total. The local fruits and ingredients featured appear to be important elements in making Malaysian cuisine distinguishable, thus echoing Fischler (1988) and Civitello (2011) who emphasised the use of ingredients in creating the local cuisine. The hot and spicy taste in Malaysian food and cuisine is highlighted by the existence of the spices featured (Karim et al., 2010; Leong et al., 2012). Interestingly, there were only two photographs of what might be called “indigenous foods”, namely a form of caterpillar that is traditionally eaten by Indigenous peoples in Malaysian Borneo, which most probably aimed to capture the attention of readers seeking adventurous food experiences.

Apart from focusing on the foods’ physical distinctiveness, the marketing collateral examined also feature dining settings that offered a wide range of Malaysian cuisine and food. For that reason, photographs of food stalls, food markets and bazaars and specific ethnic restaurants are included as part of marketing effort in the brochures, travel guides and official websites. Leong et al. (2012) noted that images of dining places and practices helped create excitement regarding the experience of Malaysian cuisine. With 8.26% of the total photograph count, these images connotated feelings of romance, togetherness, sociability, and family. Showing people from diverse cultural backgrounds enjoying Malaysian cuisine connects the readers with the country’s multi-ethnic identity.

As participating in and attending cooking demonstrations and cooking classes vividly links tourists with the local food and cuisine (Leong et al., 2012), a substantial number of “culinary lesson” photographs were observed (65 photographs, or 8.25% of the total). Food preparation was the most preferred subject choice and was exhibited as much as cooking. Other photos showed the chef demonstrating food in the training kitchen which could be seen as an opportunity to learn about the local cuisine and how to prepare it. As previously mentioned, a plethora of food related-programmes including cooking shows with celebrity chefs such as Malaysian-born Poh Ling Yeow and Adam Liaw, cooking competitions and food and travel documentaries on television have also helped to link food and travel in the mind of prospective culinary tourists. The mode of cooking preparation may sometimes be a
contemporary invention intended to impress and attract tourists (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Participating and attending cooking demonstrations and cooking classes portrays a more active engagement with food beyond simply consuming it and fits with a definite trend for tourists to transcend being simply consumers of experience to being producers of experience.

4.2. Textual Analysis

After undertaking the content analysis of the texts, ten categories were identified. From the analysis it appears that Malaysian cuisine is marketed using various ideas and concepts, including “sensory appeal”, “recognition”, “creating desire”, “healthiness”, “culinary heritage”, “religious”, “novelty”, “price”, “adventurous” and “paradise”. Figure 2 summarises these categories and the associated words found. The “sensory appeal” category scored the highest percentage with 22.44% compared to “recognition” (16.57%) and “creating desire” (15.92%).

The appearance of words such as “spicy”, “aromatic” and “hot” asserted that chilies and spices are among the ingredients commonly used in Malaysian cuisine. Moreover, words that symbolise the novelty of local fare are incorporated to express the kind of gastronomic experience tourists will encounter when eating the Malaysian delicacies (Karim et al, 2010).

The concept of “recognition” taps into how the local food and cuisine described have a strong connection with place (Bessiere, 1998; Boyne & Hall, 2004). As previously mentioned, the cuisine could be used to portray the regional identity of the destination and attract visitors. The idea of highlighting local specialty dishes found in a particular area or region is one of the marketing techniques used to capture tourists’ attention. For that reason, the word like “popular”, “famous”, “favourites”, and “specialty” were frequently used. For example,

“…Penang assam laksa, a sweet-sour hawker dish popular across Malaysia and Satay is Malaysia’s most famous contribution of the culinary world”

(MTPB, Culinary delights, 2012: p. 9)

“…Char Kway Teow or ‘stir-fried ricecake strips’ is arguably one of the most popular dishes among Malaysians of all races…”

(A Taste of Malaysia, n.d.)

To stimulate tourists’ desire to experience the local fare, words such as delicious, mouth-watering and delectable were also used. Indirectly, they “create desire” for the local fare. This finding corresponds to Leong et al. (2012) study that Malaysian food could stimulate a desire to visit Malaysia to sample the food.

Some concepts were less common in the marketing collateral. Even though Malaysia is multicultural and majority Muslim, these aspects were not highly accentuated as compared to sensory appeal. Religious beliefs and practices may be challenging to convey or the assumption has been made that such aspects of a destination’s culture may not appeal to many tourists. While the national policy privileging Islam in the spheres of tourism is reflected to
some extent in its promotion (Henderson, 2008), a lower number of words referred to “Halal food” even though the information might be valuable to those concerned with such dietary rules and requirements.

What is striking is that although there are few references to the health benefits of consuming Malaysian food and cuisine, quite a large number of words reflecting healthiness were found. Results showed this category is among the top five ranking with words such as “fresh”, “homemade”, “organic”, “natural”, and “goodness” repetitively used in the description of Malaysian food and cuisine. The suggestion of health benefits have mostly been associated with the ingredients, freshness and cooking style as noted in one of the marketing collaterals and websites;

“…For a novel experience, try the local hawker-style fare at open-air food courts where dishes are freshly prepared upon order… the ingredient freshness of Malaysian food is its beauty…”

(MPTB, Malaysia Travel Manual, 2012: p.97)

“…The apparent simplicity and freshness of this kind of Malaysian food is its beauty…”

(Guides, n.d.)

Likewise, few words conveyed affordability. Given that some equate high price with high quality local food and cuisine (du Rand & Heath, 2006), the Malaysian Government may not want to highlight its affordability so that tourists will better appreciate the quality of local food and cuisine. Nevertheless, the words “affordable”, “inexpensive” and “reasonable” in the “price” category conveyed a positive connotation of Malaysian cuisine as delivering value for the money.

In comparison with other categories of words, marketing Malaysia through the words such as “gastronomic paradise”, “tropical paradise”, and “food paradise” is one of the government initiatives to position the country for epicurean tourists. The words in the “paradise” category to market the Malaysian cuisine as tourist destination reporting 2.06% out of the total. This could be another marketing strategy that demonstrates the critical connections between local cuisine and tourism is to use “food and eating out” as a promotional theme. Henderson (2009) argues local cuisine must not only be included as part of tourism experience package, but must be positioned as a critical component of the destination image and advertising themes. It has been particularly evident in the Singapore and Hong Kong Tourism Boards’ marketing campaigns that position both countries as a “food paradise” (Henderson, 2009).

5. Conclusion

This study deals with the presentation of Malaysian food and cuisine in Malaysian Government marketing collateral as part of promoting Malaysia as a tourist destination. It contributes to a better understanding of how Malaysian cuisine is represented by relevant government agencies’ promotional brochures, travel guides, and websites. This study, at the same time, provides a better understanding of the marketing strategies that have been developed for the purpose of promoting the local cuisine. Content analysis of the photographs and texts reveal that Malaysia is not only well-known for diversity of cultures and races, but for the resulting food.

The result shows Malaysian cuisine is predominantly represented through photographs showing “close-ups of the meal”, “local fruit” and “local ingredients”. Moreover, food related activities such as “culinary lessons”, “dining places” and “dining practice” further elaborate the identity of Malaysian food and cuisine. Clear images of the ingredients used in most of the Malaysian food and cuisine could show tourists the type of the food that they will encounter and experience during their travels. Regarding the textual analysis, specific words such as spicy, hot, savoury, and tasty are repetitively used in most of the Malaysian Government marketing collaterals which convey “sensory appeal”. Similarly, there is a substantial number of words such as delicious, mouth-watering, and tempting frequently applied to create a tourist’s desire to experience Malaysian cuisine while visiting the country. The goal of producing such images and descriptions is to attract and motivate potential tourists travelling to Malaysia to enjoy a local tourism experience. More importantly, it helps to create awareness of Malaysian cuisine identity and to brand the tourist destination.

Content analysis of both photographs and text found that the Malaysian Government has put a great deal of attention in choosing well-defined images and appropriate words to express the ideas behind the local cuisine. This is essential for the country to build up a clear and distinct cuisine image, especially in light of the competition from its neighbours such as Singapore and Indonesia whose cuisines share similar dishes. Therefore, relevant government
agencies who get involved in planning and strategising related cuisine marketing initiatives should develop identities for the destinations (Horng & Tsai, 2010). For example, the photograph analysis found that emphasising the various colourful ingredients found in the food not only conveys ideas and the creativity of food presentation, but provides potential tourists with insightful information about the uniqueness of Malaysian cuisine. This can be seen through existence of repetition of the same meal and ingredients such as “Nasi Lemak”, “Satay”, and “Red Chilies”. Additionally, it will guide the potential tourists to visualise and anticipate the type of cuisine experiences that they will venture during travelling in Malaysia.

Overall analysis of photographs also found that the Malaysian Government not only demonstrates the sensorial characteristics of the Malaysian cuisine through “close-up”, “local ingredients”, and “local fruits” photographs. Photographs of local foodways used to increase the visibility of Malaysia as a culinary tourist destination also show the local community lifestyle including, images of a happy family sharing and enjoying food and of a girl wearing scarf eating a bowl of hot noodle soup using chopsticks. Such photographs could encourage the tourists to try the local cuisine, get closer to the local community, and thus enhance their travelling experience while in Malaysia.

The analysed texts in both marketing collaterals and websites provide an understanding on the role of certain words that could influence tourists to experience the Malaysian cuisine. The words under the “sensory appeal” and “creating desire” are important in marketing Malaysian cuisine. Furthermore, the appearance words such as popular, famous, specialty, and favourite under the “recognition” category can convey how certain types of local food are well recognised and available at certain places or venues in the country. However, it is less clear how photographs of indigenous ingredients and words under the “religious” category promote Malaysian cuisine. The Malaysian Government may be able to improve marketing strategies by targeting the needs of different market segments. For example, tourists who have religious dietary requirements (i.e., Muslims, Hindus, Jews) can get specific details about the food available and served at a particular tourist destination. This can improve the effectiveness of utilising marketing resources.

In conclusion, all these local cuisine marketing efforts demonstrate the Malaysian Government’s seriousness in promoting the country as a food tourist destination. Although there is still a need to continuously improve the existing marketing strategies, the successful implementation would be impossible without great support and reciprocal cooperation between the Malaysian Government and various related tourism and hospitality representatives.

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