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A study on the influence of electronic word of mouth and the image of gastronomy tourism on the intentions of tourists visiting Macau

Abstract

The purpose of this study focuses on the extent to which electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and the image of Macanese gastronomy tourism influences tourists' intentions, based on samples of those who use the Internet, to search for information about Macanese gastronomy. This study was conducted from April to June 2013. A quantitative research method was adopted and online questionnaires were distributed to those participants who were members of online communities or travel groups. An incentive strategy was also used to increase response rates. Following data collection, the analysis was carried out. The findings revealed that the image of gastronomy tourism and eWOM had significantly positive effects on tourists' intentions, and electronic word of mouth had a significantly positive relationship with the image of Macanese gastronomy tourism. This suggests that both are leading factors in attracting tourists; therefore boosting the travel industry in Macau. Additionally, the image of cuisine held a stronger perception than image of restaurants and food related activities. The dimension of sociability held more credibility in comparison to other aspects of eWOM. This perhaps suggested that the image of gastronomy tourism had not been delivered sufficiently to tourists. The findings attempted to provide evidence for the Macau Government Tourism Office and website operators to effectively promote the image of gastronomy tourism in Macau. Internet use was explored in terms of motivating tourists to travel for reasons of gastronomy in order to create a reasonably valid construct for use in market segmentation purposes.

Key words: gastronomy tourism; image of gastronomy tourism; tourists' intention; electronic word of mouth; Macao

Introduction

The so-called "Monte Carlo of the Orient," Macau's economy relies heavily on gambling. Since the establishment of the Macau special administrative region (SAR), the economy in Macau has become increasingly strong. Different businesses relating to tourism have also benefited. However, the gambling industry is also a source of instability in the Macau economy, as the nature of gambling business is not susceptible to technological advancement or productivity growth. In recent years Macau has attempted to divert itself from the developing singles economy through gambling to focus more on culture and humanity. In particular, Macau's unique geographical location and historical background contributed to

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the diversity of communion between east and west culture including religion, architecture and cuisine. Combining unique Macau food with tourism could be a great opportunity for the tourism industry. Gastronomy is considered as an important activity while travelling (Santich, 1996; Hall & Mitchell, 2005), and one of main resources to attract tourists to visit the destination. Many researchers, such as Szivas (1999), Lee and Arcodia (2011), also indicated that gastronomy not only attracts tourists, but also facilitates the development of local economy. In addition, food related activity such as food festivals can enhance the image of gastronomy tourism (Chang & Yuan, 2011).

Culinary or gastronomical activities of a destination are also categorized as part of cultural tourism (Corigliano, 2002). Richards (1996) claimed that cultural tourism may include experiencing the cultural attractions as well as sampling the local food. Long (2004) emphasized that savoring the food of others is the way one can really experience and accept different culture without reluctance. Therefore, gastronomy tourism holds potential in Macau and it has increasingly drawn tourists' attention as Macanese unique food cannot be found elsewhere in the world. Over the centuries Macau developed a special, unique cuisine that combined elements of Portuguese, Chinese, Indian, and even Malay cooking. As a result, gastronomy tourism combines not only cuisine and tourism, but also cuisine and culture. While promoting the gastronomy tourism, it is necessary to use the unique local cuisine and food culture as the image of gastronomic destination in Macau. Therefore, gastronomy tourism offers great potential to be promoted in Macau.

While transmitting the gastronomic image, word of mouth (WOM) is one effective tool for tourists to evaluate an unfamiliar tourist destination. In other words, when tourists lack knowledge regarding a destination, they may like to search for information on the benefits to evaluate the destination. The WOM is from those who had visited the tourist destination where their affective element of satisfaction, pleasure and sadness all motivated them to share experiences with others (Dichter, 1966; Neelamegham & Jain, 1999; Nyer, 1997). Through exchanging information between customers, WOM becomes influential power to affect others' decisions. Word-of-Mouth Marketing has suggested that WOM can facilitate customers to accept products much more easily; sometimes even better than the effects of advertising communication. Due to the development of the technology, Buttle (1998) argued that WOM can be mediated by electronic means. As a result, web-based technologies have created numerous opportunities for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication.

The purpose of this article intends to explore whether eWOM and the image of gastronomy tourism influences tourists' intentions to visit Macau to learn about Macanese cuisine. Therefore, the aims of this study are to investigate (1) the relationship between the image of gastronomy tourism and tourists' intentions (2) the relationship between eWOM and tourists' intentions, and (3) the relationship between eWOM and the image of gastronomy tourism. It is hoped that the findings of this study can provide some suggestions to the Macau Government tourist office and website operators to promote Macanese gastro-tourism.

Literature review

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

Since 1950, word-of-mouth (WOM) has been found to exist in interactions between customers (Whyte, 1954). The study of Kotler (2003) showed that when consumers evaluate an unknown new product which involves complexity and overload purchasing information, they may seek relevant public praise to help them make a decision. Because the information of WOM does not involve commercial properties, the customers will consider it with more credibility than a product advertising itself. Hence, Gittell (2002) indicated that the transmission of WOM could be considered as an independent, reliable and trustworthy information source, and at the same time, obtain an enormous power on the effects of transmission. Many scholars and marketers have noticed its strength and adopted it in marketing strategy.

Prior to the Internet era, customers shared the product-related experiences through traditional WOM (Sundaram & Mitra, 1998) between friends and family, that is private conversations. In recent years, the Internet has emerged as a new channel of WOM (Dwyer, 2007); called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Different from traditional WOM, comments on a product that are written and available in the websites can be measurable by marketers (Godes & Mayzline, 2004). In other words, online conversations may offer an easy and cost-effective opportunity to measure WOM. It improved the effects of traditional WOM as the private conversations are very difficult to trace. Due to holding such importance and popularity, eWOM communication, currently, both product information and recommendations provided in eWOM can satisfy various consumer segments. In the last few years, researchers have been actively examining the effect of eWOM on consumer behavior.

Hinnig-Thura, Gwinner and Gremler (2002) classified eWOM in two main types; one is the platform of information exchange between customers and the other is the platform provided by product companies for customers to express their opinions. Furthermore, Gelb and Sundaram (2002) also categorized the channels of eWOM in more detail; *Email (and instant messaging), Websites, Blogs and virtual communities, newsgroups, chatrooms, product review sites, bulletin board system, industry portal discussion areas, online forums* and so on. Using different methods, customers search for the required information and simultaneously, the online information affects their decision on purchasing the products.

According to Wu and Wang (2009), more and more customers heavily depend on the information from eWOM to learn about a product and brand. However, different from the tradition WOM, eWOM sometimes lacks of the creditability because of its anonymity. Therefore, creditability becomes an issue while studying eWOM. Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) point out promoting creditability could increase the level of trustworthiness and expertise. That is, when the level of information creditability is higher, the more the customers will trust this information. Many scholars such as Gunther (1992), and Ye (2000) suggest that the effects of eWOM is based on the creditability. Ohanian (1990) concludes the former studies such as McGuire (1985) and suggests that creditability consists of three dimensions; trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. The framework of Ohanian (1990) was later adopted widely by other studies. Using the scales of trustworthiness, it includes 'dependable — undependable', 'honest — dishonest', 'reliable — unreliable', 'sincere — insincere', 'trustworthiness — untrustworthiness'. As for expertise, there are five scales: 'expert — not an expert', 'experience —

inexperienced', 'knowledgeable — unknowledgeable', 'qualified — unqualified', 'skilled — unskilled'. Concerning attractiveness; 'attractive — unattractive', 'classy — not classy', 'beautiful — ugly', 'elegant — plain', 'sexy — not sexy' are included. Later Tsai (2008) modifies the framework of Ohanian (1990) due to attractiveness being hard to measure and suggests an alternative category, called sociability, to replace it. Sociability includes social recommendation and social interaction. Social recommendation indicates when a customer identifies the credibility of eWOM; when he felt he could rely on other customers' or communities' recommendation. Social interaction refers to when a customer could not identify the credibility of eWOM and could ask for help from other customers or communities. Consequently, this researcher decided to adopt the framework of Ohanian (1990) and Tsai (2008) into the questionnaire to evaluate the effects of eWOM on tourists' intentions and the image of gastronomy tourism in Macau.

A classification of gastronomy tourism

The term 'gastronomy tourism' can be recognized as 'food tourism', 'tasting tourism', or 'culinary tourism'. Gillespie (2002) stated that the study of gastronomy is the understanding of the scope of production and preparation of food and drink as well as how, where, when and why they are consumed. Similarly, Long (2004) defined culinary tourism as experiencing and participating in the foodways of other people, which include but are not limited to consumption, preparation and presentation of food items. Hall and Mitchell (2005) also define food tourism as 'a visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production regions is the primary motivating factor for travel' (p. 725).

Eating is one of the physiological needs of a human being. When tourists travelled to unfamiliar destinations, they firstly worried about food and beverages for basic human needs. This explains how the importance of the connection between food and tourism cannot be ignored. Gastronomy tourism is related to food and eating experiences that occur when people travel. Tourists may look for types of food similar to those that they eat at home or to try exotic flavors. They might make assumptions like 'there would be nothing to eat there' (Cohen & Avalli, 2004), and what should they do. It can be seen that food and beverages play an essential role while traveling. Food is not only a tourist attraction (Hjalager & Richards, 2002), but it also provides an experience of food tasting for tourists (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997) and engages a different cultural phenomenon (Tikkanen, 2007). Therefore, gastronomy tourism is not only associated with eating and drinking, but also events ranging from food festivals to farm visits (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2002).

As Hu and Ritchie (1993) stressed, food was one of the most important reasons for people to visit a destination along with weather, accommodation and scenery. Food and beverage expenditure basically occupies one-third of the overall tourist expenditures (Graziani, 2003). The study of Boyne, Williams and Hall (2002) showed that tourists spend almost 40% of their budget on food when traveling. According to a visitor expenditure survey by the Macau Government tourist office, each tourist spent on average 36% of their total expenditure on food in 2012. This figure thus supports the findings of Boyne, Williams and Hall (2002). It can be interpreted that food and beverages can be an effective promotional and positioning tool of a destination (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Where food and beverages have increased tourists' interests in local cuisine, more and more tourist destinations promote their local cuisine as a main core tourism product. For example, authentic and interesting food can attract visitors to a destination. Boyne *et al.* (2002) argues that one of the main reasons for most people desiring to visit Italy is due to its cuisine. Consequently, Italian cuisine and wine has boosted the Italian tourism industry. The image of France has always been associated with its food and wine. In another example, the number of tourists visiting Hong Kong has been increasing because of the growing number of restaurants that offer many varieties of cuisine. A major reason for tourists to visit was to experience and taste the food (Frochot, 2003). A study by Rimmington and Yuskel (1998) found that the main reason for travelers revisiting Turkey was due to its cuisine, contributing to travelers' overall satisfaction.

Local eating habits and table manners can also affect the perception of tourists towards a destination (Cohen & Avalli, 2004). The study by Reynolds (1993) found that food and drink can help tourists to understand the social and economic lifestyle of a destination or a country. For example, food has blended into the Italian culture and connected to the lifestyle of its people (Corigliano, 2002) and become its national identity. It cannot be denied that food plays an important role in attracting tourists to Italy due to its reflection of Italian culture and lifestyle. Therefore, the image of culinary tourism cannot be limited to unique cuisine, but also needs to take food culture into account.

Macanese gastronomy tourism focuses on food as its unique characteristic, where it has always played a major part in Macau society and is a good reflection of the community's long multicultural experience presenting a different type of life. Therefore, the image of cuisine cannot only be limited to the taste of the Portuguese and Chinese cuisines in the restaurants, but also local food sold by street vendors existing in the narrow streets in Macau, which is in favor of gastronomy. Currently Macanese gastronomy tourism contains various types from visiting Michelin starred restaurants, typical Portuguese restaurants, to local street vendors. Food related activity in Macau such as the Macau food festival hosted by the Macau Government Tourist Office every year presents its multicultural gastronomy. Hegarty and O'Mahoney (2001) claimed, dining habits help tourists understand differences between their own culture and a destination culture. So it is important to unite Macanese cuisine and food culture together when promoting the image of gastronomy tourism. In order to maximize the marketing efforts, Macau as a gastronomy destination should establish an appropriate image initially and then use a mixture of appropriate information to deliver the desired image.

Tourists' intentions

Customers frequently develop an attitude toward purchasing based on the evaluations of prior service experience. They undergo a cognitive decision-making process about whether to stay in or leave a service firm (Colgate & Lang, 2001; Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000; Wang, Lo & Yang, 2004). Oliver (1997) describes this attitude as the development of a fairly stable like/dislike of a product based on previous experience. This attitude is strongly related to the customers' intentions to the service/product and to be engaged in word-of-mouth behaviors. In this sense, Oliver (1997) defined behavioral intentions as an affirmed likelihood to engage in a certain behavior. The intention defined by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) is that a personal future behavior will execute an expected plan, or tendency. Based on the proper evaluation, intention is a prediction tool when studying customers' future behavior. Many researchers such as Reynolds and Wells (1977), and Dodds, Monroe and Grewal (1991) support this statement

and state that it is more accurate to predict future behavior by applying the concept of intention. Intention can be considered as existing between evaluation and purchase decision. Intention cannot always lead to actual purchase behavior, because various factors still exist in influencing the purchase decision. Hence, intention is one important indicator in studying purchase decision.

Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1995) present the most recognized model of consumer purchase decision-making. This model divides the consumer purchase decision process into five stages: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) purchase decision and (5) post-purchase behavior. Later, Mowen and Minor (2001) agreed that consumer decision making follows a series of processing results from perceiving problems, searching for solutions, evaluating alternatives and making decisions. In other words, purchase intention indicates that consumers will follow their experience, preference and external environment to collect information, evaluate alternatives and make purchase decisions (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000; Yang, Wu & Wang, 2009). Purchase intention can measure the possibility of a consumer to buy a product. The higher the purchase intention is, the higher a consumer's willingness is to buy a product (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). Kotler (2003) looked at the concept of intention from another angle and proposes that individual attitudes and unpredictable situations will influence purchase intention. Individual attitudes include personal preferences to others and obedience to others' expectation, and unpredictable situations arise where consumers change purchase intentions because a situation is appearing (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991). Consumer purchase intention is considered as a subjective inclination toward a product and can be an important index to predict consumer behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Along with the similar concepts of intention suggested by other researchers, Zeithaml (1988) proposes three measurement items to measure purchase intention; they are 'uses possible to buy', 'intended to buy' and 'considered to buy'.

As behavioral intention is an important concept in understanding tourist choice of tourism products and future motives and behavior, in this study tourists' intentions to consume gastronomy tourism resources of a destination remain a complex process that need to be well studied for the successful promotion of gastronomy tourism. Consequently, this researcher considered the model of Zeithaml (1988) as an appropriate framework to apply in order to study tourists' intentions to visit Macau.

Methodology

Survey instrument

This study intended to discover the image of gastronomy tourism and the influence of eWOM on the tourists' intentions. A self-administered questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive literature review. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the image of Macau gastronomy tourism and the intention to visit Macau, eWOM and travelers' demographic characteristics. The first section is related to the image of gastronomy tourism. The questions were modified from the studies of Krarim and Chi (2010) and Lertputtarak (2012), and also took Macau's current situation into account. Three subscales, cuisine, restaurants and food related activities, consisted this section, and there were 6 items in each subscale. A 5 point Likert scale was used. Respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement that ranged from 1 = strong disagree to 5 = strong agree.

Section 2 was designed to explore the extent of how the electronic word of mouth influences the travelers' intention. The questions were based on the studies of Ohanian (1990) and Tsai (2008) and were divided into three parts: trustworthiness, expertise, and sociability. A total of 12 items was included. Respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement that ranged from 1 = strong disagree to 5 = strong agree.

Section 3 was designed to find out tourists' intentions. There were 4 items included in this section to explore the intention to visit Macau in the next five years. Respondents were asked to rate the level of agreement that ranged from 1 = strong disagree to 5 = strong agree.

Sample and procedure

The target population for this study was members of online communities or travel groups, who were interested in discussing gastronomy of tourist destinations, enjoyed tasting local food and experienced food culture while travelling. Where, in particular, gastronomy could be primary motivation for them to visit a tourist destination. The reason selecting this target population meant that we could examine whether eWOM influenced tourists' intentions, and the image of Macanese gastronomy tourism motivated tourists to visit Macau. We could then understand whether they had learned about Macanese gastronomy on the internet, which was essential. The sample population was obtained from various travel chat-rooms, a bulletin board system, online forums, an online community and free online survey questionnaire research such as MY3Q. A convenience sampling procedure was employed.

In order to identify a valid sample in this study, the beginning of this questionnaire had stated the purpose of this study clearly; for those who had searched online for Macanese gastronomy tourism but had not been to Macau before. Furthermore, as Macau is linked to its popularity in the gaming industry, it was essential to identify the purpose of visiting from tourists. By focusing on the gastronomy tourists, the questionnaire was only answered by those tourists whose purpose was for tasting and learning Macanese gastronomy only, and not those interested in gaming in a casino. As a result, the specific gastronomy tourist could be seized. In order to increase the response rate, an incentive strategy was used for participants returning a complete survey; every responder would receive a souvenir.

The pilot study was conducted in January 2013. A total of 40 participants were obtained from friends and their friends to check whether the wording and meaning of the statements were clear for them to respond. After modifying some unclear meaning and wording in the questionnaires, the main study was conducted from April to June in 2013.

Reliability

The study adopts Cronbach's alpha (α) to measure the internal consistence reliability of the questionnaire. The results show that Cronbach's α of the image of gastronomy tourism, eWOM and tourists' intention is 0.894, 0.896, and 0.863 respectively. This indicates that the design of the questionnaire has a high internal consistence.

Data analysis and research findings

The study adopted convenience sampling to collect data and applied SPSS19.0 to analyze data. 500 copies of questionnaires were distributed and 492 copies were returned. Excluding 8 invalid copies, 484 copies of questionnaires are used for data analysis. Thus, the effective response rate was 96%. Data analysis was divided into three phases. In the first phase, frequency analysis was used to analyze respondents' demographic information. In the second phase, mean scores were calculated on three subscales of gastronomy tourism, which were the image of cuisine, the image of restaurants and the image of food related activities. Mean scores were calculated on the three subscales of the credibility of eWOM; trustworthiness, expertise and sociability. In the third phase, simple linear regression analysis was applied to determine the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Demographic profiles

The gender of the respondents was almost equally distributed with 52.9% male and 47.1% female. More than half of the respondents' ages were 26-35 years old and under (64.7%), followed by 36-45 years old (15.5%), below age 25 (13.4%) and 46 years old and above (6.4%). More than half (64.9%) of the respondents reported a monthly income of 5001 RMB (RenMinBi (Chinese Currency), 1 USD = 6 RMB) and above. The next income group 2501-5000RMB consisted of 26.4% of the respondents. 8.7% of the respondents reported monthly income under 2500 RMB. Professionals, such as a doctor or lawyer (21.1%), followed by 20.2% of the respondents in management positions, the same as staff (20.2%), government officials (18.4%), students (11.2%) and others (8.9%). The permanent residences of the participants were China (55.4%), Hong Kong (18.4%), Taiwan (11.6%), North East Asia and South East Asia (6.4%), and Europe (6.2%) and others (2.1%).

Table 1
Summary of respondents' demographic profile

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	256	52.9%
	Female	228	47.1%
Age	Below 25	65	13.4%
	26-35	313	64.7%
	36-45	75	15.5%
	Above 46	31	6.4%
Monthly income (RMB)	Below 2,500	42	8.7%
	2,501-5,000	128	26.4%
	5,001-8,000	185	38.2%
	Above 8,000	129	26.7%
Occupation	Government official	89	18.4%
	Corporate manager	98	20.2%
	Skilled professional	102	21.1%
	Staffs	98	20.2%
	Student	54	11.2%
	Other	43	8.9%

Table 1 Continued

		Frequency	Percentage
Permanent residence	China	268	55.4%
	Hong Kong	89	18.4%
	Taiwan	56	11.6%
	North East Asia and South East Asia	31	6.4%
	Europe	30	6.2%
	Others	10	2.1%

Descriptive analysis

The overall mean of the image of gastronomy tourism was 3.92, eWOM was 3.60, and the tourists' intention was 3.88. By examining each component of the image of gastronomy tourism, the results showed the following; the image of cuisine was 4.03, the image of restaurant was 3.79 and the image of food related activities was 3.71. By examining each component of eWOM, the results showed that trustworthiness, expertise and sociability were 3.22, 3.38 and 3.78 respectively. The results of the item analysis on the image of gastronomy tourism and eWOM showed that the p-value in all items was less than 0.001.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics

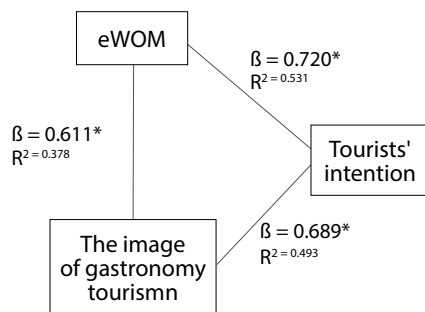
	Mean	SD
The image of gastronomy tourism	3.92	0.68
eWOM	3.60	0.61
Tourists' intentions	3.88	0.58
The image of cuisine	4.03*	0.64
The image of restaurant	3.79*	0.56
The image of food related activities	3.71*	0.72
Trustworthiness	3.22*	0.74
Expertise	3.38*	0.75
Sociability	3.78*	0.581

Note: * p < 0.001

Regression analysis

The image of gastronomy tourism significantly and positively affects tourists' intentions ($\beta = 0.689$, $R^2 = 0.501$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.493$, $p < 0.001$). This represents that the image of gastronomy tourism has a significant influence on tourists' intentions, and therefore, H1: the image of gastronomy tourism which has a positive relationship with tourists' intentions is sustained. eWOM significantly and positively affects tourists' intentions ($\beta = 0.720$, $R^2 = 0.538$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.531$, $p < 0.001$). This demonstrates that hypothesis H2: the eWOM has a positive relationship with tourists' intentions is supported. Furthermore, the results indicate that eWOM significantly and positively affects the image of gastronomy tourism ($\beta = 0.611$, $R^2 = 0.387$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.378$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the hypotheses H3: eWOM has a positive relationship with the image of gastronomy tourism is sustained.

Figure 1
The relationships among the eWOM, the image of gastronomy tourism and tourists' intentions



Note: * $p < 0.001$

Discussion and conclusion

In the competitive marketplace of tourism, a tourist destination needs to present its unique features to draw tourists' attentions. Gastronomy tourism is a new emerging trend in tourism industry and it presents not only the unique cuisine but also the background of food culture. eWOM can be considered as one of many effective marketing strategies to promote the gastronomy tourism as it can affect both the tourists to perceive the image of a tourist destination, and influence their intentions to visit. Therefore, the creditability of eWOM should be enhanced to ensure the image of tourist destination be transmitted appropriately and increase the possibility of tourists' intention. In this study, the researcher attempted to investigate the relationships between the image of gastronomy tourism, eWOM and tourists' intentions. Based on the research findings, this study can be concluded as follows.

The relationship between eWOM and tourists' intentions

With a reportedly strong relationship between eWOM and tourists' intentions, it has been confirmed in this study that eWOM was an important factor in influencing tourists' intentions to visit Macau. Specifically, there were three dimensions included in the creditability of eWOM: (a) trustworthiness (b) expertise (c) sociability. In this study, responders rated trustworthiness at the lowest level, followed by expertise and sociability. This implied that tourists considered sociability as the most reliable dimension to the credibility of eWOM. In particular, the information of websites was suggested by friends or net friends. The information provided by private traveling websites was least credible. With regards to the dimension of expertise, the responders considered the information provided in the websites lacked honesty, reliability and sincerity. It could be assumed that most information concerning Macau gastronomy tourism was posted by private online moderators. Under these circumstances, the image of Macanese gastronomy tourism and whether it is being transmitted properly is questionable.

Similarly, the studies of Bansal and Voyer (2000), and Chen (2009) showed that where the message was provided by more professional website users, the customers were more likely to trust the messages and this enhanced their purchasing intentions. It can be concluded that improving the creditability in both commercial and public information in various websites, could be valuable in helping potential

gastronomy tourists make their travel decisions. Therefore, eWOM could be applied into the marketing program to increase the tourists' intentions to visit.

The relationship between the image of gastronomy tourism and tourists' intentions

This study confirmed that there was a significant relationship between the image of gastronomy tourism and tourists' intentions. Many countries have identified gastronomy tourism as one of today's emerging trends in tourism (Krarim & Chi, 2010). The image of Macanese gastronomy tourism in this study was divided into three subscales: cuisine image, restaurant image and food related activities. The findings showed that tourists perceived the image of cuisine much more strongly than the images of restaurants and food related activities. This implied that the image of Macanese cuisine has obtained its unique characteristic and fame. However, the image of food related activities is least perceptible in comparison with the other two aspects. It suggested that the image of food related activities requires further promotion. Even though the Macau food festival has been held since 2000 to promote Macanese cuisine, tourists perceived the image of food events or festivals held in Macau to be unrelated to the promotion of food culture and special street cuisine. This can be observed from the results of this study where food culture and special street cuisine included in the perspective of food related activities obtained lower mean scores. Tourists' perceptions towards the image of gastronomy tourism can help Macau determine what type of marketing program to develop in order to appeal to potential travelers. Therefore, strengthening the image of gastronomy tourism could provide an excellent predictor of tourists' intentions, along with bringing revenue to a destination.

The relationship between eWOM and the image of gastronomy tourism

This study also confirmed the positive significant relationship between the image of gastronomy tourism and eWOM; the image of gastronomy tourism may be influenced by eWOM. As for conveying the information of eWOM to the potential tourists, this should be based on the kind of image the destination would like to present to the travelers. The current study showed that the image of food related activities was not sufficiently delivered to tourists and resulted in only a few tourists experiencing the food related activities such as getting involved in food culture and enjoying special street cuisine. Due to the online information, food culture was not provided; potential tourists could not obtain certain understanding on Macanese gastronomy tourism. The reason behind this could be that commercial or official websites might focus more on promoting local cuisine and restaurants as those two aspects were directly related to bring revenue to a destination. However, the imbalance of a particular image of gastronomy tourism and culture could be dangerous in a tourist destination. As eating habits are culture-orientated, they could allow tourists to perceive the meaning behind the food from country to country. Similarly, Cohen and Avalli (2004) argued that the food culture, including local eating habits and table manners can affect the perception of tourists towards a destination. As a result, through enhancing the food image from different angles, gastronomy tourism could have an opportunity to be promoted and bring potential revisiting tourists.

Implication and recommendation

According to the findings of this study, this researcher attempted to provide some possible recommendations to the Macau Government Tourist Office and website operators. There are currently only a few information platforms for tourists to discuss the Macanese cuisine relating to Macanese culture. This might be because the information held by the Macanese gastronomy tourism is currently provided mostly by private online operators such as bloggers, discussion forums or chat-rooms moderators. The information of gastronomy tourism might not be transmitted comprehensively and focuses more on introducing Macanese cuisine but not on food culture. Furthermore, it is sometimes hard to control the creditability of eWOM in anonymous private websites. Such as, when a tourist has a personal prejudgment regarding Macanese food and spreads this negative information online. Since it is difficult to control messages passed on by various websites, the image of gastronomy tourism needs to collaborate more directly with the professional websites operators to keep track of the image being broadcasted. It is necessary that the website operators establish an expertise platform for tourists to discuss their experiences on both cuisines, and learning about Macanese food culture while travelling in Macau. By means of enhancing the creditability of eWOM, it is suggested to invite high profile bloggers, travelers or gastronome to note down their experience in Macau to establish more representative eWOM. Simultaneously, the Macau Government Tourism Office could invite professionals who are expert in both food and culture to provide their online viewpoints to educate tourists how to taste Macau. In doing so, the tourists could gain more information from professionals to improve the image of gastronomy tourism in Macau and therefore improve their intention to visit Macau.

Note

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