Soothing the taste buds and the soul? An exploratory analysis of consumption of comfort foods in international travel

Abstract

This research investigated dining behaviors from the perspective of eating comfort foods when traveling internationally. Individual in-depth interviews, supported by the photo elicitation technique, were conducted with thirteen participants who had traveled abroad within the past year. Content analysis was used and thirteen comfort food characteristics emerged in three main dimensions: past experience, pleasure and well-being, and palatability. The results may serve as a valuable reference for future studies on the roles of comfort foods in travel.

Keywords: Comfort foods; local cuisine; international travel; content analysis; photo elicitation; implicit theories

Introduction

With steady and continued growth in international tourism pre-COVID-19 (UNWTO 2019), the importance of local travel experiences "living like a local" is being increasingly emphasized (Cohen and Avieli 2004; Hussin 2018). As one of the main resources in destinations, food and beverages account for approximately one-third of total tourist expenditures, making dining a significant contributor to tourism revenues (Mak, Lumbers, and Eves 2012a). Also, tourists are attaching greater importance to the local food culture and knowledge available in destinations (Su, Johnson, and O'Mahony 2018; Williams, Yuan, and Williams 2019) and seeking out culinary experiences when travelling overseas (Wijaya, King, Morrison, and Nguyen 2017). Local dining experiences constitute an essential component of experiences at destinations (Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen 2016). Such pleasant local experiences increase satisfaction during travel, thereby prompting tourists to revisit or repurchase (Ji et al. 2016).

For some people, the main motivation for travel is to get a taste of the food and

beverages of specific geographic regions as gastronomic and culinary tourism is growing in popularity (Gálvez et al. 2017). However, while there is a bounty of local cuisines across international destinations, other visitors choose particular foods that comfort them. Comfort food in tourism deserves more attention from researchers as food choices may influence destination marketing and management. Previous studies on comfort foods are mostly conducted from a food science perspective (Spence 2017) or to explore comfort food preferences (Troisi and Gabriel 2011; Troisi et al. 2015; Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003) and for constructing comfort food typologies (Locher et al. 2005; Troisi and Wright 2017). Few have focused on tourist choices and their needs for comfort food when traveling overseas. On one hand, comfort food consumption is potentially related to positive emotions, reward, or remembrance, three situational categories suggested by Soffin and Batsell (2019) when an individual wishes to maintain, enhance, or extend a positive emotional state. On the other hand, comfort food might also be consumed when experiencing negative emotions such as feelings of anxiety, stress, and fear when traveling (Blasche, Weissensteiner, and Marktl 2012; Fennell 2017; Van Strien et al. 2019).

Although authenticity and ethnic culture have long been stressed in culinary tourism (Ellis et al. 2018), some people tend stay in an environmental bubble during travel (Cohen 1972; Özdemir and Seyitoğlu 2017). Culinary tourism is a negotiation between the exotic and the familiar, a balancing between what is novel and what is familiar to a person. In addition to being sufficiently novel and different to stir tourist curiosity, food also needs to be familiar enough to be recognized as being edible (Long 2017). Therefore, food consumption in tourism, as with daily eating, may supply people with a sense of comfort, relaxation, ease, and security, and hence help overcome anxieties and discontinuity caused by unfamiliar environments (Quan and Wang 2004). However, experiences as extensions of daily life experience have been somewhat overlooked (Quan and Wang 2004), leading to a gap in the

existing literature with respect to the roles of comfort foods in international tourism.

Previously, implicit theories have been used to explain varied consumer psychology (Jain and Weiten 2019). Differing implicit beliefs lead to varied consumer preferences for healthy and indulgent choices (Kim, Kulow, and Kramer 2013). Although implicit theories have been discussed in prior studies on consumer behavior, few are applied in the tourism domain, particularly concerning comfort food consumption at foreign destinations. According to Mak, Lumbers, Eves, and Chang (2012b), tourists (inner factors), food (object), and destination environments (external factors) affect food consumption. Wijaya, King, Nguyen, and Morrison (2013) extended the framework, adding a component for visitor experiences, including expectations, perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. However, these factors have not been assessed for comfort food consumption in international travel. To enhance the understanding of perceptions of comfort foods during international travel, this research explored tourist preferences for and perceptions of comfort foods in foreign countries. Qualitative research methods were used to uncover comfort food preferences and beliefs and food consumption behavior at foreign destinations. A framework of categories and attributes of comfort foods was defined by visitors who were familiar with hospitality and international travel. The findings provide suggestions for businesses as well as directions for future research on the roles of comfort foods in overseas travel experiences.

Implicit theories and food consumption in tourism

Social and consumer psychologists have garnered a rich set of findings from investigating the processing and judgmental impacts of implicit theories on various facets of people's day-to-day lives (Jain and Weiten 2020), including consumer behavior and choices (Kim et al. 2013; Mathur, Jain, and Maheswaran 2012), attitudes (Akhtar and Wheeler 2016; Kwon and Nayakankuppam 2015), and preferences (Kim et al. 2013; Rai and Lin, 2019). However, none of these are applied for food consumption during international travel. Implicit

theories reflect the beliefs that individuals hold regarding the nature of human and non-human attributes, as well as more global phenomena in everyday life (Jain and Weiten 2020), which influence the ways people interpret and evaluate their social worlds (Hong et al. 2004). Implicit theories have been used to explain whether people believe in fixedness or malleability (Chiu, Hong and Dweck 1997; Hong et al. 1997; Jain and Weiten 2020). Dweck and Leggett (1988) identified two perspectives of implicit theories that predict inferential practices in perception. Entity theorists believe that peoples' traits are relatively unchanging, while incremental theorists hold that the qualities of people are not fixed but malleable through time and effort (Dweck, 1999; Levy et al., 1998). The former tend to make more dispositional inferences and attributions, whereas the latter generate more process-oriented, psychological-state explanations (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck 1997; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, & Sacks 1997).

Belk (1997) explains that consumption during travel involves boundary crossing and maintenance processes. Although tourists are generally more willing to accept changes in foods on holiday, they also tend to remain steadfast to 'core' foods that cannot be changed or easily modified (Mak et al. 2012b). When engaging in exploratory and adventurous consumption experiences, people will meanwhile search for consumption experiences that enable them to maintain connections to homes left behind (Bardhi, Ostberg, and Bengtsson 2010). From the sociological perspective, individuals possess a propensity to explore novel foods, and yet, also have a natural tendency to dislike or suspect new and unfamiliar foods (Fischler 1988; Mak et al. 2012b). Since consumption practices are social actions where consumers make sense of products in a variety of ways (Holt 1995), food tastes and consumption are shaped by socio-economic standing and cultural norms, reflecting socialization processes that directly affect individuals (Bardhi et al. 2010). In addition to physiological motivations (Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003), preferences toward comfort-

giving foods are closely related to the social contexts (Birch, Birch, Marlin, and Kramer 1982; Birch, Zimmerman, and Hind 1981; de Castro and de Castro 1989) that influence the development of food perceptions and comfort food preferences (Booth, 1985).

Based on the foregoing discussion, given the novel and unfamiliar environments with which travelers to foreign countries typically confront, implicit theories may help shed light on beliefs regarding comfort foods when abroad, as well as illuminating the motivations, information processing, evaluations, and food consumption behaviors.

Food preferences and food consumption behavior of tourists

For tourists, food is not only a tool for satisfying their hunger but also serves as a medium between them and the local culture. Food choice is not just a process of eating (Rozin 2006) but has a symbolic meaning that reflects tourists' preferences, identities, and cultures (Shepherd and Raats 2006). Therefore, food preference also implies making a choice between two or more selections. People may have food preferences when away from home that differ from what they normally follow. Mostly they undoubtedly choose foods they like; however, given the novel and strange environment that tourists confront, the role of personalities, family background or familiarity, and cultural and religious factors should be highlighted. When faced with unfamiliar foods at destinations, willingness to try something new is determined by individual characteristics. For instance, according to Özdemir and Seyitoğlu (2017), tourists were divided into authenticity seekers, moderates, and comfort seekers, who seek out different levels of authenticity and thus have divergent food preferences during travel. Authenticity seekers prefer authentic local restaurants (Sengel et al. 2015) to international chain restaurants that are everywhere as a result of globalization, even if they have to face high risk and uncertainty, while comfort seekers, who expect security and comfortable travel prefer familiar foods in comfortable restaurants without the need to face unknown risks. Consequently, food-related activities are less attractive to them because of safety concerns or

so-called food neophobia (Özdemir and Seyitoğlu 2017; Ji et al. 2016), which could be affected by familiarity from mere exposure (Yeomans et al. 2006). Accordingly, tourists will determine whether they like or dislike new flavors based on their past experiences (Ryu and Han 2010); food preferences are cultivated by flavors to which people are accustomed, starting at a young age.

Furthermore, eating at destinations can be perceived as an extension of daily food and beverage regimens (Mak et al. 2012b). While tourists try different and new foods at foreign destinations, they usually do not abandon their core foods and favorites. That is, eating is often constrained by habits and cultural backgrounds. For example, Chinese travelers may accept potatoes while in the UK and Ireland, but it is very unlikely that they will eat them at every meal and give up rice as their staple food (Quan and Wang 2004). A devout Muslim will seek out Halal food when traveling without exception (Akyol and Kilinc 2014). This also supports Quan and Wang's (2004) theory that food purchases can be regarded as an extension of the family's eating and drinking habits or reinforcement of family comfort. In addition, cultural differences may deeply affect food preference and food acceptance levels of tourists as well. Many Westerners cannot accept eating animal innards, but for Asian tourists, innards are delicacies (Amuquandoh 2011). If we view food behavior as a buffer between people's own culture and the local culture, then food can satisfy both their desire for home cooking and for novelty in those with food neophobia or food neophilia respectively. In other words, such cultural dissonance perceived by tourists travelling abroad may be mitigated by food (Quan and Wang 2004).

On the surface, food consumption behavior is a choice between buying and not buying. In reality, food choices are driven by preferences. Food preferences, in turn, are affected by food attitudes and the core foods in different cultures. Moreover, there are purchase influences, which include sociodemographics, individual characteristics, personalities, and

other factors. In tourism, foods may help travellers overcome anxieties and discontinuity caused by unfamiliar environments by providing a sense of comfort, relaxation, ease, and security (Quan and Wang 2004). However, despite considerable conceptual and empirical research on the factors influencing food selection when traveling internationally, there is a lack of agreement on what constitutes comfort foods and little research evidence on what they are when people travel abroad. Their interplay with local cuisines is also not yet well understood.

Comfort foods and factors affecting eating at foreign destinations

As Locher et al. (2005) stated, comfort foods may be best thought of as any food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress, that evokes positive emotions. Consequently, there is no one specific ingredient or flavor that can represent all comfort foods (Spence 2017). In general, comfort foods refer to dishes or items that warm the stomach and the heart (Chen 2013) and are usually emotionally linked and inseparable from past memories. Therefore, comfort foods are regarded as food prepared in a traditional style, usually coming from simple, ordinary recipes (Richman 2013) with a nostalgic or sentimental appeal (Merriam-Webster 2021). For example, 40% of the comfort foods consumed in the United States are "homemade and natural" foods such as hot soup, main courses, and vegetables (Wolcott 2001). These foods trigger memories of being fed by parents or grandparents, sharing with family during childhood or eating with lovers and reduce internal anxiety of individuals once being consumed (Locher et al. 2005; Ortolani et al. 2014). In other words, comfort foods are associated with social and emotional significance (Locher et al. 2005) and have emotional soothing effects on consumers, such as easing their feelings of loneliness, regardless of varying food preferences. For example, the Munich beer festival in Germany not only maintains friendships, but also builds new social circles for its attendees. In beer tourism, brewery attractions such as Guinness (Dublin, Ireland) and Carlsberg (Copenhagen) provide

an environment for people to meet new friends and for friends and family to socialize. Tasting local foods could be an opportunity to interact with family and others, thereby gaining a sense of belonging and resulting in superior travel experiences (Kim, Eves, and Scarles 2009). This was similar to the social aspect in motivation factors described by Fields (Fields 2002).

The psychological state of international travelers and its influence is another crucial factor to food consumption. Due to a loss of familiar signs and symbols, anxiety, stress, alienation, frustration, and a sense of fear increase immediately for some tourists who travel abroad (Blasche, Weissensteiner, and Marktl 2012; Fennell 2017; Oberg 1960). In terms of cultural shock, anxiety and alienation of tourists result from encounters with regional food that they have not tried before at foreign destinations (Bardhi, Ostberg, and Bengtsson 2010). Apprehensions about food safety may be another instigator of comfort food consumption when traveling abroad (Hull-Jackson and Adesiyun 2018; Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, and Mandala 2018; Lee, Pennington-Gray, and Kim 2019; Yeung and Yee 2020). As a result, it is common to see strategies adopted by destinations to reduce perceived risk including chained-brand products (Fennell 2017) similar to what they have at home, some of which may be comfort foods. The mere exposure effect could be one of the possible explanations. People will consciously or unconsciously choose brands and labels that they see more often, which make them feel safer than products that they have never used before (Zajonc 1968). Likewise, past experiences will to some extent decrease doubts or insecurities of tourists. For instance, Fennell (2017) suggested that individuals have a tendency to eat familiar food to reduce the fear in travel. In this regard, comfort foods usually bring to mind familiar foods that represent security and home. Tourists essentially go out into the street for authentic experiences, but still return to the bubble where familiarity and stability exist (Hampton 2013) whether they are food neophobia or not.

Additionally, foods can also be viewed as comforting because of their ingredients or

physical characteristics, such as temperature, texture, and sensory appeal (Troisi and Gabriel 2011). Based on this notion, another commonly recognized type of comfort food is junk (unhealthy) food that is high in calories. Studies in recent years show that popular comfort foods, accounting for 60%, in the United States, include potato chips, ice cream, cookies, and candies. The existing literature has also proven the relationship between individual's stress and unhealthy food consumption (Finch, Cummings, and Tomiyama 2019). Therefore, those foods which are high in starch or sugar are often considered to be comforting (Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003). Based on the above discussion, comfort foods are people eat when they are sad or worried, often sweet food or food that people ate as children (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). There have been many previous studies on the food consumption behavior of tourists. Most focus on tourists' food consumption motivations (Fields 2002), effects of individual characteristics on food consumption (Ji et al. 2016), and local food consumption behavior (Kim, Eves, and Scarles 2009; Mak et al. 2012b; Sengel et al. 2015). By comparison, comfort food is a topic that has recently been introduced to tourism and hospitality and there are few published articles on it. Even fewer articles have placed comfort foods into the international tourism context.

Methodology

Taking the visitor perspective, this research explored outbound tourist preferences for and points of view regarding comfort foods. To fulfil the research purpose, qualitative research methods were more suitable for data collection. Visual images are often used to explore tourist viewpoints and concerns during trips and particularly the food (Andersson et al. 2016). Using photographs can narrow the psychological distance between the interviewer and interviewees and help elicit different information from that obtained through verbal inquiries (Cederholm 2004; Harper 2002). Photographs are widely recognized as having the potential to evoke emphatic understandings of how people experience their worlds (Pink 2004; Belin

2005; Mizen 2005). Therefore, this research conducted in-depth interviews in a semi-structured format with photographs to elicit more in-depth responses from participants (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, and Baruchel 2006).

By drawing on prior research, an interview outline was developed prior to the interviews and three experts (a scholar, restaurant manager, and an author of books on food and beverage) were invited to assure validity. As literature has shown that independent travelers are more likely to do more planning before trips (Tsaur, Yen, and Chen 2010), as well as making their own food decisions, people with a background in gastronomy, who had traveled abroad independently and frequently within the past year were selected as our participants (Boztug et al. 2015). More specifically, in addition to being international tourists, the participants were all connected in some way with food in their careers, including a tour guide, restaurant and coffee shop owners, a manager of a chain restaurant, a food magazine editor, a hospitality teacher, a food journalist/author of books on culinary science, an executive chef, and a food blogger (Table 1). Before the interviews, participants were told to provide 15 to 20 photographs of food they ate while they were traveling in foreign countries. As the interviewing began, participants were given a brief explanation of the purpose of the interviews. Next, participants were asked to express their meanings and values concerning comfort food during international travel based on the photographs they had selected, including the reasons why they took the photos and their associations with comfort food in foreign countries (Harper, 2002).

The interviews were conducted from January to April 2018, each of which lasted 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The audio recordings of the interviews were converted into text transcripts after completion, which were then categorized by content analysis through a coding process and repeated comparisons of the data, and were eventually used to develop a framework of comfort food consumption on international trips. The interviewing was

discontinued once no new information could be extracted from the data (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). In total, thirteen participants were recruited by snowball sampling, including six males and seven females as the data reached a saturation point at 13 (Seidman 2006). Quotes are identified by respondent numbers, as shown in Table 1. The responses of each interview are shown in Table 2.

[Table 1 and Table 2 inserted about here]

It is also important to note that to ensure the interview transcripts accurately represented the content that interviewees wished to express, member checking as recommended by (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and (Decrop 1999) was accomplished. Furthermore, the content analysis reliability equation (Holsti 1969; Wang 2012) was used to calculate the agreement of the coders: $PA = 2A/ (N1 + N2)$. Percentage agreement (PA) is the percentage of agreement of the two coders. A is the number of codes that the two coders agreed upon. N1 is the number of coder A's codes and N2 is the number of coder B's codes. This equation serves as a basis for measuring reliability. Kassarjian (1977) indicated that if the reliability coefficient is higher than 85%, then the result is satisfactory. The codes (dimensions) and sub-categories were discussed by the two coders numerous times. Once they had reached a consensus, the codes and categories were given to a third party for a fair determination. Coder A had 179 items for the first analysis and coder B had 270. Overall, 173 items were categorized in the same analysis unit categories. The first percentage agreement was 0.77 (173*2/ (179 + 270)) and the result was not satisfactory. After the second round of discussion, the two coders reached a consensus on 271 analysis units. The codes and categories were given to a judge, who retained 269 analysis units. Overall, the two coders categorized 254 analysis units in the same categories. Thus, the percentage of agreement was 0.94 (254*2/(271 + 268)). The reliability coefficient was higher than 0.85, indicating that the analysis was reliable.

Past experience

The results were classified into three major categories (see Figure 1). Past experience involves childhood recollections, nostalgia, sense of belonging, and memories. The participants mentioned that childhood recollections served an important role in comfort food consumption in terms of triggering nostalgia:

For me comfort foods are like memories of my childhood. They make me feel nostalgic and become symbolic of remembrance (Respondent. M).

There is a treat called puffed rice candy in Tainan. It was the first time that I could not help shedding tears when I saw it again as it reminded me of my childhood. When I was in elementary school, on the way to school there was a vegetable market where a food stand cooked puffed sugar, attracting the interest of a lot of children. When the sugar puffed up, I just felt Wow! life is so beautiful (Respondent. J).

The nostalgic appeal is crucial to some individuals' perceptions of comfort foods even though they do not experience that era directly (Lupton 1996).

When you visit a restaurant where locals eat, like in an alley, it feels like you are eating in an ancient restaurant, savoring the taste that has been passed down. Such a nostalgic experience is really wonderful and healing (Respondent. B)

Childhood recollections affect eating habits (Branen and Fletcher 1999; Wadhera et al. 2015) because parents or elder families usually shape children's food preferences (Unusan 2006). As an important vehicle for recollections of childhood and family (Holtzman 2006), certain foods are therefore taken for comfort foods. Locher et al. (2005) noted that intimate social exchanges occur among close friends or family members while preparing and consuming foods at family gatherings. As a result, comfort food is also the food that has a nostalgic or sentimental value to someone (Long 2017; Soffin and Batsell 2019), especially during special events or activities, or when one feels homesick or lonely (Long 2017; Soffin

and Batsell 2019; Spence 2017; Trois and Gabriel 2011). Such emotions will hence stimulate tourists' desire for certain foods during their trips abroad. For example, one subject showed a photo of hot and fried noodles (chow mien) wrapped in aluminum foil. The food that he had loved since childhood reduced his stress and fatigue when he was away from home (Trois and Gabriel 2011).

In addition, comfort foods are those which reinforced a sense of belonging, cultural and national identity when participants were eating due to past memories brought on. One participant noted that he always visited Ng Ah Sio Pork Ribs Soup Eating House in Singapore where he had visited with his parents several times. A bowl of *bak-kut-teh* with pepper and medicinal herbs was a part of his childhood memory and a comfort food offered exclusively by the country. Food, especially the culinary heritage that corresponds to a whole group has a symbolic meaning and may thus generate a feeling of belonging to the group due to the collective memories (Bessière 1998) The relationship between food and ideas of home and belonging has been highlighted in previous research (Raman 2011). In this regard, comfort foods not only nourish our collective minds (Troisi and Wright 2017) but also recall family bonds, reduce feelings of loneliness (Troisi and Gabriel 2011). Our respondents expressed how the taste of home is comforting in a foreign land.

Food that makes you feel comfortable and secure is comfort food, like home-cooked noodles or chicken soup... It has a family taste, and when you eat it outside, you will feel at home, that is the feeling of belonging (Respondent. L).

The participants also related their interest in comfort foods to personal memories of a specific person, place, or past lives (Spence 2017) as food and memories are usually strongly correlated (Holtzman 2006). For example, one respondent mentioned that

Comfort food is the experience of a certain kind of food related to past life experiences, and it reminds you of the old times, whether they might be good or bad (Respondent. C).

[Figure 1 inserted about here]

Pleasure and well-being

Comfort foods are mostly consumed when people find themselves in a jubilant mood or to celebrate or reward themselves for something (Wansink and Sangerman 2000) because of sensory experience of food (Berridge 1996) apart from familiarity. Spence (2017) asserted that it is necessary to consider the role of multiple senses (specifically touch, smell, and taste) from a more emotional perspective regarding comfort foods. The respondents mentioned that comfort foods provide a sense of ritual, and satisfy themselves physically and mentally.

When I get home at night, or when tired and exhausted at work or on vacation, I feel like eating Taiwanese popcorn chicken (comfort food). Eating comfort food is a kind of satisfaction (Respondent. C).

The results echoed the concept of self-indulgence that comfort foods may supply (Locher et al. 2005), or the so-called reward system in the human brain (Adam and Epel 2007). Also, food can be linked to the sense of acceptance caused by special times (Locher et al. 2005; Charles and Kerr 1988). Reward value is hence an important factor for tourists to choose comfort foods and is almost always accompanied by satisfaction that involves the comfort or well-being of travelers. For example, one interviewee thought that,

I like to search for information about the local food as I visit different countries. And I will feel satisfied once I eat the food on my wish list. That kind of food is a comfort food for me (Respondent. C).

The statement supports the notion that the satisfaction with food serves as a mediator to improve sadness and increase happiness (Van Strien et al. 2019). Therefore, satisfaction could be one of the important drivers for tourists pursuing comfort from food. Besides, regional cuisine may spring surprises on foreigners from time to time. In this study, some respondents said that they were sometimes amazed by food that they had not eaten at the destinations.

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Such food can be described as comfort food at that moment particularly for seniors (Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003; Addis et al. 2010).

Many times, I was amazed by tasty local foods which I had not tried before while traveling abroad, and feeling satisfied and comfortable after eating (Respondent. D).

In addition to sensual pleasures, there was also a feeling of being moved or healed such as happiness or relaxation mentioned by some participants, or more broadly, psychological well-being, after they had comfort foods.

The experiences of dining at fine restaurants sometimes make my day brighter and happy and those foods hence could be my comfort foods (Respondent. E).

During travel, we were first curious about the food and soon we were in a very relaxed mood and felt comfortable while eating (Respondent. J).

Regarding sensory experience, previous research has also shown that olfactory cues can help to aid relaxation (Spence 2003). The taste of food can make many impressions on tourists during trips, and people are more likely to be attracted to the taste of food in a relaxed mood as emotion is the determining factor in triggering comfort food (Dubé, LeBel, and Lu 2005). To summarize, pleasure and well-being contain reward value, satisfaction, and psychological well-being.

Palatability

Palatability was the most direct experience after people had eaten comfort foods. These tastes delivered feelings of comfort through multiple senses. As a result, comfort foods also feature a high calorie content (saturated fat or refined carbohydrates; e.g., Spence 2003). In this study, most interviewees thought of sweet or warm food like soup as their comfort foods at international destinations. For example, one interviewee indicated that when going on business trips, the stress from work made him crave sweets. Thus, he would look for local desserts that met his expectations and alleviated his anxiety. Another subject preferred hot

soup. Although hot soups were unavailable in the United States, chowder still could serve as an acceptable substitute. This responds to the research of Wansink, Cheney, and Chan (2003) and Spence (2012), which suggested that sweet flavors and warmth seem to be prevalent in a wide range of comfort foods. Like food, wine has been seen as a major tourist attraction and major motivation for travel (Park, Reisinger, and Kang 2007).

> *Alcohol is a kind of comfort agent, it makes me feel relaxed easier during travel, and at the same time enjoy the atmosphere of holidays. Especially Japanese Izakaya, a comfortable place for me to visit* (Respondent. A).

In addition, it is important to recognize the social and cultural attributes of food, such as meat is often considered to be related to masculinity and comfort (Kildal and Syse 2017). Eating meat is a natural, necessary, normal, or nice psychological profile (Hopwood and Bleidorn 2019). Respondent J, for example, said that it was weird not having meat during the meal and therefore eating meat during the trip would make him feel comfortable. Another mentioned that the mouthwatering hot soup with large chunks of beef sold next to his alma mater was comforting because it was so reminiscent of the good old days during his college years. Given that comfort food ingredients are typically unhealthy (Locher et al. 2005;Wagner et al. 2014), wholesome food is becoming an alternative for comfort food in modern society. That is, comfort food has been linked to maintaining their health and quality of life (Spence 2017; Stein 2008; Wood and Vogen 1998). As the opinion from respondent B, sugar-free green tea overseas is a kind of comfort food that he must buy immediately in terms of anti-cancer effects and health care.

Lastly, spicy or the sensation of heat is a popular taste for many travelers, even though it has been less emphasized in comfort foods compared to sweet and salty flavor (Spence 2017). The respondent J stated that a slightly pungent taste, such as spicy hot pots have a compensating effect psychologically. Like junk food, spicy food can relieve the pain and

comfort of the soul. In summary, palatability such as sweet, warm, alcoholic, meaty, wholesome, and spicy is indispensable in comfort food consumption at destinations.

Figure 2 shows the results in a three-dimension semi-cube. The thirteen sub-categories, which best reflect tourists' perceptions of comfort foods when they travel abroad are centered on the graph.

[Figure 2 insert about here]

Conclusions, discussions, and future research directions

The existing literature on comfort food has primarily focused on items eaten at home rather than when traveling. Since international tourists are in unfamiliar environments unfamiliar, their states of mind may differ from those when at home. This could result in different ideas about comfort foods. To address this knowledge gap, this research conducted exploratory research on comfort foods in diets when people traveled abroad. The findings reveal that for those international tourists from East Asia, past experiences, pleasure and well-being, and palatability are the three major categories of meanings of comfort food.

First, comfort foods have many different forms and are basically related to personal past experiences. The results showed that "giving a nostalgic feeling" was mentioned by most of the participants regarding what comfort foods are. Comfort foods brought back their childhood recollections, reminded them of the hardship of starting a business, or referred to a familiar taste. Such food had a special place in their hearts. Besides sparking strong personal emotions via one's past lives or memories, sense of belonging and cultural identity that provide a bubble where tourists feel familiar and relieved in foreign countries are noted as well. Interestingly, tourists returning to destinations they have visited multiple times may develop special bonds with local food; these bonds work in a manner similar to that of a sense of belonging (Lee and Boccalatte 2019; Troisi and Wright 2017). Smelling, seeing, and tasting the same food again makes them reminisce about satisfying and memorable

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experiences of the past. According to Fields (2002), one of tourists' motivations for purchasing food is the desire to increase interpersonal relationships and sense of community (Hjalager and Richards 2003) including families or close friends from home, or even strangers they spend time with occupying the same space of local restaurants or bars, as depicted in the Midnight Diner series by a well-known Japanese cartoonist Yaro (2006). This may correspond to Xu and Jin (2020), who indicated that socially excluded people are more likely to consume nostalgic products when they believe that they are not capable of changing the situation (entity theorists). As a result, nostalgia may serve as a psychological resource that maintains a meaningful conception of one's current life, as well as increasing positive mood, self-esteem, and social connectedness (Loveland et al., 2010; Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, Juhl, and Arndt 2012; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, and Cordaro 2010). In short, given the unique social experiences that individuals have when abroad, nostalgic food may provide a sense of comfort when traveling in unfamiliar environments relative to their home countries.

Second, comfort foods are foods that engender pleasant feelings through senses including satisfaction and psychological well-being during international travel, expressed as "eating makes me happy", "eating makes me feel great", and "not only does eating it make me happy, but it also makes me feel touched" according to our subjects. This implies that even though regional food can be somewhat risky for international tourists, they will still draw comfort from it as long as it brings pleasures that satisfy or exceed their expectations. As Özdemir and Seyitoğlu (2017) stated, tourists pursue different levels of authenticity. In comparison with food neophobia travelers who prefer keeping eating habits at foreign destinations (Mak et al 2012a), most of our respondents possess a lot of experience in the hospitality industry and thus are expected to be more willing to try new foods. To a large extent, they are more like adventurers or voracious tourists, exploring the history and

creativity reflected by regional food. In this case, other than nostalgia, pleasures and novelty turned out to be important qualities of comfort foods as well. In terms of implicit theories, those subscribing to incremental beliefs would consider well-being as being fluid and alterable, and therefore leading to personal growth initiatives and well-being outcomes (Howell, Passmore, and Holder 2016). For tourists with incremental beliefs, unfamiliar and exotic foods may elevate psychological well-being during international travel if the food quality exceeds expectations.

Third, Spence (2017) asserted that there are no fixed ingredients to comfort foods and that food with certain palatability is more likely to be considered comfort food. However, this research found that people generally consider sweets or desserts, warm foods (e.g., noodle soups), and food with specific tastes to be comfort foods, which is supported by the results of previous studies (Troisi and Gabriel 2011; Wolcott 2001). Moreover, modern people are attaching greater importance to health today, therefore they may also view healthful items as comfort foods (Feder 2013). Interviewees called wholesome food comforting because it was thought to have beneficial effects on the body and did not evoke a sense of guilt as with consuming junk food. Those people who follow the beliefs of entity theorists may be likelier to feel that behavior is not under their control and this could impact their intentions to consume unhealthy, indulgent food, whereas incremental theory subscribers are more willing to consume healthy food.

Overall, personal characteristics and cultural backgrounds have an effect on what people consider to be comfort foods. Thus, in practice the study suggests that the tourism, food, and beverage industries may refer to these factors to anticipate people's probable reactions to certain food and adopt strategies to promote the destinations more effectively. It is suggested that food service businesses reflect and use the qualities of their local food to preserve traditional food cultures and continuously attract returning tourists. The findings are expected

to offer a valuable conceptual platform for future research on the topic. Future research may use this conceptual foundation as a basis to develop comfort food scales of other cultures and nationalities. To further illustrate, future studies may consider developing scale items using the three dimensions and 13 sub-categories of comfort food-related consumer perceptions detailed in the conceptual model (Figure 2) to assess tourists' comfort food consumption behavior.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This research explores outbound tourist perceptions of comfort food consumption by taking an implicit perspective, as scholars have called for more application of implicit theories in research on consumer psychology (Jain and Weiten 2020). It was found that past experiences in food consumption, pleasure and psychological well-being derived from food consumption, and personal food tastes (i.e., palatability) together determined perceptions of comfort foods during international travel. Moreover, the implicit beliefs of these outbound tourists help to deepen the understanding of consumer psychology, including the functions and meanings of comfort food that affect tourist judgments and choices at foreign destinations. The results are somewhat consistent with the conceptual framework of Wijaya et al. (2013), which consists of three components of international visitor dining experiences. Past experience are an internal factor that influences subsequent food experiences, including expectations and satisfaction. The palatability of local food corresponds to an external factor that also affects subsequent dining experiences. Finally, pleasure and well-being derived from food may be viewed as an outcome of comfort food consumption. In conclusion, the three components shape outbound people's ideas about comfort food during travel.

In general, the contribution of this research is to broaden the knowledge of the attributes of comfort food, which may impact food choices in foreign destinations, but has not received much attention from researchers to date (Locher et al. 2005; Spence 2017; Troisi and Gabriel

2011; Troisi et al. 2015; Troisi and Wright 2017; Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003). When experiencing cultures that are exotic, comfort food offers a sense of familiarity and safety, allowing visitors to experience someone else's familiar foodways as well as creating a "psychological island of home" (Long 2017). Based on the notion, comfort food is not only associated with satisfaction, but reflects cultural power related to identity and social contexts. Furthermore, people with dissimilar worldviews may perceive comfort food differently. From the perspective of entity theorists, they may be more likely to consume nostalgic or indulgent foods to relieve uneasiness. This research highlights and categorizes international tourist needs for comfort food and shows the diversity of people's food consumption behavior.

This investigation also provides recommendations for management. First, past experiences and memories play an important role in the food choices of international visitors (Wijaya et al. 2013). Therefore, food service providers should consider offering eating in a family-type atmosphere (Long 2017) while promoting the authenticity in dining experiences. Preserving local food culture and traditions is essential to producing diverse tourism experiences, which increases the attractiveness of destinations for first-time and repeat visitors. However, food offerings must cater to visitors with divergent cultural backgrounds to generate greater feelings of comfort during journeys. To conclude, the present research offers an insight into the categories of comfort food from the foreign tourist perspective. Food and beverage suppliers in destinations may have to strike a balance between local food culture preservation and globalization to benefit local communities without compromising tourism experiences.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this research. Since dining with local food in destination settings can be complex and challenging, it is questionable whether the dynamics of such experiences can be appropriately captured by the attributes that have been incorporated within

the framework of comfort food (Wijaya et al. 2013). Besides, the participants in this research were all from Taiwan. Because personal and cultural factors have a pronounced effect on whether individuals consider certain food as comforting, people of other cultural or national backgrounds may perceive comfort foods differently. Thus, the results of this analysis only represent Taiwanese people's definitions of comfort food while traveling. Although this research aimed to collect as much academic literature on comfort food as possible, such food has no standard ingredients or form. Therefore, only the similar features of comfort foods were identified and these may not reflect the opinions of all Taiwanese people. In addition, because "people who love to eat and those with food, beverage, or hospitality-related backgrounds" were selected for interviews, those who loved to travel and eat but with different backgrounds (e.g., amateur foodies and backpackers) were excluded.

This research focused on international visitors from a single region. To capture more complete ideas of comfort food and develop more comprehensive strategies, future researchers should consider including other stakeholders in destinations such as destination management organizations (DMOs), food and beverage businesses, residents, and local governments. Despite the results not being fully representative, they can still serve as a reference for future studies on comfort foods and tourism.

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