

ABSTRACT

The subject matter of this dissertation is food tourism or tourists' participation in food related activities at a destination to experience its culinary attributes. In addition, the culinary tourist or the tourist for whom food tourism is an important, if not primary, reason influencing his travel behavior, is its focus.

The empirical objectives of this dissertation concerned identifying the underlying dimensions of food tourism, developing a conceptual framework that explains participation in food tourism, develop taxonomy of food tourists by segmenting the tourists based on their participation in food tourism, and finally identifying the variables that predict membership in these food tourist segments. The effect of sociodemographic variables on participation in food tourism, and their association with the food tourist segments were also examined. Further, all the findings were analyzed within the theoretical framework of the world culture theory of globalization and the cultural capital theory.

Based on the survey responses of 341 tourists visiting the four coastal counties of South Carolina, the analyses revealed that food tourism is composed of five dimensions or classes of activities. These include dining at restaurants known for local cuisines, purchasing local food products, consuming local beverages, dining at high quality restaurants, and dining at familiar chain restaurants and franchises. The conceptual variables significant in explaining participation in food tourism were food neophobia, variety-seeking, and social bonding. The sociodemographic variables that effect participation in food tourism were age, gender, education, and income.

Segmentation of tourists revealed the presence of three clusters: the culinary tourist, the experiential tourist, and the general tourist. The culinary tourist was identified as the tourist who, at the destination, frequently dines and purchases local food, consumes local beverages, dines at high-class restaurants, and rarely eats at franchisee restaurants. In addition, the culinary tourist segment was more educated, earned higher income than the other two segments, and was characterized by its variety-seeking tendency towards food and absence of food neophobia.

The dissertation's findings highlight the role of diverse culinary establishments (restaurants, farmer's market, pubs etc.) that contribute to the food tourist experience, and emphasize the importance of destination marketing organizations and the small and medium enterprises working in tandem. Further, the findings also suggest that destinations targeting the culinary tourism market should articulate the availability of indigenous local dishes, varied culinary cultures and food tourism activities.

The evidence that the fundamental structure of food tourism revolves around the local, along with the presence of eating familiar food at chain and franchisees, as a dimension of food tourism, shows that the dialectics between the local and the global is at play, lending credence to the implications of the globalization theory to the food tourism context. The findings also support the use of cultural capital theory in explaining the culinary tourists, as seen by their possession of the indicators of cultural capital, namely an advanced education, and 'cultural omnivorousness' typified by their variety-seeking tendency.