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Research paper

Experiential value in branding food tourism

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ABSTRACT

Although food tourism has been characterized as an emerging industry, studies of branding in food tourism are limited. This work applies a novel, value-driven approach to evaluate experiential value as the antecedent for branding food tourism. The research setting is Tainan: a Taiwanese historical city with many street vendors selling traditional foods. Data were collected only from Taiwanese residents. Empirical results reveal that one type of experiential value, consumer return on investment (CROI), can significantly enhance a place's food image. Place food image then, in turn, significantly affects a tourist's behavioral intentions toward food tourism. Based on the findings, the study makes a theoretical contribution to examining experiential values in food tourism by identifying CROI as a key antecedent of place food image. The study also makes practical recommendations for branding food tourism in a given destination.

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1. Introduction

Food has historically been considered a key attraction for tourists, with many destinations attempting to provide tourists with culinary experiences (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). During travel, tourists typically spend approximately 40% of their budgets on food (Boyne, Williams, & Hall, 2002). According to Hall and Mitchell (2001), food tourism is characterized as tourists visiting 'primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food and tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a specialist food production region are the primary motivating factors for travel' (p. 308). As food tourism is gaining importance, food is now a key element in destination marketing strategies (du Rand & Heath, 2006).

To elucidate the role of food at various destinations, researchers have analyzed food attractions at sophisticated urban destinations (McKercher, Okumus, & Okumus, 2008), food experiences at festivals (Silkes, Cai, & Lehto, 2013), and the ways in which local cuisines are promoted on islands (Okumus, Kock, Scantlebury, & Okumus, 2013). This study focuses on food tourism related to a destination (such as a city, region, or nation) that is well known for its food tourism. For example, Texas is a place famous for barbecue, the city of Boston attracts tourists who enjoy fresh seafood, and Shanghai city is recognized for its unique Shanghai cuisine.

Recent studies have found that food also can enhance the identity of destinations because it is strongly related to ways of life, local production, cultural celebration, and heritage (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Hence, this study specifically investigates the importance of food tourism for place branding. Boyne, Hall and Williams (2003) argued that policy makers should cooperate with practitioners and developers to promote food-related tourism initiatives as a means of regional development, demonstrating that the role of food in tourism can be extended from a tourist's attraction to a destination into the tourist's major attraction to a destination. Recently, Horng, Liu, Chiu and Tsai (2012) shed light on the concept of branding in culinary tourism in Taiwan, studying brand loyalty to identify significant, yet indirect influences of brand image and perceived value on travel intention. As shown by Horng, Liu, Chiu et al. (2012), food tourism benefits from the stable translation of image to intention. However, a knowledge gap exists in clarifying the key value of a food experience when forming an image. Because food experiences have been found to strongly evoke people's behavioral intentions in tourism (Sims, 2009), the lack of understanding about the perceived value of food experiences should be addressed to contribute valuable findings.

Value has long been applied by scholars to examine tourist participation in food-related consumption (Kim, Kim, & Goh, 2011; Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008; Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012). As determined by Holbrook (1986), value is the key outcome that concerns customers about their consumption. Service providers who can create desired value to target customers are able to maintain long-term success in the market (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). A customer's

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value-driven behavior in consumption has been proven in neuroscience by testing a brain's responses to brands (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012). McKercher et al. (2008) also argued that the roles of value and the benefits of food tourism should gain increased attention. In line with the above literature, value can be considered a major influence on a tourist's overall perception of food tourism.

Traditionally, quality value, emotional value, and price value are the three types of perceived value examined by tourism scholars (Chen & Tsai, 2008; Ryu et al., 2008; Sánchez, Callarisa, Rodríguez, & Moliner, 2006). With the trend of studying sensory experience, the importance of experience in tourism has been widely discussed (Kim, 2014; Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Recently, this trend has motivated scholars to explore the effectiveness of experiential value of tourism (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014; Jin, Line, & Goh, 2013; Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Frost, 2014; Wu & Liang, 2009). Mathwick, Malhotra & Rigdon (2001) proposed the concept of experiential value, defining it as benefits gained from subjective perceptions of four experiences: (1) consumer return on investment (CROI), (2) service excellence, (3) aesthetics, and (4) playfulness. Although food tourism prioritizes sensory experiences (Long, 1998), when studying food tourism, experiential value should be another focus. Therefore, experiential value was selected by this study as the antecedent to branding in food tourism, and its effects on food tourism were assessed.

Taken together, the primary goal of this work is to elucidate the role of experiential value as the antecedent of branding in food tourism. Tainan, a historical city famous for traditional Taiwanese foods, was selected as the research setting. Empirical results gained from analyzing the perceptions of food tourists who visited Tainan yield valuable theoretical and practical implications. With regard to its theoretical implications, this work adds valuable knowledge to the literature on branding in food tourism. In terms of its practical implications, the findings provide useful information for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) that seek to brand their cities as food tourism destinations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food tourism

Food tourism can be narrowly defined as tourists visiting food producers, restaurants, food-related festivals, and other places where special foods and their ingredients are produced, sometimes by professional chefs (Hall & Mitchell, 2001). Food tourism can be broadly defined as the participation of tourists in food-related activities during a trip, such as purchasing local foods and consuming local cuisine (Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Shenoy, 2005). Enjoying delicious food, eating special meals and experiencing food-related cultural traditions are experiences that are often sought after by modern tourists (Horng & Tsai, 2012a,b). Compared with other travel activities, food often can be consumed outside the limitations of seasons (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). One should also note that food tourism differs from normal food consumption, as it offers many possibilities to develop food and beverage-related narratives that address important dimensions of a local culture, including its history and local attractions (Ignatov & Smith, 2006). Through food tourism, tourists often have the opportunity to have authentic experiences (Sims, 2009).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, Hall and Sharples (2003) established levels of interest in food when traveling: (1) high interest, such as gourmet tourism, gastronomic tourism, and cuisine tourism, each of which consider food to be the primary motivation for traveling; (2) moderate interest, such as culinary tourism, where tourists view food-related activities as essential to understanding a

destination's local lifestyle; (3) low interest, such as rural/urban tourism, through which tourists participate in food-related activities because they want different experiences; and (4) low interest/no interest, where tourists consider food and eating as simply satisfying needs. The food tourism mentioned in this study covers the range from high interest, moderate interest, to low interest. That is, this study focuses on tourists who visit a place with the purpose of participating in food-related activities, including those who consider food to be the primary plan or purpose for their travels.

The three categories of food tourism, including high, moderate and low interest, have been examined in previous studies. Tourists with a high interest in food tourism arrange all or nearly all of their activities to be related to food during a trip (Hall and Sharples, 2003). As demonstrated in the study by Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán (2012), the core travel motive for culinary tourists who visited Córdoba, Spain was food. To attract tourists with high interest in food tourism, Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán (2012) further suggested strategic initiatives such as providing culinary tours or promoting integrated perspectives of gastronomy in Córdoba, by synergizing local food and wine resources. Tourists with moderate interest in food tourism can choose to attend food-related activities to understand the local lifestyle at a destination (Hall & Sharples, 2003). As described in the work of Mason and Paggiaro (2012), tourists attended the food event called 'Friuli Doc' in northeast Italy to discover the foods, handicrafts, wines, and folk traditions of the region. By attending this food festival, tourists gained a deeper understanding of the lifestyle of local residents. Tourists with low interest in food tourism tend to join food-related activities because they offer something different (Hall & Sharples, 2003). As in the case proposed by Sims (2009), local food can enhance the tourists' perceived authenticity of heritage by making them familiar with the historical and cultural features of the destination. Tourists who consume these local foods would consider this consumption to be a means of gaining different experiences, rather than the mere satisfaction of physiological needs.

2.2. Experiential value as the antecedent

Kelly (1987) argued that experience is a perception, an explanatory ideology of action, and a conceptual process linking time and space. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that a positive experience is perceived as good when one's emotional, intellectual, and/or spiritual response exceeds a certain threshold. Schmitt (1999) identified five dimensions of experiential marketing: sense, feel, think, act, and relation. In their brand study, Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) conceptualized brand experiences as 'subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments' (p. 53). They also identified four dimensions of a brand experience: sensory experience, affective experience, intellectual experience, and behavioral experience. In their tourism study, Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) defined memorable tourism as 'a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred' (p. 13). They developed seven dimensions of the tourism experience: hedonism, involvement, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, knowledge, and novelty. Kim and Ritchie (2014) then assessed the cross-cultural validity of the seven dimensions.

Experiential value may be interactive, relative, preferred, personalized, and it may dynamically change as experiences accumulate (Holbrook, 1994). Two dimensions of experiential value have been proposed by Holbrook (1994). The first dimension is the extrinsic-intrinsic value of an experience. Extrinsic value is the

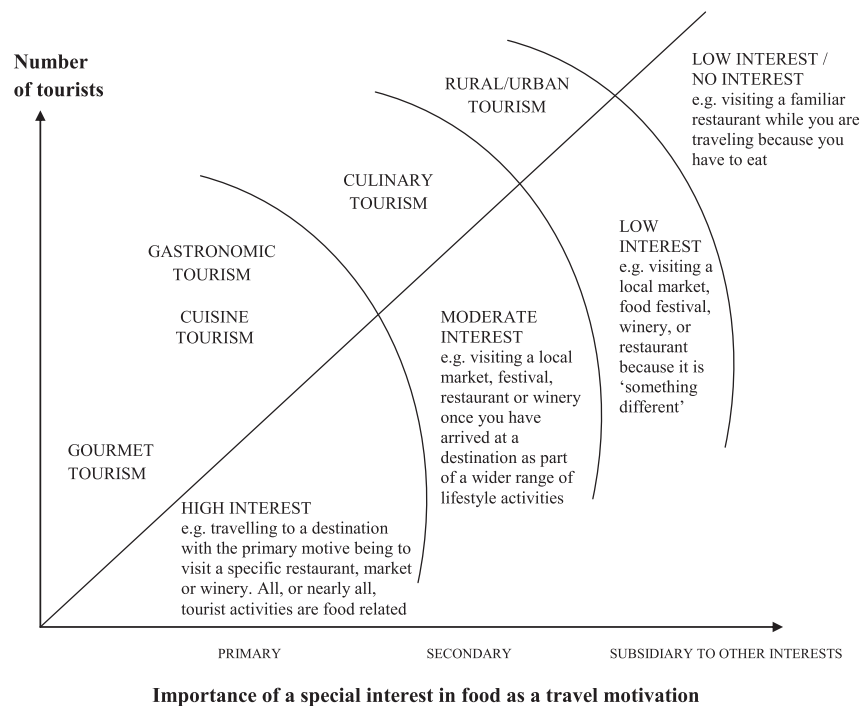


Fig. 1. Different extents of food tourism.
Source: Hall and Sharples (2003).

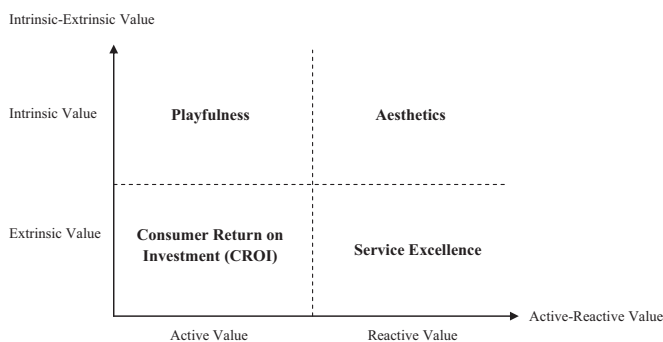


Fig. 2. Four types of experiential value.
Source: Mathwick et al. (2001).

utility of an exchange and is closely related to task completion; intrinsic value, in response to a consumption experience, is derived from feelings, such as playfulness, fun, and appreciation (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Batra & Ahtola, 1991). The second dimension is activity (Holbrook, 1994), which can be divided into active and reactive categories. An active value represents the customer's close collaboration with a marketing entity, while reactive value is the customer's appreciation for, comprehension of, or response to a consumption experience (Holbrook, 1994). Based on these two dimensions, Mathwick et al. (2001) further identified four types of experiential value: (1) consumer return on investment (CROI), active sources of extrinsic value; (2) service excellence, reactive sources of extrinsic value; (3) aesthetics, reactive sources of intrinsic value; and (4) playfulness, active sources of intrinsic value. Fig. 2 lists these four types of experiential value. Different from traditional approaches to studying contents and forms of experiences in food tourism (Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Sims, 2009), examining experiential value could add new knowledge to the current trend of tourism literature focusing on value creation in tourism experiences (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Moreover, different from previous food-related studies that specifically have

focused on aesthetics (Charters & Pettigrew, 2005) or service (Bojanic & Rosen, 1994), analyzing the four types of experiential value in one model could clarify the value of a tourist's experiences in food tourism.

This paper defines experiential value as the antecedent of branding place food image. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) argued that a destination's image is formed by the perceptions of tourists, based on both cognitive and affective components. In line with the concept, the place food image refers to a tourist's cognitive and affective perception of food in a specific place. According to Fakeye and Crompton (1991), tourists can perceive a more complex place image after concluding a visit to a destination. Beerli and Martin (2004) also demonstrated that a tourist's perception of destination image can be enhanced after gaining the experience of a real visit. In addition, previous studies found that a visiting experience can effectively enhance the tourist's environmental attitudes toward the destination (Lee & Moscardo, 2005), his or her satisfaction (Chen & Chen 2010a,b), and behavioral intentions (Tsai & Lu, 2012). Therefore, after perceiving experiential value while visiting a place, a tourist's perceived place food image should be enhanced.

In place branding, Qu, Kim and Im (2011) argued that branding a destination is primarily accomplished by managing its image, especially by generating a unique image that can strengthen a potential tourist's overall perception of a destination and by differentiating that destination from others. This assertion reveals the possibility of branding a destination by emphasizing a unique image. Recent studies have found the significant roles of culture and mega events in creating a unique image of a place (De Noni, Orsi, & Zanderighi, 2014; Knott, Fyall, & Jones, 2015; Larsen, 2014). The idea of turning place food image into a unique image for branding a destination can be found in studies by Ab Karim and Chi (2010), Horng, Liu, Chiu et al. (2012), and Okumus et al. (2013). In line with these studies, the research framework of this study is proposed (see Fig. 3). In this framework, the place food image of a food destination is a unique image. We argue this place food image can significantly enhance a tourist's behavioral intention to visit and/or revisit that destination. Moreover, this work expands

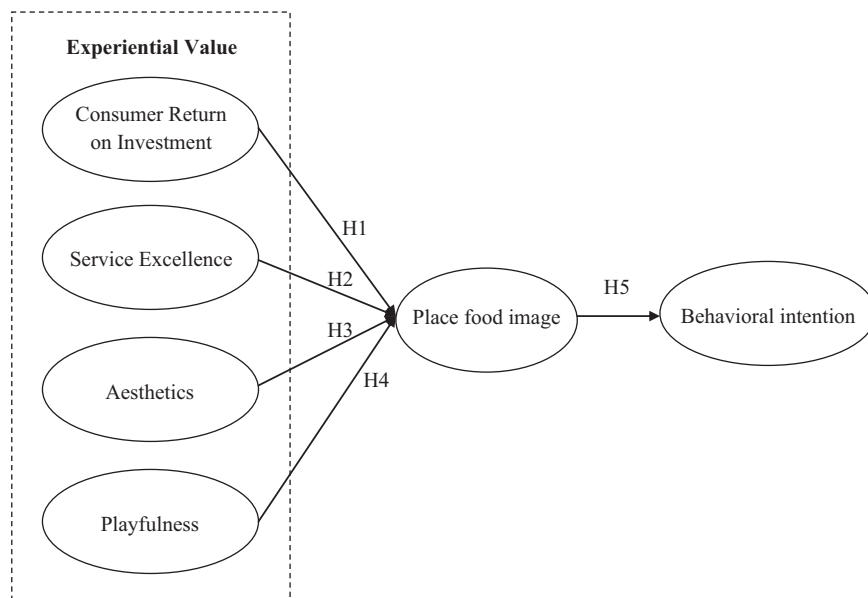


Fig. 3. Research framework of this study.

current knowledge of this issue by adding experiential value dimensions as antecedents to place food image. Justification for each hypothesis is addressed in the following sections.

2.2.1. Consumer return on investment (CROI)

Mathwick et al. (2001) argued that the CROI is the return from financial, behavioral, temporal, and psychological resources that are actively invested by consumers during consumption. Any evaluation of CROI is normally based on economic utility, affordability, and the utility of a consumption encounter (Mathwick et al., 2001). In conceptualizing the consequences of service experiences, Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996) incorporated an evaluation of CROI, including ongoing revenue, spending, price premium for a favorable service, decreased spending, and a stop transaction relationship for unfavorable service. McCall & Bruneau (2010) determined that when customers are bargain shopping, their price knowledge and beliefs about price-quality are manifested in the tendency to be very concerned with CROI. Hwang, Choi, Lee and Park (2012) demonstrated that concerns about CROI can be used to segment customers in full-service restaurants.

Price sensitivity is an effective factor for segmenting a tourist's willingness to participate in tourist activities (Masiero & Nicolau, 2012). When selecting activities, tourists compare the pleasure that may be gained from an activity with its cost: therefore, CROI is a decisive element in the overall perception of a destination (Masiero & Nicolau, 2012). Using the Internet, consumers can easily assess the CROI of destinations by comparing prices of tourism products (Tso & Law, 2005). In food tourism, Winarno and Allain (1991) noted that low price is a key draw for street food and the reason why street food is popular in Asian countries. Choi, Lee and Ok (2013) also noted that although street food is always inexpensive, customers may not obtain the value they desire from street food. To reduce risk of destroying a price-value perception, firms must emphasize price-matching guarantees (Hardesty, Bearden, Haws, & Kidwell, 2012). Taken together, due to the additional value derived from personal evaluations, a high CROI may prove favorable for a city's food brand image, while a low CROI may significantly reduce a city's food brand image. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H1. CROI is positively related to a city's food brand image.

2.2.2. Service excellence

Mathwick et al. (2001) characterized service excellence as an extrinsic and reactive value that is subjective. Cina (1990) identified five steps through which firms can achieve service excellence: (1) know your moments of truth; (2) inventory your moments of truth; (3) assess the importance/performance of each contact; (4) establish a service management discipline; and (5) implement your action plan. Johnston (2004) argued that customer delight, which is at the positive end of the emotion spectrum, can determine the customer's perception of service excellence, rather than the services that can exceed the customer's expectations. Based on the importance of service excellence, multiple studies have explored how to improve service excellence. Johanson and Woods (2008) noted that service quality should be based on the capability of a firm to manage its employees' emotional labor. With dyad data from hotel human resources (HR) managers and employees, Tang and Tang (2012) further demonstrated that good HR practices can enhance employee cognition of expected service behaviors, and then improve collective service-oriented citizenship behavior.

In examining dining experiences, service quality has been widely emphasized as pivotal in a customer's overall perception of a restaurant (Bojanic & Rosen, 1994). Full-service restaurants emphasize their effort to pursue service excellence, such as paying special attention to individual requests (Jani & Han, 2011), their customers' perceptions about fairness when waiting (Sulek & Hensley, 2004), empowering employees to provide unexpected services to customers (Hancer & George, 2003), and utilizing information technology when serving customers (Oronsky & Chathoth, 2007). Taken together, service excellence can add value to a service experience and improve a restaurant's image. Recent empirical studies also showed that high service quality can improve brand image for restaurants (Ryu et al., 2012; Wu, 2013). The following is therefore hypothesized:

H2. Service excellence is positively related to a city's food brand image.

2.2.3. Aesthetics

Mathwick et al. (2001) defined an aesthetic response as 'a reaction to the symmetry, proportion and unity of a physical object,

a work of poetry or a performance' (p. 42). They also deconstructed aesthetics into two dimensions: (1) the salient visual elements in a physical environment, such as physical attractiveness, color, graphic layout, and photographic quality; and (2) the entertainment dimension of a service performance, meaning that all nuances of an experience are worth savoring. Vilnai-Yavetz and Rafeali (2006) showed that good aesthetic perceptions can generate feelings of pleasantness, service satisfaction, and the intention to reuse that service. In focusing on the aesthetics of UK boutique hotels, Lim and Mel (2009) found that hotel buildings should communicate the personality and characteristic of the hotel brand. For example, hotel websites should emphasize relaxation and a unique atmosphere, and hotel rooms should always be described as individual and unique.

Some food tourism researchers have examined the role of aesthetics. Charters and Pettigrew (2005) firstly argued that wine tasting is an aesthetic experience because it can invoke pleasurable feelings during the tasting experience, including those related to cognition and emotions, and may involve personal taste and shared values. In establishing the dimensions of innovative cuisine, Hu (2010) asserted that aesthetics, as one dimension, can be evaluated via four core competencies: (1) knowledge of fashion trends; (2) sensibility of the aesthetic experience; (3) the ability to make harmonious sense of the product; and (4) positive attitude toward the increasing aesthetic value of products. Ryu and Han (2011), who analyzed the effects of a restaurant's physical environment on the dining experience, found that aesthetics can reduce any discrepancy between expectation and performance, and improve both the customer's satisfaction and loyalty. We assert that due to the importance of aesthetics for food tourism, the aesthetics of a food tourism experience in a city can strengthen or weaken customer-perceived assessments of a city's food brand. Hence, the following is hypothesized:

H3. Aesthetics are positively related to a city's food brand image.

2.2.4. Playfulness

Mathwick et al. (2001) defined playfulness as 'intrinsic enjoyment that comes from engaging in activities that are absorbing, to the point of offering an escape from the demand of the day-to-day world' (p. 44). Glynn and Webster (1992) identified five factors to measure playfulness: spontaneity, expressiveness, fun, creativeness, and silliness. Intrinsic involvement in a playful experience allows people to escape from practical considerations, often forgetting to check the time during an experience (Babin et al., 1994). Barnett (2007) defined playfulness as 'the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment' (p. 955). Moreover, people with playful personalities are typically happy, humorous, impulsive, adventurous, cheerful, spontaneous, unpredictable, active, sociable, energetic, outgoing, and funny (Barnett, 2007). Due to its significant role in coping with stressors and creating a flow experience (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013), playfulness has long been explored in studies of addiction to computer games (Padilla-Meléndez, del Aguila-Obra, & Garrido-Moreno, 2013).

In food marketing, playful features can assist in selling healthy products because, rather than simply emphasizing healthy functions, they can improve and enrich a customer's perceptions of a product (Gram, de La Ville, Le Roux, Boireau, & Rampoux, 2010). When designing a restaurant's interior, improving perceived hedonic value can stimulate sensory and affective feelings, and strengthen satisfaction and behavioral intention (Ryu, Han, & Jang, 2010). Moreover, emphasizing entertainment cues at restaurants can improve the influence of food quality on the customers' affective responses (Teng & Chang, 2013). Taken together,

playfulness can enrich dining experiences, and may eventually strengthen the consumers' overall perception of a restaurant brand. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H4. Playfulness is positively related to a city's food brand image.

2.3. Brand image and behavioral intention

Oliver (1980) showed that after any consumption experience, satisfaction can transfer from post-attitude to post-intention as a sequential satisfaction outcome. Experiential value can assist customers in evaluating their satisfaction, such that a city's food brand image can be enhanced by experiential value (Oliver, 1980). Based on the achievement of satisfaction, a city's food brand image can then enhance the customers' behavioral intention. Zeithaml et al. (1996) further proposed that after service experiences, customers can generate both favorable (positive statements, recommendations, loyalty, increased willingness to pay a price premium), and unfavorable intentions (negative statements, switch behavior, complaining to others). After a travel experience, tourists subjectively generate behavioral intentions toward the visited destination, such as intentions to revisit and word-of-mouth promotion (Tian-Cole, Crompton & Willson, 2002).

The link between a city's food brand image and behavioral intention can be considered from several perspectives. The social perspective explains a customer's tendency to use brands with favorable images in social settings. Graeff (1998) found that brand image can significantly influence a customer's behavioral intention, especially when the brand will be used publicly or for social purposes. For example, Chinese tourists prefer to stay at luxury hotel brands while traveling, especially those brands that provide experiential and symbolic value (Chen & Peng, 2014). A unique destination image can serve as the key antecedent to a tourist's behavioral intention. Qu et al. (2011) proved that, although most studies considered cognitive and affective images as major antecedents of behavioral intention toward a destination, a unique image can also attract tourists. For some destinations, food plays a large role in their unique images, making it a primary reason why tourists are attracted to a destination (Horg & Tsai, 2012a,b; Okumus et al., 2013; Silkes et al., 2013). A recent meta-analysis (Zhang, Fu, Cai & Lu, 2014) found that the relationship between destination image and loyalty was generally stable. Cognitive image, affective image, overall image and cognitive-affective joint image can individually improve three loyalty types: (1) attitudinal loyalty, which is the intention to recommend an experience to others; (2) behavioral loyalty, which includes the intentions to visit and revisit; and (3) composite loyalty, which is a behavioral intention. Taking Shanghai as a case city for studying city branding, Larsen (2014) explored foreigners' perceived image of the city, showing the importance of image in forming a city brand. Based on the above, the following is hypothesized:

H5. A city's food brand image is positively related to behavioral intention.

3. Method

Tainan, a historical city, uses traditional Taiwanese foods as a means to retain its heritage (Chen & Chen, 2010a,b). Based on its long developmental history and its location as a hub for diverse cuisines, food culture in Tainan is characterized by numerous street foods that are favored by locals (Huang, 2003). Moreover, street food is the major attraction for more than 80% of tourists who visit Tainan (Yu & Yang, 2009). The food offer also appealed to a CNN reporter, Wei (2015), who wrote an article to introduce the

charm of street food in Taiwan's oldest city, Tainan. Another news article by Wei (2012) reported that Tainan's food fame is mainly based on a network that consists of small street vendors who serve and cook the food outside. Since 2007, Tainan's City Government has promoted food tourism by assisting its food vendors in marketing their products, cooperating with local businesses to renovate restaurants, hosting events to select the top 10 food souvenirs, and branding food tourism (Yu & Yang, 2009). To further promote traditional street food in food tourism, the Tainan City Government has hosted the Tainan Food Festival since 2011. These efforts have increased the revenue of the overall tourism industry in Tainan City by 23.82% (Yu & Yang, 2009). Due to the importance of food tourism in Tainan and the practices of Tainan's City Government in branding it as a food tourism destination, Tainan is an ideal research setting for examining the role of experiential value in branding food tourism.

Convenience sampling was applied to distribute the survey to tourists who chose to visit Tainan for food-related activities, and who were on the final day of their trip. A gift valued at US\$2 was provided to each participant as an incentive and for appreciation. Five college students who were majoring in hospitality management were trained and stationed at four popular tourist sites (Yongle Market, Zhengxing Street, Ximen Road, and Bao'an Road) in Tainan from February to March in 2014. Famous local foods, such as spring rolls, bowl rice cakes, herbal tea, steamed buns, tea-flavored ice cream, salty porridge, rice cakes, and beef soup can be found at these sites. According to the definition of food tourism by Hall and Sharples (2003), to categorize a tourist as traveling for food tourism, he or she must at least pass the 'low interest' level described in Fig. 1, which means the tourist participates in a food-related activity because it is 'something different' rather than simply because of hunger. The trained student researchers stood at the selected four popular tourist sites, identifying people who behaved like tourists, based on actions such as carrying a camera or map in their hands. First the students asked interviewees to verify their status as tourists, then asked them about their motives for visiting Tainan and for details about the food sites they visited during their stay. Those who identified themselves as tourists traveling in Tainan with the motive to eat local food, and who had visited some local food sites during their trip, were invited to participate in this study.

All of the items in the tourist survey were anchored by a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one for 'strongly disagree' to five for 'strongly agree.' Three experts in food tourism were asked to assess the validity of the questionnaire. Before the official survey, a pilot study with 30 tourists was implemented to ensure that Cronbach's α of each construct exceeded .80. Experiential value was measured by asking participants about their food experiences in Tainan via a four-dimension scale developed by Mathwick et al. (2001). This scale has four items for CROI, three for service excellence, three for aesthetics, and four for playfulness. Tainan's food brand image was measured by asking participants about their perceptions of food in Tainan. In total, nine items based on the work of Horng, Liu, Chou, and Tsai (2012) were revised and used to measure the city's food image. Behavioral intention was measured by using three items from the study conducted by Tian-Cole et al. (2002). For example, subjects were asked about their revisit intention and willingness to recommend Tainan. In addition, researchers also obtained background information, including gender, age, marital status, education status, occupation, place of residence, monthly income, frequency of visits to Tainan, travel mode used, and food sites visited during their stay in Tainan.

4. Results

In total, 360 valid questionnaires were collected with a 86.96%

usable response rate (360 out of 414). A total of 54 invalid questionnaires were deleted due to incompleteness. Of these 360 participants (see Table 1), 58.1% were female, 54.2% were aged 21–30, 66.9% were single, 66.9% had a college degree, 44.4% earned less than US\$500 per month, and 89.2% of travelers were not on a group tour. Additionally, 39.7% were students and 23.6% were employed. As Tainan is in southern Taiwan, 52.8% participants lived in the south and 29.2% came from the north, where most Taiwanese live. It was notable to find that 61.9% of participants had visited Tainan more than five times, and 13.9% of participants had visited the city three times or fewer. In terms of the food sites they visited, street food stalls were the most popular (90.8%), followed by night markets (72.2%), quick-service restaurants (50.8%), and restaurants recommended by others and/or the media (34.2%). It should be noted that night markets are mainly consisted by street food stalls. To distinguish between street food stalls and night markets, the street food stalls selected for this study were located on streets rather than at night markets. Because of the cheap and delicious street food of Tainan city, the majority of its tourists were students with relatively low monthly income.

Table 2 provides means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and reliability values for all variables. Data reliability was ensured by assessing the Cronbach's alphas for all constructs, which were in the range of .74–.85, exceeding the critical value of .70 (Nunnally, 1978). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus 7 was applied to determine whether the measurement model was an adequate fit to the data. Table 3 shows the results of the measurement model. The CFA results indicate that the fit to the data were acceptable ($\chi^2=680.07$, $df=284$, $p \leq .000$; RMSEA=.06; SRMR=.05; CFI=.91; TLI=.89) (Bollen & Long, 1993), and all indicators had statistically significant loadings ($p \leq .05$) for appropriate constructs. Additionally, Average variance extracted (AVE) was used to assess the discriminant validity of all constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE of all constructs was .46–.77, demonstrating acceptable discriminant validity. Thus, all constructs had adequate reliability and validity.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to test the hypotheses. Both the chi-square statistic and the fit indices indicate the structural model is reasonable to explain the proposed relationships ($\chi^2/df=2.19$, $p \leq .000$; RMSEA=.06; SRMR=.05; CFI=.92; TLI=.91). As predicted, CROI, one dimension of experiential value, was positively related to Tainan's food brand image ($H1$, $\beta=.50$, $p < .05$). Additionally, food brand image positively affected tourists' behavioral intention ($H5$, $\beta=.74$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, service excellence ($\beta=.18$, $p=.34$), aesthetics ($\beta=.03$, $p=.87$) and playfulness ($\beta=.17$, $p=.41$) did not have significantly positive effects on Tainan's food brand image. Thus, $H2$, $H3$ and $H4$ were not supported. In sum, CROI was the only experiential value dimension to significantly affect food brand image, and Tainan's food brand image significantly enhanced its tourists' behavioral intention. Table 4 summarizes SEM results, while Fig. 4 visualizes the standardized structural model of SEM.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine four types of experiential value as the antecedents of branding food tourism. This study selected the culinary center of Taiwan (Wei, 2012), Tainan City, as the research setting and sampled participants who were identified as food tourists. Results of this study found that CROI significantly exerted a positive influence on place food image, and place food image significantly improved the tourists' behavioral intention for food tourism in the case city. Meanwhile, the predicted effects of service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness on

Table 1
Demographic information of participants (n=360).

Variables	Sample	Percentage	Variables	Sample	Percentage
Gender			Monthly income		
Male	150	41.7	Under \$500	161	44.7
Female	210	58.3	\$501–833	53	14.7
Age			\$834–1167	61	17.2
Under 20	89	24.7	\$1168–1500	53	14.7
21–30	196	54.2	\$1501–2000	24	6.7
31–40	55	15.3	Above \$2000	8	2.2
41–50	12	3.3	Number of times to visit Tainan City		
51–60	5	1.4	1 time	25	6.9
60 and above	3	0.8	2 times	41	11.4
Marriage status			3 times	51	14.2
Married	62	17.2	4 times	19	5.3
Single	298	82.8	5 times and more	224	62.2
Educational status			Travel mode		
Elementary	6	1.7	With travel agency	7	1.9
Junior high	18	5.0	Self-service trip	323	89.7
Senior high	36	10.0	Others	30	8.3
College	243	67.5	Place of residence		
Graduate school	57	15.8	North Taiwan	107	29.7
Occupation			Central Taiwan	58	16.1
Business	88	24.4	South Taiwan	191	53.1
Professional work	41	11.4	East Taiwan	4	1.1
Education	22	6.1	Food sites visited this time in Tainan City		
Government	14	3.9	Night market	260	72.2
Natural resources	6	1.7	Street food stall	327	90.8
Housekeeper	19	5.3	Quick-service restaurant	183	50.8
Student	144	40.0	Hotel restaurant	31	8.6
Others	26	7.2	Full-service restaurant	24	6.7
			Recommended restaurant	123	34.2

Table 2
Correlation table (n=360).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CROI	4.10	.57	(.75)					
2. Service excellence	3.99	.64	.65**	(.74)				
3. Aesthetics	3.66	.78	.45**	.57**	(.85)			
4. Playfulness	3.99	.63	.73**	.64**	.56**	(.78)		
5. City food brand image	4.35	.44	.67**	.58**	.38**	.57**	(.84)	
6. Behavioral intention	4.54	.51	.56**	.49**	.35**	.52**	.59**	(.82)

Note: 1. The value in the parentheses is the Cronbach's α of the scale.

2. *Correlation is significant at $p \leq .05$.

** Correlation is significant at $p \leq .01$.

place food image were not supported. Explanations of the findings and their implications are addressed in following sections.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Analytical results have several theoretical implications. First, CROI can be a critical experiential value that can improve a tourist's perception of place food brand image. Tainan is famous for its street food, which is always inexpensive. Among all subjects, 44.7% had a monthly income < US\$500 and 90.8% enjoyed street food. Delicious, affordable food is an attractive food experience for people with limited budgets. Such findings fit the argument by Choi et al. (2013) concerning the importance of street food in food tourism, while also revealing that street food is a 'major type of food sites in a city' that acts as a moderator between experiential value and the city's food brand image. The significant effect of CROI in this research may be because street food in Tainan attracts CROI-oriented tourists. Based on this finding, places famous for

affordable street food, such as Penang and Bangkok, might be similar to Tainan with an emphasis on CROI in branding food tourism. Like tourists in Tainan, tourists in Penang and Bangkok might perceive place food image mainly through CROI. Meanwhile, like most tourists in Tainan, many tourists who are attracted to the affordable street food in Penang and Bangkok may also have a relatively low income.

Second, service excellence, aesthetics and playfulness in food tourism may exist when tourists eat in hotel restaurants, full-service restaurants, or theme restaurants. In this study, 90.8% of subjects had tried street food in Tainan, and 72.2% had visited night markets for food. Both street food stands and night market food stands typically lack the service excellence, aesthetics and playfulness that are more likely present in hotel restaurants and full-service restaurants (Chen, Yeh & Huan, 2014; Jin et al., 2013; Ryu et al., 2012). The latter sites were visited by fewer than 10% of subjects. This finding again indicates the need for future studies to consider the 'major type/types of food sites in a place.' For example, with numerous full-service restaurants in Paris, tourists may strongly perceive service excellence; with sophisticated food presentation in Kyoto, aesthetics might be the top experiential value remembered by tourists; and, with lively vendors delivering street food and having joyful interactions with customers in Istanbul, playfulness might be the strongest type of experiential value to significantly enhance the tourists' perceived place food image. Some previous studies provided clues to support this speculation. For full-service restaurants, Jin et al. (2013) found that when customers experienced CROI and service excellence, the quality of their relationship with that full-service restaurant was significantly improved. For nostalgia-themed restaurants, Chen et al. (2014) proved the stimulated emotion of nostalgia is the driver for the consumers' perceived value, image and intention, revealing the necessity to manage aesthetics in this type of

restaurant. For festivals, Mykletun (2009) argued the importance of playfulness in strengthening tourist experiences with local food traditions, activities, and street culture music in high social contact settings.

Third, food can serve as a unique image for branding a place. Results found that place food image significantly enhanced the tourists' behavioral intention for food tourism. Because Tainan's traditional foods are considered delicious, approximately 60% of subjects had visited the city more than five times, while approximately 7% of tourists were visiting the city for the first time. As native culture and the environment can create unique images (Qu et al., 2011), this study proved that food also can motivate behavioral intention to visit a place. Moreover, differing from previous studies that argue restaurants are the most popular food sites in food tourism (Baker, Murrmann, &

Green, 2013), this study proved that street food also can be very important.

5.2. Practical implications

Empirical results have two major practical implications. First, CROI should be emphasized by places that rely on street food for food tourism. For places that are famous for their street food, the high CROI should be emphasized when targeting consumers. Demographic information further reveals that tourists who travel alone, with friends or with family, and have limited disposable income are a target market for street food vendors. DMOs can develop food travel packages based on different food budgets. As a result, street food vendors can experience improved financial performance and reduce their marketing costs, both typical benefits of such promotional packages. Additionally, DMOs can provide maps that identify street food providers in their cities. To satisfy the demand for good CROI, tourists should be able to download these food maps online or obtain copies at major transportation sites.

Second, place food image should be emphasized by local governments when branding themselves as famous for food. Analytical results show that food can create a strong and unique image, motivating a tourist's intention to visit and revisit. In the competitive tourism market, unique place food image can be promoted to distinguish a city from its competitors. Traditionally, DMOs rely on sites such as museums, the natural environment, and temples to promote tourism, while food is only a supporting character. With a strong place food image, DMOs can remarket their cities by defining them as food destinations that are supported by other tourism resources.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this study contributes several valuable findings to literature, some knowledge gaps are worthy of further exploration. First, major types of food businesses in a place may influence the relationship between experiential value and place food image. Tainan is famous for its traditional food stands, where items do not require a wait and are usually cheaper than food found at restaurants. The characteristics of food stands may explain why CROI is the only experiential dimension to be significantly related to food brand image. Other dimensions of experiential value may also exert positive influences on a place's food image when that place is famous for other types of food businesses, such as theme restaurants (Tsai & Lu, 2012) or coffee shops Kang, Tang, Lee, & Bosselman, 2012). Second, future studies should prevent having major participants who are students with low income. To gain insight from foreign tourists with financial resources about their intentions for food consumption, it would be ideal to sample tourists who are employed with a monthly income. Similarly, to understand foreign tourists' experiential value of exotic street food, future studies could specifically sample foreign tourists.

Table 3

Measurement model results (n=360).

Construct and measurement item	M	SD	AVE
CROI	4.10	.57	.59
Tainanese food has a good economic value	4.16	.73	
I am willing to wait in line to eat Tainanese food	3.85	.87	
Eating Tainanese food makes me feel relaxed	4.14	.74	
I am happy with Tainanese food prices	4.27	.64	
Service excellence	3.99	.64	.66
Tainanese food providers offer friendly service	3.97	.81	
Compared to other places, Tainanese food is served uniquely	4.15	.78	
Tainanese food providers have professional culinary skills	3.87	.79	
Aesthetics	3.66	.78	.77
The dining environment of Tainanese food stores/stands are aesthetically appealing	3.60	.92	
Decorations of Tainanese food stores/stands are attractive	3.53	.94	
Store/stand styles of Tainanese food providers are very impressive	3.86	.83	
Playfulness	3.99	.63	.60
Eating Tainanese food lets me forget worries	3.99	.86	
Eating Tainanese food makes me feel like I am in another world	3.77	.89	
I enjoy the warmth and passion of Tainanese food providers	4.08	.75	
I perceive the pure enjoyment of Tainanese food	4.11	.72	
City food brand image	4.35	.44	.46
My dining experience in Tainan is consistent with my impression	4.01	.77	
Tainan offers appealing food	4.58	.54	
My choice to visit Tainan to enjoy local food reflects who I am	4.09	.79	
Tainan is a friendly city suitable for culinary tourism	4.49	.59	
Visiting Tainan is a wonderful opportunity for sampling cuisine	4.58	.52	
Tainan has a relaxing dining atmosphere	4.03	.88	
Tainan has a rich food culture	4.48	.62	
Tainan's cuisine is diverse	4.55	.58	
Tainan's cuisine is unique	4.29	.68	
Behavioral intention	4.54	.51	.72
I am willing to revisit Tainan	4.56	.58	
I will actively recommend Tainanese food to others	4.57	.59	
I am willing to recommend Tainan when other people ask for suggestions	4.49	.62	

Note: M=mean; SD=standard deviation; AVE=average variance extracted.

Table 4

Results of SEM (n=360).

Paths	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	p-value
CROI-City food brand image (H1)	.50	2.28	.02*
Service excellence-City food brand image (H2)	.18	.95	.34
Aesthetics-City food brand image (H3)	.03	.17	.87
Playfulness-City food brand image (H4)	.17	.83	.41
City food brand image-Behavioral intention (H5)	.74	21.66	.00**

* The proposed hypothesis is significant at $p \leq .05$.

** The proposed hypothesis is significant at $p \leq .01$.

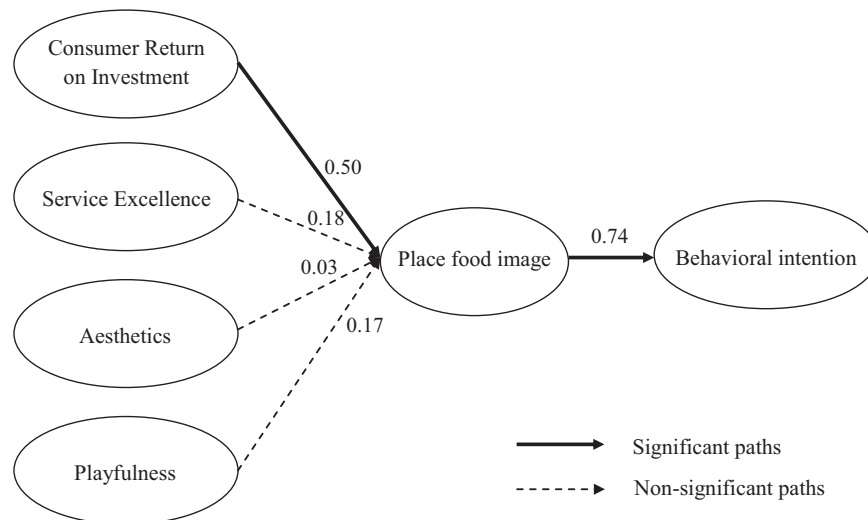


Fig. 4. Results of the standardized structural model.

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