


Chapter 10

Economic Benefits and Challenges of Mountain Tourism: Factors Influencing Destination Food Image


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ABSTRACT

The image of destination food has been a prominent feature in attracting international tourists to mountain regions. However, the unprecedented circumstances caused by a series of lockdowns and the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted international tourists' patronage of local food outlets. This research examines the concept of destination image and the moderating factors that influence the satisfaction levels of international tourists. The study focuses on responses from 395 international tourists who visited mountain regions specifically for culinary experiences. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, resulting in 22 sub-factors that were condensed into three major factors: Attractiveness, Food-Culture, and Health & Nourishment. The research critically discusses these factors in the context of current literature and highlights the implications for regulatory bodies and decision-makers. Additionally, the study addresses the economic benefits and challenges associated with mountain tourism. Future research directions and limitations are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over time, food has emerged as a distinctive attraction at various destinations worldwide, significantly impacting tourists' decisions (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017). Tourists evaluate destinations based on the practicality and relevance of their attractions, with food playing a central role in this evaluation (Bornhorst, Ritchie, and Sheehan, 2010). Globalization has facilitated the free movement of tourists due to easier accessibility, and this has greatly benefitted mountain destinations that can offer unique culinary experiences. Recognizing the importance of food in shaping destination image,

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-8764-1.ch010

many mountain destinations have initiated programs and clubs to facilitate tourists seeking local and traditional culinary experiences (Paül and McKenzie, 2013). Food not only fulfills tourists' basic needs but also offers them a gateway to understanding regional culture, thereby profoundly influencing the destination's image (Bjork and Kauppinen, 2017; Mak et al., 2017). The literature consistently highlights the relationship between food image and tourists' purpose of visit, emphasizing the need to evaluate food image to develop a comprehensive perception of a destination.

Mountain tourism, in particular, has seen significant growth over the past few decades. This growth can be attributed to several factors, including increased per capita income, higher living standards, better transportation options, and more leisure time (Colasante, et al. 2024). Furthermore, technical innovations and the widespread use of the internet have played a crucial role in this expansion. The internet enables potential tourists to gather extensive information about mountain destinations, evaluate their resources, and form positive impressions before making travel decisions (Srivastava & Sharma, 2024). This capability has made the task of building a destination image both more complex and more crucial, as it plays a vital role in convincing tourists and distinguishing one destination from another. Mountain regions, with their unique landscapes and cultural offerings, attract a distinct segment of tourists who are often drawn to the adventure, serenity, and cultural richness these destinations provide (Ali, A. 2023). However, the unique challenges faced by mountain tourism, such as accessibility, infrastructure development, and environmental sustainability, require careful consideration and management. Despite these challenges, the allure of mountain destinations remains strong, driven by the desire for unique experiences and the opportunity to connect with nature (Sharma & Srivastava, 2020). Several previous studies have found that family decisions, including children's consent, significantly influence whether families proceed with tours or excursions. This finding highlights the importance of understanding the decision-making process within families when marketing mountain destinations. In recent years, research has shifted from focusing solely on tourists' decision-making perceptions to examining the marketing and promotion strategies employed by destination management agencies. These marketing strategies directly impact tourists' decision-making processes (Ozer, 2012). Key factors such as attractions, promotion strategies, local behavior, accommodation, transportation, cuisine, safety, festivals, and celebrations are critical in attracting tourists to mountain regions (Ajake, 2015). Although customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions are related but distinct concepts, they reinforce tourists' decisions to use specific products or services. Behavioral intentions are now seen as constant predictors of marketing strategy performance (Chi & Qu, 2008). Mountain tourism offers substantial economic benefits to local communities. The influx of tourists generates revenue through accommodation, dining, transportation, and various recreational activities. Local food and cuisine play a significant role in this economic equation. Tourists seeking authentic culinary experiences are often willing to spend more, thereby boosting the local economy. Identifying mountain destinations with a predominant advantage due to local food and beverage products is vital, as even a small contribution to their development can enhance their positioning in the global tourism market.

Local food and cuisines are high contributors to the tourism industry but have unfortunately not attracted extensive research. The culinary heritage of mountain regions often includes unique dishes and ingredients that cannot be found elsewhere. This uniqueness adds to the appeal of these destinations. Moreover, the promotion of local food can lead to the development of agri-tourism, where tourists visit farms and producers, further enhancing their understanding of local culture and contributing to the local economy. However, the economic benefits of mountain tourism also come with challenges. One significant challenge is the seasonality of tourism in mountain regions. Tourism peaks during specific seasons, such as summer for hiking and winter for skiing, leading to fluctuations in income for local businesses. This seasonality requires local businesses to adapt their strategies to ensure sustainability throughout the year. Additionally, the infrastructure in many mountain regions may not be equipped to handle large numbers of tourists, leading to potential issues with overcrowding and environmental degradation. Environmental sustainability is another critical challenge in mountain tourism. The influx of tourists can strain natural resources, leading to negative impacts on the environment. Sustainable tourism practices are essential to preserving the natural beauty and ecological balance of mountain regions. This includes implementing measures to reduce waste, manage water resources, and protect local wildlife. Encouraging tourists to engage in responsible behaviors and supporting local conservation efforts are crucial steps in this direction. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges to mountain tourism. Travel restrictions and health concerns have deterred international tourists, leading to a significant decline in visitor numbers. Local food outlets and hospitality businesses have faced unprecedented challenges, with many struggling to survive. The pandemic has under-

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