Encounters of Accidental Tourists: Maintaining Boundaries Through Food Consumption

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This study examines the tourist paradox of striving to experience the cultural different Other while never leaving home through the lens of food consumption. The study attempts to provide an understanding of the ways that tourists relate to local and home food and the role that these relationships play in tourist experiences. The study is conducted through interviews with 29 American tourists after their first tourist trip to China. A semiotic data interpretation revealed the ways tourist informants made sense of their cultural experience in China through a continuous process of categorization of foods. Even short-term mobility can become a frightening and alienating experience emotionally and existentially. The encounter with the Other challenged tourists as competent consumers, decision makers, and alienated them from the Other. We find that tourist grapple with these negative experiences by creating a symbolic distance towards the Other through food categorizations. We further elaborate on the symbolic project of restoring normality and dealing with alienation through consumption of familiar home foods.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The study attempts to provide an understanding of the ways that tourists relate to local and home food and the role that these relationships play in personal management of tourist experiences. Tourism involves boundary crossing and may generate a sense of fragmentation and discontinuity. Tourist traveling may even threaten our familiar sense of who we are. Thus, tourists do not only engage in adventurous explorations, but also in boundary maintenance practices (Belk 1997). Acculturation studies have pointed at several such practices and have emphasized the role of possessions and rituals in boundary maintenance practices during long term mobility. However, research that examines the ways that tourists manage their experiences abroad is lacking. Further, mobile consumers behave conservatively when it comes to food consumption and foods tastes are among the most resistant practices during acculturation. Considering the relationship between food, identity, and home, we intend to provide an explanation and perspective on such tourist food experiences. Food consumption is fundamental for human life and we take the perspective that food is never just about eating and eating is never just a biological process (Rozin 1999; Watson and Caldwell 2005). In this paper, we examine how food becomes a cultural resource for consumers that are temporarily away from their everyday life contexts.

One of the reasons that tourists feel distressed when being faced with the local food at the tourist destinations is that “food consumption simultaneously asserts the oneness of the ones eating the same and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (Fischler 1988: 275; Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Food consumption is not only about defining oneself towards or from various groups, it is also about being unique, which is a fundamental aspect of our sense of self-identity (Giddens 1991). On this more individual level food consumption is central since any human is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he or she chooses to incorporate. When the self is threatened by the abundance of unfamiliar cultural cues at the tourist destination, food becomes an anchor that reminds the tourist of who they really are.

Food plays a salient role during boundary crossing and maintenance also because it is an essential and portable part of the materiality of home (Miller 2001), and as such can be used to recreate an experience of home and a sense of stability when away (Petridou 2001). Additionally, food tastes reflect socialization processes that work directly on the body and these embodied tastes tend to be enduring and difficult to transform (Allen 2004). Prior research has shown that mobile consumers resist changes in such embodied food preferences and long for the cultural environments similar to their home country (Thompson and Tambah 1999). Thus, we expect that tourists may cope with cultural and existential alienation through maintenance of these embodied food preferences to recreate a sense of home in the body and abroad.

The empirical data for this study consists of accounts of 29 middle-class American consumers’ experiences of food consumption during a trip to China that lasted for 10 days. This particular context (i.e. first time tourists to a culture that is distinctly different from their native culture) was deemed appropriate for understanding the a) consumer alienation experiences as tourists; and b) the existential role of food as a coping mechanism. Data collection took place during and after the trip. Informants were instructed to keep a personal journal of their food encounters during their trip. When they returned to United States, we used their personal journals as the backbone for one-to-one in-depth interviews that lasted from 30 to 90 minutes with each of them. The interviews evolved around their overall tourist experience in China, their experiences with Chinese foods and other types of foods they selected to consume. An interpretative and semiotic perspective was followed in analyzing and interpreting the data.

Informants make sense of their tourist experiences and consumption of food through continuous categorization and interpretation of the host and home food cultures illustrated in the paper by a model inspired by Greimas’ semiotic square. We find that the category Chinese food creates considerable discomfort whereas the remaining three categories of the semiotic square (Domestic, Non-Chinese, and Non-Domestic food) represent positive food encounters because these enable informants to cope with experiences of alienation. Consistent with prior work, we find that the mass tourist typically lacks the local cultural capital to make sense of the experience abroad and makes little effort do so (Hannerz 1990). Thus, food encounters with the Other challenge tourist as competent consumers, decision makers, and alienate them from the local Other. Tourists attempt to grapple with these negative experiences by creating a symbolic distance towards the Other through food categorizations and judgments. Further, we find that negative judgments that informants made about the local Chinese food were extended to the judgments about the social Other.

Another important finding in the study is the fact that cultural and food regimes continue to play a salient role in making sense of daily consumption experiences. We find that they become even more salient during boundary crossing situations (such as tourism) when the home culture is symbolically threatened (Swidler 1986). Our informants resisted local foods and practices and strived to sustain the home-based cultural interpretation framework and practices. Consumers may not be as open to food experimentation as it is often suggested in the food consumption literature. This research shows that the familiar ways of eating food are still strongly connected to the consumers’ sense of self as embodied practices (Allen 2004). This leads us to wonder whether the suggested condition of gastroanomy is exaggerated (Warde 1997) and traditional food-ways continue to structure our eating in the same way as before.

Additionally, globalization processes and food transnationals have created in some way a reassuring standardized servicescape for tourists that enables them to experience “home” abroad through patronization of these predictable, safe, and familiar spaces and tastes. We find that while informants reject transnational fast foods at home, they embrace it with longing and satisfaction abroad. For many informants search and consumption of non-Chinese food became a symbolic project of finding and experiencing a sense of home and normality. They expressed greater satisfaction with non-Chinese food that was also transferred to quality and customer satisfaction evaluations with the overall servicescape. Further, we find that iconic authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004) with the “home food” was sufficient for tourists to reduce cultural and personal anxieties and feel comfortable, at home abroad.