

The Potential of Destination Websites to Link Tourism to Local Food in Vanuatu

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Abstract

The Internet plays a significant role in the development of a sustainable tourism industry and can enhance the consumption of local food in developing countries. As the Internet becomes a major tool for visitors to search for experiences, destinations design their websites to successfully reach the elusive tourist. The purpose of this research is to explore the role of destination websites in enhancing the use of local food in the tourism industry in Vanuatu. Content and discourse analyses are used to ascertain the extent to which local food is promoted on destination websites. The study highlights that the potential of destination websites to link tourism to local food is not being maximised. A lack of images, written descriptions and hyperlinks on the websites to enhance relevant food information leads the destination to miss opportunities to showcase the food culture of the country and increase visitor's expenditure.

Keywords: Internet; destination websites; local food; Vanuatu; developing countries.

1 Introduction

The Internet is the main marketing tool and source of knowledge about local food opportunities in destinations used by tourists (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Beyond a marketing tool, the Internet can play an important role in the development of a sustainable tourism industry in Vanuatu and other South Pacific island nations through, for example, enabling linkages with the agriculture sector (Berno, 2011; Milne, In press). Destination websites enable interaction between tourism operators, businesses, visitors, local producers and the broader community (Milne, Clark, Speidel, Nodder, & Dobbin, 2009). The tourism industry in Vanuatu, as with other South Pacific nations, relies heavily on imported food, resulting in leakages of tourism earnings (Berno, 2011). Leakages from foreign-owned hotels in Vanuatu are estimated to be as high as 80% of total costs (AUSAID, 2006).

This paper explores the role of destination websites in enhancing the use of local food in the tourism industry in Vanuatu. Destination websites are created by government, communities and private organisations to promote tourism and act as a portal of information to future visitors (Wober, 2003). The objectives of this paper are to (i) describe if and how destination websites promote local food experiences; (ii) examine the role of destination websites in creating linkages with the local food sector, by analysing information and links to local producers' sites.

2 Theory

The Internet has revolutionised the way that destinations inform, communicate and interact with visitors (Burgess, 2011). Global access to large and relevant information

instantly is the key to stimulate tourism demand (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Milne, 2009). Also, the Internet provides a vital competitive advantage for destinations to promote tourist products and other complementary goods and services (Burgess, 2011). Therefore the content of tourism websites plays an essential role in enhancing linkages between tourism and local food in destinations (Singh, Milne, & Hull, 2012). Tourism websites, especially destination websites, have the potential to assist visitors in planning their trip and developing their opportunities for exposure to local food and cuisine (Horng & Tsai, 2010). The Internet can integrate tourism businesses, customers and communities by facilitating the flow of information between multiple parties and stimulating relationships (Milne, In press; Buhalis & Minghetti, 2010). Linking tourism websites to local producers' websites can enhance communication and build collaboration between tourism operators, visitors and local growers. For example, a local hotel's website may include a menu that is linked to a local producer's website, which provides information about local food availability and seasonality (Singh, 2012).

In the South Pacific nations, the ability of the Internet to enhance sustainable development outcomes for tourism remains hampered by access, costs and skills issues (Milne, In press). Research states that the level of Internet participation in Pacific island nations has been limited compared with that in other developed countries, such as New Zealand and Australia (Network Strategies, 2010). In Vanuatu there are only 9,290 Internet users, which represents just 6.7% of the population (VNSO, 2009). A low level of Internet participation challenges the potential of the Internet to link local food to tourism. Therefore destination websites need to be at the forefront of tourism marketing and promotion so that linkages between tourism sector and local agricultural operations can be developed and sustained (Singh, 2012).

3 Methods

The primary data that underpins this research has been collected through an audit of destination websites that promote tourism in Vanuatu. A total of 32 destination websites was audited, and of these 4 are regional, 16 are national, 7 are private and 5 are community sites. From an interpretivist perspective, content and discourse analyses examine the main features of destination websites, such as images, written descriptions, and other structural features including internal and external hyperlinks. Texts and visual representations displayed on websites play a major role in shaping and guiding visitors' behaviour and expenditure (Sigala, 2011). Therefore, the way that local food is promoted on destination websites will affect its consumption and the creation of linkages between the tourism sector and the producers of local food.

4 Results

Few (n=3) of the audited destination websites show food as a tourism attraction on the home page. Local food seldom appears in the presentation of large pictures and is also totally ignored in the display of small pictures. The only website that shows large images featuring local food is a community blog. The front page of the blog shows the rural aspect of Vanuatu and how important agriculture and natural resources are for the subsistence of the community. The pictures of local people working the land,

local produce and villages displayed at the community blog stimulate the sale of local products and agricultural services such as farm tours or holidays (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). Pictures displayed at the community blog show the independence that websites provide to remote communities, enabling them to express and present themselves in the international marketplace (Deuchar, 2012).

Of the 32 audited destination websites, only eight provided images and 17 explanations of local produce through all other pages of the sites than the homepage (see Table 1). The local cuisine is largely absent from most of the destination websites and it is promoted even less than the local produce: of the 32 destination websites, only seven provide some kind of explanation about the local cuisine. Furthermore, only four sites display pictures of the local cuisine, and the pictures are usually small and without supporting information such as notes that specify the background of the image, or identify the local produce or ingredients and cultural traditions that involve the dish. Pacific countries are little known as culinary destinations and recent studies show that their marketing initiatives do not embrace the potential of food as a cultural tourism resource (Berno, 2011; Milne, 2009; Singh, 2012). Linkages between tourism and local food need to be stimulated by demand, but without information to encourage visitors to try new local food experiences, enhancement of the links will not occur (Milne, 2009).

Table 1. The number of destination websites with local food images and descriptions

Websites	Local produce		Local cuisine	
	Text	Pictures	Text	Pictures
Regional (<i>n</i> = 4)	1	0	0	0
National (<i>n</i> = 16)	10	5	4	3
Private (<i>n</i> = 7)	3	2	3	1
Community (<i>n</i> = 5)	3	1	0	0
Total (<i>N</i> = 32)	17	8	7	4

The audited websites report low frequencies across all the themes identified, with not much detailed information about food – often just a couple of sentences – and little emphasis on food as a tourist attraction (see Table 2). The abundance of ethnic restaurants that provide typical meals from other countries is the most recurrent category in the promotion of food experiences in destination websites compared with the promotion of local producers. All of the sites only provide brief information about three food producers, and there seems to be little intention on the sites to encourage the consumption of local food.

The promotion of the local food market in tourism websites is another way that the tourism industry can enhance linkages with the agriculture sector. Local producers in Vanuatu sell farm-grown produce from their stalls inside the market. The local market is the place most often mentioned in the audited destination websites for tourists to taste local food, but information is limited on the availability of produce that could be of interest to culinary tourists. Moreover, information about the local food market is often difficult to find in the destination websites as it usually appears alongside other types of information.

Table 2. The types of information about local food given in destination websites

Types of information	Regional <i>n</i> = 4	National <i>n</i> = 16	Private <i>n</i> = 7	Community <i>n</i> = 5	Total <i>N</i> = 32
Cultural aspects	1	1	–	–	2
Produce from natural resources	–	1	–	3	4
Agriculture, part of the economy	–	2	–	2	4
Types of local produce	–	3	–	2	5
Local food guide	–	3	–	–	3
Local dishes and recipes	–	2	1	–	3
Food events	1	2	–	–	3
Ethnic restaurants	–	3	4	–	7
Local food market	–	3	3	–	6
Local producers	–	2	1	–	3
To bring your own food	–	1	1	–	2

The positioning and use of hyperlinks in websites is essential to provide access to relevant information and strengthen links between tourism operators and businesses (Baggio & Corigliano, 2010). None of the destination websites presents an internal hyperlink that could provide further information about the local producers of Vanuatu (see Table 3). Of the three local producers mentioned in destination websites, only one has a website: ACTIV Community. During the research three other local producers with websites were identified: Venui Vanilla, Tanna Island Coffee, Tanna Coffee. None of these local producers' websites appear linked to the audited websites by an external hyperlink, and so opportunities to increase interaction and visibility between stakeholders as well as disseminate information to stimulate tourism demand are being missed (Reino, Frew, & Albacete-Saez, 2011).

Table 3. The use of the Internet to promote local producers in tourism

Local producers	Information provided	Internal hyperlink	External hyperlink	Producers with website, but not linked
South Pacific Nuts	√	-	-	No
ACTIV Community	√	-	-	Yes
Teouma Prawns	√	-	-	No
Local Market	√	-	-	No
Venui Vanilla	-	-	-	Yes
Tanna Island Coffee	-	-	-	Yes
Tanna Coffee	-	-	-	Yes

5 Conclusions

This study has explored the role of destination websites in enhancing the use of local food in the tourism industry in Vanuatu. The study contributes to existing tourism research in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), especially on enhancing the sustainability and economic performance of the tourism industry. The results of the study show that destination websites in Vanuatu are more proficient in providing

information than interaction and integration to the local food sector. Even so, audited destination websites show constraints as a source of information to develop linkages between local food and tourism. This paper supports what Milne (In press, p. 1297) states that “local levels of information technology acumen must be enhanced” to upgrade tourism websites in order to expand local development in the region. Initiatives of destination websites to promote local food experiences are critical to provide information to visitors and increase tourism yield. By displaying images and descriptions of local food experiences and providing hyperlinks to relevant community sites, destination websites can facilitate links between tourism and the local economy in SIDS.

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