SEEING THE VOICE OF TAIWANESE CUISINE: CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. *Taiwanese cuisine is popular globally and has become an important destination of culinary tourism. More and more Mainland Chinese students are coming to study in Taiwan. The dining experiences of these students in Taiwan have received increased attention and merit exploration. This study interviewed Chinese students studying in Taiwan by adopting the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to elicit the participants' mental images about Taiwanese cuisine, revealing the deeper thoughts and creating a consensus map based on dominant constructs. The map was then validated by factor analysis and six image frameworks were proposed: flow experience, Taiwanese atmosphere, good value, fad curiosity, authentic flavor, and unique names. These image frameworks provide management implications to improve marketing strategies. Further research is suggested.*
Keywords: Taiwanese cuisine, ZMET, Dominant constructs, Consensus map

1. **Introduction.** Taiwanese cuisine is famous all over the world. A Facebook poll conducted by CNN [1] ranked Taiwan as the world's top culinary destination. Local food has been found to be an important element of the tourist experience which adds value to a destination [2]. More and more visitors around the world are coming to Taiwan not only to enjoy the scenery but also to taste the local food. The development of Taiwanese cuisine has increasingly become an important destination of culinary tourism. It is suggested that food and the cultural context of the tourist destination share an inseparable symbiotic relationship, indicating the synergy of gastronomy and tourism [3]. Tourists' food consumption is a prevalent research topic in the literature on consumer behavior [4-6]. It was found that food consumption constitutes up to even one third of the total spending of tourists [7]. The unique cuisine of western European countries of France, Italy, and Spain is well recognized worldwide, and has become an attraction to visitors. The desire to experience a particular type of food or the produce of a specific region offers a great number of gastronomic opportunities for tourists [8,9]. Taiwanese cuisine is also unique; however, few studies have been conducted so far.

Mainland China's rapid economic growth and its students' growing demand for higher education have made it a popular location for student recruitment among its neighbors (e.g., Japan and South Korea) and major countries in the Western world [10]. The number of Mainland Chinese students studying in Taiwan is growing annually and their dining experiences are worth researching. Hospitality managers would like to know what the Chinese students' thoughts and expectations are regarding their dining experience in Taiwan in order to meet their various needs and to improve the quality of their service. Chinese students may also play an important role in promoting food locally or in their hometown.

This study interviewed Chinese students studying in Taiwan and adopted the ZMET to examine their subconscious thoughts on Taiwanese cuisine. The ZMET is a consumer research tool that is grounded in multiple disciplines including psychology, cognitive science, sociology, semiotics, and visual anthropology and uses both nonverbal (image) and verbal (in-depth interview) forms of language [11-14]. ZMET-based analyses elicit consumers' metaphors (mental images) to reveal approximately 95% of their latent thoughts [14,15].

2. Literature Review.

2.1. **Taiwanese cuisine.** The cuisine is defined as the manner in which "cultures manipulate and transform potential foodstuffs into what these cultures consider proper human food" [16]. Taiwanese dishes consist of food created or modified in Taiwan and that with Taiwanese flavor. Taiwan's food culture has gone through several variations, for example, from the early Taiwanese aborigines dishes to influences from the southern provinces of China, most notably the province of Fujian and Hakka-style dishes, to Japanese influences when under Japanese rule and even western influences when under the rule of the Dutch. After the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan, authentic Chinese cuisine was brought into Taiwan from different regions in China including dishes from Guangdong, Jiangxi, Chaoshan, Shanghai, Hunan, Sichuan, and Beijing. Up to the present time Taiwan has developed a cuisine which includes traditional Northern and Southern Chinese dishes, and locally developed as well as western dishes. Hendijani and Chern declared in their research that food offers pleasure and entertainment as well as to serve as a social purpose [17]. Delicious food is served along with social environment as part of the customers' dining experience. The literature suggests that highly involvement customers spend their leisure time talking about and recommending the dining experience and their word-of-mouth has inordinately high credibility to others [18-20]. In a report titled "Mainland Chinese Students Love Taiwanese Food", Mala hot pot and chicken cutlets ranked as the top two foods [21].

2.2. **Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique.** The ZMET is a research methodology that relies mainly on visual images to provide a window into the hidden thoughts of customers. This methodology has also been used to explore the consumers' subconscious thoughts about everything from fabric sprays to the Internet [22]. Zaltaman and Zaltman emphasized that deep metaphors reveal the latent thoughts of consumers, and managers have increasingly recognized the influence of the unconscious minds of their customers and tailored their marketing communication accordingly [23]. These perceptions are equivalent to the sensory-based metaphors formed by specific experience. The sensory-based metaphor thus, becomes not only the bridge to the mind, but also a means through which consumers' thoughts and perceptions can be understood [14,15]. The method is at once open and free of specific questions but also structured as the interview delves deeper into respondent associations in a process similar to visual sociology and psychoanalysis [24]. Moreover, this technique can be used to examine the part of the mind that consumers do not know how to express or are not aware of [25]. ZMET was applied in a study on the thoughts and feelings of B&B lodgers and much customers insight was extracted for marketing strategies [26].

ZMET is adopted in this study to elicit the target population's subconscious thoughts and feelings. The initial stage of the procedure is to conduct an in-depth interview of 10-12 interviewees based on pictures and which involves the following ten steps: 1) storytelling, 2) missed issues and images, 3) sorting task, 4) construct elicitation, 5) most representative image, 6) opposite image, 7) sensory images, 8) the mental map, 9) the summary image, 10) vignette [14,15]. After the interviews are conducted, constructs are proposed based on the information collected from the interviews. The constructs that are mentioned by more

than one third of the interviewees are considered dominant constructs. A consensus map is then created based on the dominant constructs. In this study a confirmation analysis was added to the procedure to verify the reliability and validity of the consensus map.

3. **Research Methodology.**

3.1. **Research method.** The research procedure involved qualitative and quantitative analysis and was conducted in five stages. In the first stage, the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) scale [27] was adopted. Chinese students deemed to have high involvement with Taiwanese cuisine were selected and invited to an in-depth interview. In the second stage, students who agreed to participate were asked to bring eight to ten pictures relevant to the research topic. Pictures were digitally scanned and all interviews were recorded. In the third stage, dominant constructs were elicited from the thoughts, emotions, attitudes and feelings of each interviewee. In stage four, a consensus map was created according to the dominant constructs and pair-constructs proposed by more than one fourth of the interviewees [15,28]. In the final stage, a follow up survey was conducted and validated with factor analysis to come up with image frameworks.

3.2. **Data collection and analysis.** Questionnaires based on PII were administered to 200 Chinese students studying in Northern part of Taiwan. In total there were 132 respondents. After outliers were removed from the data set, the highly involved subjects who consented to participate in this study were interviewed sequentially according to PII score. To ensure the birthplace distribution and gender balance in the demographic data, 12 Chinese students were chosen to be interviewed. The interviewees were asked to create summary images by using their own pictures and write the vignettes to express their thoughts and feelings on Taiwanese cuisine. The interview time totaled 16.9 hours, and altogether 26 dominant constructs were elicited. Figures 1-3 present the personal summary images created by interviewees A, and K, followed by their corresponding vignettes.

FIGURE 1. Summary image of interviewee A

FIGURE 2. Summary image of interviewee K

FIGURE 3. Chinese character "ren"

"Taiwanese cuisine has a huge appeal. Many of them are special and creative and make you want to try them. "O-a-Jian" (oyster omelet) is pronounced in the Minnan Chinese dialect, and its interesting pronunciation *makes me want to eat it. There is a great deal of other novel food in Taiwan that is created using different ingredients. All of it represents an admirable commitment to perfection and innovation." (interviewee A)*

"Humanity is the essence of Taiwanese cuisine. I arranged my pictures into the shape of the [Chinese] character "ren" [people] to mean that Taiwanese people are hospitable and hardworking. The picture on the top is the most important one and conveys the best personal touch and shows a breakfast vendor starting work early in the morning. Taiwanese cuisine is prepared in a transparent way, *and it is affordable and comes in generous portions or ample ingredients. We all have to eat every day." (interviewee K)*

3.3. **Creating the consensus map.** The Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) was adopted to establish the causal relationships among the dominant constructs [29]. These causal relationships that were mentioned by at least one quarter of the subjects ($n \geqq 3$) were identified to create a consensus map (Figure 4). The causal relationships were indicated by the direction of the arrows. The numbers indicate the number of times the constructs were mentioned by the 12 interviewees. For example, *strong hospitality* by vendors causes *nostalgia for home* cooking and results in a *happy and satisfying* dining experience.
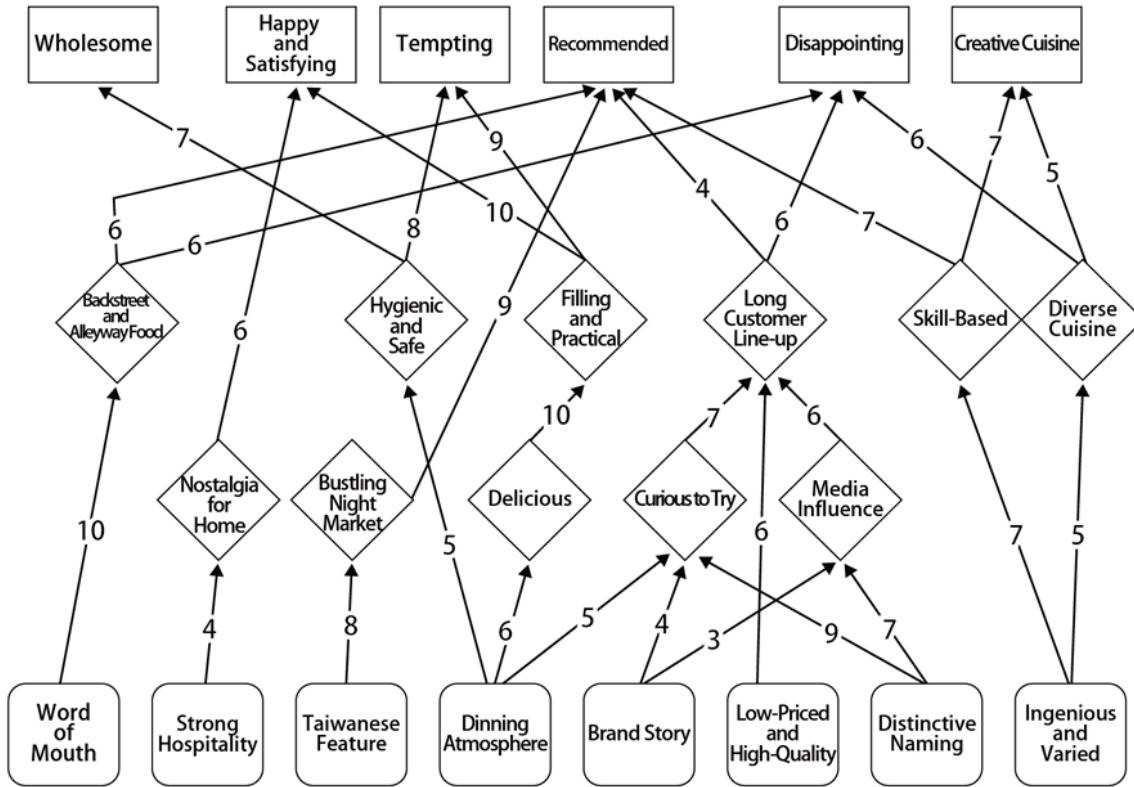
FIGURE 4. Consensus map of Taiwanese cuisine

TABLE 1. Total variance explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalue			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.280	28.933	28.933	7.132	28.529	28.529	2.914	11.655	11.655
2	1.360	7.451	36.384	1.713	6.854	35.383	2.364	9.458	21.112
3	1.249	6.847	43.230	1.705	6.821	42.204	2.171	8.685	29.797
4	.998	5.470	48.701	1.279	5.116	47.320	2.102	8.410	38.207
5	.916	5.018	53.718	1.276	5.105	52.424	2.037	8.147	46.354
6	.860	4.712	58.430	1.155	4.618	57.043	2.025	8.099	54.453
7	.773	4.239	62.669	1.097	4.388	61.431	1.472	5.888	60.341
8	.758	4.153	66.822	1.049	4.194	65.625	1.321	5.283	65.625

3.4. **Validation with factor analysis.** According to the constructs in the consensus map, another survey was conducted with Chinese students who had stayed in Taiwan for more than 3 months and experienced Taiwanese cuisine. This time the sample size was 10 times the average of all the items of the constructs, with a total of 252 valid responses returned. All the responses exhibited an adequate overall reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.8$) and were deemed appropriate for factor analysis (KMO = .838; Bartlett's test of sphericity = .000). The factor analysis extracted eight components from the total variance explained, which exhibited a combined explanatory power of 66.822% (Table 1).

After these eight components were obtained through factor analysis, the components with loadings greater than 0.4 were examined. This left six common variables and image frameworks were proposed.

4. **Research Results and Implications.** Factor analysis yielded six image frameworks that represented Chinese students' expectations: "Flow experience", "Taiwanese brand", "Good value", "Fad curiosity", "Authentic flavor", and "Unique names".

(1) **Flow experience.** During meals Chinese students do not only care for the food itself, and they care more about a human touch that features *wholesomeness* and *creative cuisine* that contributes to a total involvement. Such a culinary experience can be *tempting* and leave a favorable impression of Taiwanese cuisine. For example, when having "Dim sum" with friends, they can forget worldly things and enjoy the moment with little stress.

(2) **Taiwanese atmosphere.** A Chinese journalist stated that "people are the most beautiful scenery in Taiwan" [30], alluding to the hospitality, friendliness, warmth, and kindness of Taiwanese people. Thus, Taiwanese *feature*, *brand story*, *dining atmosphere*, *strong hospitality*, and *word of mouth* all appeal to these students. For example, the world famous Din Tai Fung and its "xiao-long-bao" (soup dumplings).

(3) **Good value.** Chinese students prefer having meals which they perceive as high cost-performance *value*, food which are *filling*, *practical*, and *tasty* sold at night market. This was a place where Chinese students enjoy *sharing* food with their friends. For example, when eating in the night market, you can enjoy the low cost, entertain the sharing and become more intimate with your friends.

(4) **Fad curiosity.** The Chinese students *were curious* to taste Taiwanese cuisine largely because of *media influence* and their *curiosity.* In particular, Taiwanese idol dramas (e.g., Corner with Love) and travel television show that present Taiwanese cuisine was their references. They were also impressed by the restaurants that were operated by Taiwanese celebrities (e.g., Jay Chou) and cartoon-themed restaurants, the latter of which is a recent fad in Taiwan like Hello Kitty themed restaurants.

(5) **Authentic flavor.** Producing authentic flavor requires *skilled-based* cooking approaches to yield diverse *cuisine*, thereby alleviating the *nostalgia for home* and creating *long customer line-ups* at various food vendors and shops. Examples of authentic flavor include "Peking roast duck", "Fuzhou dried noodles", "Szechuan fried rice", "Chongqing hotpots" and "Hakka fry".

(6) **Unique names.** *Low-priced and high-quality*, *ingenious and varied*, and *distinctive naming* constitute Chinese students' expectations of delectable Taiwanese cuisine. Creative cooking techniques and foods with special names or pronunciations, such as "O-a-Jian" (oyster omelet) and "Guan-Cai-Ban" (coffin toast bread), stimulate the auditory, visual, olfactory and gustatory senses of students. Sometimes ambiguity in the names intensifies the sense of beauty.

5. **Conclusion.** This study interviewed twelve Chinese students studying in Taiwan by adopting the ZMET to elicit the participant's mental images and thoughts and feelings on Taiwanese cuisine. Twenty dominant constructs were identified and a consensus map was created. A confirmation analysis was designed to verify the reliability and validity of the consensus map. Questionnaire items were examined by factor analysis. Results of the study yielded six image frameworks that represented the students' expectations toward food consumption in Taiwan.

These six image frameworks can be applied to creating a tourist's desire to experience Taiwanese cuisine while visiting Taiwan. Such images and descriptions can provide marketers and government the content for producing advertising materials, for example, travel guides, brochures and websites to market tourist destinations. The goal is to attract and motivate potential Chinese and Asia Pacific tourists travelling to Taiwan to enjoy a local tourism experience. More importantly, it helps to create awareness of the identity of Taiwanese cuisine and to brand Taiwan as a tourist destination. Further research is suggested in these six image frameworks to validate the thoughts and feelings of consumers in other regions toward their local cuisine.

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