

## The Taste of Macau: An Exploratory Study of Destination Food Image

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**Abstract :** Local food is one of the most attractive elements to tourists. The role of local cuisine in destination branding is very important because it is the distinctive identity that helps tourists remember the destination. The objectives of this study are: (1) Test the direct relation between the cognitive image of destination food and tourists' intention to eat local food. (2) Examine the mediating effect of tourists' desire to try destination food on the relationship between the cognitive image of local food and tourists' intention to eat destination food. (3) Study the moderating effect of tourists' perceived difficulties in finding local food on the relationship between tourists' desire to try destination food and tourists' intention to eat local food. To achieve the goals of this study, Macanese cuisine is selected as the destination food. Macau is located in Southeastern China and is a former colonial city of Portugal. The taste and texture of Macanese cuisine are unique because it is a fusion of cuisine from many countries and regions of mainland China. As people travel to seek authentically exotic experience, it is important to investigate if the food image of Macau leaves a good impression on tourists and motivate them to try local cuisine. A total of 449 Chinese tourists were involved in this study. To analyze the data collected, partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique is employed. Results suggest that the cognitive image of Macanese cuisine has a direct effect on tourists' intention to eat Macanese cuisine. Tourists' desire to try Macanese cuisine mediates the cognitive image-intention relationship. Tourists' perceived difficulty of finding Macanese cuisine moderates the desire-intention relationship. The lower tourists' perceived difficulty in finding Macanese cuisine is, the stronger the desire-intention relationship it will be. There are several practical implications of this study. First, the government tourism website can develop an authentic storyline about the evolvement of local cuisine, which provides an opportunity for tourists to taste the history of the destination and create a novel experience for them. Second, the government should consider the development of food events, restaurants, and hawker businesses. Third, to lower tourists' perceived difficulty in finding local cuisine, there should be locations of restaurants and hawker stalls with clear instructions for finding them on the websites of the government tourism office, popular tourism sites, and public transportation stations in the destination. Fourth, in the post-COVID-19 era, travel risk will be a major concern for tourists. Therefore, when promoting local food, the government tourism website should post images that show food safety and hygiene.

**Keywords :** cognitive image of destination food, desire to try destination food, intention to eat food in the destination, perceived difficulties of finding local cuisine, PLS-SEM

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