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Expressing Sustainability in Marketing of Local Food Products in Rural Tourism

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Introduction

Food is an inseparable part in creating the tourists' travel experience and the trend risen from responsible consuming makes it possible to highlight the sustainable issues marketing food products and services also in tourism context. Tourists have become more conscious of the environmental, social and cultural effects of products and services and also the interest in sustainable alternatives has increased. Buying local food can be a way for tourist to act sustainable (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

Consumers connect several attributes with local food including also sustainable ones. Therefore it is important to market local food so that it reveals the sustainable message clearly to the tourists. Marketing products or services considering the sustainable characteristics in addition to the most important beneficial attributes for consumers would be an effective concept for marketing local food with sustainability (Belz & Peattie, 2009). Although the importance of food in tourism and the interest of the tourists on local food are recognized, the combination of food, tourism and sustainability in rural tourism context is unexamined in Finland.

The objective of this paper is to present how sustainable dimensions are understood via the pictures and texts of local food products. In this paper an interview study of a local food box is introduced.

Literature review

Food is an inalienable part of travel experiences and it might even be the main reason for travelling. Consuming local food and drink products can create connections to local cultures and make tourist feel responsible. (Everett & Aitchison, 2008)

Local food is assumed to be sustainable, because locally owned producers generate economic welfare in the region; it sustains cultural heritage, and it strengthens the regional identity. Issues that motivate Finnish consumers to use local food are: wellbeing effect to own and family's health, positive economic impact (e.g. the support of local entrepreneurs) and trust. The most important attributes of local food for Finnish consumers are the freshness, taste, healthiness and safety. (Isoniemi et al., 2006)

It has been shown that despite tourists' declared positive attitudes towards sustainable tourism, only a few of them act accordingly by buying responsible tourism products or services. This is mainly because often other attributes are more significant for the consumer than sustainability related ones. (Budeanu, 2007) Among the customers as well as tourists there can be identified sustainability oriented segments, like LOHAS-consumers. It has been suggested that if, the attributes consumers value in a product or service can be combined with

the sustainable attributes of the product or service, the marketing with sustainability arguments may be successful. This is because consumer sees that sustainable attribute of a product/service may give him/her certain benefits and this could motive him/her to purchase the product/service. (Belz & Peattie, 2009) According to theory of consumer demand the decision consumer makes in buying is based on the attributes of the product and the attributes represent the utility consumer is demanding. (Lancaster, 1966)

The term 'sustainable' in itself is not favourable when marketing by sustainability. To enhance the marketing of local food in tourism business it is important to know what kind of pictures and texts communicate consumers the desired benefits of the product. The motivational factors why consumers buy local food is known, but if sustainability issues are used in marketing local food it should be ascertained, what particular sustainable issues are necessary to highlight and how. It is unexamined how the sustainable message via pictures and texts in local food context are understood by consumers in rural tourism context. The information could be helpful in marketing local food to reach the sustainability oriented customer segments. Therefore the main question in this study is: how do pictures and texts (including packaging material) express the sustainability of local food?

Methods and material

A package was designed (material, pictures and texts) for a local food box concept and tested by consumers. Consumers were interviewed (semi-structured) about the local food and sustainability related attributes connected with the local food box. The attributes were the most often mentioned as motivational factors for consumption, or quality characteristics of local food mentioned in local food studies (Isoniemi et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2009). As well these attributes can be considered also sustainable ones. Altogether thirty interviews were carried out with twenty women and ten men. The age of the consumers ranged from 20 to 65.

The picture of the box was showed to consumers (Figure 1.) and asked how they felt about local food box by following themes:

- Generally what sustainable issues of the local food box brings.

- Specific sustainable issues of local food box:

 - Local food production

 - Good taste

 - Cleanness or purity

 - Healthiness

 - Freshness

 - Support for local entrepreneurs

There was a phenomenological approach chosen in the research, because it focused on the human experiences of the consumer. The data analysis process was carried out by abductive analysis. The results were analyzed by thematic analysis to exam the themes within the data.



Figure 1. The tested local food box included a variety of food from South Savo region.

Results

The local food box clearly expressed the following issues: “local food production”, “purity” and “support for local entrepreneurs”. According to the comments of consumers the word “local food” refers to local food production. It was noticed that the picture of lake landscape was connected in mind to a certain familiar place which reminded the answerers of locality from their point of view. Certain images of landscapes may represent locality if it can be recognized and located (as in this case the lake landscape). The purity was mentioned to have connection to the local food box because of the elements “lake” and “nature” in the picture. It could be assumed that elements that consumer see as to be pure, like Finnish lakes, communicate the purity of products. The support for local entrepreneurs is a well-known impact of local food. So the word “Local Food” itself includes the message of supporting local entrepreneurship.

The issues that were less expressed by the local food box were “taste”, “healthiness” and “freshness”. The local food box design did not very well reveal a good taste. Reasons for that were dark colors of the picture which reminded consumers of autumn, and the photo of the landscape was not successful to connect comments with good taste. Those who identified single products in the box argued that this box expresses good taste.

Most of the consumers had the opinion that the box did not communicate healthiness or freshness. Those who had an opinion that the box reminded healthiness mentioned that the products itself communicate the health effects (for example the vitamins of fish), not the box per se. The main reason why the box did not communicate the freshness was the contents of the box. Canned food does not represent the concept of freshness even if the canned food is local food.

When asking the consumer about the overall sustainability of the local food box the participants paid attention to the material of the box and food products’ packaging, which they regarded to be “recyclable” or “no plastic”. Secondly they noticed the sustainability of the food products, whereupon they meant the origin of the products (from nature or nearby).

Discussion and Conclusions

The consumers experience about how the pictures and texts of local food box express the sustainability of local food were examined. The picture of lake landscape (and text 'local food') represented to consumers clearly the issues 'local food production', 'purity' and 'support for local entrepreneurs', but not the issues 'taste', 'healthiness' and 'freshness'.

The local food concept itself contains several sustainable dimensions and issues, like local production. By the image of landscape, the locality can be expressed, but it may be difficult to promote food. It seems to be that the more concrete the image is associated to food the more obvious is that the image is connected to food (Törn et al, 2015). In this case the lake landscape did not have a very strong bond to food, but maybe a photo of a crop field could do that instead. It can be concluded that in this case both the picture and text are meaningful in communicating the sustainability issues: local food production, purity and support for local entrepreneurs.

One important notion was that consumers paid the most attention to the images and the materials, not to the texts. Pictures have an important role in capturing consumers' attention (Bolen, 1984) and images are too open to a variety of possible meanings. Adding a text will help to extend or point out the meaning of the image. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) Also it is known that there is a large consumer segment that favour environmental friendly packaging (Rokka & Uusitalo, 2008). For that reason it is favourable to also consider the material of the products.

The big question is that why did this local food box not communicate the most important attributes "taste", "healthiness" and "freshness"? According to Isoniemi et al. (2006) the freshness is an important attribute of food and especially meaningful in the local food concept and for that reason worth highlighting. It could be recommended that in marketing with the good taste colorful and bright colors are useful. Also the food product itself is the best advertiser of the taste (Kupiainen et al., 2008). It is worth investing in the visual images of local food, because the visual images of local food may play a key motivational role in providing sensory pleasure for tourists (Kim et al., 2009).

Healthiness is one of most major motives in buying local food (Isoniemi et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2009), and for that reason should be communicate very visible and clear to the consumer. It can be concluded that the food products themselves are the best communicators of the healthiness, because people are aware of the health effects of certain products. We encourage marketing material to include sufficient information about the health issues of products (Wansink, 2003).

It can be concluded that the sustainability of local food is able to express by pictures and texts. It is already known that by the package design it could be able to influence consumers' image of the product (Kupiainen et al., 2008). The sustainable image of local food is already rather good. If the sustainability message wanted to be emphasized, it needs carefully selected pictures and supporting texts including emotional and rational appealing elements (Törn et al. 2015).

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