EFFECT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL OF SNACK STALL CLUSTERS ON TOURIST LEISURE INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing diversity of leisure activities and savoring food for pleasure and enjoyment has gradually become an important choice of activities for fun and leisure. Many places in Taiwan have developed clusters of snack stalls offering a wide range of snack selections and local specialties. However, to attract tourists to buy and savor snacks as their main leisure activity, the cluster organization must build up consensus among members of the cluster, establish reciprocity norms and build social capital and shared resources in order to enhance tourist leisure involvement.

A questionnaire was used to collect data regarding social capital of clusters of snack stalls and tourist involvement willingness, and analyses were performed to explore the relationship and effect between social capital of clusters of snack stalls and tourist leisure involvement. Based on the study findings, the networks construct of social capital had no direct effect on tourist leisure involvement and could show a positive and indirect effect only through trust and norms established by the cluster organization.

KEYWORDS

Snack Stall Cluster; Social Capital; Leisure Involvement.

1. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Recreation and leisure has become an important part of life in recent years and people find different ways to relax body and mind after a stressful day. People want to freely choose non-work related activities that can enrich their lives or satisfy physical and psychological needs and desires. Of the many increasingly popular leisure activities, eating food for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment has become a new choice. Eating food has gone beyond the practical purpose of satisfying hunger and getting energy and people seek out tasty snack food for the enjoyment of eating it. Getz and Frisby (1988) pointed out that local food festivals held in different places were the second most powerful force next to local natural scenery to draw tourists. Savoring snacks in different places has become a popular leisure activity.

Local snack foods and delicacies have been an important part of everyday life and can reflect the unique lifestyle and culture of local people. Owing to the geographical environment, climate, local customs and other factors, snack foods in different places are given their own unique flavors and culinary techniques and often become a symbol of pride.
of local people. As tourism has grown into a highly profitable industry, many local areas and places have made every effort to integrate snack food stalls to form clusters of stalls in order to draw tourists and grab business opportunities. Clustering of snack stalls is a bottom-up process in which a cooperative and reciprocal relationship is developed among stall vendors. This kind of relationship can be viewed as a form of social capital for tourism attraction of an area (Lesser, 2000; Adler and Kwon, 2002). Social capital of clusters of snack stalls is beneficial to both stall vendors and tourists (Jone and George, 1998).

Given the above considerations, social capital can be used to determine if a cluster of snack stalls has been developed successfully. The aggregate sum of resources built up by the social network of a cluster of snack stalls can be used to evaluate the strength of attracting tourists to savor snacks at the cluster as a leisure activity. Thus, this study focused on the correlation between social capital of clusters of snack stalls and tourist leisure involvement and explored if snack stalls could draw tourist participation and involvement and increase mutual benefit by integrating interpersonal networks, building up cooperation and trust and establishing reciprocity norms to form an organization and marketplace offering both cultural features and fun and recreation. Empirical data analyses were performed to examine the correlation between three major constructs and tourist leisure involvement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Snack Stall Cluster and Leisure Involvement

Snacks, or xiaochi, literally meaning “small eats” have become a unique part of Chinese cuisine. Whereas a meal is prepared food primarily consumed at home or restaurants, snacks usually refer to foods prepared by street vendors in cities, towns and villages (Lin, 1997). Snack is also a small portion of food eaten between meals. Since most ingredients are simple and locally chosen, snacks often come in diverse and varied selections due to different cultural customs and geographical environment in different places. In other words, local snacks and delicacies often represent specialties of a particular place (Deng, 1994) and embody the combined living and sensory experience. A small marketplace that gathers a wide array of snack stall vendors offering specialties of different places is called a snack stall cluster.

The concept of involvement was first applied in the field of consumer behavior to describe how consumers make different choices depending on their level of involvement (Dimanche et. al, 1991). In later research studies in which the involvement construct was extended to explain behavior issues, involvement was related to personal motivation and interests, values and needs (Rothschild, 1984; McIntyre, 1989; Kyle et al., 2003). Leisure involvement refers to the time and energy individuals spend on leisure activities and the degree of pleasure and self-expression derived from high involvement in those activities (Stone, 1984; Slama and Tashchian, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Selin and Howard, 1988). Leisure involvement may come from personal interests or values, and it may be evoked by a particular stimulus or product. In nature, leisure involvement can be viewed as an attitude towards leisure activities; although this attitude may last a very short period of time, it is a criterion for continued participation in leisure (Wiley et al., 2000). Since leisure is part of life extricating from external pressures of one’s cultural and physical environment, different lifestyles nurture different ways and types of leisure and can thus lead to different levels of leisure involvement.
Local snacks offer tourists a plethora of indulgent multi-sensory experiences – the taste, smell and texture of food. Tourists can smell delicious aroma floating through the air while strolling around the food stalls with appetizing local snacks on display. In addition, a wide range of snack foods and local specialties can create a leisure environment for the pursuit of novelty and change and become a local attraction for tourists (Urry, 1990). Therefore, clusters of local snacks inevitably become an important social capital for local tourism and recreation.

2.2 Social Capital Theory

The concept of social capital has been widely applied to explore various kinds of social organizations. Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam are the three most cited researchers on social capital. According to Bourdieu (1983), there are three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Bourdieu suggested that social capital is made up of social obligations (or social connections), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words to membership of a group – which provides each of it’s members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in various senses of the world (Bourdieu, 1983; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Therefore, social capital is not a natural given and must be constructed through conscious calculation and repeated interactions and coordination over long periods of time. Social capital is thus the set of resources made available to members of a group based on the social relationships they establish and maintain within the group. In other words, social capital is the resources that contacts hold and the structure of contacts in a network (Burt, 1992).

Coleman (1988) argued that social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors and is a product of the network relationships between two or more participants. Coleman identified three aspects of relations of social capital which could constitute useful resources for individuals within the network. These are (1) obligations, expectations and trust, (2) information channels, and (3) norms and effective sanctions. According to Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000), social capital is features of social organization that can facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital can be defined as the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them (Fukuyama, 2001). In other words, social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, trust and norms. During social capital accumulation process, networks are formed and secured to create coordinated actions in order to improve the efficiency of society. Trust and norms are a social lubricant that allows any group or organization to operate smoothly. Therefore, social capital is instrumental to economic improvement and development.

In summary, just like pubs and bars are a central part of life and culture in Europe and North America, eating at snack stalls is a common leisure activity in Chinese society. Snack foods having distinctive local flavor have become an essential characteristic of Chinese food culture and a unique form of social capital in the structure of Chinese society. To effectively increase business revenue, a cooperative relationship can be developed among snack stalls to form clusters of stalls, which becomes an important place for leisure and recreational activities within an area that attracts large crowds. Therefore, vendors of snack stalls in the cluster naturally strengthen their interpersonal
trust, cooperative behavior and reciprocal norms for mutual benefit in the area. For clusters of local snack foods, networks, trust and norms are three important components of social capital. Snack stalls can increase cluster efficiency through the facilitation and modulation of the three dimensions of social capital. Next, an analysis was performed to explore the correlation between these dimensions and leisure involvement.

2.3 Network

The extent to which an individual has access to resources through social capital depends on the person’s connections, the strength of these connections, and the resources available to their connections. Individual choice can to some extent determine the strength and extent of connections. Through network connections, individuals can acquire other types of capital (such as cultural or economical) allowing them to have access to other social class (Bourdieu, 1986). Foley and Edwards (1999) offered the formula, “Social capital is best conceived as access plus resources,” and contended that an individual can acquire social capital only when the person is able to effectively use the group’s resources. According to Foley and Edwards, “access” refers to social networks. A network can be built among a cluster of snack stalls within an area, so they can share resources. These clustered stalls can offer a wide array of snack choices that complement each other and are certain to satisfy every appetite and thus help to draw and share large crowds of tourists. Therefore, for snack stall vendors, social capital is embedded in social relations among vendors and between vendors and tourists (Reimer, 2002). Stall vendors within a cluster may develop close interpersonal relations after long periods of time, just like between friends or coworkers. They attend to stalls of each other and refer tourists to other stalls within the cluster for other types of snack foods in order to enhance mutual benefits of vendors and tourists. In this study, we thus hypothesize that network connections of clusters of snack stalls have a positive and significant effect on tourist participation and involvement in eating snack foods as a leisure activity (H1).

2.4 Trust

Granovetter observed that ties in a social network can generate trust and economic action is embedded in structures of social relations and trust. Trust lies at the core of social capital and a trust relationship among members of a group can reduce transaction cost and increase social cohesion, which can facilitate productive activity and collective action (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, maximum efficiency in society comes from the accumulation of trust and trust binds social relationships and affects efficiency and economy in society. Trust determines the individual willingness to extend credit or listen to advice of others and the level of collective action (Sobel, 2002). Societies with high levels of trust can result in a great number of associations and membership organizations and large-scale organizations can make a direct and positive contribution to economic growth and the strengthening of democracy (Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000). Modern economic life entails a minimum level of trust (Fukuyama, 1995). Social capital is constructed upon relations and social structures on the basis of trust (Coleman, 1990; Foley and Edwards, 1999).

Snack stall vendors build up trust and understanding of each other through interactions in the cluster environment and the accumulation of trust is converted into recognition towards the entire cluster. Besides, gaining tourist trust is viewed as an important condition to increase overall benefits of the stall cluster. In this study, we thus
9. REFERENCES


