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Positive Destination Image Building: The Power of Diet

A post-COVID 19 tourism and hospitality landscape faces a series of transformations as the pandemic has accelerated discourse and debates around consumption patterns and their implications on human health. At the same time, a growing body of evidence examines the extensive environmental impacts of animal agriculture as issues around animal welfare in food systems arise highlighting its links to corporate social responsibility and ethical frameworks. As a result, many tourists choose plant-based diets that are entirely free of animal produce for environmental, health and ethical reasons. Food often plays a central role in the tourist's destination image formation process given the multisensorial nature of its consumption that may project differential destination attributes. Conceptual frameworks on destination image identify that these images can be approached from the cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotional) and conative (behavioural) dimensions (Stylidis, 2022). The role of food in destination image building has been widely researched but the influence that following a plant-based diet exerts on the tourist's destination image-building process remains an area under-researched. Hence, a qualitative social constructivist approach was adopted and 20 semi-structured interviews with tourists who follow rigid plant-based diets were recruited using a combination of a simple random sample/snowball sampling approach. Although the study did not focus on a specific destination context, findings indicate that these dietary choices and requirements stimulate destination images of social belonging (affective) given the social nature of food consumption and community development around eating patterns. Images off-the-beaten-track (conative) are also elicited by plant-based diets as the quest for authentic culinary experiences results in engagement with less popular precincts and establishments, often regarded as more local and authentic. Images of cosmopolitanism (cognitive) are also stimulated given the progressive image projected by destinations that cater to the needs of a diverse set of tourists. Finally, images of emotional solidarity (conative) are also rooted in these tourists' personal normative beliefs around food consumption. Therefore, this study highlights how health, environmental and ethical concerns influence consumption patterns and how the hospitality industry can make substantial contributions to positive destination image building.

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