

## TRICK OR TWEET: DOES THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASE AWARENESS AND SALES OF STREET FOOD OR FOOD TRUCKS?

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Migacz, Steve PhD Student and Petrick, James F. PhD, "TRICK OR TWEET: DOES THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASE AWARENESS AND SALES OF STREET FOOD OR FOOD TRUCKS?" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 9.  
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**DOES THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASE AWARENESS AND  
SALES OF STREET FOOD OR FOOD TRUCKS?**

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Abstract submitted as  
**Research in Progress**  
for the  
**Student Research Colloquium**

2013 Travel and Tourism Research Association International Conference

## **TRICK OR TWEET: DOES THE UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INCREASE AWARENESS AND SALES OF STREET FOOD?**

The role that food plays is complex: it is a necessity of life, yet it also serves to enhance and impact our lives in many ways. The meal is more than an object; it is an event or lived experience where the senses meet with emotions and cognitive energies (Rozin, 1999). In the social domain, food becomes a lens through which we may explore the stratified realities of a society, its ideas about worth, about class, sex/gender, race, religion, and even nationality and humanity (Bonnekessen, 2009, p. 280). Food is often central to the understanding of culture; the ways in which it is caught, farmed, cleaned, processed, cooked and eaten are symbolic of different kinds of meaning at many different levels (Srivivas, 2007). As eating together is perhaps the most basic expression of human sociality, ethnic cuisine (and those whom provide it) could act as the bridge between a diversity we cherish and a common humanity that must be achieved if we are to live harmoniously in an ever flattening world (Van Den Burghe, 1984).

One aspect of food that is sweeping into the subconscious of popular culture in the United States is the reincarnation of street food. Street foods, broadly defined as ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors or hawkers (especially in the streets and other similar places), have become a provision for social experiences that symbolize multicultural harmony for many food enthusiasts (Miles, 2011). There is an inherently authentic aspect of street food that may be why it is attractive to consumers (Camarena, Sanjuan, & Philippidis, 2011). Globally, street food operations represent a significant part of urban food consumption for millions of low-and-middle-income consumers. Street food preparation and selling provides a regular source of income for millions of men and women with limited education or skills, especially because the activity requires low initial investment. This activity also supports local agricultural producers and food processors and contributes to local and national economic growth (Steptoe A. P., 1995). In the United States, chefs and food enthusiasts with similar backgrounds and reduced start-up costs can account for over 20,000 trucks, generating nearly \$650 million dollars in sales (Sacks, 2011).

One of the biggest challenges for food truck survival is creating awareness and interest via advertising, recognizing a severe lack of experience and resources compared to restaurant chains (Miller R., 2012). This paper will build on previous research that suggests that successful web advertisements have a positive effect on purchase intentions (Hwang, Yoon, & Park, 2011), assuming the perceived benefits carry over to the food truck industry. Also, further investigation will be conducted to determine the most appropriate audience and advertisement style. The ultimate goal of this proposed research is to provide a plausible advertising strategy for small business owners who presumably do not have an extensive background in advertising. While food can act as a reinforcement of ethnic ties, it can also provide a passive yet enjoyable method of integration and inclusion of nonindigenous cultures. The continued success of street food in the United States could have implications far beyond a source of revenue, which is the underlying purpose of this paper.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:** According to Acho-Chi, street food service points have become empowering public sites for social networking where people relax, tell stories, brag,

and discuss politics, sports and business ventures. As such, street food selling and consumption have become synonymous with expressions of sharing and conviviality (Acho-Chi, 2002, p. 136). This positive determination of street food is shared by Romano who claims, "the deeper hunger that's driving the street-food trend is the desire to reach out and connect with a globalized world that we're more aware of and reliant on than ever" is worth celebrating (Romano, 2011, p. 54). Street food in the United States allows us to indulge in cross-culture experimentation and socialization for a fraction of the cost one would pay at a standard sit-down restaurant. The barrier to continued success for street food in the United States does not appear to be an aversion to new cultures. Americans have often suspended traditional racial prejudices and opened themselves to a range of diverse culinary and cultural experiences (Barbas, 2003). The more relevant obstacle facing street food is expanding its customer base. This would include potential customers who are not proactive in the search of mobile food trucks, particularly for dining destinations with little visibility or brand awareness. The most difficult aspect of this endeavor is to produce effective advertising with a severely limited budget.

Although it has been postulated that only a third of all advertising campaigns show an immediate and significant influence on sales for restaurant franchises (Herrington, 2010), advertising for restaurants continues to accrue billions of dollars annually. As the users of social networks grow past a billion, restaurants are using social media to obtain feedback on menu offerings, communicate with customers, and increase traffic via contests and giveaways. DiPietro et al. conducted a study to measure how chain restaurants use Facebook, Twitter, and FishBowl (DiPietro, Crews, Gustafson, & Strick, 2012). One of the interesting findings was that respondents cited people under the age of thirty-five to be the most appropriate age group to be reached via social media. A study conducted by Hyun et al. provided findings on evaluative advertising dimensions (Hyun, Kim, & Lee, 2011), suggesting that advertising that contained relevant news, entertainment factors, and a sense of familiarity positively influenced purchase behavior. According to Hwang et al. (2011), effective website design for casual-dining restaurants can contribute to building brands and future purchases, and if web visitors like the websites of particular restaurants, they are more likely to visit those restaurants.

Previous research has also shown that significant others can be especially powerful elicitors of normative thoughts and behavior (Stapel, Joly, & Lindenberg, 2010). Furthermore, thinking of significant others is likely to activate the norms, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors they are associated with (Van Knippenberg, 1992). For these reasons, social media has in many ways replaced interaction and word-of-mouth advertising, and has thus become a very powerful advertising tool (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremier, 2004). Social media has been studied extensively in terms of how it can be used for effective advertising for restaurants, particularly large restaurant chains (DiPietro, Crews, Gustafson, & Strick, 2012). However, research focused on utilizing social media for advertising street food trucks is currently lacking.

**METHODS:** To determine the usage of social media as an advertising outlet, surveys (similar to DiPietro's model) will be administered randomly to street food truck purveyors in a twelve mile radius of Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas on random days of randomly chosen months. The location was chosen because of its established reputation for housing several street food trucks (Austin boasts over 1,000 food trucks for the 1.7+ million residents). An additional survey will be constructed and administered to measure advertising awareness and usage of street food trucks, as well as demographic information pertinent to the study. In addition, the content of any advertisement recalled will be recorded. This survey will incorporate validated

measurement tools that have been previously discussed, particularly those by Hyun et al. and Hwang et al. The distribution of the survey will be random. One of the criteria for selection will be that the respondent live in a ten mile radius of a proximity recognized as having street food truck operations (operationalized with a dummy variable "Do you live within ten miles of a food truck").

Analyses will be conducted to determine (1) if street food vendors are currently utilizing social media for the purpose of advertising, (2) whether social media influences certain demographic groups like gender and age, and (3) if advertising via social media influences behavioral intentions to purchase street food. The resultant hypotheses are thus:

H<sub>1</sub>: Advertising via social media is not currently utilized by the majority of street food vendors interviewed.

H<sub>2</sub>: The importance of advertising via social media will be positively influenced by age of street food patrons.

H<sub>3</sub>: Social media advertising positively influences street food patrons' behavioral intentions.

H<sub>4</sub>: Favorable social media advertising for current non-users of street food under the age of 35 will positively influence future purchases

**EXPECTED IMPLICATIONS:** The majority of street food trucks vendors lack the extensive marketing backgrounds, as well as the capital to invest in traditional advertising outlets (Zukin, 1995). In addition, social media advertising is not currently utilized by the majority of street food vendors (Herrington, 2010). However, research indicates that social media is rapidly gaining popularity within the food industry as a cost efficient and positively influential advertising tool. Increasing the exposure of street food should increase the likelihood of increased usage of street food. This study will help determine the usage of social media as an advertising tool among street food purveyors. Establishing usage levels among street food purveyors will help determine if (1) street food purveyors are taking advantage of a powerful advertising tool and (2) measure the success of those efforts. In addition, this study will also help determine the most appropriate target (demographically and geographically), as well the most effective content and advertising style to implement. Additionally, the research may contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness and relevance of social media advertising among non-users of street food. Street food purveyors will likely be able to utilize the findings to offset the severe disadvantages they face in competing with free-standing restaurants and restaurant chains in terms of marketing and advertising. Finally, this study can provide street food purveyors something they most likely lack: an efficient marketing strategy. As stated previously, the continued success of street food in the United States could have implications far beyond a source of revenue.

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