

Consumption pattern and consumers' opinion toward street food in Nakhon Si Thammarat province, Thailand

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Abstract

Street food in NST province is crucial for the people due to the changing of lifestyles. The consumers demand enhances the number of street vendors in the province. Nevertheless, there are vendors that are not practicing good hygienic compared to other province. The objectives of this study are to identify the pattern of street food consumption, and consumers' opinion towards the street food. Observation and in-depth interview were used to collect data. Ten respondents with various demographic backgrounds were interviewed on their experiences, and opinions toward street food. The data found that the street food consuming pattern was formed in six major themes: consumer characteristic, type of food, location, time of consuming, ways to consume and reasons of consuming. Additionally, the study also declared consumer's opinion on the problems related to street food. The finding aims local authority to have more understanding on the culture of street food consumption, and the problems that have been existed to find the appropriate improvement, and do not induce any conflict between local authority with street vendors and authority with consumers.

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Introduction

The definition of Street food in Thailand is very similar with the other developing countries that referred to ready to eat food that the vendors and hawkers prepare or sell in the public places, for example, school, hospital, rail way station, etc. (FAO, 2005), in the types of push cart, kiosk, ortent (Yatmo, 2008). The members of one street food stall are usually combined with entire family members, and most of them are female (Muyanja, 2011). The street food business begins from poor urban people because that is the fast way to acquire subsistence income, and need low investment (Acho-Chi, 2002). Street food entrepreneur is a good channel to increase employment for people in the urban area where there are limited work opportunities (Mwangi *et al.*, 2001).

However, the existence of street food business in Thailand caused problems similar to other countries. The presence of street vendors disrupt the environment, then there is an argument about should or should not the hawkers be removed from the street (Yatmo, 2008). Furthermore, street food is also a risk factor to cause food poisoning, for example, diarrhea from unhygienic food (Umoh and Odoaba, 1999). A report from Health Assembly Resolution Office (2010) revealed that diarrhea was the number one of

illness in Thailand caused by unhygienic practices. The unhygienic food practices starts from the raw material to serving the food, raw material is not kept in proper temperature condition (Ekanem, 1998), and the presence of insects and domestic animals that subjects to food contamination (Hanashiro *et al.*, 2005). Street food is always associated with food borne illness. From the incidents it can be noticeable that the vendors do not pay enough attention to food safety (Hanashiro *et al.*, 2005), or they probably are lack of education which influence the lack of sanitary knowledge (Muyanja *et al.*, 2011).

Nevertheless, the problem cannot be solved if it focuses only on street vendor because the consumers also have the role in determining the success of street vendors. The growing of street food purchasing is due to the growth of the urban population and changing lifestyles. Therefore, people will not be cooking at home because buying the food from the street vendors is time saving, convenience, and inexpensive when compared to the food that is prepared from the other sectors (Yassmeen, 2000). Nevertheless, the consumers realized that there is high food safety risk of the street food (Badrie, 2006). None the less, the consumer education level can enhance the awareness while they are purchasing street food (Badrie, 2006).

Nakhon Si Thammaratis located in the southern part of Thailand, and the population is the 8th highest

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among the 77 provinces. The characteristic of street food business and consuming pattern are not so much different from other provinces, but the major difference is the food safety issue. The number of street vendors who passed qualification called “Clean Food Good Taste” (CFGTT) standard in this province was lower than other provinces. This standard can be used to evaluate the food safety by using physical and microbiological inspection. The food from the vendors who did not pass this qualification mean that the food is probably unsafe for consumption (Ministry of Public Health, 2012; Euytragul, 2001).

In order to solve the street food issues in this province, it is better to identify consumption pattern, and the opinion of consumer towards the street food operations. If we can understand the culture and what consumers really wants, it will be easier to eliminate any conflict that possibly might occur among local authority, street vendors and consumer, as appeared as in some country (Yatmo, 2008). In addition, identification the consumption pattern can be ensured the location of problem. Thus, the objectives of this research are to identify and understand the consumption pattern, and to examine the consumer opinion toward street food in NST province. The following are the research questions identify the consumption patterns and understanding the street food pattern, and examining consumers’ opinion towards street food.

RQ1: Who are the consumers?

RQ2: What are they consuming?

RQ3: Where are they consuming?

RQ4: When do they consume?

RQ5: How do they consume?

RQ6: Why do they consume?

RQ7: What are their opinions toward street food

Conceptual framework

Question one to five will identify characteristic of consumers, types of food, street food location, time consuming, and the way they consume the food, respectively. The finding from research question six will provide researcher with more understanding the reason of consuming. Consequently the last research question will examine consumer opinion towards street food in this province. The finding will be categorized in several themes that will be the important factors to identify the street food consumption pattern.

Methodology

This research used qualitative design to collect data from respondents because this design is

suitable for exploring and understanding a social problem in order to develop policies, then the data was interpreted to find the meaning of them. The strategy to conduct qualitative data in this research was called Phenomenological by identifying people’s own experience in the particular situation. A small number of respondents were engaged to share about their experiences, after that the pattern of data was developed and evaluated the meaning (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Observation and in-depth interview technique were used for data collection in this research.

Observation

Observation was the first data collection technique used in the study, photography was a common visual instrument used to record the scenery and background of pattern towards street food in NST province including consumer interaction with the environment (Morce and Richards, 2002; Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This observation used only photography to compare the data from in-depth interview technique without participation with the respondents.

In-depth interview

In-depth interview was the second data collection technique used for exploring the people’s experience towards street food. The pattern of interview was more conversational than the formal interview, and the conversation based on participant not interviewer (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Purposive sampling was a common method used to search for respondents in qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). The respondents aged between 20 to 60 years old were chosen using snow balling technique; first key informant was determined by researcher then he or she was asked to suggest or recommend other suitable respondents (Merriam, 2009). Semi structure interview was applied to respondents because this process would make respondents feel at ease, but still maintained the structure of objectives (Bailey, 2007). The questions asked about consumers’ opinion or experience towards street food, and the sequence of questions could be switched. Before the in-depth interview began, a consent form must be signed by all of respondents to show their voluntary participation in the interview (Mack *et al.*, 2005). The instruments were interview guideline question, field note and voice recorder. After the field work, the voice recorder was transcript and analyzed into the themes and code before interpretation.

Data was checked for reliability by checking the mistake that may probably occurred through the



Figure 1. Street food characteristic at "Clong Tharian" NST province



Figure 2. The local authority did food safety checking at "Clong Tharian" NST province

voice transcription and the meaning of the code must not changed the meaning from the memo (Creswell, 2009). In term of validity, triangulation types multiple methods: observation, in-depth interview and secondary document, were compared to check the validity of data (Merriam, 2009).

Finding

Observation finding: a camera view

The photography recorded the characteristic of NST street food from the observation as shown as in Figure 1 and 2. In Figure 1, a number of consumers were consuming local traditional food "Kanom Jean" at Clong Tharian street food, which was located beside the road side leading to NST central. The stalls were located on the foot path without any permanent construction; there were only 4-5 tables with seats, and a few umbrellas to protect the consumers and the vendors from the sun. Consumers were conveniently purchasing the food, they could come by public transportation, private car or motorcycle; motorcycle was the best vehicle to visit the street food, they could park just besides the stall. Police men and transport police men were authorized to organize the parking to prohibit consumers intervene other transportations on the road. Sometimes they got conflict with people because there was not enough parking and the people tried to park at the prohibited area. Moreover, the police also directed the vendors not to park their stalls downed on the road. In Figure 2, a local public health authority was checking the food safety at one stall by using a test kit that would produce the result immediately to the vendors, and the consumers might be confident with the food while

Table 1. Respondents Profile

| No. | Gender | Age | Occupation | Income/month (Thai Baht) | Education level |
|-----|--------|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | M | 31 | Lecturer/ Researcher | 12 000 | Masterd. |
| 2 | F | 28 | Sale person | 9 000 | Diploma d. |
| 3 | F | 55 | Teacher | 40 000 | Bachelor d. |
| 4 | M | 43 | Banker | 36 000 | Bachelor d. |
| 5 | M | 40 | Coffee shop owner | 50 000 | Bachelor d. |
| 6 | F | 31 | Chemical technician | 9 500 | Bachelor d. |
| 7 | F | 33 | Public health officer | 16 000 | Masterd. |
| 8 | F | 45 | Owner business | 25 000 | Bachelor d. |
| 9 | M | 32 | Computer consultant | 15 000 | Masterd. |
| 10 | F | 32 | Health consultant | 13 000 | Masterd. |

M = Male, F = Female, d = degree of education level, Currency (1/04/2013): 1USD ≈ 30 Thai Baht (TBH)

consuming the food at the particular stall. Then, the test results were collected for further evaluation for the food safety certification. The authority would ask them politely when testing the food at the stall, and the vendor gave the cooperation to the authority. Nevertheless, most consumers will select vendors without the certification instead of those who had the certification.

In-depth interview

Ten respondents in Table 1 were interviewed on their experiences towards street food, and their opinion about street food operations. The themes of data were provided from qualitative data analysis process (Tesch, 1990). From the interview, the data can be categorized into seven themes as demonstrated in Table 2, those themes formed the pattern of street food consuming and consumers opinion toward street food in NST that was similar with previous research from other countries.

Respondents' profile

Snow balling technique was used to identify ten respondents as shown in Table 1, there were 6 females and 4 males whose age between 28 to 55 years old. They had various occupations and had higher education. The respondents' income was in the range of 9,000 to 50,000 Thai Baht per month. From the demographic profile in Table 1, it illustrated that the street food in NST, Thailand was not only patronized by the low income like in Nairobi, Africa that was mentioned in Mwangi (2002), but there were consumers from various income groups.

Pattern of consuming and consumers' complain about street food

After ten respondents were interviewed about their experiences, the data were categorized in several themes as shown as in Table 2. From data in Table 2 seven themes were identified the pattern and the problem of consuming, included consumer opinion about street food operation in NST province. The themes were characteristics of consumers, types of food, street food location, time of consuming, the

Table 2. A pattern of street food consuming and consumers' opinion

| Themes | Responses |
|-------------------------|--|
| Consumer Group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students age range 7-19 years old, adults age range between 20-60 years old, and the elderly whose age was higher than 60 years old. The consumer group between 20 - 60 years old was the main customers. The students and elderly usually came in the morning. |
| Type of Foods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Main dishes: cooked food, ala-carted, tradition food (southern and east northern style) Franchise noodles Snacks: grilled meat ball, deep fried items, steamed items, boiled nut, etc. Desserts: local desserts and ice cream Beverage: fresh fruit juice, soya milk, tea-coffee Cutting fruit: several kinds of fruit were cut, and packed in small plastic bag including fermented fruits |
| Location | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Along the road side head to central city In down town In front of or beside school, bus stop, rail way station, bus station, shopping mall, temples, hospital, hotel, resident zone and park |
| Time of consumption | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Morning, the target consumers were students and elderly Lunch/ afternoon, the target consumers were people from work places or nearby shopping area Evening, the main time of street food business Midnight, the target groups were teenager and middle age consumers Every day, 3-4 days per week, 5 days per week |
| Consumption patterns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> With family, friends or alone An average spent around 30 - 500 THB per time depended on the number of family member Eating at stall or taking a way |
| Reasons for consumption | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was very convenient It was fast Some stall was very tasty and uniqueness |
| Consumer opinions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The vendors intervened transportation both on the road and foot path Unsafe |

way they consume, the reason of consuming, and consumers' complain. The consumer also gave their opinion regarding on each theme that affected their life or their social environment, and the detail of each theme was described as following:

Characteristic of consumers

There were the three groups of consumers: first group was students who studied in school aged lower than 20 years old, second group was consumers age range were between 20 to 60 years old, and the third group was consumers aged more than 60 years old. Most of consumers were residents in NST province and their age range was between 20 to 60 years old. Except the NST residents, it was also found a few of tourists who purchased street food because their accommodations were located in the down town area and surrounded with several food stalls; however, the street food in this province was not a famous tourist destination like other provinces, so the group of tourist was not the main group of consumer here.

Type of food

The respondents summarized the street food sold could be categorized into five groups: they were main dishes, noodles, snacks, desserts, beverages and fresh cut fruit. For example, the main dishes, were

cooked food and ala-carte food that could be served in separated dishes, and ate with rice, or put the food on the top of rice. Noodle could be served for lunch and dinner that mostly was a franchise noodle; for example, "O-deng" or "Chai-See". Snacks could be prepared by several techniques, deep-fried, grilled or boiled. Thus, consumers can find all kinds of foods in street market that can make street food market very popular today. However, the customers could not expect excellent service at the street food like when dining in a restaurant because the vendors had a maximum four workers, so self service was the best service at the street food.

Street food location

The locations were along the road side close to residential area, work places, schools, railway station, shopping areas and temples. These places were easily accessible by general consumers who used various transportation modes.

Time of consuming

The times of consuming were divided in four periods: morning, lunch/ afternoon, evening and midnight. The different times period would offer different types of food and different types of customers. In some location, the customer could experience street food throughout the day, there were different hawkers who ran the business. When the first period finished, the push cart was clear up, and waited for the second period, so the stalls were not something that was permanent. The elderly purchased their food in the morning while the middle age customers preferred in the evening even though there were the same type of food.

Consumption patterns

The members in family probably influenced consumers' choices, but mostly they made their own decision whatever they choose. They would be having the food at the stall or asking vendors for take away. The percent of take away was higher if the consumer came alone, and/ or there were more than two members in their family. Each time, the respondents spent around 50 THB to 300 THB depended on the number of persons in their family, and they thought that cost was reasonable when compared between cost and amount of food.

Reason for consumption

The main reason that the consumers' chose street food was convenient. Some respondents mentioned street food could be the place for relaxation and

entertainment; for instance, visiting the tea-coffee hawker in the evening.

Consumers opinions

It was the last theme of the findings, and it was surprising that the all respondents had bad experiences in consuming street food. The respondents agreed that food practices of vendors were not hygienic. The opinions of respondents were showing as follow:

“They use low quality utensils which were not food grade plastic container; some vendor used paint can filled with water for the cooking.” Respondent 1

“They used inappropriate container, such as, plastic bag or foam cup to contain the hot food, some vendor used the reused paper which another side was visible ink.” Respondent 2

“At one time, I found a plastic bag in the soup pot, and the vendor neglected to pick it up. She asked me whether I wanted this soup or not, when I said no, then she gave it to another customer, and I never came back to that vendor anymore.” Respondent 3

Besides being unhygienic, the other problem was the street hawkers parked their stalls that blocked the traffic on the footpath. The local authority tried to solve this problem by moving the street food market into some places, and some place vehicles were not allowed. However, it was not successful because it was inconvenient for consumers, then the street food market would move back to the original location.

“The local authority used to organize street food to be in one location/ centralized that customers can walk around, but the number of consumers decreased because it was inconvenient, so the street food market returned to the place which existed today.” Respondent 4

Discussion and Conclusion

Kongchuntuk (2002) stated that most of Thai people do not cook anymore as a result to number of consumers who eat out increased, thus this has benefit the street food vendors that are expanding in most all public places around the city. Additionally, the street food business is informal food sector that requires less investment (Yasmeen, 2001; Nirathorn, 2005). Street food is more attractive to consumers than a formal restaurant except for a special occasion (Gunniga, 2009) because the location of street food business is located beside the road that consumer can purchase food easily (Rajagopal, 2010), and some area the consumer just park their vehicles in front of food stall. Furthermore, the food price is also cheaper than the restaurant. Consumers normally

spent about 300 THB for the whole family. But when having food in restaurant, 300 THB is enough for only one person. From the consumption patterns, the street food business runs throughout the day, and all consumer groups depend on street food vendors, so it is the culture that needs to be interdependent between the vendors and consumers, and it emphasizes that the street food cannot be moved out from consumer's life. Consumer realizes there are some problems in street food business, first is the hygienic issue, and second is traffic problem. Local authorities have tried to solve bit of these issues, nevertheless, it was not successful because the food still unsafe (the number of vendors who passed CFGT qualification was lower than standard) as the respondents number 1-3 revealed, and the street food market could not move to the new location because it was not convenient for the consumers as reported by respondent 4.

This research revealed characteristic of street food and consumers' lifestyle in NST that could assist the local authorities to create strategies to improve the street food market. Two important factors that should be considered, first, the location of street food, the location of street hawkers should not intervene with the urban development however it should be convenient for consumers as well. The authorities can apply the concept of this situation to find the place that is appropriate for entrepreneur, and do not “pollute” (Douglas, 1966) urban environmental, as the same time, there is convenient for consumers, or create strategies to encourage consumers to go to the new location, the traffic congestion and “dirt” (Douglas, 1966) scenery which caused by street vendors will be eliminated. Second factor that is more important than the first is the food hygiene, the local government or the authority should determine serious policy regarding food safety, and force street vendors to follow because from the consumer interviewed, the unhygienic of street food has been still the problem for all consumers.

Thus, this study will enhance the managerial, local authority or local government understands the culture of street food in NST province by learning the consumption patterns. The co-operation among the consumers, street vendors and local authority is the most important to solve street food problem today. It is hoped that future studies will examine consumers' concerned when purchasing street food.

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