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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOOD CONTENT ON THE GREEK TRAVEL DESTINATION IMAGE.

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ABSTRACT

In the modern days, tourists tend to increasingly use social media during the pre-trip, on-site (in-situ) experiences, and feedback levels. These are progressively influencing travellers' behaviours, as well as forming the experiences, impressions and ideas of consumers. This thesis intends to explain how food-related content on social media can influence the destination image of Greece, considering the value of food as a unique and distinguishing element of the touristic destinations and identifying the power of social media food content on developing gastronomic tourism and improving the destination image of Greece. We aim to recognize the power of social media channels and particularly Instagram, in impacting destination choice, offering inspiration for travel planning as well as interpreting the relationship between Greek gastronomy and travelling in the digital era.

To achieve our goals, both primary and secondary data were collected. The literature review is performed from the broadest to the most exact relevant subjects. The data collection, as well as analysis, have been implemented through the qualitative method. To clarify the questions asked and to attain the scope of this thesis, we resort to the focus group technique, collecting ideas from several young culinary tourists belonging to the target group of Millennials and Generation Z.

The combination of both primary and secondary data offered significant findings that contributed to recognising the value of social media food content on the destination image of Greece. It is worth mentioning that the results of this research prompted that there is a strong impact of social media food content on consumer behaviours, travel choices, as well on the motivations of young gastronomic tourists.

RESUMO

Nos dias de hoje, os turistas tendem a usar cada vez mais as redes sociais durante a pré-viagem, as experiências no local (in-situ) e o seu feedback após a experiência. Estes influenciam cada vez mais os comportamentos dos viajantes, bem como as experiências, impressões e ideias dos consumidores. Esta tese pretende abordar como os conteúdos gastronómicos nas redes sociais podem influenciar positivamente a imagem do destino da Grécia, considerando o valor da comida como elemento único e diferenciador dos destinos turísticos e identificando o poder dos conteúdos gastronómicos das redes sociais no desenvolvimento do turismo gastronómico e melhorar a imagem de destino da Grécia. O objetivo é reconhecer o poder das redes sociais, particularmente, o Instagram, em impactar a escolha do destino, oferecendo inspiração para o planeamento de viagens e interpretando a relação entre a gastronomia grega e as viagens a este destino na era digital.

Para atingir os nossos objetivos, foram recolhidos dados primários e secundários. No que se refere à revisão de literatura, foi realizada desde os assuntos mais amplos até os mais exatos relevantes. A recolha de dados, bem como a análise, foi implementada através do método qualitativo. Para esclarecer as questões colocadas e atingir o âmbito desta tese, recorreremos à técnica de *focus group*, recolhendo ideias de vários jovens turistas com interesse pela gastronomia pertencentes ao público-alvo dos Millennials e da geração Z.

A combinação de dados primários e secundários ofereceu descobertas significativas que contribuíram para reconhecer o valor do conteúdo gastronómico nas redes sociais na imagem de destino da Grécia. Importa referir que os resultados desta investigação demonstram o impacto do conteúdo gastronómico das redes sociais nos comportamentos dos consumidores, escolhas de viagem, bem como nas motivações dos jovens turistas com interesse pela gastronomia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THEME

It is widely known that the interests and requirements of tourists have undoubtedly shifted during the last 20 years. Indeed, one of those major changes is food, which no longer represents a basic need but rather a great inspiration for people to travel (Mak et al., 2016). Primarily, the travellers' desires and behaviours reflect the main elements that automatically influence the success of a destination and then form the image of a destination that can be connected with its gastronomy (Lai et al., 2018). The recent literature has confirmed that consuming food has transformed into one of the great reasons that people choose to travel today (Mak et al., 2016; Camilovic, 2020). This affirms that the intentions of visitors to travel to a destination can be highly affected by the image of the local cuisine (Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). In addition, the value of social networks is increasingly a subject of study research globally, especially when it comes to gastronomy, which is becoming more and more important as an activity in the tourism industry.

Furthermore, a decisive sector of the global tourism industry is gastronomy and is considered that culinary tourism is an amalgamation of Agri-tourism and cultural tourism. In the last years, gastronomic tourism in Greece has progressed immensely as millions of tourists visit the country each year to taste the new flavours, get to know the culinary heritage and immerse themselves in the local culture of each Greek destination. Greek cuisine has a lot to offer its variety in terms of gastronomic experiences, besides that its culinary traditions go back 4,000 years, showing influence by several cultures. Gastronomy in Greece is a popular subject since ancient times and whoever is consuming it, can get a taste of its history. This has resulted in creating the first symbol of "fusion" cuisine, an amalgam of different tastes and customs.

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Following the definition of the research questions, in this study a literature review data analysis was constructed, to establish a study based on the existing and recognized frameworks. Therefore, the aims of the thesis are mentioned below:

- 1) Identify what channels people use when looking for food travel inspiration and information online.
- 2) Examine if people seek information about travelling from Instagram.
- 3) Analyse what kind of social media content is more relevant for people while planning their travels.
- 4) Investigate tourists' relationships with food while travelling.
- 5) Assess the role of Greek gastronomy when choosing Greece as a tourist destination.
- 6) Help DMOs develop their online strategies.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This dissertation will expose the impact of the digital palate in influencing the destination image of Greece. The research questions that this study will try to cover are the following:

The primary research question is

- a) Are travellers influenced by social media content in their travel decisions and planning?

The secondary research questions are:

- b) Does Instagram specifically influence the choice of destination as well the travel planning?
- c) What is the impact of foodstagramming and gastronomic tourism on the image of the destination?

1.4 RATIONALE

Even though Greek gastronomy is not a new topic, the development of gastronomic tourism in Greece is still relatively new in the academic literature. Due to the major gastronomic potential that Greece owns, along with the influence of the development of

culinary tourism on the improvement of the economy, this dissertation approached the research with the scope to discover whether and to what extent, food content on social media can influence the image of Greece. The idea of improving the destination image, thanks to gastronomy is still quite new in the academic literature (Lai et al. 2018), as well the motivations of culinary tourists, capture constantly the interest of tourism researchers. Therefore, this dissertation will contribute to filling the research gaps about the gastronomic touristic product of Greece based on the power of social media. It will also add to the knowledge of the gastronomic product as a tool for the development of the tourism industry as well the culinary heritage of Greece, as a valuable strategy for the improvement of the destination image. Moreover, this dissertation will offer significant knowledge to academia regarding the motivations and digital behaviours of Millennials and Generation Z, groups that are of high interest as they consist of the future consumers of touristic destinations.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

To clarify the questions asked and to accomplish the objective of this thesis, the viewpoints of ten young culinary tourists were collected. To further evaluate their motivations the methodology practised was a focus group. Specifically, a group of open questions (that allowed in-depth dialogue between the participants), was elaborated to confirm that the information was collected on certain research questions to understand and investigate them. The conversations were recorded with the consent of all the respondents, to be carefully analysed afterwards.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The current dissertation includes six chapters, presenting firstly the introduction and the main research questions.

Following the demonstration of the subject to be expanded, the literature review is constructed from the widest to the most precise accordant topics. The first section intends to define gastronomy tourism while the second part will describe the profile of culinary tourists, highlighting their motivations and providing essential insight for the interpretation of their consumer choices. The third and the fourth parts will portray the social media platforms, emphasizing the power of Instagram and the new digital phenomenon of publishing food content on social media and particularly on Instagram, called “foodstagramming”. Then, the fifth part will be dedicated to the power of social media in Marketing strategies, presenting the viewpoints of the existing academic literature. Afterwards, will follow a segment devoted to the

authenticity in the tourism industry and the push and pull factors of food travel tourism. Finally, the last three parts will focus on the tourism industry of Greece, emphasizing the value of tourism, and the seasonality as a great challenge of the Greek touristic product, and will offer interesting ideas later for culinary tourism to mitigate the negative consequences of this fact.

Then, the third chapter is the methodology, where the researcher will exhibit and clarify the research methods used to accomplish the relevant understanding of the topic. In this part, the reader will understand the reason why qualitative research was chosen, as well as the reason for the conduction of focus groups for collecting the essential data. This chapter there will be illustrated the criteria of the sample collection, as well as valuable information about the procedure.

Later, the results deriving from the empirical study will be presented in the fourth chapter, in which the main insights from the focus groups will be organized into three different categories, including the social media-Instagram, food and Greek gastronomy-Greek culture. These results in combination with the literature review will justify the next series of conclusions. The last chapter dedicated to the conclusions will separate the theoretical from the managerial contributions and will display the limitations of the study, as well as the potential ideas for future research.

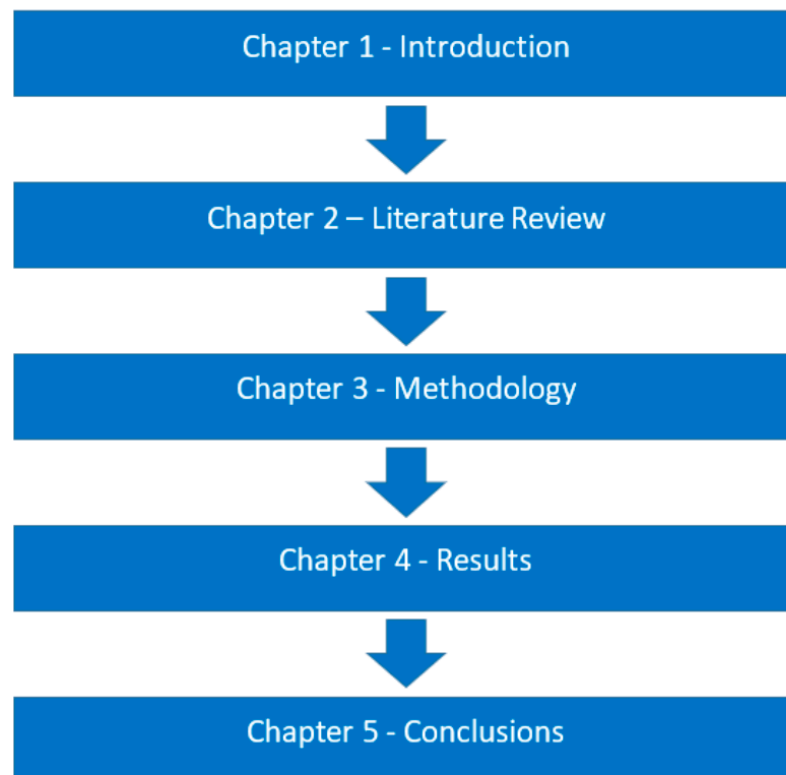


Figure 1: Thesis structure

Source: Own Elaboration

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 GASTRONOMY TOURISM DEFINITION

In the literature review, many researchers have provided multiple definitions of food tourism over the years. Adopting the definition of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) about gastronomy tourism as

“a type of tourism activity which is characterized by the visitor’s experience linked with food and related products and activities while travelling. Along with traditional and or/innovative culinary experiences. Gastronomy Tourism may also involve other related activities such as visiting the local producers, participating in food festivals and attending cooking classes. Eno-tourism (Wine Tourism), as a sub-type of Gastronomy Tourism, refers to tourism whose purpose is visiting vineyards, wineries, tasting, consuming and/or purchasing wine, often at or near the source.” (World Tourism Organization, 2019)

A more modern and general definition could be offered by Wolf (2022) “Food Tourism is the act of travelling for a taste of a place to get a sense of a place”, including the farm visits by gourmet aficionados, food and beverage loving travellers and all the twenty diverse sectors that the food industry includes (Wolf, 2022). Whereas, interestingly Williams et al. (2014) define “Gastronomy as the decoration of the dish that one chooses to try (food styling), the presence of the table (table styling) where the dishes are served, the aesthetics of the food served (menu presentation), the decoration of the space where tourists have dinner (merchandising) and finally the process of serving food (art de table)” (Williams et. al., 2014).

It is widely known that the need of consuming food at a destination is a vital factor and concerns everyone, however, food is the element that characterizes and simultaneously separates people. There is a powerful difference between the tourists that consume food to survive during their trips and the tourists that tend to consume food not only for their physiological needs but also to accomplish their hedonistic and cultural goals. To discuss food tourism, it is essential to define and comprehend the territory as it represents the identity of a destination. The culture, culinary products, traditional techniques as well authentic dishes symbolize the gastronomic character of a destination (World Tourism Organization, 2019). Food tourism is thus focused on the general approach of getting to know a destination by eating, participating in culinary activities and tasting the culture of a place.

The connection between food and tourism is a subject widely researched by academia. Sormaz et al. (2016), argue that during the years multiple terms which emphasize the correlation between gastronomy and tourism have been noted, including “food tourism”, “gastro-tourism”, “culinary tourism”, “gourmet tourism” or even “gastronomic tourism”. Moreover, it is essential to comprehend that gastronomy belongs to the cultural heritage of each destination, to interpret the linkage between tourism and gastronomy (Ellis et al. 2018; Dixit, 2019). According to Mak, Lumbers, Eves & Chang (2012), tourism and gastronomy are inextricably linked concepts. These two terms can utterly influence tourist behaviour while in search of authentic experiences when they encounter the local delicacies. Particularly, not only when they decide to taste the local products, but also when they choose to take part in gastronomic experiences, such as visiting wineries, participating in food festivals or even visiting museums related to gastronomy.

2.2 PROFILE AND MOTIVATIONS OF GASTRONOMIC TOURISTS

According to the academic literature, the people who choose culinary tourism as a form of tourism share some specific characteristics, which will be described below. Thus, researching and analyzing the profile of gastronomic tourists, can contribute to the development of a touristic product in the gastronomic destinations and assist the already existing ones to focus more on this specific target group.

Vargas- Sanchez & Lopez- Guzman (2018) note that the culinary tourists who strive for gastronomy while travelling, end to expect a superior level of both authenticity and quality regarding the local gastronomy in the destinations. Although, the age of gastronomic tourists are changing constantly throughout the years and academic literature discusses the presence of diverse age groups (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2021). Hence, Ignatov and Smith (2006) express that the age of the culinary tourist is around 45 years old, whereas Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisainen (2016) claim that the age can be even younger. McKercher et al. (2008) assume that gastronomic tourists are characterized by a medium to high purchasing power, aged between 35-45 years, and are highly educated, including university degrees. Simultaneously, they share a passion for adventure and exploration, and for that reason, they decide on destinations with a unique cultural heritage, while they have great experience in travelling. Finally, culinary tourists spend most of their available budget on activities related to gastronomy and culture (Williams et al, 2014). In the literature review, there are identified gaps regarding the profile of young culinary tourists. For this reason, this thesis will focus on the target group of Millennials and Generation Z, identifying their profiles, their consuming habits, their motivations as well their contribution to the tourism industry.

Moreover, multiple academics recognize the gastronomic tourist as a traveller with a significant salary, i.e., a much higher disposable income in comparison with the average tourist, and is often willing to spend more, to live unique culinary experiences, and with a higher education (Abdelhamied, 2011; Getz et al., 2014; Jimenez Beltran et al., 2016; Levitt et al., 2017; Moral-Cuadra et al., 2021).

Interestingly, during the scientific research conducted over the years, both the age and the level of interest in gastronomy while travelling has changed significantly, implying that more and more culinary tourism is attracting the younger generations (Moral-Cuadra et al., 2021) but still not enough information is available regarding the profile of the young culinary tourists. Thus, considering that gastronomic tourists exert a great influence on the local economies, thanks to their powerful level of expenditure, more and more gastronomic destinations can work the promotion of their culinary activities (Du Rand and Health, 2006).

According to Fields (2002), there are four types of motivations behind the urge of exploring the gastronomy of a destination. Firstly, physical motivations are mainly described by the urge to maintain sustenance, followed by cultural reasons driven by the desire of the visitors to experience the culture of a destination through its gastronomy (Chang et al., 2020). Besides, the third category is interpersonal motivations, primarily the need for socializing using culinary products as tools of communication and cooperation between travellers (Sthapit, 2018; Salgueiro Rachao et al., 2020). Lastly, the fourth motivation is characterized by status and prestige, predominantly by the social interactions which evolve by adopting exclusive experiences (Moral- Cuadra et al., 2021).

2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Social media refers to all the means (tools) of sharing information, communication and public data. Simultaneously, the term “social networking” refers to the creation and use of communities where the interconnection of people who have common interests takes place. In other words, the term “social media” refers to social networking tools, while the term “social networking” refers to the whole process of social networking (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Fatanti and Suyadnya (2015), explain that with social networks there is the opportunity to represent content that has audio, texts, and audiovisual material (video) as well as to broadcast live what is happening. Almost all social media platforms use today this content to enable their users to interact with each other by creating content, commenting and watching what other members publish, offering the opportunity to communicate as a transmitter or recipient. Users can use either a computer or a mobile device (tablet, smartphone. etc.) (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Most

people publish reviews, feedback or even comments while sharing and communicating with other users online (Burgess et al. 2009).

According to Kiralova (2014), a tourist destination is successful only when it can adequately satisfy its visitors. Moreover, in the last years, more and more National Tourism Organizations (NTOs), Destination Management Companies (DMCs) as well, and Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) use social media content as a major marketing tool and manage to effectively promote what they represent thanks to their advertisements or the word of mouth. They manage to comment and share their experiences with potential tourist destinations. The strategies followed by companies for the promotion of the product or services as well as the tourist destinations are focused on social media since in this digital world social media can increase the competitiveness between the companies as well the tourist destinations (Kiralova, 2014). Besides, it is essential to acknowledge that of the level of online transactions, tourism is considered to be the largest worldwide (Mack et al., 2008; Vukolic et al., 2022).

Nowadays, social media have become part of the daily life of most people offering them the opportunity to share their experiences even in live streaming. For this reason, social media is an excellent source of information for users, thus creating an open line for marketing, in order to expand the business. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, Twitter, LinkedIn... etc. are some of the most popular media channels and consist of the most effective and accurate platforms to build strategies to attract customers (Zhang et al., 2011).

The main feature of social media channels is the high level of social interaction it offers by creating standards for group interactions. Group chats, live video broadcasts and comments-feedback on them help to expand the social circle and meet new people and friends. So, it is not just information that is transmitted through a network, but a process in which via social relationships a sense of communication is created. Many people tend to control on social media platforms the quality of several products or services before they buy anything (Saboo et al., 2016). Posts (including comments, reviews or general feedback) on social media exert a strong impact on the users during and post travelling (Chua and Banerjee, 2015). Simultaneously, the number of likes of the posts is remarkably affected by the abundance of the content (Sabate et al., 2014).

Gajic et al., (2020) suggest that the content on social media networks which consists of links and links inserted in the post can engage more and help the interaction between users and companies in comparison with plain posts with text. Several researchers recommend paying further attention to the interaction of posts as the users tend to select more to communicate with companies and often ask questions on social media, and this works as a major character in the User Generated Content (Lin et al., 2017; Vukolic et al., 2022).

In addition, a digital platform which increasingly attracts the attention of both individuals as well companies and corporations is Instagram. It has transformed into an “essential business tool” for promoting and approaching users and travellers immediately (Miles, 2014; Zadeh and Sharda, 2014). Founded in 2010, it has over 1 billion monthly users worldwide (Statista, 2022) and is now the most popular medium in the field of mobile telephony in terms of image and video sharing. Instagram is a social network platform that is based on photo-sharing. It offers the users the opportunity to create content and later edit it thanks to its special features, (filters). In addition, the consumers can share and promote common interests (e.g. makeup, cooking, travel, etc.) but also react to whatever they like or comment on. Last year, the platform launched the "Instagram Video", which mainly combined Instagram TV (IGTV) and feed videos into one format. So, virtually everyone can create their channel and watch their videos, with live reactions and comments.

Another interesting feature of Instagram which attracts a significant number of users on the platform is the “Story”. Thanks to this feature (which reminds the same characteristic as Snapchat), users can post pictures, videos, and music, and the content will vanish in 24 hours. This technique is extremely popular, especially among young people. Research has shown that 500 million daily active stories were reported on Instagram in January 2019 (Statista, 2022). This feature makes the platform extremely appealing to marketers worldwide. Considering the latest research of April 2022, almost 32% of worldwide users are aged between 25 to 34 years (Statista, 2022).

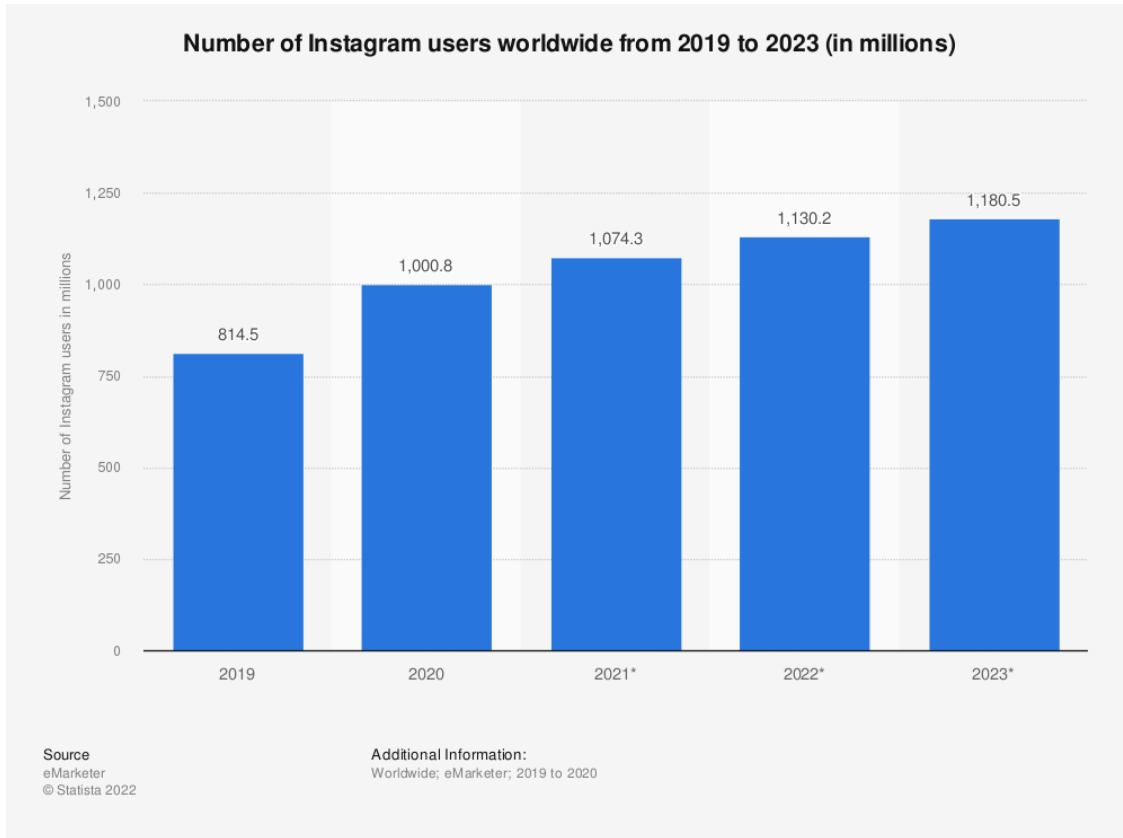


Table 1: Chart depicting the number of Instagram global users from 2019-2023.

Source: Statista (2022).

2.4 INSTAGRAM AND FOODSTAGRAMMING

Social media has a significant influence on the tourism and travel sector, as shown by the application of Instagram, where the hashtag #travel appears in more than 634 million posts, and the hashtag #food appears in more than 487 million posts, while there is a rapid increase in those numbers daily (Instagram, 2022).

As Baker (2017) pointed out, 48% of Instagram users utilize the platform to search for a new destination. This platform enables potential travellers to search the tag of a location and can then locate more photos and videos of the destination, and finally find more content published by other users, locals or travellers (Gretzel, 2016).

According to Karnikowski (2014), the content on Instagram of a user with 100.000 followers or more can automatically attract more consumers than any other advertising campaign. This is the main reason why companies approach influencers and travel bloggers and try to promote through them effectively their products or their services.

In the last years is observed a new phenomenon globally, which draws the attention of many researchers, called *foodstagramming*. This activity consists of people who tend to capture pictures or videos of their food content and later share it on social media channels and particularly on Instagram (Atanasova, 2016; Blanchette, 2013; International Business Times, 2013). Considering that this trend is mainly focused on the fundamental role of the aesthetics of the food content, accordingly the content must be as aesthetic and tempting as possible, to trigger the appetite of the users via a digital screen. Spence et al. (2016), claim that firstly thanks to the digitally visual perspectives, people can satisfy their culinary experiences and almost 60% of them adopt the mentality of consuming their food firstly with their cameras and then with their forks (Zagat, 2016; Spence et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, the presentation of food is not a recent digital trend as Civitello (2011) claimed that food displays in the Middle Ages were more significant than the food flavours. Since then, the presentations of food often symbolized the social status of people, differentiating the higher social classes from the lower. Nowadays, the activity of sharing food content has become extremely popular thanks to the mobile devices that the majority of people own and can easily capture at any moment. As well, thanks to the multiple editing features that the social media channels own, they offer the opportunity to all the users to edit and transform their pictures into extremely aesthetic digital products.

Although, several researchers argue why digital satiation is significant and why *foodstagramming* has become such a popular trend among young travellers. Recent research based on cognitive psychology reports that digital food content can strengthen the sensory experiences can change the cephalic phase release of insulin as well as change the heart

rates when imagining or waiting for the food to arrive (Drobes et al., 2001; Wallner-Liebman et al., 2010; Delwiche, 2012; Spence et al., 2016). Given that, “digital hunger” can be described as the physiological need to observe food content. This has as a result the disposition of physiological, neural and behavioural answers from food displays expressing some unisensory motivations (Spence et al., 2016). Considering the cognitive image of pictures or short videos focused on food, it is reflected that this kind of content can attract the consumers’ attention to the image of a potential culinary destination, thanks to the audio-visual sensory actions (Li et al., 2020). Particularly, the food content can captivate the users regarding the flavour details of a food product. This can result to influence the affective image of a gastronomic destination (Li et al., 2020). Interestingly, several researchers suggest that to avoid any negative experiences and comments, while digitally promoting food products, the content must be by the original taste of the food (Li et al., 2020).

As mentioned above the role of aesthetics is essential in *foodstagramming* and recently more and more of the trend of proliferating food pictures on social media takes place also during or post travelling (Wong et al., 2019). Indeed, travelling behaviours and motivations are constantly changing thanks to the development of culinary tourism and the constant use of mobile devices. As Long (2004) has stated that culinary tourism is the process of experiencing new cultures via gastronomy (Long, 2004). According to Albers and James (1983) imagery contributes to understanding tourist perceptions as well as their behaviours. Tourists’ perceptions about culinary destinations can be reflected in their “digital footprint”, as in fact, the camera is the initial “identity badge” of a tourist (Chalfen 1979, p. 436) while the art of photography grows simultaneously with tourism. Although, it is vital to differentiate the categories of photography. Firstly, there are the pictures made by the tourists and secondly the pictures created by the stakeholders of a tourist destination (Chalfen, 1979, p. 437). Based on tourist-produced pictures, the tourism operators pay extra attention to organise their destination marketing strategies, resulting in attracting potential food visitors.

The motivations behind the “glorification of food content in appetizing colours and pleasing compositions” (Arumsari, 2019, p.5) will be described below. Researchers claim that people tend to use *foodstagramming* to offer valuable information and help other consumers whether to choose or not a specific product or service, to show off their food preferences considering that the food is very much a symbol of identity or status. Lastly, many users tend to publish their food content just to show the products they consume at a certain time. It is worth noting that since Instagram is a platform used by many businesses and marketers, *foodstagramming* can be an extremely successful product, bringing multiple economic benefits to the potential strong foodstagrammers (Arumsari, 2019).

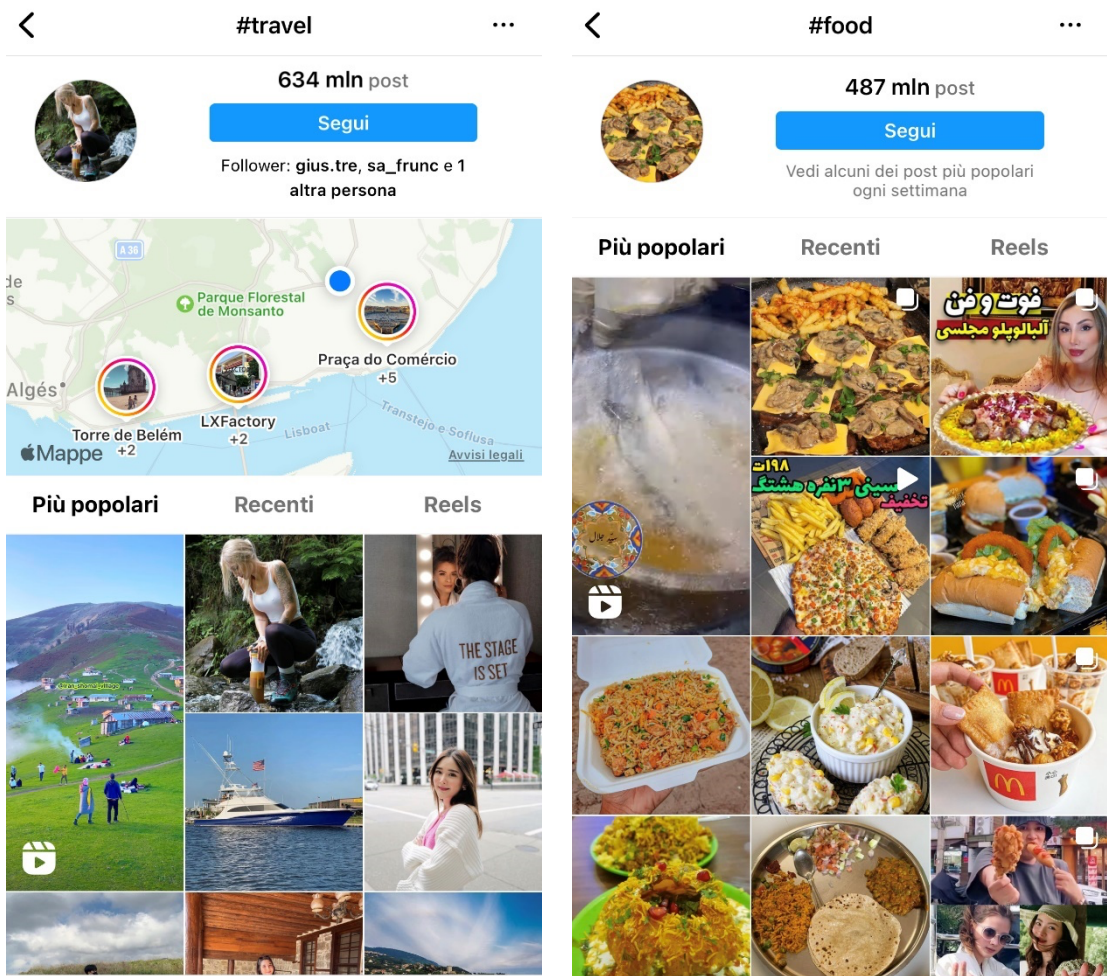


Figure 2: Pictures of the Instagram page depicting the hashtag #travel with 634 million posts and #food with 487 million posts accordingly.

Source: Instagram (2022).

2.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MARKETING STRATEGY

It is widely known that in the last decades due to the development of social media and generally the rapid digital expansion almost replaced in many sectors communication needs, and habits are based on the traditional communication tools (including Television, Radio, newspapers. etc.). Particularly, the preferences of the Millennials and Generation Z are concentrated more on online platforms instead of traditional media (Eva, 2017). By sharing their digital content online, social media users can interact thanks to those online applications (the Chu, Deng and Cheng, 2020). Mainly, because the users of social media can create engaging and interactive content, resulting in a way of communication based on democracy, emphasizing the infinity of ideas, group connections, and healthy dialogues. Furthermore, in comparison to traditional media, the speed of the information offered on social network platforms attracts the young generations who seek quick and reliable sources in the fast-paced world.

About social media channels, tourism and gastronomy portray the most viewed content (Vukolic et al., 2022). Certainly, in recent times, the tourism industry is impossible to be comprehended without social media, leading to a massive improvement in the tourism industry. According to the latest statistics, a large number of Millennials, almost 87% are social media users who tend to search for information about their potential travel destinations (Vukolic et al., 2022). While online reviews and ratings extraordinarily affect their final travel decisions, as users tend to depend on brands which have been highly rated by other users (Vukolic et al., 2022).

Satisfaction can be the main factor to motivate the traveller's engagement with the Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) on social media platforms regarding their culinary and travel experiences (Chu, Deng and Cheng, 2020). Chung, Deng and Cheng (2020), argue that e-WOM behaviours in the travel and tourism sector can be utterly influenced by the social values provided by social media platforms. Besides, the digital relationships between tour operators and social media users are fundamental. Consumers are always benefitting through the basic form of social media, the creation of User Generated Content and sharing of useful information with other consumers.

Regardless, publishing an extreme number of content often can contribute to the negative promotion and general ineffectiveness (Mariani et al., 2016). Regarding higher engagement, Swani et al (2017), suggest that comments reflect a high level of online engagement as the users devote time to their daily lives, rather than just liking a post which depicts users' interest. Lastly, it is significant to note that despite social media platforms can assist in the construction of online satisfaction and brand loyalty, they may also encourage

negative and unfair criticism. As often consumers express their ideas, opinions and reviews in a rude and impolite way (Buted et al., 2014).

It is essential to acknowledge that many studies have shown that User Generated Content, conceptualized as e-WOM behaviours can affect investment possibilities, brand awareness, social validation, trust, travel choices as well the sense of loyalty. (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Besides travellers before arriving at a destination create an image which is based on a mix of expectations influenced by word of mouth, promotions, media information as well usual perspectives about a destination. (Kiralova, Pavlicecka, 2015). To distinguish themselves from competitors, destinations must be sufficiently promoted to their specific target groups and provide unique experiences with their touristic products. Gastronomy tourism can contribute to this idea with success.

Moreover, the destinations must provide reliable descriptions of their touristic products as it is acquired beforehand and away from the place of consumption. (Kiralova, Pavlicecka, 2014). Social media platforms offer users the opportunity to participate, create, and share content. They may contain reviews, forums, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, podcasts, reels, and photo-sharing sites (Wong, 2021). However, in the last few years, social media users tend to utilize exclusively mobile applications (Broadband Search, 2022). Smartphone devices today incorporate the most essential social media applications.

Indeed, culinary destinations have utilized social media as a tool for promoting gastronomic products with interactive marketing purposes, although the continuous increase of gastronomic tourists using social media, produces new challenges for the tourism industry (Kiralova, Pavlicecka, 2015). The abovementioned profile of culinary tourists shows highly educated people who seek reliable and trustworthy sources of information, often through social media (Bjork and Kauppinen- Raisainen 2016). For that reason, the culinary destinations can attract this kind of tourist by offering information with significant emotional appeal faster and for a lower cost, since the competition in the global tourism market is immense.

The culinary tourists expect a personal approach, and communication that is based on interaction, intelligence, authenticity and creativity, while the messages must encompass emotions and empathy. The gastronomic tourists desire to take part in the development of the culinary product and want to purchase based on the positive experiences. Social media can assist culinary destinations to continue their competitiveness by using creativity, presenting engaging content as well develop and inspiring interactive dialogues (Kiralova, Pavlicecka, 2015).

2.6 THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Over the years, authenticity is depicted in words such as «genuine», «real», and «original». It is widely acknowledged that culinary tourists tend to seek authenticity within food experiences (Cohen, 1988). They try to discover opportunities to experience valuable interactions with the locals. That is because in a progressively commodified and standardized world of gastronomic construction, managing to explore something local is always linked with greater quality. Because by some means, the local is always more «genuine» (Hall, 2019). Therefore, authenticity and quality exert a major influence on gastronomic tourism.

Authenticity could be the result of a visitor's perception of a place's identity as a result of experiencing features of the territory's identity (Richards, 2011). There is a powerful connection between the tourist perception of real authentic experience and the relationship with the locals. As this kind of interaction contributes to creating a deeper bond between the tourist and the residents, providing them with the opportunity to consider their travel experience as a different one by escaping the mass tourist hordes (Richards, 2011).

In addition, authenticity in food tourism becomes an excellent tourism marketing tool, and throughout the years an increasing number of countries and regions tend to appreciate this and attempt to use gastronomy to market themselves (Richards, 2011). Precisely, the local gastronomic product of Greece can become a reason for visiting the country. Thus, a considerable feature of creating authentic results is the nostalgia and the power of a traditional, simple and healthy rural past (Richards, 2011). Although, Angelopoulos et al. (2019) suggest that according to the Greek restaurateurs both the locals and the tourists comprehend local ingredients as unique and an essential part of authentic Greek recipes. The authenticity and the traditions within Greece as determined by the value of the local products and recipes, which is paramount for the locals, as well as the freshness and the taste of the Greek products (Autio et al., 2013).

Lastly, it is widely recognized that, in tourism authenticating genuine experiences, such as those connected to food and beverages, has been combined with an increase in the satisfaction of the travellers. Moreover, the use of food and heritage in destination branding exerts a great influence on the promotion of an authentic experience. Even National Geographic Travel advertises that the best holiday is the one where the traveller earns an

insider's point of view by experiencing actions like food, that show the local character (Killburn, 2018).

2.7 PUSH AND PULL FACTORS IN THE FOOD TRAVEL INDUSTRY

It is widely recognized that several components exert a strong influence on the tourists' food travel choices to consume touristic products these determinants are defined as push and pull factors in the academic literature. Genc (2021) expresses that push factors contain psychological and internal aspects, whereas pull factors include external aspects linked to the destination image.

Mak et al., (2012) mention that the decision to explore a destination to experience gastronomy is a strong idea and that destination satisfaction, as well as the tourism experience, can be highly affected by the food. According to Genc (2021), push factors are the strengths that attract the attention of travellers while on vacations. On the contrary, pull factors encompass multiple destination features including cultural and natural sites that stimulate external tourist interests. In other words, people tend to travel because they are pushed and pulled by these two diverse components (Sastre and Phakdee- Auksorn, 2017).

Kim et al. (2009) mentioned that the push factors of food travel comprise escape, relaxation, excitement, the taste of food/wine, socialization, interpersonal relationships, social status-including prestige, novelty, cultural experiences, health, adventure, social interaction, as well family affection. Although, pull factors are described as the uniqueness of the own characteristics of each destination (Kim and Park, 2018).

Regarding push, factors include firstly the sensory experience (taste of food) as the main decision for travelling. Thanks to the sensory experience travellers tend to participate in food tourism activities, such as food festivals, and events. etc (Kim & Eves, 2012). Different occasions to taste new culinary products and gastronomic experiences are often offered to tourists, leading to the appreciation of the food tourism destinations (Su et al., 2018). Then, socialization can be defined as a strong push factor in the food destinations as people who share a common enthusiasm for gastronomy can meet, and travel for socialization. Another push factor that has been identified in the literature is the "cultural experience", as the passion to learn about new cultures and the history of a food destination. This can be succeeded by participating in food events and getting to know the culinary heritage of each destination (Su et al., 2018). Food tourists search for the "authentic culture" often through food seeking to

explore the eating habits of the locals, increasing like that their knowledge about different gastronomic environments (Kim et al., 2012). Also, especially for millennials and generation Z, the main push factor is the Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) as technology and social media have become an integrated part of their lives and the phenomenon of peer exclusion is well recognized by academia. To avoid feelings of misery, loneliness and even depression, Millennials and Generation Z can be pushed to travel to a new destination or even experience new gastronomic products.

On the other hand, pull factors can be defined as the destination-generated forces and the motives linked to the attractions of a destination (Swarbooke & Horner, 2007). According to UNWTO (2012) “food tourism appeals” consist of the principal element linked to food events, food tours, markets, and restaurants. etc. The unique gastronomic product of Greece is one of the pull factors motivating tourists to visit the country as culinary tourists. As a result, food tourism attractions must be accepted as pull factors of Greece as a food tourism destination (Su et al., 2018). Another aspect of pull factors is the “destination attractions” considering that culinary tourists are highly culturally educated, hence they seek to explore destinations with a plethora of cultural legacy. Therefore, the local farms in the regions of Greece, the different food festivals (festival of honey, olive oil, wine, snail, sardines, mushrooms. etc), the cooking lessons in the islands offered by the local communities, food tours, as well the local markets can work as the food magnets of the touristic product of Greece and can be interpreted as the pull factors.

Concluding, push and pull factors of food and travel motivations are developed as multifaceted ideas. Push factors contain three aspects “tastes of food”, “socialization” and “cultural experiences” while “food tourism attractions” and “destination attractions” consist of two elements of the pull factors.

2.8 TOURISM IN GREECE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The financial progress of Greece was mainly connected to the industrial sector. The huge value of the tourism and hospitality sector arrived later. Particularly, the significance of tourism in Greece has been well recognized in the last decades, as it is the central aspect of the economic strategy (Williams & Show, 1994). Tourism is undoubtedly a valuable source of wealth for the country while its annual income contributes to an exceptional level to the formation of the country's GDP. As activity tourism exerts a strong influence on many sectors of the economy including transportation (air travel and bus transfer), accommodation (hotel or other), catering (restaurants or bars inside or outside the accommodation), entertainment (including sightseeing ...etc.), and in-store consumption. Thus, tourism is an activity that concerns many different parts of the social and productive aspects of a country (Ikkos, 2020).

Furthermore, tourism was the bulwark in the recession and unemployment during the years of the financial crisis in Greece and led the country to growth rates. Due to the large dispersion of tourist destinations throughout the country, tourism plays a catalytic role in shaping income in many regions of the country. On the other hand, tourism has a strong seasonality since the holidays for Sun & Sea (still the most important for the European product market) are the main tourist product of the country.

Sectors directly dependent on tourism are trade, real estate, management and financial services.

The data which will be covered below will be based on the pre-pandemic levels for obvious reasons. Accordingly, Greece in 2019 welcomed almost 31.3 million tourists and received almost € 17.8 billion. The upward trend of tourism in Greece has already begun in 2012. However, the seasonality of arrivals and revenues reflect the dependence of our country's tourism on the dominant product, at the European level Sun & Sea, as from the beginning to the end of the summer season (April until September) is recorded at 79.8% of arrivals and 84.8 % of revenue.

According to the first estimation of ELSTAT, the direct contribution of tourism to the country's economy in 2019 is estimated at €23.4 billion, a figure that corresponds to 12.5% of GDP (Ikkos, 2020).

- Taking into consideration the multiple benefits, the total contribution of tourism to the country's economy in 2019 is estimated between € 51,6 and € 62.1 billion, corresponding to between 27.5% and 33.1% of GDP.

Furthermore, more than 90% of the income from tourism activities comes from abroad, turning tourism almost into an entirely export activity. (Ikkos, 2020).

2.9 SEASONALITY IN GREECE

Seasonality has been acknowledged as a large challenge for the tourism sector globally, mainly due to the difficulties in obtaining access to capital, hiring and maintaining full-time staff, challenges in overconsumption and overuse of facilities and infrastructure, as well problems with low returns in investments producing high risk in businesses (Corluka, 2019). Seasonal activity of the workers in the tourism sector leads to general income instability with effects on the society but especially on the tourist areas.

Corluka (2019), expresses that in cases of several Mediterranean destinations which are based on the 3S touristic product (Sun, Sand and Sea) the seasonality in general, is extremely highlighted in the summer months. Creating mainly problems because the destinations display extreme differences in the population as in the summer months; there are more visitors than they can accommodate, whereas in other seasons there are too few. Duro and Turrion- Prats, (2019) point out that Mediterranean countries (including Greece) are characterized by a progress rate in tourist visits, which at the same time is connected to a large growth of seasonality.

Nevertheless, in Greece, there are unexploited regions that could be further developed through city tourism or gastronomy tourism. The low number of overnight stays in regions such as Western Macedonia, Epirus, and Western and Central Greece in contrast to the high number of overnight stays in South Aegean, Crete and Ionian islands, creates the need for effective initiatives that could combat the problem of the seasonal activity in specific areas.

Even though seasonality is a well-researched phenomenon in the tourism industry by several scientists over the years, there is still a general feeling of lack of awareness of the phenomenon in Greece particularly. Due to inadequate knowledge, the opportunities to mitigate the phenomenon are decreased. Certainly, the Greek economy could be saved when solutions to deal with the challenge of seasonality could be adapted. Although to achieve this, the tourism product must be differentiated, and both the existing gaps and the future deficiencies must be tackled. Indeed, tourism is bombarded with great threats constantly, as it is a living part of the economy and depends strongly on international circumstances.

Many researchers over the years have clarified that tourism seasonality is almost impossible to be entirely eradicated, although there are various approaches which can assist in successfully managing the challenges of the phenomenon. Corluka (2019), points out that by researching the demands of tourists and the existing touristic products, the stakeholders

can follow several strategies to combat the negative consequences of the phenomenon. Lee (2008) and Goulding et al. (2004), explain that there are four common actions to address the effects of seasonality including the price, transforming the destination, market variety as well as the benefits of the state.

2.10 MITIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF SEASONALITY THANKS TO GASTRONOMIC TOURISM

Firstly, a great way to mitigate the challenge of seasonality would be the traditional or artificially created food events, food festivals and special celebrations so as to enhance the demand during off-peak seasons (Goulding, Baum and Morrison, 2005; Baum and Hagen, 1999; Baum, 1999; Witt and Moutinho, 1995).

Furthermore, special interest weekends, getaway breaks, gastronomy-based holidays, and culture and heritage tourism can improve the touristic flows and decrease the level of seasonality in Greece (Jang, 2004; Jeffrey and Barden, 1999; Witt and Moutinho, 1995). Another valuable option to combat the challenge of seasonality would be the creation of special occasion packages for accommodation, restaurants, and activities to encourage higher visitation, repeat visitation or even to extend stay to support and develop expenditure to reimburse for low season (Jeffrey and Barden, 1999). In other words, by offering discounted prices during off-peak seasons while the same product is high priced in peak seasons. Considering that low season means more space for cultural tourists who do not visit the country for mass tourism consuming the main touristic product of sea and sun. In addition, circular tours or shifting of stay one-week spend at the seaside and one week in the countryside, participating in gastronomic activities of the local farms (Allcock, 1989), would contribute to mitigating the great risk of seasonality in Greece.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter will describe the stages of the research, analyse the process followed for the data collection and data analysis and finally examine several hypotheses. Every research must include the theoretical part as well as a detailed methodology in its framework, so the purpose of the research can be analysed to ensure a successful research process.

This research was based on the collection of both primary and secondary data. The first was gained from two focus groups, while the secondary data was obtained from several academic sources focused on culinary tourism and digital marketing research. This research aims to examine if the food content on social media exerts a significant influence on the international gastronomic tourists' travelling decisions (particularly the Millennials and Generation Z) and their motivations to visit Greece, in order to experience the culinary touristic product. In this dissertation, the topic was approached through secondary research, where information was collected on certain research questions to understand and investigate in depth. The information of the secondary data was collected through the bibliographic review of the existing academic literature, to analyse the theoretical framework of the research so as to depict the current situation of culinary tourists on social media.

3.1 FOCUS GROUPS

As mentioned before, the research method implemented to gain qualitative information was only the qualitative focus group. A focus group consists of a small group of 6 to 10 people to be created an open conversation between them, a facilitator asks several wide questions (Nyumba et al., 2018). This qualitative method turns out to be the most valuable research alternative, as it provided further details in the discussion between the participants that would not be possible to be gained under the circumstances of a normal survey or a questionnaire (Nyumba et al., 2018). The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' behaviours, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way where other methods are not applicable as they can examine in detail how the participants think and feel regarding the subject (Gundumogula, 2020). However, focus groups are considerably best used as a qualitative method of data collection, thanks to the flexibility, richness and different advantages in collecting data. For this reason, they became the most significant method to collect qualitative data for this research project (Gundumogula, 2020).

Besides, sometimes some people tend to gain information from pre-accepted ideas, rather than the focus groups tend to be more private and confidential, providing the facilitator with the opportunity to pay further attention to the behaviours of the participants while

answering the open questions (De Franzo, n.d.,; Flynn, et. al., 2018; Malhotra et al., 2017). The aim of utilizing this research method was to search for significant and undiscovered facts about the Millennials- young gastronomic tourists, their motivations to travel to Greece and try the local cuisine, their relationship with social media and how influenced they could be regarding the food content they constantly get bombarded with on social media. Moreover, it was fundamental to find out if the food tourism product was enough to attract the participants to visit Greece.

This research was based on two focus groups, one virtual and one physical. The virtual one was conducted via an online meeting through the Zoom platform because most participants were international and outside of the current state of Portugal where the dissertation was performed. It took place on the 13th of April 2022, at 17:00 (GMT+1) and was headquartered in Lisbon, Portugal. It lasted 55 minutes and consisted of 10 open questions which promoted a healthy and fruitful dialogue around the topic. The second focus group was a physical meeting that took place on the 15th of April 2022 at 18:00 (GMT+1) and was again headquartered in Lisbon, Portugal.

3.2 SAMPLES

The participants were selected regarding their age (minimum 20 maximum 40 years old), preferably Millennials, their relationship with social media (all of them were active users with at least 2 hours spent on social media daily), their level of interest and knowledge in gastronomy and food tourism in general, as well as their interest in travelling and exploring different cultures, although visiting Greece before was not required.

The Millennial generation group was particularly selected since it is the age group that is the most affected by social media 18 to 29 years old: 90% in the adults; and 30 to 49 years old: 82% in the adults regarding the latest statistics (Clement, 2020) and most active on social media. Also, considering that this age group represents the future consumers of every touristic product at any destination, automatically made it attractive to examine more about their consumer behaviours as well as their motivations. Moreover, the factor of how connected the participants with gastronomy and food tourism played a significant role to select them, to visualize how much, they would be affected when choosing a culinary destination or how engaged they could be with any gastronomic experiences offered in a destination. Lastly, the participants were chosen regarding their high interest in travelling and exploring different cultures, so they could represent potential consumers of the culinary touristic product of Greece.

The focus groups included 10 people (6 women and 4 men) between 23 to 32 years old from 8 different nationalities including Germany, Indonesia, the USA, Spain, Poland, Italy, Switzerland and Portugal. All participants were active social media users with an average of 3 hours per day on social media and share a high interest in gastronomic experiences and culinary tourism. Interestingly, even if it was not a requirement to have previously visited Greece, all members except two had visited Greece at least once.

Code name	Age	Sex	Nationality	Designation	Social media preference	Time spent on social media per day
P1 (Veronica)	25	F	Poland	student	Instagram	4
P2 (Monica)	26	F	Spain	social media manager	Instagram	5
P3 (Luis)	29	M	Portugal	banking analyst	Instagram	2
P4 (Vincenzo)	32	M	Italy	software engineer	Instagram, Tik-Tok	3
P5 (Chang)	26	M	Indonesia	fitness instructor	Instagram	3

Table 2: Focus Group 1: Characteristics of the samples from the online focus group.

Source: own elaboration

Code name	Age	Sex	Nationality	Designation	Social media preference	Time spent on social media per day
P6 (Nadine)	28	F	Germany	architect	Instagram	4
P7 (Petros)	25	M	USA	pilot	Instagram	3

P8 (Virginia)	28	F	Italy	travel agent	Instagram, Tik-Tok	4
P9 (Sandy)	27	F	Switzerland	linguistic teacher	Instagram	3
P10 (Lara)	23	F	Portugal	nurse	Instagram, Tik-Tok	3

Table 3: Focus Group 2: Characteristics of the samples from the physical focus group.

Source: own elaboration

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that this study will try to cover are the following:

The primary research question is

- a) Are travellers influenced by social media content in their travel decisions and planning?

The secondary research questions are:

- b) Does Instagram specifically influence the choice of destination as well the travel planning?
- c) What is the impact of foodstagramming and gastronomic tourism on the image of the destination?

The interview questions were composed to be as general as possible, (always within the limits of the research) to gain constructive information from the participants, preventing any chance of biased answers. What is more, all the questions aimed to target how each respondent felt regarding the overall relationship with the food and travel content shared on social media, and their past experiences with the Greek culinary products which could offer valuable details about the future gastronomic touristic product in Greece?

3.5 ANALYSIS

The sessions were recorded with the authorization of all the participants and after the completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed to permit wider analysis. Once

all the interviews were transcribed, the texts were coded. For the procedure of coding, the researcher performed a manual analysis of the data. While analysing the transcriptions, the researcher tried to search for common words and concepts, to have an overview of what has been mentioned about the subject. Then during the coding, three main topics emerged including a) social media-Instagram, b) Food, and c) Greek gastronomy- Greek culture. Each of these main categories of topics will be analysed, considering what has been mentioned about it and each subcategory linked to it.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 FOCUS GROUPS ANALYSIS

The empirical research aims to provide relevant insight to fulfil the purpose of the research. The present study's scope is to comprehend the impact of food content in social media on the image of Greece. As one of the aims of this thesis is to help DMOs develop their online strategies, the results will be defined under those circumstances.

The first question was to mainly discover what social media platform the participants use the most, so it could depict which platform could be used in the future by any kind of stakeholders, to target this age group for future touristic experiences.

Regarding the second question, it was related to the sources that participants choose when they plan to travel. Mainly, this question intended to confirm if the participants would choose also some of the social media platforms while planning their travel experiences.

The third question was connected with the level of inspiration of social media when choosing a destination, to understand how strong influence social media exerts on the millennials.

Concerning the fourth question, the intention was to discover how much people consider important social media, to document and share their personal experiences while travelling. Additionally, this question also offered some information about the motivations or even the reasons why millennials tend to share their travel experiences on social media.

Moreover, the 5th, 6th and 7th questions were related to gastronomy and travelling. The point of these three questions was to examine the power of the local cuisine and whether the

local gastronomy of a destination would attract them to visit, as well as to discover how strong the relationship with the food they owned, as far as the travelling experiences.

Besides, the last two questions were related to the touristic environment in Greece. The intention of making these questions was to find out the motivations of the focus group members in visiting Greece, as well as their knowledge and their relationship with Greek gastronomy.

Finally, the last question was exceptionally helpful to comprehend the power that Greek gastronomy owes, to create a strong touristic product in Greece, as well as the intention of the answerers to visit Greece as culinary tourists. As it is widely accepted the cultural product in Greece is outstanding and well recognized, including the history, philosophy, theatre, sciences, archaeological sites, cultural institutions, and museums.

4.2. MAIN TOPICS AND CLUSTERS

Based on the focus group questions, three main discussion topics emerged: social media and Instagram, food, Greek gastronomy, and Greek culture. These topics can be further divided into subtopics, open for discussion with each of the respondents depending on the conversation line.

4.2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND INSTAGRAM

The first and the second questions managed to answer successfully the initial research questions of the thesis - "What channels do people use when looking for food or travel inspiration and information online?" as well as "Do people seek inspiration for travelling from Instagram?"-. Therefore, proving the power of social media on this age group, let alone the influence of Instagram particularly in their future travel and food-consuming decisions. This concept was highly confirmed as the respondents of the focus groups, from all the different nationalities, notably agreed that Instagram constituted their most preferred social media platform. Indeed, it offered them the opportunity to research new destinations, choose between the products that they could consume, interact with other people, create communities exchanging common ideas and interests, exchange parts of their lives and their experiences... etc. Some participants claimed that it is the only application they use, as all their friends or their social network can be found on this platform. Moreover, P4 mentioned that Instagram is the only platform that provides him with the possibility to check everything, including videos, news, contact with other people... etc. While P5 responded that Instagram is the only important

application in his country Indonesia. Interestingly, all respondents agreed on using Instagram as the main social media platform, proving the research of Auxier and Anderson (2021) and Abney et al., (2018) that Instagram is a social media platform which is becoming increasingly famous worldwide because it offers the users the opportunity to check new destinations, to choose which products they can consume, to socialize with other people, to create communities exchanging common ideas and interests, to share parts of their lives and their experiences by creating self-generated content... etc. In addition, the ideas of Baker (2015) that “48% of Instagram users seek information of a new destination by utilizing the platform” were recognized by the results of this question. Then some participants (P4, P8, P10) chose TikTok and even YouTube, as alternative platforms to socialize or share content.

Regarding the second question, it was related to the sources that participants choose when they plan to travel. Mainly, the answers to this question remarkably supported the ideas of Vukolic et al. (2022), that a great number of Millennials, almost 87% are social media users who tend to search for information about their potential travel destinations. However, most of the respondents choose the website of Skyscanner when they want to organize flights. Whereas one participant (P5) chose Google flights and another one chose kiwi.com. Besides, regarding the crucial part of the accommodation, almost all the participants chose booking.com, as their first source of information while organizing a trip. All the aforementioned results support Eva's (2017) preconceived opinions that the preferences of the millennials and generation Z are concentrated more on online channels instead of traditional media. Worth mentioning, it is that one participant (P7) selected Instagram as the first source when organizing his trips claiming that he always searches for destinations and accommodation based on how attractive the content is he finds on Instagram, confirming the ideas of Kiralova and Pavliceka, (2015) that social media is not the first source of information when organizing a trip, people though could still get strongly affected to choose a destination by the user-generated shared content. Those results could be strengthened by the suggestions of Chua and Banerjee, (2015) that posts (including comments, reviews or general feedback) on social media exert a strong impact on the users during and post-travel.

The results of the 3rd question elaborated on the central research question of the thesis “whether people seek inspiration for travelling on social media” as well as “Does Instagram influence destination travel planning?”. All the respondents demonstrated keen enthusiasm for the content of social media, while several even expressed that the level of their social media influence could be so great, that they could even end up choosing a destination that was not in their initial plans, just because they got inspired by that on social media. The responses of some participants (P1, P2, P6, P8, P10) come in great accordance with the points of Vukolic et al. (2022) that Millennials users tend to search for inspiration and information about travel destinations on social media. This is because the aforementioned

participants claimed that they even follow Instagram accounts, that they are particularly based on sharing travelling content or travel bloggers, so they can get inspired, motivated as well informed about their future travel itineraries. Therefore, Karnikowski's (2014) perceptions were reinforced regarding the influencers or the travel accounts with more than 100.000 followers that can automatically attract and engage more consumers than any other promoting campaign. This result explained perfectly why more and more companies tend to approach travel bloggers and influencers to promote via them their services.

Moreover, participants (P1, P2, P6) even responded that most people of their age spend 4 to 5 hours per day on social media, scrolling on Instagram. So, it is vital for them to check on social media any travelling content, before choosing a destination, to get a general idea of the place/ product/experience. Besides, they even mentioned that they do not believe that there would exist any kind of future without a social network. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that the travelling content on social media inspires them to plan a trip, while P4 supported that he does not get inspired to travel initially from the social media content. However, if he chooses a destination to travel to, then he will turn to social media to get information about the activities, the place etc.

Concerning the results deriving from the fourth question, the intention was to explore the level of importance that social media has in people's lives and to document and share their personal experiences. The results reflected once again how powerful is social media in the daily lives of people, as all the respondents documented their travel experiences on social media, to a great extent or a minor. Particularly, several responded that posting stories during or post their travelling was a quite often phenomenon, as well as posting pictures or reels on their Instagram feeds. Unsurprisingly, some of them mentioned that they prefer to keep them private, although they would still document them and post them on their close friend's lists on Instagram. Demonstrating well the concept of Wong et al. (2019) that the trend of proliferating pictures of food or travel on social media, occurs more and more in the modern days, with published content during or post travel. The results of this question defended the assumptions of Arumsari (2019) that people tend to post content on social media to offer significant information and assist other consumers in their future purchases.

4.2.2. FOOD

The results deriving from the 5th, 6th and 7th questions illustrated the power of the local cuisine and the significance of food when choosing a destination and while travelling. The outcomes of those questions contributed to responding to one of the research questions “how strong is the relationship with food while travelling?”. Besides the results of those questions are well-presented that the local gastronomy of a destination is capable to attract them to visit the destination. Particularly, most of the participants acknowledged the relevance of local gastronomy when choosing a destination, highlighting the value of the culinary heritage in Mediterranean countries, such as Greece. Most of the members (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P9) agreed that local gastronomy is relevant when choosing a destination. Particularly, one participant (P2) discussed that food, especially in the Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Italy, or Spain consists of one of the main attractions, while another respondent (P5) recognized the relevance of local gastronomy when choosing a destination, to comprehend the behaviours of local cultures. This verified the concept of Mak et al., (2012) that tourism and gastronomy are inevitably associated as they can fully influence tourist behaviour, while in search of authentic experiences when they encounter the local delicacies.

Furthermore, this question created a strong debate between the respondents, as several of them stated that local gastronomy may be relevant but would not be the priority while choosing a destination, whereas others discussed that local gastronomy is the main influence when selecting a place to visit. (Participant (P7) even commented, “I could even go to another planet if I would hear that they make the most amazing traditional pasta.”). Another member (P8) noted that the local gastronomy; is relevant, as she would feel awful if the destination, she visits does not have a strong culinary heritage. She particularly stated, “Honestly, I would feel extremely bad, in case I had to end in a McDonald’s while being on vacation.”.

Although the results of this question were particularly interesting as they demonstrated the significance of food in travel experiences generally. Specifically, one respondent (P4) claimed that even if he did not consider the local gastronomy completely relevant, he would still try to seek authentic culinary experiences when visiting a destination, such as searching for authentic places where locals go and taste good meat. Considering most of the respondents’ results, food maybe not be the most valuable determinant when choosing a destination, despite its role is fundamental in either transforming the travel experience into wonderful or unpleasant.

In respect of considering food the principal aspect when travelling, most of the respondents (almost all the group members) disagreed, even though, in a list one out of three, they all put food in the second place when visiting a destination. Besides, it is essential to share the idea

of the respondent (P5), which later all the participants found factual and seemed to agree. “The food may not be the most important aspect while choosing a destination, although it is important enough to either make magnificent or horrible your travel experience.”. Another interesting point of view was that two different members (P3, and P4) noted that the food is a secondary aspect when travelling, however, they always like to discover typical restaurants with local cuisine even though food is not their priority.

Interestingly, travelling more than four hours to taste the cuisine of another culture, was appealing enough to most of the male participants, but not to the females, depicting a sociocultural difference. This could be interpreted because the females could try themselves to produce similar or relevant recipes of the other culture’s cuisine, while men could find difficulties with such action. As well, male respondents found it interesting and entertaining the travelling in such circumstances, whereas the women associated it with more complex and tiring situations. Worth mentioning is that the results of this question helped to respond to the research question of “how strong is their relationship with food while travelling?”. Furthermore, the results portrayed the high status of gastronomy as a destination as most attendants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P7) tended to proceed into traveling for more than four hours to have the opportunity to immerse themselves into the local culture, as they all acknowledged that food is profoundly affiliated with the culture of a destination. This demonstrated the level of cultural education of the participants and their representation of culinary tourists.

4.2.3. GREEK GASTRONOMY AND GREEK CULTURE

The results of the last three questions interpreted the touristic environment in Greece while reporting the motivations of people for visiting the destination of Greece. Thanks to the results of those questions, the last research question of the thesis was managed to be answered successfully. The results defined “how powerful is the Greek gastronomy when choosing Greece as a tourist destination?”. Particularly, it is noteworthy that all participants had at least tried once in their lifetime Greek food and experienced Greek gastronomy positively. While all of them managed to recognize a couple of traditional Greek food and products including moussaka, feta cheese, Greek yoghurt, Greek olives, spanakopita, the traditional alcoholic beverage of Ouzo, and pita gyros being the most popular among their responses. Regarding the Greek street food, almost everyone acknowledged that they have tasted pita gyros or souvlaki and they were extremely satisfied with their experiences. Besides, a couple of the participants (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7) claimed that they enjoy extraordinarily Greek

cuisine, so they tend to consume it also while being abroad and not just when visiting Greece. Moreover, two members (P1, P5) recognized the traditional Greek beverage “Ouzo” and surprisingly they commented that even if they did not enjoy it, they still wanted to consume it while being in Greece.

Interestingly, those products/dishes could be used in marketing strategies, to raise awareness about the traditional culinary traditions and attract tourists into the country to try the local gastronomy. Those results come from the ideas of Allcock 1994; Jang, 2004; Jeffrey and Barden, 1999 and Moutinho, 1995 that taking part in gastronomic activities as well as creating gastronomy-based holidays can overcome the challenges of the seasonality in the country of Greece. Remarkable was the fact that the Greek food was satisfying to everyone. In this case, it was highly interpreted the value of the culinary heritage in Greece, as people were trying to consume it while being abroad and not just only when they visited Greece, confirming that is a well-recognized and well-preferred type of cuisine.

Finally, the results of the last question revealed the motivations of the respondents to visit Greece as culinary tourists. The last question indeed illustrated the greatness of Greek gastronomy as a strong determinant to visit the country, except the cultural attractions. The results of this question proved that the aspects that attract tourists to Greece are the rich natural environment, the pleasant Mediterranean climate, as well the cultural monuments that describe Greece as a museum of history and culture (Venetsatsopoulou, 2006).

As the cultural product was outstanding and well recognized by all the participants, they all declared that they would still visit the country even without the presence of cultural and historical heritage. This displayed that Greek cuisine could work as a strong element of visiting the country and experiencing it in situ. Furthermore, later many (P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10) acknowledged that food is encompassed in the culture of Greece and when consuming it, they would feel that they would go through the culture, mainly because it is created by people who use specific techniques, traditional recipes, and local products. etc.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The research performed in the present dissertation had the scope to demonstrate the relationship between social media users and gastronomy, as well as to improve the destination image of Greece thanks to gastronomy.

The first research question mentions that travellers are influenced by social media content on their travel decisions and planning (e.g., foodstagramming or others); while the existing literature review already recognizes that travel planning procedure has transformed the last years from the traditional way to meet a travel agent to book the holidays, to the online travel booking. Consumers tend to search the essential information and proceed to travel planning by themselves (Rezdy, 2021). Especially Millennials and Generation Z pay more attention to online platforms instead of traditional media (Eva, 2017). Thanks to the appearance of social media, travellers greatly count on social media platforms and online reviews before organizing a trip (Buonicontri et al., 2017). Tourists today always benefited from the basic form of social media, the creation of User Generated Content and sharing of useful information by other consumers while revising digital information (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015, Chung, Deng and Cheng, 2020).

This thesis has proved that travellers are immensely impacted by social media content on their travel decisions and planning. The booking procedure has become a piece of cake completed through diverse online platforms and is needed only a credit card. While all the inspiration, as well as the information, could get easily collected through social media content (food or travel content). Tourism and gastronomy portray the most viewed content on social media, according to Vukolic et al., 2022). Finally, the academic literature acknowledges that online reviews and ratings extraordinarily affect the final travel decisions, as users tend to depend on brands or services which have been highly rated by other users (Vukolic et al., 2022).

Proceeding to the second research question “if Instagram influences the destination choice and travel planning”, in the literature there has been researched on how social media, user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth affects consumer behaviours and travel planning, but Instagram is a rather new social network and there has not been much research on how Instagram influences destination choice and travel planning. This thesis has highly proved the power of Instagram as a social media platform and as a strong marketing tool. With over 1 billion monthly users worldwide (Statista, 2022) and with almost 32% of its global users aged between 25-34 years, it has developed into the most popular social networking channel. The success of Instagram is based on its design to work on a mobile device with simple

choices and easy and clear navigation. The thesis has verified that Instagram exerts a large influence on travel planning as most users tend to seek information on new destinations using Instagram by observing and creating content, exchanging ideas and expressing personal experiences. Thanks to Instagram consumers have their knowledge widened on multiple destinations and thus their travel options expanded. Besides, the existing literature identifies the contribution of Instagram to the promotion and branding of a destination via photography (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015). While Karnikowski (2014) has highlighted the power of an Instagram user with more than 100.000 followers, who can automatically attract more clients than any other advertising campaign.

Regarding the third research question of “what is the impact of foodstagramming and gastronomic tourism on image destination” the existing literature accepts that the trend of proliferating food pictures on social media, impacts the image of the culinary destinations and takes place not only during but also post travelling (Wong et al., 2019). This thesis has confirmed that people pay attention to the food content they find on social media, including pictures, videos, reels, and even the reviews of food and beverage sectors as well, before choosing a destination. Many consumers head to control the media and the quality of several services before they purchase anything (Saboo et al. 2016). Showing once again the importance of foodstagramming in the image of destinations as well the consumer’s behaviours. Most people claim that the image of one destination can be highly developed in all terms thanks to gastronomic tourism, as they acknowledge that gastronomy and culture are inseparably linked. The present literature notes that the activity of sharing food and travel content on social media is highly appealing to users worldwide. This occurs because this kind of content reflects the most representative and authentic perceptions of the travel experience (Vukolic et al, 2022). This dissertation justified this theory by demonstrating that consumers today trust more online reviews by fellow consumers as User Generated Content is based on real-time experiences, “rather than stimulated stories pushed by restaurants themselves” (Sebastian, 2019). Indeed, the literature has confirmed that consuming food has become one of the greatest reasons people choose to travel our days (Mak et al, 2016; Camilovic, 2020). This affirms that the intention of visitors to travel to a destination can be highly affected by the image of the local cuisine (Ab Karim and Chi, 2010). Therefore, this thesis explained the benefits of culinary tourism as well the foodstagramming on the image of destinations. It testified that gastronomic tourism contributes to the improvement or expansion of local businesses, including hotels (overnight stays in local hotels), restaurants (assisting a network of local farmers and owners of restaurants), and even guided driving or walking tours that enhance authentic experiences. As a result, this thesis proved the ideas of Kiralova and Pavlicecka (2015), that social media as well foodstagramming can assist culinary destinations to continue their competitiveness by using engaging content as well as developing and

inspiring interaction. Concluding, the most interesting outcome of this research is that it shed light on the existing gaps in academia regarding the power of local gastronomy in influencing the travel decision on visiting Greece. Considering that people would still see the country even without the presence of the historical and cultural heritage that it owns, shows that it must be paid further attention to creating marketing strategies based on the local gastronomy. As this research showed that people acknowledge the strong connection of local gastronomy with the Greek culture, and support that it could work as a powerful marketing tool to reinforce the image of Greece as a culinary destination.

5.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results derived from the data analysis and the literature review, this thesis will provide a set of practical tools for DMOs and NTAs and generally stakeholders of the tourism industry that wish to start or develop culinary tourism.

It is widely known that food has become a strong motivation for distinguishing tourism destinations and turning them into engaging and interesting culinary destinations as culinary tourism has transformed into a whole market component (World Tourism Organization and Basque Culinary Center, 2019). Besides, many tourism associates agree that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be greatly enhanced thanks to gastronomy tourism, which from the previous information shared on this thesis, it seemed that could support sectors such as agricultural advancement, financial development, employment increase or even sensible consumption and production (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

Considering that the research of the dissertation is based more on the young age groups, including Millennials and Generation Z, there will be offered some practical recommendations for developing and promoting food tourism as well attract the younger generation.

Firstly, in the modern days with the massive power of social media, the touristic destinations and companies of Food & Beverage need to be “grammable”. Most of the participants of the research groups mentioned that before visiting a restaurant or a culinary destination, they control the social media presence of the restaurant as well as the shared content by fellow consumers.

So, it is fundamental for the stakeholders to pay careful attention to the products and the interior decoration of their companies, to inspire the clients to capture photos, film their experiences and then publish them on social media channels. This can work as an excellent reliable and free promotion, as social media depict the highest advertising form for the younger generations (Ktchnrebel editorial team, 2019). This action can be greatly achieved by multiple

factors, including the appealing presence of the food products so the consumers can be inspired to shoot pictures of them. A visually attractive dish can stimulate far better on social media platforms.

Besides, extra attention must be paid to the decoration and lighting conditions in many restaurants. A poor light environment can almost ruin the digital appearance even of the most well-presented dishes and result in potential negative e-WOM and low-quality reviews. Taking into consideration that the mouth eats after the eyes, it is crucial to create the most suitable circumstances to attract and engage young consumers through social media.

Moreover, it is highly significant for all the stakeholders to keep always updated on the information on their food services and products. For instance, incorrect addresses, opening hours or even contact data on Google maps, Apple Maps, TripAdvisor etc., can work as a negative reflection of the company. As most young consumers tend to search for his kind of information on the internet, it is extremely relevant to provide them with the correct and updated logistics.

Besides, there are several actions that both the local stakeholders as well the state in Greece, can collaborate on to promote gastronomic tourism. As it has already been analysed before the millennials consider significant the promotion of culinary tourism on social media. The local traditional products, food and beverage festivals and traditional techniques or food tours must be well advertised on social media platforms. Further marketing concepts connected to gastronomy tourism include the change of the image of a destination using local food and creating a market using local food (Ellis et al. 2018).

Regarding the local gastronomy in Greece, young-travellers consider the selection of catering companies that support the local market of products to be largely important. The interest of millennials in local food could be explained by issues related to the environment, ethics, sustainability and local health issues, as well as their desire to support local networks and economies.

This is because tourists belonging to this generation prefer supporting businesses whose main policy is to pay attention to the quality of the products, they offer through the raw materials they buy from the local market and support it financially. The young travellers seek to engage in activities that allow them to meet and acquire new knowledge about the history, culture and tastes of the place through gastronomic festivals or events. Millennials consider extremely significant the tasting of local dishes of Greece, as they acknowledge the local food as “authentic” and “special” (Bjork et al. 2016). Tasting local delicacies offer authenticity and simplicity of flavours which is not the same in every place and this is the reason that makes that experience that special.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

Although it is widely known that all research inevitably deals with limitations, this one is not an exception, as this is in the intrinsic nature of any scientific research. Several limitations should be acknowledged and therefore provide recommendations for future research.

The first limitation was the international context, during which the study was conducted. The focus groups converged during the ongoing situation of the Covid-19 pandemic taking place in most countries. Consequently, the health restrictions as well the time constraints of this dissertation, prevented the researcher from visiting more countries and reaching a wider sample.

What is more, there were observed several limitations regarding the sample. The majority of the sample population consisted of European participants, one participant from Asia and another one coming from North America. The rest of the continents were not represented as the study could not reach respondents from the other continents, resulting in an unbalanced number of participants in each region. Another possible limitation could be that the sample consisted of Millennials and Generation Z attendants. The study could not focus on reaching older respondents, who may provide completely different data about cultural backgrounds, food-travel motivations, as well social media usage. Another limitation has been encountered in the unbalance of the sample considering the gender. The focus groups gathered a higher number of female participants. Receiving more male respondents would have provided different insight when interpreting the sample as their responses are equally valuable to females' responses in the study and would depict more differences between the genders. In addition, the focus groups were only conducted in the English language to be the main one used. Hence, the research excluded potential culinary tourists using other languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Arabic, Spanish etc.).

Regardless of this, the most crucial limitation that occurred was the decreased number of respondents available to participate in the exploratory study. Considering that most participants were international and outside of the current state of Portugal, where the virtual focus group was headquartered. Thus, it was extremely challenging to manage to find available people to participate at that specific time, considering the different time zones worldwide. Despite the complication in collecting adequate members, contacts were regularly taken place and the focus groups were achieved. Against the various limitations, both methodological and the ones coming from the specific fieldwork, this research has provided

useful insights into the relationship between digital marketing and gastronomy, in improving the destination image of Greece.

5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering the aforementioned limitations of the dissertation, a series of proposals for additional analysis can be accumulated. It is significant to demonstrate that none of the limitations is unconquerable. The first limitation about the experience of the pandemic situation influencing the research procedure, as well as the results. Consequently, it would be helpful to reciprocate the procedure to examine the variations in the perceptions of the consumers in the future.

Given the limited practicalities of the research sources, theories linked to the dissertation topic were accomplished in a general view to offer an approximate idea of the subject to the readers. Therefore, a more extensive survey could be carried out to implement the scope of the research. This research could also be pursued by conducting quantitative research, to gain a wider knowledge of people's travel planning as well as their habits on social media. For instance, questioning people from different genders and diverse age limits could reflect valuable information on their behaviours, and perspectives and highlight potential contrasts between the genders and the different age groups.

Specifying the research only to Instagram users would also provide more precise insight into the Instagrammers' consumer behaviours, as well as travel planning choices. This would result in a more accurate interpretation of the data, supporting the stakeholders to achieve more specific strategies to target wider consumer groups.

Another interesting idea would be to survey in multiple periods of the year, to examine if people's social media use and their further influence from social media on travel planning behaviours vary between the seasons. Furthermore, another engaging idea for future research would be exploring the negative consequences of social media marketing and specifically, Instagram could cause to culinary destinations. For example, possible unfavourable outcomes of Instagram could be the over-popularity of the destinations which could exert a large pressure on the local land use and can lead to soil erosion, the rise of pollution, traffic congestion, overcrowding, as well pressure on the actual infrastructure resulting in the deterioration of the touristic product (Wengel et al, 2022). Finally, thanks to the research important knowledge for possible antagonistic destinations can be developed, as well as different ways of achieving competitive benefits.

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APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is the social media platform you use the most?
2. What is the first source you turn to when planning a trip?
3. Does social media travelling content inspire you to plan a trip/ consider a destination?
4. Do you document your travels on social media (photos, stories, reels, videos)?
5. Is local gastronomy relevant when choosing a travelling destination?
6. Do you consider food the foremost aspect when travelling?
7. Have you considered travelling more than 4 hours to try another's culture gastronomy?
8. If you had to travel to Greece, what would be the three most appealing factors of your visit?
9. Do you know any traditional Greek food? If yes, which one(s)?
10. If there were no other cultural attractions (archaeological sites, cultural institutions, museums), would you consider Greek gastronomy appealing enough to visit the country?

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Focus group for the dissertation: The influence of social media food content on the Greek travel destination image.



Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Purpose

This focus group is carried out by Evanthia Koutoulaki, a student of the Master's Degree in Tourism, Development, and Culture, at ISCTE Business School, University Institute of Lisbon, under the supervision of a PhD. Prof. Ricardo Godinho Birlo. The research aims to analyze to find out if the food content in social media has a significant influence on the international gastronomic tourists' travelling decisions and their motivations to visit Greece, to experience the culinary touristic product. The information obtained will be

used to develop a business project for the dissertation above.

Procedures

As part of this study, you will be part of a group of approximately six to ten people via Zoom. There will be a facilitator who will ask questions and facilitate the discussion, which will be recorded. If you volunteer to participate in this focus group, you will be asked some questions related to your experience with social media, food tourism, and gastronomic experiences within your travelling schedule. (if applied) or what you expect about it. These questions will help us to understand new markets and rising needs, better. *Please remember that your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the focus group at any time.*

Benefits and Risks

If you participate, the information you provide may be beneficial for your future experiences and the development of the wine tourism industry. There is no risk involved in this participation rather than the possible differences of opinion you may experience in a debate. Everyone participating in this research will be asked to respect others' experiences, opinions, and privacy. The information discussed during the focus group must remain confidential. Thus, none of the participants can disclose anything said within the discussion context.

Confidentiality

Your data (name, place of residency) obtained for this dissertation, will be kept confidential and anonymous. However, we will publish statistics related to the age, gender, and income of the participants, which are needed for the analysis.

Consent

By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study and accept that you fully comprehend the information above.

Participant's signature: _____ **Printed name:**

_____ **Age:** _____

Gender: _____ (If you prefer not to say it, please leave it blank). **Place of Residency:** _____

Date: _____

If you have any questions, opinions, or concerns about this study, please contact semao@iscte-iul.pt