



SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING OF GASTRONOMY: CHEESE BRANDING IN SPAIN

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Abstract:

We analyse the role of social media as a marketing strategy used by local food producers to promote their brands and associated meanings. With a qualitative approach (visual, content, and semiotic analysis of 2,229 pictures posted in Instagram in the period 2014-2020), we identify six visual categories (product (38.6%), natural heritage (10.1%), socialization and status (9.1%), cultural heritage (8.3%), experiential events (6.0%), and miscellanea (28%)) and twenty-four sub-categories. Results show that Spanish cheeses are mainly promoted as products, followed by other implicit food meanings. For the brands with a greater number of visual posts, solidarity-related elements were also identified. Findings add evidence to the capacity of social media and food-based visual narratives to promote cultures and identities. Food brands are an effective vehicle for transmitting symbolic meanings, contributing to increase local destinations' awareness and to create value for local stakeholders and visitors through food marketing.

Keywords:

culinary heritage, food tourism, gastronomy marketing, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Research evidence shows that food encompasses a wide range of meanings, such as identity, culture, production and consumption (Hall and Mitchel, 2000), food as a symbol of social status (Bourdieu, 1984; Poole, 2012; Frochot, 2013), food as an experiential tourism and leisure resource (García Henche, 2018), food as an expression of brands' personality and values (Ginsberg, 2015), and sustainability (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Hall and Mitchel, 2000), among others.

Previous research has scarcely explored the relationships between local products and social media, which were mostly focused on the case of wine (Canovi and Pucciarelli, 2019), inviting both public and private stakeholders to further explode this potential and engage with customers through social media marketing (Li *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the use of social media to communicate and market food heritages and practices is crucial to protect and promote the tangible and intangible meanings attached to cuisine (Choi and Bleviss, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2014). In the same line, Platania and Spadoni (2018) advocate on the contribution of social media (e.g., Twitter) to the evolution of food

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cultures as facilitators and accelerators of information and knowledge exchanges about food. This research aims to further understand how cheese brands and culture are marketed online. Social media, Instagram in this case, becomes a vehicle for communicating brand meanings, stimulating food-based cultural identity and, ultimately, creating value for the cheese brands' stakeholders, within a marketing framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyse and quantify the importance of food's meanings, a significant bulk of research chooses to focus on visual images (Frochot, 2013; Ingrassia *et al.*, 2022; Philip *et al.*, 2022), those provided by social media platforms being relevant resources for the promotion of objects and subjects (Carson, 2005). In this line, TripAdvisor (Park *et al.*, 2021; Sangkaew and Zhu, 2022, etc.), Facebook (Antoniadis *et al.*, 2020), Twitter (Samoggia *et al.*, 2020; Platania and Spadoni, 2018; Zhou *et al.*, 2018) or YouTube (Castonguay and Messina, 2022; Liew and Hassan, 2021) are frequently used by researchers.

Instagram, the fourth most popular social network worldwide (Statista, 2022), is also a significant example of social media usage for marketing purposes (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015), gastronomy occupying a special place (Vila *et al.*, 2020). According to key statistics for 2022, published by Sprout Social (Chen, 2022), brands choose Instagram, in the first place, to post their images (75% of the content published represents single images), followed by Facebook (images account for 61% of the content published) and Twitter (only 47% of the brand contents are single images).

Among the categories most present in the images published in Instagram, research evidence shows, for example, that while 'product' category is present in many cases (Ginsberg, 2015), brands' differentiation comes from other categories, such as, the social dimension of the food ('people and product'), the consumer-food individual interaction ('person and product'), consumer entertained engagement with the brand ('humour and product') or the identity ('lifestyle') (Ginsberg, 2015). García Heche (2018) found that cultural values and leisure experiences are among the most promoted categories by Spanish food markets' images, and the food markets which are more active in social media are also the ones better ranked in TripAdvisor.

This research has a two-fold objective: to identify which 'cheese meanings' are most visualised in social media (e.g., Instagram) and how is the positioning of cheese manifested; and to understand how 'cheese meanings', as a non-human actor and, by extension, the marketing communication strategies based on food experiences, contribute to the construction of a destination (Ren, 2011), by enhancing a 'sense of place' focused on cheese.

METHODOLOGY

The method is focused on a content (Gillian, 2007) and semiotic analysis focused on the process of category development (Constas, 1992), in the context of a visual research design (Spencer, 2010). At a first stage, a content analysis is carried out to define the categories that inform the pictures published in Instagram pages of Spanish quality cheese labels. At a second stage, we perform a semiotic analysis to identify the meanings attached to 'signs' (Peirce, 1991) in the context of social media visual materials. The sample included 10 (out of 28) official Spanish cheese quality labels with active Instagram accounts, and data collection included the posts from the creation of each Instagram account until June 2020 (N=2,229 total posts). A preliminary test was performed, with the case of Manchego cheese, to identify the attributes and pre-define the categories, to ensure that all elements illustrated in the posts were included. As a result, six main categories were identified: 'product', 'natural heritage', 'people', 'cultural heritage', 'events', and 'miscellaneous'. In addition, twenty-four mutually exclusive sub-categories were also defined.



RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results show that ‘product’ (38.6%) representation takes the lead, confirming existing evidence (Ginsberg, 2015), followed by ‘natural heritage’ (10.1%), ‘people’ (9.1%), ‘cultural heritage’ (8.3%) and events (6.0%). Thus, the marketing of cheese brands promotes both the consumption of cheese and the desire to visit its place of origin. Moreover, the analysis of the ‘miscellaneous’ category (28.0%) shows that brands rely mostly on their ‘own promotion’ efforts (19.8%), rather than the promotion made by others (1.1%). Data also show that, except for one cheese label, all exhibit the awards and prizes won (2.6%) to increase brand value and reputation. Solidarity items (0.5%) have a scarce presence indicating that sustainability and social issues need more visibility in social media. Overall, data show that an enormous potential exists to better reflect cheese as a local identity factor and enhancer of a destination’s attraction. From this perspective, the results could expand the understanding of cheese-based social media marketing by intertwining it with food (cheese)-based tourism as a factor of destination marketing.

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