



Social Media Marketing and Gastronomic Tourism: The Case of Luxury Restaurants in Italy

Bachelor Thesis for Obtaining the Degree

Bachelor of Business Administration in

Tourism and Hospitality Management

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Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

The thesis was not submitted in the same or in a substantially similar version, not even partially, to another examination board and was not published elsewhere.

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Abstract

The luxury travel market is increasingly gaining significance and luxury gastronomic tourism is expected to be one of the sectors which will develop the most in the next future. Extant research demonstrates the effectiveness of social media marketing in the tourism industry, however, empirical analyses on how social media are used in the luxury gastronomy sector are rare. This topic is particularly relevant in the Italian context, where food is a key component of the national tourist image. The current study evaluates social media strategies implemented by luxury restaurants in Italy. The author used content analysis to assess the Facebook social media activity of the three Michelin-starred restaurants located in Middle Italy. The evaluation has been done by analyzing the type of content, frequency, and popularity of posts. The study conducted demonstrates that dish-focused images, which are the content that occurs the most in the restaurants' feeds analyzed in the sample, are not necessarily significant elements to exploit in increasing users' engagement. Indeed, posts concerning Michelin star news and the chef image within the restaurant end up being those categories that incentivize the most user's interactions, thus increase popularity. The results contribute to understanding the most efficient approaches to social media marketing in the luxury gastronomic sector. Hence the findings can be used to benchmark the existing strategies and guide the development of future ones.

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List of Abbreviations

B2B: business to business

CAGR: Compound Annual Growth Rate

eWOM: Electronic Word of Mouth

HNWI: High Net Worth Individual

ISTAT: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Statistical Institute)

OR: Online Review

ROI: Return of Investment

SNS: Social Networking Site

UGC: User Generated Content

1 Introduction

During the last decades, digitalization has completely or mostly changed our way of interacting with the external world. This new approach to reality is primarily based on the use of the so-called “social media”, which by definition are “*new forms of media that involve interactive participation*” online (Manning, J. 2014, p.1158). Social media has acquired an important role in our daily lives and sharing content with our friends and loved ones has become the order of the day.

The influence played by social media on our lifestyle is a much-debated theme which has and continues to divide people. The harshest criticisms are those that accuse social media of creating a real addiction and of abstracting from reality (Hou et al., 2019). Nonetheless, its effective function as marketing tool is undisputed (Appel et al., 2020). Marketing strategies applied on social networks have given entrepreneurs the opportunity to advertise their target audience in a unique and personal way by replacing single interactions with long-term relationships (Gascon et al., 2017). According to the estimations of Statista (2021), the number of social media users is estimated to grow reaching 3.96 billion individuals in 2022, which corresponds roughly to 51% of the global population. Thanks to this gradual upward movement, the possibility to reach as many individuals as possible increases as well.

One of the main sectors which benefitted from the social media influence is unquestionably the gastronomic sector (Carranza & Carranza, 2015). Indeed, food is probably the most shared content on Instagram and Facebook. Seeing dishes that seem tasty and sometimes unfamiliar, makes people want to travel and to experience it firsthand. Moreover, trying a traditional cuisine is surely one of the best ways to immerse oneself in a foreign culture. So, unquestionably, gastronomy plays a central role in tourism representing an ever-expanding branch of it (UNWTO, 2012). Gastronomic tourism “*is a journey, in regions rich in gastronomic resources, who generate recreational experiences or have entertainment purposes, which include visits to primary or secondary producers of gastronomic products, gastronomic festivals, fairs, events, cooking demonstrations, food tastings or any activity related to food*” (Lee et al, 2015, p. 3). Italian food, which has always been famous all over the

world, has seen its success increase thanks to the photos and videos published on social networks (Doxee Marketing Team, 2020). As proved by different studies, Italian cuisine is one of the most popular in the world (Lindblom & Mustonen, 2015; SERT, 2017), and the best way to taste it is by visiting Italy.

Italy reached top positions in tourism rankings thanks to its heritage and culinary culture (Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, 2017). Nonetheless, social media marketing's contribution to Italian luxury gastronomic tourism has not been studied yet. This is due to the fact that, when thinking about Italy, the first thoughts that come in someone's mind are homemade and popular dishes such as pasta and pizza. But Italy is not only about that. Italy, in fact, has 374 Michelin-starred restaurants and in the Michelin guide the country is second only to France, and is the fourth country in the world for the number of three-starred Michelin restaurants (McCafferty, 2020; La Guida Michelin Italia - il sito web ufficiale, 2021).

This thesis strives to investigate how social media are used in luxury gastronomy's businesses taking Italy as case study. First, this research will analyze what luxury gastronomy is and why it is important to invest more research on the topic. Secondly, it will be explained what social media marketing means and how it can be beneficial but also challenging for businesses. Once these two aspects have been scrupulously analyzed, analytics on the role of social media in luxury restaurants will be presented in order to understand how these channels are being used and what role they have in marketing activities.

To better define the purpose of the study the following research questions were formulated:

1. *How do Italian Michelin-starred restaurants use social media for marketing purposes?*
2. *Which content is the most effective from the customers' and managers' points of view?*

To get a full understanding on how social media can increase restaurants' image and reputation, a content analysis was chosen to provide a theoretical basis on this topic. After having fully understood the differences between quantitative and qualitative

content analysis, data from three Michelin-starred restaurants based in Italy were taken from their Facebook's feeds in order to understand what content restaurants present in their marketing activities and what typology could be the most effective in increasing popularity.

The hypotheses developed for this latter analysis were the following:

- *H0: There is no difference in the effect post characteristics have on the popularity of the luxury restaurant*
- *H1: Post characteristics have varying impact on the popularity of the social media post of the luxury restaurant*

2 Literature Review

2.1 Luxury Gastronomy

2.1.1 Culinary Tourism

As defined by Smith and Xiao (2008, p. 289), tourism is *"any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates or consumes branded local sources"*. Based on this definition, it can therefore be stated that food, being one of the principal local sources of every country, represents a core element of the tourism industry. Food constitutes an essential part of the cultural heritage of a destination, being an integrated component of the overall tourism experience. Its importance is evident when we consider the fact that food has become the driver of a distinct and independent sector within the tourism industry: culinary tourism. This type of touristic experience is the portion of the tourism industry that offers travelers the possibility to deepen their knowledge on new cultures and traditions through food activities. The assumption at the basis of this experience is that, ever since people from all around the globe have prepared food and specialties influenced by the culture and by the surroundings, and its preparations and consumption have become a part of the national identity (Mulchay, 2019).

A solid definition of culinary tourism, also known as gastronomy tourism, is given by Wided Batat (2020, p. 150), who defines it as the ensemble of *“drinking and eating experiences that happen during the travel where individuals might expect to experience diverse food cultures and thus eat different types of food as what they used to eat at home”*. Since culinary activities held abroad can reflect the cultural image of the destination, they can enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Discovering the cultural roots and their particular and unique traditions by tasting local specialties become a potential driving force for tourists to visit new places and destinations (Boniface, 2003). The authenticity of these food-related experiences influences positively travelers’ perceptions of the tourism experience (Jang et.al, 2011, cited in Lunchaprasith & Macleod, 2018), leading them to spend more during their stay (Parsa et al., 2005, cited in Lunchaprasith & Macleod, 2018).

Taking for instance Maslow’s pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs (1987), food belongs to the physiological needs. However, to demonstrate how food can fulfill not only physical needs but also self-esteem, Satter (2007) applied the principles of Maslow’s hierarchy to create a new pyramid focused only on “food needs” (Figure 1). At the bottom of this new graph, food’s role corresponds to the one assigned by Maslow, indicating those individuals driven by hunger and anxiety to get “enough food”. Moving upwards, the next step is “acceptable food”, in which individuals are no more threatened by hunger but do not have much choice. Afterward, the next layer is “reliable, ongoing food”, in which individuals have the economic stability to regularly access food. Once overcome this level, the further layers are “good tasting food”, “novel food” and “instrumental food”, indicating a new function for food: to satisfy customers’ desires and expectations (Satter, 2007). This ascending movement in food’s accessibility indicates how food does not limit itself to its basic need, but how it also becomes a mean to reach customers’ satisfaction and personal fulfillment once arrived at the edge of the pyramid: the instrumental food.

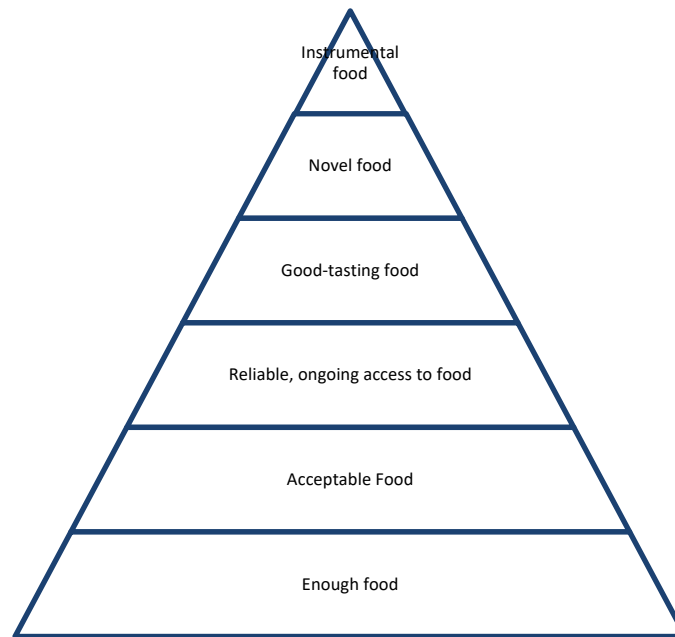


Figure 1: Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs (2007)

Based on the “60+ Food Tourism Statistics” report published by the American travel website JerseyIslandHolidays.com (2021), 95% of travelers of the world can be classified as food travelers; about the 70% of people decide where to travel based on the variety of drinks and food of a determined location; and on global average travelers spend about 33% of their money on food. A possible factor that could have led to these results is globalization, and Barrère, Bonnard, and Chossat (2009, p. 5) provided a possible explanation for that: “*in a global world, consumers seek to be world citizens and consumers, to enlarge their knowledge and understanding of other people and creations, and, particularly, their gastronomic creations*”. Thanks to the phenomenon of the globalization, traveling has been significantly eased. Tasting local food, which is probably rather different from that of the native country, and then from what tourists are used to, represents a unique way to take full advantage of the touristic experience. Indeed, tourists learn and get to know in first owes about the culture and traditions of the country visited tasting their specialties and flavors.

2.1.2 Luxury gastronomy and tourism

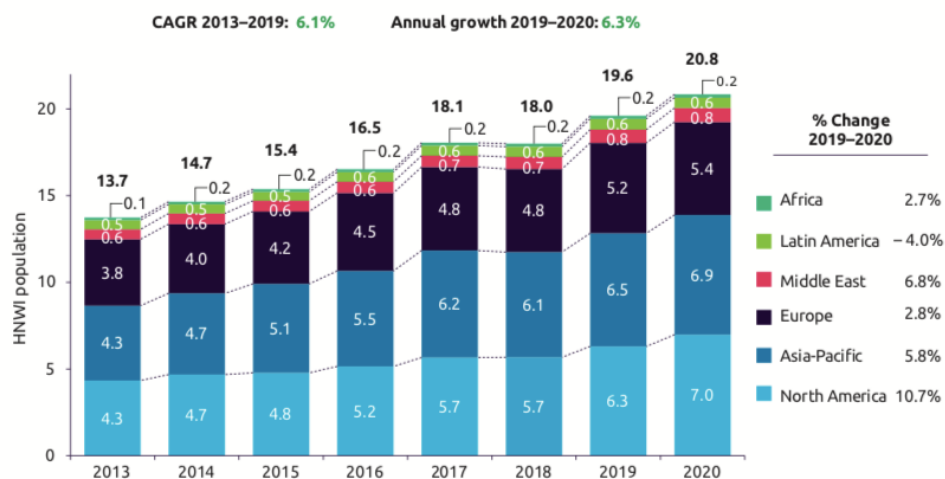
In spite of the abundance of articles which strives to demonstrate how culinary activities and experiences enhance the authenticity of touristic destinations (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Boniface, 2003; Jang et.al, 2011 cited in Lunchaprasith & Macleod, 2018; Parsa et al., 2005 cited in Lunchaprasith & Macleod, 2018), almost none of those studies considers the specific and peculiar role of luxury gastronomy as a distinct asset in gastronomy tourism. Luxury gastronomy is not the same as popular gastronomy and it belongs to luxury consumption (Barrère, Bonnard, & Chossat, 2009). To identify the key factor that makes the luxury sector differ from the others, Batat (2019a, p. vii) provides the following explanation: *“more than in any other sector, luxury consumption is a response to a search for emotions, pleasure, uniqueness, consideration, and greatest services. The luxury consumer wants to live experiences— not just buy luxury products or services”*.

An experience encompasses any moment in time in which an individual feels involved on an emotional, physical, spiritual, or intellectual level (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and collects unforgettable perceptions (Gram, 2005, cited in Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Batat (2019a) divides experiencing luxury into three categories: low, moderate, and high. While low experiencing luxury refers to a low involvement from the buyer, the level of personal commitment in moderate experience luxury increases but reaches its peak only in high experiencing luxury (Batat, 2019a). According to this classification, luxury hospitality, particularly luxury gastronomy such as dining at a Michelin-starred restaurant, is a highly engaged experienced realm in which *“experience is a central component of the offer”* (2019a, p. 24).

Since in this thesis luxury gastronomic tourism is considered a distinct field worthy of being analyzed, it is now important to understand who the target audience is, since not all tourists have the same approach to food-related activities and experiences. Hall & Mitchel (2005, cited in Batat 2020) distinguish three layers of tourists in the culinary sector: 1) “occasional culinary tourists”, representing those individuals who can benefit from culinary activities, but for whom these do not represent the main reason to travel. 2) “culinary tourists” who look for a touristic experience that

encompasses both gastronomic and cultural aspects. 3) “gourmet tourists” who travel with the aim to visit specific internationally renowned restaurants to experience the local “haute cuisine”. While three types of culinary tourists may participate in luxury gastronomic experiences, one may argue that the last group (gourmet tourists) is the main target audience of the luxury gastronomic tourism. They travel with the aim to experience a particular and unique culinary experience encompassing the idea of combining gastronomy to a broader touristic experience.

The American bank Merrill Lynch and the society Capgemini estimated that in the world in 2006 there were 9.5 million High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs), meant as individuals with a high net worth “typically defined as having investable assets - financial assets discounting real-estate and consumables- in excess of US \$ 1 million”, constituting about forty million people able to potentially consume luxury products on a regular basis (2008). Furthermore, as demonstrated in Figure 2, despite the COVID-pandemic, the global number of HNWIs is constantly increasing accounting a CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 6.1% (Capgemini, 2021).



Note: Chart numbers and quoted percentages may not add up due to rounding.
Source: Capgemini Financial Services Analysis, 2021.

Figure 2: Number of HNWIs by region (millions), 2013–2020 (Capgemini, 2021)

Within the tourism industry, luxury tourism is a growing trend developed in recent years. According to the findings reported by the Allied Market Research, an advisory

company of Allied Analytics LLP (*Luxury Travel Market Size, Share & Growth | Industry Report, 2021–2027, 2021*), the global luxury market size in 2019 reached its highest value amounting to \$945.6 billion and it is expected to grow at an 11.1% CAGR, forecasting a value of \$1,193.3 billion in 2027. Therefore, even if apparently gourmet tourists might represent only a small percentage of food travelers, it is important to take into consideration the significant increase in individuals with a high social and economic status able to undertake luxury consumption-based travels (Barrère, Bonnard, & Chossat, 2009).

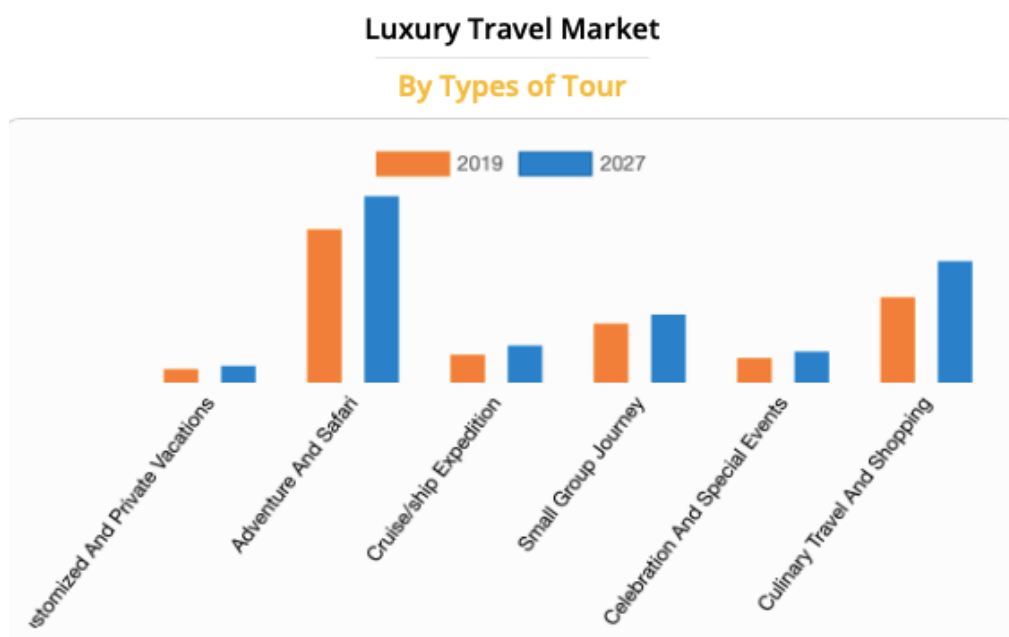


Figure 3: Luxury Travel Market Size, Share & Growth

As shown in Figure 3, in the luxury travel market, the culinary sector is the second sector that, according to statistics, is destined to grow exponentially compared to the other sectors, thus becoming an increasingly significant source of income. Based on the data collected by the Allied Market Research and shown in Figure 2, it would definitely be counterproductive for Europe not to invest in the luxury tourism market, as from the report analyzed Europe dominates this field, and its dominant position is foreseen to increase with a CAGR of 9.3% within 2027 (*Luxury Travel Market Size, Share & Growth | Industry Report, 2021–2027, 2021*). With respect to this, Wolf (2006, cited in Mulchay, 2019) declared that “*food and cuisine are the most overlooked*

components of the travel experience”, making clear that a better focus on this aspect and a better understanding of its marketing strategies could lead to further development of the tourism sector worldwide.

2.1.3 Role of culinary tourism in Italy

In Italy, gastronomy has always been considered an important aspect of the Italian culture. A huge number of the stereotypes concerning Italians are related to the culinary sphere. The reason why Italians always remark the importance of Italian food in their everyday lifestyle, as well as the importance of meticulously following traditional recipes, and the quality of the ingredients, stems from the social and cultural significance of the food. Italians themselves use the expression “*i piaceri della tavola*”, literally translated as “*the pleasures of the table*”, to indicate a feeling of enjoyment and happiness correlated to the interpersonal interactions among individuals when eating or drinking. Meals cover a central part in Italians’ social life, thus representing one of the best moments in which someone can build new social relationships or strengthen old ones. In the Italian culture, indeed, food represents a physical and visual representation of the traditions and characteristics of a determined geographical area: each of the 22 Italian regions has its own specialties and reflects its costumes and traditions.

Italy reached top positions in tourism rankings thanks to its heritage and culinary culture (Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, 2017). Nonetheless, Italian luxury gastronomic tourism’s contribution to Italian overall tourism performance has not been studied yet. This is due to the fact that when thinking about Italy the first thoughts that come in someone’s mind are homemade and popular dishes such as pasta and pizza. However, Italy does not limit itself to those. In fact, the country has 374 Michelin-starred restaurants and in the Michelin guide Italy is second only to France and is the fourth country in the world for the number of three-starred Michelin restaurants (McCafferty, 2020; La Guida Michelin Italia - il sito web ufficiale, 2021). As it has been demonstrated by some studies on the French case (Batat, 2020), Michelin-starred restaurants play an essential role in destination attractiveness, promoting the country’s image in the culinary tourism sector. Indeed, studies showed

that destinations which host restaurants with one or more Michelin stars have registered on average an increase of 25% in tourists' frequency (Barrère, Bonnard, and Chossat 2009).

As it has been previously mentioned, Italy has numerous luxury restaurants of the highest quality (McCafferty, 2020). However, bringing a luxury experience on the table and creating a new type of culinary tourism is not a tradition of Italian origin, but it was inherited from France, following the model of the Michelin Guide, published for the first time in 1920 (About Us, 2020). The Michelin Guide was invented by the Michelin brothers Andre and Edouard, owners of the eponymous tire company, with the aim of increasing the use of cars by offering precise indications on how to properly mount their tires, and on where to go to eat and to find shelter for the night (About Us, 2020). At the beginning, the guide indicated all the best restaurants and hotels in Paris, and then in the whole of France. In the course of the years, the guide became more and more famous, and the Michelin brothers decided to make the guide as unique as possible by asking some culinary experts to try the restaurants reported in the book and to rate them anonymously awarding stars for fine dining establishments (About Us, 2020). The Michelin Guide evaluates fine dining restaurants following determined criteria not known to the public and awards up to three stars: one Michelin corresponds to *"high quality cooking, worth a stop"*; two Michelin stars corresponds to *"excellent cooking, worth a detour"*; while three Michelin stars refers to *"exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey"*. During the 20th century, the French culinary guide became a bestseller, becoming perfectly known abroad and including, therefore, also luxury restaurants outside France. Once arrived in Italy, the model of Michelin Guide was imitated by Italians. "Il Gambero Rosso", a culinary magazine founded in 1986 as an additional section of the Italian newspaper *"Il Manifesto"*, published in 1990 a guide of the best restaurants in the Italian territory called *"Ristoranti d'Italia"* imitating the original Michelin Guide, thus marking the beginning of luxury gastronomic tourism in the Italian peninsula as well (Mantovano, 2019).

Offering popular and gourmet dishes, Italy represents in the eye of the tourists the perfect culinary touristic destination. Unfortunately, as it was already stated, the gourmet side of the Italian cuisine, nonetheless its importance and solid presence, still

remains in the background. This poor attention reserved to luxury gastronomy is not only a “problem” of tourists who visit Italy, who usually ignore the existence of such a big reality, but also and in most part of Italians themselves. The majority of Italian people is not aware of the potential offered by Italian luxury gastronomy, and often tends to see it with hostility as something imported from abroad, and then threatening the authenticity of the Italian popular culinary tradition. For this reason, the luxury gastronomy sector even if widely promoted, continues to be perceived by most of the Italian population mainly as a real elitist product, as well as a threat to the popular economy. In this thesis the author tries to demonstrate how, on the contrary, popular and gourmet culinary tourism do not have to be perceived as opposite, rather as complementary. Moreover, as demonstrated by the data collected for this study, the promotion of luxury gastronomy tourism would represent a unique chance for Italian economy to grow exponentially.

2.2 Social Media Marketing

2.2.1 The Web 2.0

In recent years, digital integration, meant as the process of integrating new technological innovations and devices such as smartphones into daily routines (Haddon, 2004), has noticeably changed our lives. Some of the main transformations rely on how people interact and connect with each other, how they entertain themselves, and how they use the Internet as an information source.

At the end of the 20th century, the Web 2.0 substituted the so-called Web 1.0 (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). The term “Web 2.0” was first used in 2004 by Dale Dougherty, vice president of the American publishing company O’Reilly Media, to describe a new internet era (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). Contrarily to the Web 1.0 developed just for consuming and in reason for that also known as “network of connected information”, the Web 2.0 is a “participatory web”, that gives the possibility to users to create their own content and develop a “network of connected people”. Social media are based exactly on this feature: on the user-generated content (the so-called, UGC), such as posts, videos, and photos. The word “social media” is made up of the words “social”, referring to the interactivity among users on the content shared; and “media”, which

is the plural of the Latin word *medium*, meaning “middle”, indicating a disruptive way of communication channel (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

In online business-to-consumer activities (B2C), the active participation of users has led to the so-called “commercialization of the net” (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). This is the process at the basis of the transformation the web into a real marketplace, in which the role of social media is that to promote the product and reach as many people as possible. Due to this shift from passive observers to active participants, consumers’ behavior shifted as well. In fact, consumers, now called “users”, do not just represent an audience but become a complementary element of marketing by sharing their experiences or expectations on posted content (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). Studies have demonstrated that most of the customers, before purchasing a good or a service, check comments and reviews left by other users to gain a better understanding and test whether their expectations could really be fulfilled (Lee & Choeh, 2009). This behavior is known as “e-word-of-mouth” (eWOM) and it represents the digitalized version of the traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) meant as *“an exchange of comments, thoughts, and ideas among two or more individuals in which none of the individuals represent a marketing source”* (Bone, 1992, p. 579). Even if they are based on the same concept, eWOM is slightly different from the traditional WOM. First, eWOM is durable in time, since once the message is posted in public domain, it will continue to influence potential customers through time; secondly, its ability to reach a wider range of users compared to the traditional WOM makes it a very valuable promotion channel; and, eventually, its anonymity could put in question its authenticity: often the recipients of the eWOM do not even know anything about the sender, and therefore cannot be sure on its reliability (Babić Rosario et al., 2019).

Consumers are now marketers on social media platforms and their contribution to the feed-development through tags, posts, comments, and likes, nonetheless the grade of uncertainty they might represent, have become the main reliable source of information.

Over the last decades, the number of social media users has significantly increased. Indeed, Facebook claims to record more than 2 billion of active users each month,

while messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and WeChat are on average used by 1 billion users monthly (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). Finally, according to the Digital 2021 October Global Statshot Report (Hootsuite, 2021), the COVID-19 Pandemic caused an increase of 400 million in the number of social media users worldwide over the last year. This significant growth led to currently account around 4.55 billion individuals in the world with at least a social media account, and this estimation is expected to increase at a rate of more than 1 million new users every day (Hootsuite, 2021). Since social media has become a part of our daily routine, people have seen their interpersonal relationships transformed, becoming largely “virtual”. Based on this statement, the “digitalization process” has made necessary to combine marketing strategies with UGCs. As a necessary consequence, marketing has also been digitalized, giving born to the so-called “social media marketing”. In this new digital era, this disruptive form of marketing has become an essential aspect to take into consideration, especially in the tourism sector (Gökkaya, 2020).

2.2.2 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is defined as “*the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization’s stakeholders*” (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 8).

The new feature of social media is their ability to range from connection strategies that involve many individuals to effective bidirectional communications on a small scale, crossing then the boundaries which divide “mass media” from personal media (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). Thanks to this capacity, conveying and delivering a message on social media acquires many different forms. In marketing, the general methods of communication are referred to as *media*, and within each *medium* marketers can opt for different *vehicles* to place the message they want to convey (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). For example, within the medium of radio, the vehicle chosen by the marketer could be a podcast.

To better compare these options, the social media landscape can be divided by grouping similar channels into four different zones (Figure 4) (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). The first, known as *social community*, refers to that portion of social media

focused on relationships among users who share common interests and confront thoughts. The second one, the so-called *social publishing*, indicates those channels whose aim is the dissemination of content. The third one, *social entertainment*, encompasses those mediums and vehicles which provide opportunities to play and entertain. The fourth and last one is the *social commerce*, which includes all those channels and vehicles aimed to assist online buying and selling.

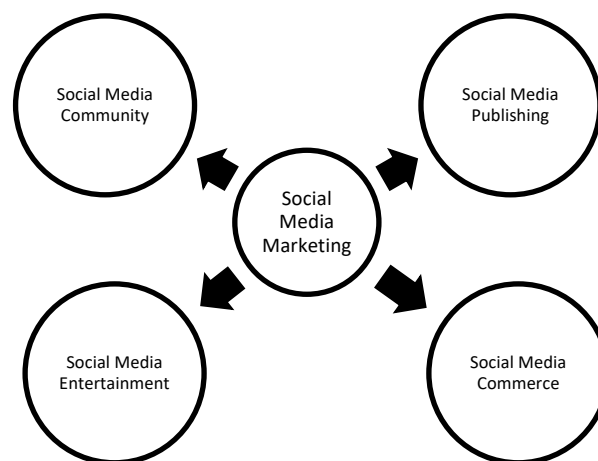


Figure 4: Dimensions of Social Media Marketing - Adapted from "Social Media Marketing across Social Media Zones" (Tuten & Solomon, 2014).

As illustrated in Figure 4, social media marketing has then many options to conduct marketing research and to place its messages and promotions. In doing so, a digital environment in which every interaction contains a marketing-oriented element is then created.

A reflection about the communication of the traditional marketing approach is now necessary. This approach, in opposition to the one of the digitalized marketing, focuses on "push messaging", meant as a one-way communicating method from an individual, or a company, to a broad audience (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The communication strategy follows a vertical top-down structure in which customers do not have any role nor impact. Once e-commerce began to spread in daily commercial

activities, traditional marketing was forced to adapt its strategy on new channels and to start using new vehicles like e-mails and banners (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). Thanks to Internet intervention, consumers were able to collect more information on determined products, and companies were then able to deliver their marketing messages more quickly and in a less expensive way, reaching micromarkets as well (meant as that portion of consumers considered too small to be pursued by traditional marketing channels) (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The level of interactivity increased with the introduction of digitalized channels, but the vertical top-down flow remained as the main structure. Only the introduction of social media in marketing activities allowed a radical change in the channel distribution layout, creating more space for consumers' engagement and interactivity.

What differs social media marketing from the traditional marketing approach is its marketing mix. Indeed, in the traditional marketing approach the marketing mix is constituted by the 4Ps: *product*, referred to goods and services offered by the company; *price*, which is the amount charged for the product; *promotion*, meant as the persuading process to make the consumer willing to buy the product; and *place*, indicating distribution channels to make the product available to the consumers (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). What enabled social media marketing to modify the structure of distribution channels is the addition of a further P-element: Participation (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). As already explained, the Web 2.0 is a "participatory web" and bases its existence on UGCs. Among its objectives such as reducing marketing-related costs and reaching a wider range of individuals, its main aim is that to increase brand awareness by stimulating users to share, comment and like content, creating an interaction among potential consumers on the network (Hasan & Sohail, 2020).

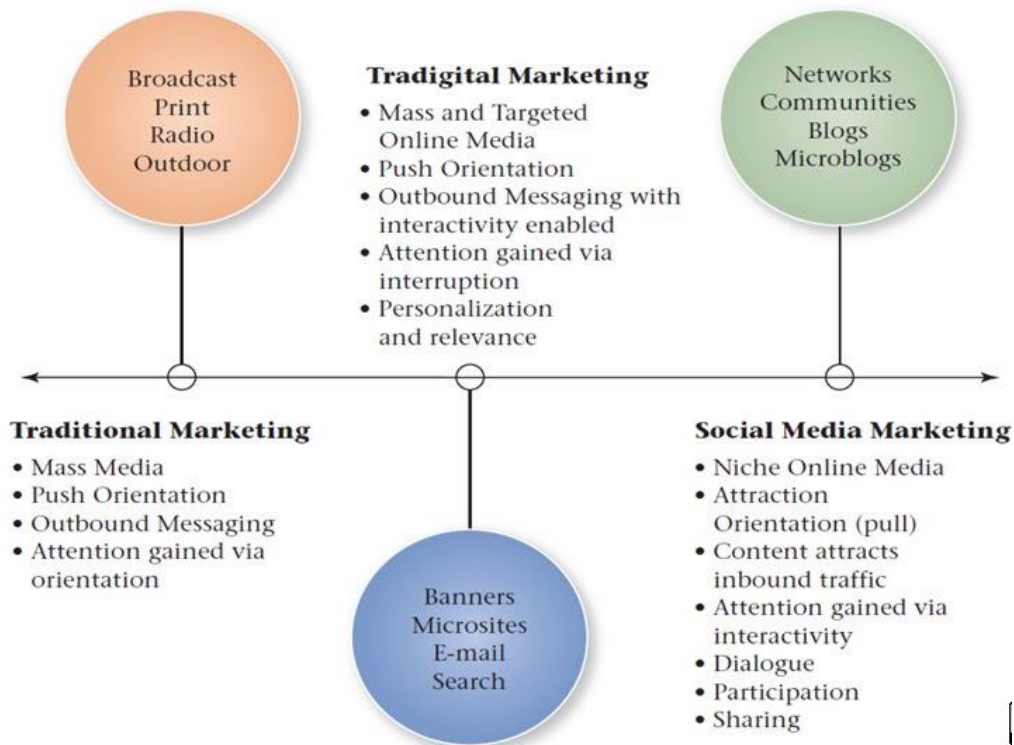


Figure 5: The Evolution of Marketing Communications (Tuten & Solomon, 2014).

Since it can create more customer profiles and help to get a better understanding on what content a user could be interested in, the expression “social media marketing” can be seen as a fictitious one-to-one approach that bases its strategy on creating a relationship with the user with the aim of suggesting content based on his/her preferences. The dynamic of this relationship development is graphically represented in the Lead Generation Funnel (Figure 6), defined as a systematic representation of the lead generation process, meant in marketing as the process of a transaction from potential buyer aware of the brand to an actual profitable buyer (Tanghal, 2020).

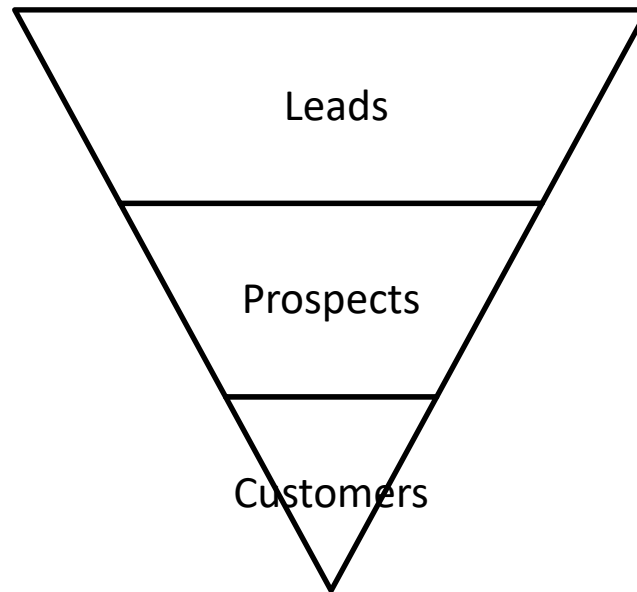


Figure 6: Lead Generation Funnel (Tanghal, 2020).

As already pointed out, Figure 6 represents the Lead Generation Funnel, which divides the process into three sections: the top of the funnel, in which “leads”, referred to as potential customers, becomes interested in the brand; the middle of the funnel, in which leads becomes “prospects”, which are those who are actually interested in the product offered but are still not sure whether to purchase the product or service yet; and the bottom of the funnel, in which prospects show the intention to buy the product promoted through social media, becoming then “customers” (Tanghal, 2020).

In the tourism industry, social media marketing helps to create brand awareness in tourists’ minds (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). Implementing this type of marketing in luxury Italian restaurants could turn out to be a perfect starting point in creating a luxury gastronomy tourism identity, currently not valued enough.

2.2.2.1 Benefits

Now that social media are becoming a precious and important tool for our daily activities, many industries seek to understand how to implement this new communication and entertainment channel into their marketing strategic planning. Indeed, the advantages of adopting a social media-oriented marketing strategy are

numerous: they allow to explore new markets; to stay up to date on new technological developments; as well as to define facility's positioning relative to competitors (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013).

The primary advantages of implementing such a strategy are its significant cost reduction and its ability to reach a wider audience compared to traditional marketing channels (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). The overtaking of the temporal and spatial boundaries is only possible thanks to the viral ability of social media, meant as a “domino effect” process by which users share content within their network which is then in turn seen, commented, or shared by other users, reaching a wider range of potentially interested individuals. According to Burmaster (2009, cited in Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013), social media sites are now considered the most persuasive and popular Internet destination on which people spend a great part of their time. Based on this latter finding, it can be stated that the concept of social interactivity has now been shifted into the digital dimension, not only making it easier to reach more individuals but also making it easier to create personalized content (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). Indeed, the second major advantage of social media is based on customers’ new role in this marketing scenario: thanks to their constant engagement and their high credibility degree, companies are now able through social networking sites (SNSs) to design more accurate customer profiles which later will be used to address more personalized advertisements (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). Detecting target audiences becomes an eased task to undertake through SNSs. Through market segmentation, meant as the process of dividing the marketplace into smaller and specialized sectors in which consumers have similar needs and desires, it is now possible to fully exploit all the data collected by social media feeds translating this information into specific marketing-aimed activities (Tuten & Solomon, 2018). The variables of the social media market segmentation are five: the *geographic segmentation*, which collects information based on the location, on the market density and size, and on environmental factors, such as climate; the *demographic segmentation*, which uses gender, age, income, educational attainment, family lifecycle, ethnic background, and occupation to create similar groups; the *psychographic segmentation*, which groups users according to personality traits,

motives, and opinions; the *benefit segmentation*, which divides consumers on the basis of the expected and perceived benefit from consuming the wanted product; and the *behavioral segment*, which takes into consideration the way of acting towards a determined brand (Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

Thanks to all these different sources of information, social media marketing does not just create “self-referential ads” but content that helps create long-term relationships, establishing bi-directional communication strategies between the sponsor and the customer (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). Consequently, the leads are more likely to become prospects, and later on customers if the long-run relationships show to be effective.

2.2.2.2 Challenges

Nonetheless, social media marketing counts also different challenges. Among these, there is the strong position of those who are convinced that social media is an alternative marketing system approach, while, to seriously profit from it, it is just a new method that should be combined with already existing traditional marketing strategies (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Forgetting this aspect leads to the very common mistake to consider only the social media strategy, which alone is not sufficient to ensure profitability (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, the most problematic and common challenge that arises when implementing a well-functioning social media marketing strategy is its significant time investment (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). To be interactive and successful, companies’ social media strategies need to develop long-term relationships which will be translated in the future into sales. Unfortunately, the amount of time between these two stages cannot be predicted, leading then to inevitable great time consumption. Based on this statement, if time management is underestimated and not implemented within organizations’ strategic marketing operations and planning, the outcome is not likely to meet the expectations.

A further aspect to take into consideration when thinking of possible complications are UGCs. As already explained, the disruptive characteristics of the Web 2.0 are the introduction of the UGCs and the new role of consumers in the commercialized net.

Now that consumers play an active role in marketing-related activities, their impact is considerable and not always positive. In other words, since UGCs are created by customers and do not follow any specific and defined rules, they can also be negative feedbacks or assumptions that interfere with the objectives of the established marketing strategy (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013).

Related to UGCs, one should not forget the problems linked to individuals' private sphere. In fact, collecting users' information and preferences to promote a brand or a determined product could be problematic when referring to trust, privacy, and security (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). According to Hoffmann et al. (1999), trust-related issues are one of the main causes for not achieving customer loyalty in social media marketing, not ensuring then long-term profitable relationships. To lower the level of uncertainty in users' minds, which can be a crucial factor in purchasing decision-making processes, the company should ensure and highlight through its social media accounts comprehensive and clear policies which explain in detail how data will be collected, used, and stored (Steinman and Hawkings, 2010).

According to Steinman and Hawkings (2010), when implementing a social media strategy, it is essential to protect trademarks and copyrights. Digital communicating allowed enterprises to address informally to the audience promoting their brands and creating long-term relationships, but also allowed facilitation for third-parties abuse of their trademarks and copyrights (Steinman and Hawkings, 2010).

A truly successful social media marketing strategy should then take into consideration all these strengths and weaknesses. As already explained previously, in luxury gastronomic tourism customers' perceived values are the main component of the whole experience (Batat, 2019a). Therefore, integrating an effective social media strategy based mostly on UGCs could represent a profitable approach to increase luxury culinary tourism's brand awareness.

2.3 Social Media in Luxury Gastronomy

2.3.1 The role of social media in the restaurant industry

Similarly to the other sectors, the introduction of social media is increasingly changing many aspects of the restaurant business, including its marketing activities and its communication strategy. As it was previously mentioned, social media marketing represents a perfect opportunity for businesses to disseminate their messages easily and effectively, as well as to create interacting content using UGCs (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013; Tuten & Solomon, 2018). Nonetheless, creating a well-functioning social media marketing strategy could be challenging, and requires a proper usage of marketing mix (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). Indeed, due to tourism's intrinsic characteristics, such as intangibility and inseparability of production from its consumption (Benckendorff et al., 2014), promoting the tourism product and assessing the quality of the service becomes a difficult task to undertake (Jyothish & Tejaswi, 2017).

Taking for instance the findings presented in the *"60+ Food Tourism Statistics"* report published by the American travel website JerseyIslandHolidays.com (2021), more than the 40% of food travelers are influenced by family and friends' social media posts, and more of the 50% among them trust online reviews left on social media platforms. Then, due to the high interconnectivity between culinary tourism and social media, restaurants get a more effective conversion rate with UGCs rather than with traditional marketing approaches (Jyothish & Tejaswi, 2017).

Currently, more than 60% of the restaurants all over the world have already included social media in their business and marketing activities (Wimpsett, 2017). According to the statistical data reported by Needles and Thomson (2013), those who exploit and profit the more for this new interactive side of marketing are independent restaurants that do not belong to chains. Indeed, chain restaurants are perceived with more stability in people's mind due to significant advertising effort made by headquarters (Needles & Thompson, 2013). In other words, social media marketing is an activity mostly undertaken by independent restaurants aimed to promote visibility and awareness of their brands (Needles & Thompson, 2013). Therefore, in the case of

Michelin starred restaurants, social network promotion becomes increasingly important. As stated in an interview with the BBC news, the Director of the Michelin Guide Great Britain & Ireland, Rebecca Burr, acknowledges that Michelin starred restaurants are “*put on a stage*”: once the rating has been assigned, it is responsibility of the restaurant managers to deliver a high-quality idea of their service and food, and to create unique experiences for consumers (Heighton-Ginns, 2018). With this purpose, creating the right online “preface” helps to develop in people’s minds, both locals and tourists, a first drafted idea on the service of the restaurant, and, if not well-developed, it could cause serious damages in terms of reputation and brand awareness.

The low participating costs of implanting social media strategies fits well the restaurant business structure, allowing managers to know exactly how the reputation of the restaurant is perceived online by the users, both food travelers and local consumers (Needles & Thompson, 2013). The Internet is seen as a strategic information source in this sector, and it allows to detect aspects or details useful to identify both opportunities and challenges. Despite its undisputed importance, the factor that questions whether it would be useful or not to implement a social media presence it’s the absence of a basis to calculate social media return of investment (ROI) (Needles & Thompson, 2013). Indeed, the choice to adapt this new technology is based more on the belief that social media are a useful marketing tool that continues to grow in terms of importance within a business (Duboff & Wilkerson, 2010 cited in Needles & Thompson, 2013). The reason why it is difficult to detect a ROI from social media activities is because it is hard to quantify how the eWOM created by the online relationship between the restaurant and the potential consumer contributes to the growth of the restaurant’s revenue (Duboff & Wilkerson, 2010 cited in Needles & Thompson, 2013).

Nonetheless, even if very complicated to determine the return of investment in social media activities, it is estimated that 71% of customers is more likely to recommend a restaurant if their requests and questions were answered in a short period of time through social media accounts (Wirthman, 2013). In fact, restaurants brands that demonstrate a high online engagement with their followers are expected to

experience an increase in clients' spending by more than 40% (Dobriła, 2019). Furthermore, almost 99% of the so-called "Generation Z" (those individuals born between 1997 and 2012, also called "digital natives") are more likely to base their decisions for dining experiences through social media than "baby boomers" (Baer & Lemin, 2019). Among the different social media platforms, Facebook represents the most suitable social network on which to base an aimed marketing strategy. This is due to the fact that more of the 60% of social media users worldwide showed active participation on this platform in 2020 (Statcounter, 2021). This latter statistic is foreseen to constantly grow in the next future, making then Facebook a real online meeting point for billions of people from different parts of the world. In fact, despite strong competition from social networks such as, for example, Instagram and TikTok, it is more likely that social media users leave comments and ratings on Facebook rather than on other platforms (Bassig, 2019). Supporting this latter thesis, it is accounted that about the 98% of the Italian companies in the food industry, including restaurants, use Facebook as the main distribution channel for their promotion activities and for establishing a direct contact with consumers (Statista, 2017).

Based on these results, it can be, therefore, stated that implementing social media marketing on Facebook represents the future of promotion as well as an asset to exploit for the restaurant industry and for the culinary tourism. Moreover, especially for promotions and to link or share news, Facebook has been defined as the perfect digital platform to create interpersonal relationships with users, making it a more authentic marketing tool from customers' eyes (Needles & Thompson, 2013).

2.3.2 Customers' decoding process on social media messages in luxury gastronomy

Creating a marketing strategy for a service and for a good implies different aspects and factors to take into consideration (Swani & Milne, 2017). As explained in the previous subchapter, the culinary tourism and the restaurant industry are sectors that sell a service, that is something intangible and hardly perceived before the purchasing decision (Benckendorff et al., 2014). Customers' evaluation on services is complicated and risky since their experiential nature do not allow people to perceive the level of

authenticity of the quality before the actual consumption. Due to this nature, customers decoding process on service-oriented promotion messages, meant as receivers' interpretation of the message conveyed, rely mostly on previous experiences, which become then the basis on which consumers can measure the potential value the service could provide them (Swani & Milne, 2017; Bødker, 2016). Online reviews (ORs) and comments left by other users on social media represent probably the main source of information used by individuals involved in culinary-related marketing activities. According to Fernández-Miguélez et al. (2020), ORs represent an opportunity to restaurants. Through the so called "strategic listening", businesses can understand the customer point of view and correct or highlight aspects that could hamper their operations. However, ORs represent most of the times a challenge for gastronomy industry due both to the experiential nature of services and the subjectivity of the evaluations (Fernández-Miguélez et al., 2020). In luxury gastronomy this aspect is more important than ever: customers usually check ORs to test whether the high price of fine dining experiences is worthy (Batat, 2020). UGCs and ORs should then portray in consumers' mind the idea that purchasing this service will not only provide them food, but a more holistic and unparalleled experience.

Emotional stimulations are also a further crucial component for customers' decoding process (Swani & Milne, 2017). In promoting food-related experiences, images are a powerful tool that could summarize in one element a feeling that could be hard to be explained by words. Through the "visual hunger", which can be described as the feature of food to appeal people making them want to consume it in first person (Spence et al., 2016), marketers can take advantage of images and videos for their promotion strategies. Through this characteristic of food, Michelin starred restaurants should be then able to stimulate people's decoding process with content that reflects the unicity and the elegance of their haute cuisine as much as the authenticity of their quality service.

2.3.3 Customers' encoding process on social media messages in luxury gastronomy

Once customers' interest is captured and feel motivated to share content within their network, they need to decide how to engage with the social media message (Swani & Milne, 2017). This stage is known as "encoding process" and is defined as the selection of content that could increase users' stimuli, in this case, on social media posts (Bødker, 2016). Due to the lack of a specific and holistic and global metrics to express popularity on all social media, it becomes necessary to recognize what interactive tools viewers use to determine the virality of the content shared. In this thesis, the term "popularity" is defined as "*being online well-known, sporting the latest trends and building an online persona*" (Nussbaum, 2017, p.1.). On Facebook, users use two major popularity metrics: likes and commenting tools (Swani et al., 2017). The first with its added reaction features (love, haha, wow, sad, and angry) is a tool that requires less involvement and less thinking; while the second one is an interactive instrument that requires time, more reflection, and a major involvement (Swani & Milne, 2017). Assuming that these two metrics are different forms of eWOM, it can be stated that comments are not strictly correlated with the marketer message strategy (Swani et al., 2017). Commenting on social media is an independent action in response to a marketing message that most of the times is influenced by previous viewers' comments (Swani et al., 2017). Conversely, liking, even if intuitive and usually a result of a not sophisticated cognitive process, is directly related to the marketer message strategy, since it is an automatic response towards the shared content (Swani et al., 2017).

On Facebook, another metrics that could calculate the level of popularity is "sharing". However, a detailed and deepen research on this function is still missing. Hopefully, this thesis would then offer a contribution to a general knowledge on the Facebook popularity metrics. Through this option, consumers demonstrate their appreciation of the marketer's message by sharing it within their networks, consequently inviting people to interact with the content. Sharing becomes an internal distribution channel in which digital contents and UGCs become user-distributed contents (UDCs), increasing then visibility and popularity (Villi & Noguera-Vivo, 2017).

To support this thesis, it is important to understand how the Facebook algorithm, known as “Edge Rank”, works. As the word suggests, the algorithm examines and ranks the relationship (“edge”) between the content and the users to determine which posts will be viewed in viewers’ feeds (Birkbak and Carlsen, 2016). This mathematical operation is composed by three elements: affinity, weight, and time (Figure 7).

$$\sum_{\text{edges } e} u_e w_e d_e$$

Figure 7: The Edge Rank Equation (EdgeRank.net)

The first, known as “affinity score”, measures how strong the relationship is between users and a specific content based on interactivity, meant as the frequency by which users like, comment, or share the advertised post (Sudharshan & Narendra, 2015). The second component refers to the “weight” of these relations (Sudharshan & Narendra, 2015). For instance, sharing options and comments are evaluated as more relevant than likes: the more are the comments and the number of sharing, the more the post will be displayed in viewers’ feed. Eventually, the third element concerns the “time coordinates”: the older the post, the less impact it will then have in increasing visibility and popularity (Sudharshan & Narendra, 2015).

Based on the findings reported by Sudharshan & Narendra (2015) on the functionality of the Facebook algorithm, the sharing option can be classified as a further popularity metrics. It can be seen as an engagement tool that combines aspects of commenting and liking since it requires less thinking and time, but also major involvement.

Thus, understanding the components of the encoding process is vital for marketing activities. Popularity, known also as engagement rate, is the key to interpret how marketing messages are delivered to the audience (Nussbaum, 2017). On the Facebook platform, taking into consideration the interpretive tools of liking, commenting, and sharing allows marketers to evaluate their strategies and the effectiveness of their content.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

Before conducting any study, the design of the research needs to be defined. The three traditional categories of research designs are explorative, descriptive, and causal and their adoption relies mainly on the aim of the research and the amount of information owned on a particular problem (Sreejesh et al., 2013).

1) The exploratory one is chosen when the purpose of the study is to gain background information and to clarify problems and hypotheses 2) the descriptive one, aims, as the word suggests, to describe and measure marketing activities at a given moment in time 3) while the last one is used to determine the causality and works in testing “if-then” statements (Sreejesh et al., 2013). Since the aim of this study is to analyze how social media are used to create a benchmark for further research, the descriptive represents the most suitable research design.

Once the design is clear, the research methodology needs to be chosen. In marketing, there are three different types of primary research data collection: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative research method deals with analyzing numerical variables and translating them using statistical techniques to gain useful information on the matter (Apuke, 2017). Usually, the quantitative research tools include surveys and experiments which collect the answers of a given sample and draw a conclusion from them to answer the main research question (Creswell, 2014). On the other hand, qualitative research aims to fully understand and gain information on people’s behavior within their social and cultural context using case studies, interviews, focus groups, and chart/documents reviews (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). The mixed-methods represent the combination of these two research methodologies to seek a better analysis of a more complex research problem, which could be more problematic to perform due to the “*feasibility constraint*” in combining data integrity, referred to as the features of the research that affect its qualitative attendance, and the currency of the sources referred to as the

characteristics of research that affect the quantitative relevance of the findings (Bonoma, 1985, p.200).

3.2 Content Analysis

According to Devi Brasad (n.d.), content analysis denotes a method of observation that focuses its analysis on evaluating what is contained in a written, verbal, or visual message, rather than asking directly those people who created the message. As already mentioned, primary data collection can be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, as a research methodology, content analysis can be performed in a quantitatively or in qualitative manner. While quantitative content analysis focuses on testing the hypotheses and not on developing them, qualitative content analysis tries to deduct a “big picture” from a particular context not describing objectively the reality (White & Marsh, 2016).

However, whether a qualitative content analysis is purely based on qualitative features is an ongoing debate. Indeed, experts like Mayring (2014) define qualitative content analysis as a mixed-method approach since they believe that this methodology supports common criteria and steps of analysis used in both quantitative and qualitative methods. The main idea that stands behind the concept of qualitative content analysis is to perform a quantitative-oriented data collection and analysis by embodying the process of allocating categories to words or images as a qualitative-interpretive act (Mayring, 2014).

According to White and Marsh (2016), the ten steps to conducting a content analysis are similar between a quantitative and a qualitative approach, but differences still occur.

1) Formulating the research questions.

At this stage, the quantitative content analysis is described by a deductive research approach in which the formulating of hypotheses about relations among variables is possible thanks to previous research. On the other hand, the qualitative content analysis is characterized by a more inductive approach in which the research

questions represent more of a guideline and a starting point for other questions that might arise during the research (White & Marsh, 2016).

2) Identifying appropriate data that could be useful in answering the research questions.

3) Determining a sample method and sample unit.

Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis sample elements from a population that are relevant in their testing, but the main difference between the two is the major objective. Indeed, the experts White and Marsh (2016) explain that in quantitative content analysis the major purpose is “generalizability” which can be understood as the capacity to draw conclusions from a sample to the population from which the sample is taken. Instead, in qualitative content analysis, even if the principle of “generalizability” is applied, the major target is “transferability” meant as the ability to apply the results to other contexts by providing a basis for identifying key factors and describing phenomena. Due to this difference, the sampling method of a quantitative approach should be random still representing the population, while the sampling approach of a qualitative one should be based on theoretical knowledge, and, therefore, limited in size in comparison to the quantitative one (White & Marsh, 2016).

4) Drawing a sample.

5) Establishing a data collection unit.

6) Establishing a coding scheme.

7) Coding the data.

This procedure is vital in the content analysis since it categorizes the content in a numerical form to indicate whether a determined image, text, or verbal expression owns that characteristic. For quantitative approaches coding is a priori, meaning that the creation of a coding scheme within research needs to be done before the actual coding (White & Marsh, 2016). Thanks to this predefined set of coding, quantitative

studies are easier to compare with each other if the coding used was the same. On the contrary, the coding scheme within a qualitative content analysis is progressive: as the analyst goes through the data, keywords or tags are created to underline aspects that could be relevant and valid to the research. Due to this difference, the qualitative content analysis' aim is not to describe objectively and realistically a phenomenon, but to subjectively evaluate components that could be relevant in understanding the hypotheses (White & Marsh, 2016).

8) Controlling and adjusting the coding process if necessary.

9) Analyzing the coded data using appropriate statistical testing, such as cross-tabulations or multiple regression analyses.

10) Interpretation of the results to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions (White & Marsh, 2016).

In this research, a mixed content analysis has been chosen to answer the research questions. Indeed, the main target of this study is to provide a possible interpretation of how social media strategies are used by Michelin restaurants by adding more knowledge on the topic in Italy. The coding scheme, which will be later explained, is the one of the qualitative content analysis since the content of the posts has been categorized and transformed into numerical data to run statistical analysis.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The first stage in data collection was identifying the restaurants involved in the research. Since the study focuses on luxury restaurants in Italy, the "Michelin Guide Italy 2022" was taken as the main reference to identify all restaurants with a single Michelin star. To ensure consistency of the data and allow aggregation of the findings, the research focused on the one-star restaurants only. Comparing restaurants with a different "grade" could have been problematic since the strategies used in marketing may have differed significantly.

Subsequently, an Excel file was created to divide the 329 restaurants found in the guide into their respective regions. Afterward, the Facebook profiles of each

restaurant was searched, and the number of followers were added to the Excel file. Only those restaurants that have their own Facebook page were considered: many of them have their social media accounts shared with a hotel or a bigger group of restaurants and, therefore, the marketing strategies used are likely to be different. To have a clearer idea of the average number of individuals interested in luxury restaurants and in fine dining on Facebook, the total number of followers of the restaurants collected was calculated and then divided by the total number of Italian Michelin 1-starred restaurants: 329. Once the average of Facebook users was found (6661.06), it was possible to evaluate what restaurants had enough followers to draw meaningful conclusions.

To collect data to run a content analysis, three restaurants in Middle Italy were chosen: “La Leggenda dei Frati” in Tuscany, “Ristorante – Il Tino” in Lazio, and “Ristorante Andreina” in Marche. The criteria used to select these restaurants are related to their geographical location and to their number of followers. Indeed, Middle Italy according to the “Institute of National Statistic” known as “ISTAT” (*Nord, Centro e Mezzogiorno d’Italia - Statistiche su dati ISTAT*, n.d.) is constituted by the regions Tuscany, Lazio, Marche, and Umbria. The region Umbria was not taken into consideration in this study since it hosts only three restaurants with a single Michelin star that on their Facebook accounts do not reach the average of Facebook users calculated before.

Italy consists of 20 regions, 19 of which have Michelin star restaurants. Given the substantial differences between the North and the South of Italy such as the weather, the type of cuisine offered and the flow of tourists (northern Italian regions are generally destinations appreciated more in winter, while southern regions in summer), the author of the research has opted to focus on the middle regions of Italy. Furthermore, Middle Italy could play a more representative role of the country hosting regions like Tuscany and Lazio (where Rome lies) known worldwide.

Now that the three subjects of the study have been chosen, the content of their latest 50 posts of each restaurant was analyzed. The data were collected during the Christmas period in December 2021 to check how the posts differed from summer to

winter times. After having analyzed the content of the posts, the number of popularity metrics (likes, comments, and shares) and the date of publication of each post were collected and inserted into the Excel file.

To answer the second research question, the multilinear regression analysis was opted. First announced by Sir Francis Galton in 1894, this statistical approach was developed to define and quantify the relations between a variable “y”, which in this case is popularity, and two or more variables “x”, represented in this research by the categories previously indicated (Kumari & Yadav, 2018). Compared to other statistical methodologies such as Chi-square and t-tests, the multilinear regression analysis allows taking into consideration the effects of other covariates during the analysis and predicts the value of “y” by each “x” (Kumari & Yadav, 2018).

Thanks to this data collecting procedure, the analysis of the data can be undertaken from a descriptive statistical point of view to evaluate what type of visual social media content is more likely to be associated with a higher popularity or engagement rate. However, to run this analysis it is needed to transform the nominal variables into scale variables. Based on this assumption, the ten categories created through the coding stage were set in form of “dummy variables”. According to Skrivanek et al. (2009), in statistical regression analyses “dummy variables” are those quantifications that use the value 0 to indicate the absence of the attribute or the value 1 to show its presence. By doing so a table was created in which the information collected about the content of the 150 posts analyzed was expressed in form of dummy variables: for each post, it has been added a “0” in those categories that did not show up in the visual representation and a “1” in that category that described the image published.

Once the data were re-interpreted in form of dummy variables, the Excel file was exported into the statistical software known as “SPSS” to perform the linear regression analysis.

4 Results

4.1.1 Use of social media

To answer the first research question a fully descriptive qualitative content analysis has been opted. Indeed, to find out how luxury restaurants in middle Italy use Facebook for their marketing purposes the frequency of publication, the type, and the composition of posts were taken as indicators to draw meaningful conclusions.

Post	Likes	Comments	Shares	Content Category	Composition		Date	Frequency
					Perspective	Background		
1	48	1	1	E-COMMERCE	Zoomed in	Pre-arranged	10/12/2021	
2	72	4	1	DISH	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	14/12/2021	2
3	3	0	0	REVIEWS AND ARTICLES	Zoomed out	Natural	12/12/2021	1
4	15	0	0	DISH	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	11/12/2021	4
5	22	0	0	INTERIOR	Zoomed in	Natural	07/12/2021	3
6	29	0	2	TEAM	Zoomed out	Natural	04/12/2021	2
7	23	0	2	DISH	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	02/12/2021	2
8	23	0	3	E-COMMERCE	Zoomed in	Natural	30/11/2021	3
9	274	8	7	CHEF	Zoomed out	Natural	27/11/2021	1
10	69	2	4	MICHELIN STAR NEWS	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	26/11/2021	3
11	192	42	13	MICHELIN STAR NEWS	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	23/11/2021	0
12	33	1	0	EXTERIOR	Zoomed out	Natural	23/11/2021	3
13	24	0	2	TEAM	Zoomed out	Natural	20/11/2021	2
14	9	0	1	UGCs	Zoomed out	Natural	18/11/2021	0
15	24	2	1	DISH	Zoomed in	Pre-arranged	18/11/2021	2
16	21	0	1	INTERIOR	Zoomed out	Natural	16/11/2021	3
17	36	3	3	TEAM	Zoomed out	Natural	13/11/2021	0
18	7	0	0	EVENTS	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	13/11/2021	2
19	24	2	0	DISH	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	11/11/2021	2
20	13	0	2	EVENTS	Zoomed out	Pre-arranged	09/11/2021	0
21	23	0	4	INTERIOR	Zoomed in	Natural	09/11/2021	5
22	47	0	1	TEAM	Zoomed out	Natural	04/11/2021	2
23	27	3	2	DISH	Zoomed in	Pre-arranged	02/11/2021	3
24	22	0	3	EXTERIOR	Zoomed out	Natural	30/10/2021	1
25	33	0	2	TEAM	Zoomed out	Natural	29/10/2021	1

Table 1: Excel Table for data analysis

Restaurant	La Leggenda dei Frati	Ristorante il Tino	Ristorante Andreina
Followers	7,017	11,984	14,441
Average of Likes	38.12	56.36	81.92
Average of Comments	1.76	2.44	4.66
Average of Shares	1.98	2.44	1.30

Average of Frequency (in days)	2.18	3.04	3.97
% of pre-arranged and zoomed-in posts	12%	40%	34%
Engagement Rate/Popularity	29%	25%	30%

Table 2: Summary of significant metrics

As illustrated in Table 1, the latest 50 posts for each restaurant were recorded on an Excel sheet and analyzed quantitatively in terms of likes, comments, shares, and frequency of publication (in days), and qualitatively in terms of content and composition of the post. Thanks to this recording system it was possible to deduct the metrics (reported in Table 2) needed to answer the above-mentioned research questions.

The data reported in Table 2 are useful metrics to answer the first research question. Indeed, the total number of followers indicates that the three restaurants selected have a higher number of followers than the national average (6661.06), therefore, their Facebook's feeds are useful to withdraw representative conclusions. The three further lines represent the average of likes, comments, and shares, the average frequency expressed in days, the percentage of pre-arranged and zoomed-in content analyzed. Thanks to these metrics it was not only possible to describe how social media are used by starred restaurants in Italy, but it was also possible to calculate the engagement rate. According to Corporate Finance Institute (CFI, 2022), the engagement rate (or popularity is given by the following formula:

$$\text{Popularity} = \frac{\text{Average Likes} + \text{Average Comments} + \text{Average Shares}}{\text{N. of Followers}}$$

From Table 2, by observing the first rows it might appear that a higher number of followers means accordingly a higher percentage in popularity. However, this statement is incorrect as the popularity rate of "La Leggenda dei Frati" is higher than the one of "Ristorante il Tino" even if the second one has a higher quantity of

followers. Indeed, popularity, as explained by the above-mentioned formula, is the total number of users’ interactions with the content shared divided by the total number of followers, meaning that for increasing popularity the main target for marketers is to increase users’ engagement. Reaching that goal is not an easy task and for that reason strategies need to be developed.

4.1.2 Type of content posted

Once all 150 posts had been observed, the author summarized the content analyzed by allocating to each post a category. The coding of the qualitative content analysis has then allowed the creation of ten different categories whose names represented the focus of the post. The ten categories are “dish”, “interior”, “exterior”, “events”, “team”, “chef”, “UGCs”, “Reviews and articles”, “e-commerce” and “Michelin star news”.

Dish	47.36%
Interior	6.66%
Exterior	12%
Events	4%
Team	10.66%
Chef	4%
UGCs	2%
Reviews and articles	8.66%
E-commerce	2%
Michelin star news	2.66%

Table 3: Division expressed in percentages of the 150 posts analyzed according to the ten categories

As Table 3 shows, the category that occurs the most is “dish” representing 47.36% of the posts shared taken from the sample. By analyzing the data, the author of this qualitatively content analysis noticed that a common strategy was opted by the three restaurants when the main target of the post was food: many of those were photos taken from a zoomed-in angle on a pre-arranged background. For that reason, the composition of the post was later added as a further factor used to understand how restaurants use social media for marketing purposes. Once each post had been analyzed, it could be stated that 56% of the 150 posts were photos taken following this strategy and 91% of these photos fell under the “dish” category. This latter finding confirms then the idea of “visual hunger” explained before, in which food is alienated from its surrendering making then the audience focus only on the dish (Spence et al., 2016).

To find out how often the Facebook account of a Michelin star restaurant should be updated, the frequency of the publication of the posts was analyzed in terms of days. Indeed, it has been noticed that the contents are shared on a regular basis in all three restaurants with intervals from 2 to 4 days. By doing so the three Michelin star awarded restaurants try to be present on users’ feeds on a regular basis.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Italian Michelin star restaurants use Facebook as a real digital marketing tool by keeping their accounts regularly updated and using various content, in particular well-implanted dishes that try to convey a message to attract the audience: the food offered in their restaurants is of high quality, unique and worth the price.

4.1.3 Popularity of social media content

Model Summary (Popularity)			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.18	.03	.03	.01

ANOVA (Popularity)					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	.00	1	.00	4.97	.027
Residual	.01	148	.00		
Total	.01	149			

Coefficients (Popularity)						
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	.01	.00		.00	8.68	.000
DISH	.00	.00		-.18	-2.23	.027

Figure 8: Linear Regression Analysis Outcome (PSPP)

As previously explained the category “dish” represents 44% of the posts taken into consideration in this study making it the most occurred subject in marketing-related social media strategies. Indeed, due to its predominant role it can only be assumed that the category “dish” is a factor that has a major role in social media strategies, but thanks to the simple linear regression analysis it can be statistically proved.

Figure 8 reports the results of the simple linear regression analysis of the dependent variable “popularity” with the interdependent variable, or predictor, “dish”. To have a full understanding of what is written in the tables each meaningful result will be explained starting from the first table.

The value “R” indicates the correlation expressed as a value between 0 and 1 between the dependent and the independent variable, which in this case is low (only 0.18). Instead, the factor “R square” (0.03) indicates the coefficient of determination which describes the percentage variance of the dependent variable explained by the independent variable. Eventually, the “adjusted R square” (0.3) is a lower percentage value compared to the “R square” as one is penalized by the number of predictors in the model (just one). The value of 3% is a low value, meaning that only 3% of popularity can be explained through this independent variable.

Therefore, it can be stated that taking into consideration just the category “dish” not much of the restaurants’ popularity can be explained.

Moving on to the ANOVA table, the p-value, or significance value, of the table corresponds to the global significance value of the whole model. In this case, the significance value corresponds to 0.027 which is lower than 0.05, which represents the most common standard error, indicating then that H0 can be rejected and H1 can be maintained: popularity can be predicted by the independent variable “dish”.

Therefore, since the independent variable is useful for predicting the dependent variable of popularity, the predictor can now be interpreted. By looking at the lowest table reported in Figure 8, the “unstandardized coefficient b” indicates the effect of an increase by 1 % of a dish-focused post on the engagement rate of the restaurant. However, the value reported is <0.001 indicating that an increase by 1% of dish-

focused posts would have a negative effect on the popularity of the restaurants taken into consideration in the sample. Indeed, the “standardized coefficient beta”, which represents the strength of the independent variable on the dependent variable, is negative (-0.18). Based on the findings just exposed, it can now be stated that even if the category “dish” represents 47.36% of the 150 posts analyzed in the sample, an increase in its quantity would not necessarily lead to an increase in popularity.

Therefore, to find out what categories could be significant in increasing the popularity rate, a multilinear regression analysis was run taking as independent variables the remaining nine categories.

Model Summary (Popularity)				
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
.65	.42	.39	.01	

ANOVA (Popularity)					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	.00	9	.00	11.39	.000
Residual	.00	140	.00		
Total	.01	149			

Coefficients (Popularity)					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.00	.00	.00	5.94	.000
INTERIOR	.00	.00	-.05	-.79	.432
EXTERIOR	.00	.00	-.04	-.66	.510
EVENTS	.00	.00	-.03	-.41	.681
TEAM	.00	.00	.08	1.17	.246
CHEF	.01	.00	.35	5.28	.000
UGCs	.00	.00	-.03	-.43	.671
REVIEWS_AND_ARTICLES	.00	.00	.12	1.82	.072
E_COMMERCE	.00	.00	.00	.00	.996
MICHELIN_STAR_NEWS	.02	.00	.54	8.33	.000

Figure 9: Multilinear Regression Outcome (PSPP)

From Figure 9, it can now be noticed that the correlation (R), R square, and the adjusted R square, respectively 0.65, 0.42, and 0.39, are much higher than the ones analyzed previously, referring to a much stronger correlation between the “y” variable and the “x” variables and to a higher percentage variance of “y” explained by “x”s .

Moving forward to the next table, the ANOVA one, the global significance value of the whole model is <0.001 which is lower than the standard error of 0.05: popularity can be predicted by the independent variables “interior”, “exterior”, “events”, “team”, “UGCs”, “Reviews and articles”, “e-commerce” and “Michelin star news”.

Now that it has been stated that the independent variables are useful predictors to determine popularity, the coefficients' table makes clear which ones are useful to get correct and positive predictions. Looking at the significance values of each category (last column of the last table in Figure 9) it can be noticed that most of the variables are bigger than the standard error 0.05, indicating then most of them are not certain to get correct predictions. However, two categories have a significance value equal to <0.001 : the "chef" and the "Michelin star news" category. From this latter finding, it can be then stated that these two last categories can be used to get better forecasts, but to check whether they have a positive effect on popularity the standardized beta value needs to be interpreted. The beta value for those posts in which the chef is the focus is 0.35 while the value for those posts in which Michelin news is reported is equal to 0.54. Both values are positive leading to the conclusion that the strength of the independent variables on polarity is moderate. Furthermore, it can be stated that the effect of posting Michelin star-related news has a greater impact on popularity than the chef-focused one. As confirmation of this last statement, by analyzing the value of the unstandardized coefficient b it can be demonstrated that an increase of 1% in the quantity of Michelin star-related posts would lead to an increase of 2% in popularity, while an increase of 1% in the quantity of chef-focused posts would lead to an increase in popularity of 1%.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

The main target of this thesis was to understand how social media are used by luxury restaurants to promote their fine cuisine and to influence individuals when travelling. Particularly, this study analyzed what content is more likely to be effective to increase popularity, and thus reaching more people, by conducting a qualitative content analysis.

From the findings reported in the literature review, it has been repeatedly said that food is the most common focus of digital marketing activities for restaurants. Indeed, from the analysis conducted before the category "dish" was the one that occurred the most on posts taken from the sample. This can be justified by the concept of "visual

hunger” previously explained, in which marketers try to arise emotional reactions from the audience by focusing their promotion on pictures and videos that make people want to consume the dish in first person (Swani & Milne, 2017; Spence et al., 2016). Connected to this latter belief, during the research it has been noticed that the three restaurants taken from the sample use a specific strategy when it comes to food: they tend to use in their content pre-arranged backgrounds and to zoom in on specific details of the dish. This is due to the fact that fine dining differs from other types of cuisine since it is more a gourmet-focused experience rather than a simple meal (Hall & Mitchel 2005, cited in Batat 2020). By alienating the dish from reality and by highlighting aspects of the food marketers are able to convince the audience of its uniqueness. The main pillar of culinary tourism is to travel to eat something different that arises emotions and gives start to new experiences (Lee et al, 2015). The gourmet tourists who are looking forward to tasting novel food, as described by the Satter’s hierarchy, are active on social media platforms and it could be therefore assumed that they are attracted on this type of content. However, it can now be stated that for Michelin-starred restaurants based in Italy focusing only on one type of content would be counterproductive. Indeed, from the findings of the statistical testing previously run it resulted that increasing the quantity of content focused on food not only would have not increased popularity, but it could also have decreased it. This could be due to the significant increase in digital content that individuals have available nowadays (Ballhaus & Chow, 2021). Indeed, according to Ballhaus & Chow (2021), the first global pandemic of this century forced many sectors to shift most of their operations to digital platforms leading to make people feeling overwhelmed by the amount of content delivered through electronic devices, highlighting the negative aspect of digital integration in hodiern society. Therefore, audiences of any sector need to be stimulated even more than before and by presenting a homogeneous type of content the engagement rate does not tend to arise and thus popularity cannot be increased.

Nonetheless, it is important to underline that this research is not representative of all Michelin-starred restaurants, and it cannot be declared that an increase in the quantity of this type of content would lead necessarily to a negative outcome. This

could be due to the fact that only a small percentage of restaurants' feeds were analyzed.

Moving on to those categories that from the research resulted to be the most effective, it has been observed that news or articles concerning the Michelin Guide were the type of content that arose the highest number of social media interactions. This latter finding is particularly interesting because of its significant impact: despite the category covered only 2.66% of the posts analyzed in the sample, it resulted being the one type of post that would lead to further development of the restaurant's image and to an increase in its reputation and popularity.

Basing our knowledge on the results of the analysis, it can be stated that the Michelin Guide in Italian luxury gastronomy represents the most powerful marketing tool that luxury restaurants can use as a reference or topic to increase their engagement rates.

A further category that showed a positive impact on popularity is the "chef" category. Even if a little less than those posts concerning Michelin stars' news, this category ended up representing a potential theme to exploit in marketing strategies. Taking as reference the words used by the Director of the Michelin Guide Great Britain & Ireland, Rebecca Burr, the Michelin starred restaurants are "*put on a stage*": they need to demonstrate their value and to make clear why they have been awarded a Michelin star (Heighton-Ginns, 2018). In research led by the experts Maccinis and Folkes (Macinnis & Folkes, 2017), it has been observed that humanizing brands and using anthropomorphic aspects in brand promotions is an effective strategy in marketing terms. Indeed, the audience feels itself part of the promotion and will be more likely to show emotional responses (Macinnis & Folkes, 2017).

From the results of the research, it can be stated that humanizing the business into the figure of the chef is a strategy that could be taken into consideration when thinking about increasing users' responses.

Eventually, all other categories have a much lower impact on the engagement rate than the three analyzed before. However, as indicated by the ANOVA table, the other seven categories resulted in a valid significance value indicating then they do have an impact on users' stimuli. The main problem lies in being sure whether they can be used to increase popularity since their significant values in the so-called "coefficient table" were not conclusive. This issue could be caused by the fact that most of them did not represent more than the 10 % of the posts taken into consideration in the sample, and, therefore, it is possible that not enough data was withdrawn from the Facebook's feeds to determine their potential impacts.

What's new resulted in this research is that UGCs, defined by experts and academic articles as a vital component of new digital strategies, are rarely used in Italian restaurants' feeds (as described in table 3, representing only 2% of the posts analyzed). The Web 2.0 is described as a "participatory", in which users' stimuli and interactions are the main core (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018). However, in the marketing strategy of these three restaurants, it appears that customers' have only a major role when liking, commenting, and sharing, rather than making content on their own. The decision to limit users' creativity and personal effort could be seen as a further aspect to investigate into more detail and, maybe, could be also a further category that could enhance popularity.

Digital marketing approaches are several and are being developed at a higher rate due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social shift of human interactions into the digital world.

This thesis is a subjective interpretation of how luxury restaurants based in Italy use Facebook as a marketing tool and provides a potential starting point to deepen knowledge on this aspect that should be more investigated due to the growing importance of the luxury sector (*Luxury Travel Market Size, Share & Growth | Industry Report, 2021–2027*, 2021). Indeed, by understanding more about what prospects and leads are expecting to see from this industry, adjusted marketing strategies can be created and lead to further development of the luxury gastronomic tourism sector.

6 Limitations

The research has been conducted by taking into consideration just one social media platform (Facebook) to evaluate what strategies have been opted in the field of marketing for luxury restaurants awarded one Michelin star based in Italy. As previously explained, the decision to focus only on restaurants that have been awarded with just one Michelin star has been met to draw meaningful conclusions since restaurants with more stars could have an already established social media presence and their strategy could differ significantly. Nevertheless, the sample tested is not representative of every restaurant that falls under this category worldwide or just in all of Italy. Therefore, this thesis seeks to put the basis on an aspect of digital marketing that has not been deepened into detail yet: luxury gastronomic tourism.

This research could be improved by taking into consideration more restaurants that fall under the category of luxury restaurants based on different touristic destinations in Italy, by analyzing more posts but also by analyzing how luxury restaurants use other social media platforms. It is also important to underline that digital marketing is now becoming more variegate since covid-19's outbreak, making then clear that businesses are testing new digital approaches to improve their operations and their presence online. Moreover, the qualitative content analysis does not allow to gain an objective representation of facts but a subjective interpretation of a phenomenon.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Appendix 1

1) Dish



Figure 10 (on the left): Example of “dish” content with pre-arranged and white background from “La Leggenda dei Frati”.

Figure 11 (on the right): Example of “dish” content with no pre-arranged and normal background from “La Leggenda dei Frati”.

2) Interior



Figure 12: Example of "interior" content from "Il Tino Ristorante"

3) Exterior



Figure 13: Example of "exterior" content from "La Leggenda dei Frati"

4) Events



Figure 14: Example of “event” content from “La Leggenda dei Frati”

5) Team



Figure 15: Example of “team” content from “Ristorante Andreina”

6) Chef



Figure 16: Example of “Chef” content from “Ristorante Andreina”

7) UGCs



Figure 17: Example of “UGCs” content from “Il Tino Ristorante”

8) Reviews and articles



Figure 18: Example of “reviews and articles” content from “Ristorante Andreina”

9) E-commerce



Figure 19: Example of “e-commerce” content from “La Leggenda dei Frati”

10) Michelin star news



Figure 20: Example of “michelin star news” content from “Ristorante Andreina”