

Marketing cheese tourism in global times

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Culinary heritage,
Food tourism,
Gastronomy,
Regional development.

Food tourism is defined as a journey to a destination in order to discover a culture through its food. Special segments of culinary tourism have emerged during the last decades to valorize local products and drinks and award tourism value to food. This is the case of cheese tourism, which has been recently studied with increasing management and marketing implications. In this sense, planning and development of food-based marketing strategies represent a key factor towards the success of a niche tourism. In particular, this paper investigates the process of marketing cheese tourism in social media. Drawing on a visual content analysis focused on Instagram, the research analyses the virtual storytelling of Manchego cheese. Results showcase how cheese is communicated to audiences and reveal the potential of social media to create a cheese-based narrative. Both theoretical and practical implications of the study are described.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between food and tourism is recently gathering a growing attention (Ellis et al., 2018; Hall, 2020). Both academics and practitioners have extensively worked towards the understanding of how food products are transformed into tourism attractions (see Dixit, 2019). This has led to the identification of food experiences as a main travel motivation (McKercher, Okumus and Okumus, 2008; Su, Johnson and O'Mahony, 2020) which, in turn, anticipates the creation of specific examples of culinary tourism such as wine tourism (Hall, 2013), beer tourism (Alonso, 2011), coffee tourism (Jolliffe, 2010) and, more recently, cheese tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2015). As part of cheese tourism, many activities emerge where visitors can experience the processes of cheese making and cheese tasting as a source of cheese identity.

In this sense, previous research showcases that the creation of identities also emerges from food –when people eat people symbolically taste ‘the nature, the culture and the identity of a region’ (Bessière 1998, p.25). Food provides a ‘special sensory

window’ (Telfer and Hashimoto, 2003, p.159) to a culture. Specifically, cheese culture relies on “foodscapes that reflect its historical background. Cheesemakers, their factories and farms as well as markets and cafes represent the iconography of Canterbury’s cheesescapes. All of them provide an authentic cheese made in New Zealand, a cheese that is proud to be local, and many cheese varieties are named in honour of local geography. Milk is not only the result of the landscape – as animals are feeding and grazing in there – but also a very important part of New Zealand culture” (Fusté-Forné, 2016, p.48).

Culinary travelers aim to discover ‘how’ people, landscapes, and traditions are built on food (Stone, Migacz and Wolf, 2019). For example, cheese festivals and markets do not only communicate the cultural identity of a territory but also its natural context: the environment where animals are grazing and feeding. The sense of place is encapsulated in a piece of cheese (Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2019). In this sense, traditional marketing strategies and, especially, the online avenues (for example, social media) offer a wide range of

Research paper

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possibilities towards the protection and marketing of food and tourism (Getz et al., 2014; Sigala, Christou and Gretzel, 2012). Drawing on the narrative of Manchego cheese via Instagram, this paper analyses how cheese is promoted digitally.

The paper is divided into four parts. First, it deals with the literature review which contributes to the description of cheese tourism, and outlines the significance of marketing food tourism practices. Later, methodology and results of the study are described, and conclusions presented.

2. Literature Review

The role of cheese in tourism has been lately studied (see Fusté-Forné, 2020a) in the framework of food tourism studies (Rachão et al. 2019; Okumus, 2020). Cheese tourism is a special interest culinary tourism which is described as the process of attributing tourism value to cheese (Fusté-Forné and Mundet, 2020) and it refers to the appreciation of the processes of milk production and cheese making, which are especially relevant in rural areas with a livestock tradition. Cheese tourism refers to the “process of developing a product closely linked to a territory, and drift towards a typology that includes not only the tourist visit to the craft workshop, but also a set of synergies from complementary food consumption and leisure” (Fusté-Forné, 2015, p.91). As acknowledged above, research on the impacts of cheese tourism for regional development has widely focused on rural environments. However, recent studies also discuss the role of cheese in industrial tourism (Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban, 2019) and urban tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2020b). All these spaces where cheese is valorized, as observed in Figure 1, are complemented with a fourth factor discussed below: the potential of the online world to enhance the promotion of cheese. Cheese provides an authentic taste of place (Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2019), which contributes to regional development (Čaušević and Hrelja, 2020) and creates a meaningful tourist experience (Folgado-Fernández, Di-Clemente and Hernández-Mogollón, 2019) which is based on a local storytelling (Fusté-Forné, 2020c).

Marketing food and beverage is critical for the development of food tourism (Du Rand and Heath, 2006; Hall, 2013). The role of social media in the promotion of food and drink products has experienced an impressive growth (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2020). Previous research has analyzed the importance of social media as an avenue to disseminate the values of gastronomy (Mariné-Roig et al., 2019; Ramírez-Gutiérrez,

Santana-Talavera and Fernández-Betancort, 2020; Yu and Sun, 2019). Since no previous research has studied the online promotion of cheese, this paper contributes to fill in this research gap in order to provide an exploratory picture of what are the contents included in the online marketing of cheese. Within the relationships between food and tourism and the processes of marketing food and drink products, quality labels emerge as an illustrative example. This is the case of a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) or a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), which acknowledge the uniqueness of a particular food in a specific place (Fusté-Forné, 2020c). Quality labels generate trust among customers (Armesto-López and Martin, 2006; Sadílek, 2019) and largely impact on food tourism marketing (Achilleas and Anastasios, 2008; Folgado-Fernández, Campón-Cerro and Hernández-Mogollón, 2019).

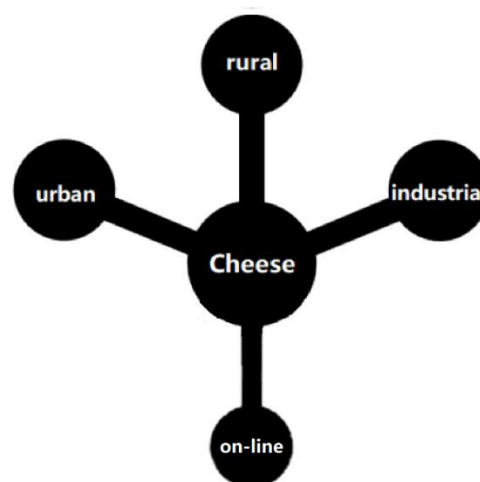


Figure 1. Cheese tourism environments

Source: Author

Marketing tourism through social media contributes to the survival and visibility of tourism products and experiences (Minazzi, 2015), especially in a crisis environment such as the generated by the spread of Covid-19 (Sigala, 2020).

3. Methodology

This research is built on a study case (Yin, 2009) which aims to analyze how cheese is marketed in social media. Based on the case of Manchego cheese, which is the most popular Spanish cheese product (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2018), the research is focused on a visual content analysis (Spencer, 2010) of the Instagram account of the PDO Manchego cheese (@quesomanchegodop). In this sense, Instagram is the most relevant example of social media for marketing purposes (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015), especially with regard to gastronomy (Vila, Costa

and Ellinger, 2020). The study covers the period between October 29, 2018 (when the Instagram account was created) and June 30, 2020, which allows to approach the characteristics of cheese social media promotion. Also, results preliminary observe the narrative during the initial effects of Covid-19 in Spain, specially the first three months of the coronavirus outbreak since Spanish government ordered the country lockdown in March 14, 2020 (Spanish Government, 2020). Data collection included a visual analysis of the posts (N=107), and results are described below.

4. Results

The analysis is based on all the posts (N=107) which generated a total of 4740 likes and 58 comments, whose analysis is observed in Table 1. Information only shows the relative relevance in the number of likes (with an average of 52 likes per post), because the typical deviation of the number of comments is too high (added to very low values with regard to the average number of comments per publication). Furthermore, Figure 2 reflects the evolution in the number of likes. Although a certain linearity is observed, a growing trend over time can also enhance the production of more content which gathers more attention of users and more feedback.

Table 1: Statistical analysis of posts (own source)

	Median (\bar{x})	Typical deviation (σ)	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Likes	52,09 likes	17,26	20	100	80
Comments	0,64 comments	0,93	0	4	4

Source: Author

The visual analysis of the posts consisted of the collection of the objects represented and the development of the categories. Six themes were defined: product, people, natural heritage, cultural heritage, events, and information. Every picture could include more than one object, and thus 107 posts supposed a total of 158 object representations. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Manchego cheese visual representation in Instagram

Category	N	%	N (Covid)	% (Covid)
Product	68	43,0%	3	16,7%
People	9	5,7%	1	5,6%
Natural heritage	14	8,9%	4	22,2%
Cultural heritage	24	15,2%	3	16,7%
Events	5	3,2%	0	0,0%
Information	38	24,1%	7	38,9%
Total	158	100,0%	18	100,0%

Source: Author

The analysis showcases that the communication of cheese is based on three features: the values of the own product which is included by its own right, but also as part of dishes and culinary elaborations; the information provided around cheese, such as Manchego cheese awards and awareness campaigns (for example, led by celebrity chef Alberto Chicote); and the cultural heritage that surrounds cheese exemplified by cheesemaking machinery and processes.

Focusing on each feature, the product category (43.0%) includes publications with a predominance of cheese along with other examples of food and drink such as wine, bread and dried fruit. The pictures where the cheese appears are usually close-ups, with special attention paid to the own

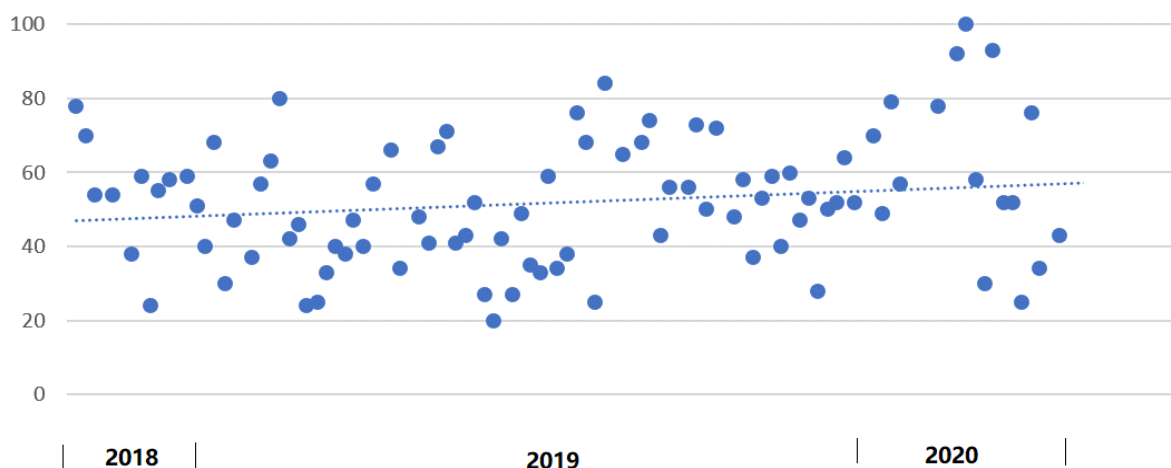


Figure 2: Evolution in the number of likes

Source: Author

cheese without ornaments. In contrast, some of the publications also show a variety of products around cheese that engage users with the combination of flavors and pairings (Figure 3). In most of the images cheese is promoted with a casein plaque which serves as a unique brand identifier, as discussed below. If the number of likes under this category are analyzed, average of likes is higher than observed data for the overall sample (60.78 likes per post).



Figure 3: Publication on 26 December 2019

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/quesomanchegodop>

In the people category, there are different publications that acknowledge awards and collaborations for the promotion of cheese, seminars and workshops about cheese, and the aforementioned campaign to provide guidance to differentiate Manchego cheese with celebrities such as chef Alberto Chicote. In this category, the presence of cheese professionals is also observed, for example, in Figure 4 a person is working at a handcraft workshop.



Figure 4: Publication on 23 March 2020

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/quesomanchegodop>

Regarding the categories linked to heritage, on the one hand, natural heritage encapsulates a presence of landscapes with the presence of Manchega sheep (Figure 5). Publications explain the characteristics of this specific breed of sheep, which is native to the La Mancha, and whose milk is used to elaborate Manchego cheeses. A unique cheese that comes from a unique sheep. On the other hand, cultural heritage refers to the protection and promotion of the historical nature of cheese making with machinery and utensils used in the production and preservation processes, as it is also observed in the following figure.



Figure 5: Publications on 1 March 2019 and 6 November 2018

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/quesomanchegodop>

The events category, with only five publications (3.2%), is focused on fairs and festivals both at national and international levels. Events are advertised through the promotion of posters (Figure 6). Finally, the category information publishes awareness campaigns where advise is provided to identify Manchego cheese with, for example, the casein plaque displayed in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Publications on 2 May 2019 and 18 October 2019

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/quesomanchegodop>

Other self-promotion publications are also included in the category and some pictures are posted to celebrate special days (for example, Christmas and New Year).

A preliminary and exploratory comparison between pre- and post-lockdown periods in Spain shows that the visual representation changed from a product-based narrative which relies on cultural heritages of cheese to a storytelling with a growing presence of information contents, and also animals and natural heritages that provide cheese with a unique Manchego taste. This matches with open-air activities as spaces for safe tourist experiences in line with post-Covid tourism recovery (see, for example, World Tourism Organization, 2020). However, this analysis relies only on a small sample of pictures published between March 14 and June 30 (n=11 with 18 object representations) which certainly needs further evidence to confirm or not the preliminary results described in this short paper.

5. Conclusion

This research explores the relationships between food, tourism, and social media. It does not only contribute to a further understanding of cheese tourism from a marketing perspective, but it also approaches the role of social media in the promotion of food. The paper has analyzed the narrative of Manchego cheese in Instagram, in order to discuss how its visual content is delivered to users and visitors. This is the main theoretical implication of this article, which in turn provides practical information to both public and private tourism organizations about how a cheese

experience is promoted in the framework of food tourism planning and management.

Results show that the main contents include cheese products, but also cultural and natural landscapes that communicate the sense of place which is transferred to cheese. Information contents are also well established in Manchego cheese storytelling, accentuated as a consequence of the coronavirus crisis. In this sense, the spread of the Covid-19 has resulted in the temporary closure of tourism services (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020), which has increased the online activity of tourism providers (Agostino, Arnaboldi and Lampis, 2020). This paper confirms that a lot of opportunities emerge from this online promotion in order to narrate cheese as a product and cheese making as an identity and heritage marker in a specific place, in this case the Spanish La Mancha region.

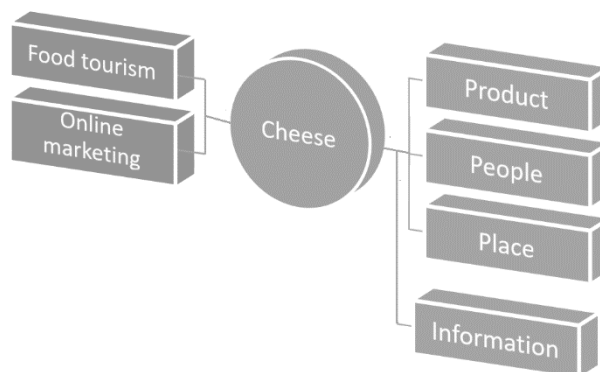


Figure 7: Online promotion of cheese in a food tourism framework

Source: Author

This research approached the online marketing strategy of cheeses in Spain, drawing from the example of PDO Manchego cheese and the visual analysis of its Instagram posts. Further studies must also analyze other quality cheeses in the country and abroad in order to generalize the results, and observe differences and similarities between regional and national environments. Other social media should also be scrutinized to provide a more robust picture of marketing strategies of food and beverage tourism. Also, the analysis of other Spanish identity products, such as olive oil, could bring a more comprehensive description of the digital relationships between rural products and tourism experiences.

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Keywords: Culinary heritage, Food tourism, Gastronomy, Regional development

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Author statement: Author(s) declare(s) that All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

This paper does not required ethics committee report

Justification: The methodology of this study does not require an ethics committee report.