Relational dynamics of high-level gastronomy in tourism

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

The restaurant industry has undergone a huge boom in the last decade and is considered an important component of the tourism industry (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). In this context, attracting culinary tourists has become the goal of many destinations since they tend to stay at the destination longer, thereby increasing tourist spending (UNWTO, 2017). Gastronomy has been found to be a fundamental attraction factor of a destination and an element of its image, which is most evenly recognised across different types of destinations (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). The reasons travellers choose a particular destination differ, but new tourism trends indicate that quality cuisine is becoming increasingly relevant to the process of choosing a destination and the construction of the destination's image (Lai, Khoo-Lattimore, & Wang, 2017).

The goal of this thesis is to analyse the relational dynamics of high-level gastronomy between customers, destinations, and the environment at technological and social levels. To reach this objective, the research project has been broken down into four sub-objectives, each addressed in a separate article:

- ✓ To determine in-depth the profile of high-level restaurant visitors, i.e., how they behave at a gastronomic, touristic, and technological level before, during, and after a visit to a restaurant;
- ✓ To establish whether high-level restaurants are in fact tourist resources capable of creating and attracting tourist flows, or if they are simply complementary activities;
- ✓ To create a model to check the extent to which high-level restaurant websites are adapted to information and communication technologies (ICT), e-commerce, and to the demands of current customers regarding the content and use of ICT in planning and booking services;
- ✓ To analyse the behaviour and priorities of high-level gastronomy customers to determine if today's society pays more attention to the reputation of these types of restaurants, or if customers are simply looking to enjoy the gastronomic experience.

Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of the thesis, three models have been proposed.

The first model is capable of quantifying the importance of single tourist attractions as a nucleus, their interactions and motivation with push factors, the surroundings and the destination and how strong they are. The second model is proposed to analyse the effects on tourists' intentions to return and recommend this type of experience to others. The third model consists of a progressive analysis of the restaurants' websites, which starts with a content analysis and continues with the application of the extended model of Internet commerce adoption (eMICA) to identify each website's level of maturity. It ends with the integration of both previous methods using principal component analysis.

To apply these models, an empirical study was conducted with a sample of 1,500 travellers who visited Michelin-starred restaurants. A self-administered (online) questionnaire was used to collect data from visitors from July to December 2017, and the link to the questionnaire was posted on Facebook groups/pages with high numbers of followers. The main analyses performed with these data were logit analysis (model one) and structural equation modelling (model two).

In regard to the third model, a total of 980 websites for restaurants with Michelin stars in Spain, France and Italy were analysed, based on the 2016 Michelin Guide. The analyses consisted of checking whether the websites accomplished the e-MICA model phases and layers, as well as checking which contents of the four web-content analysis dimensions (information, interaction, e-commerce and additional

functions) the websites present. Data collection was conducted in April 2017. The main analyses performed are analysis of variance and principal component analysis.

Results
Regarding the first objective, we discovered two different segments of tourists. The first group of tourists included those who visit a top-level restaurant as the main motivation for their trip. The second group were primarily motivated by the destination itself. Both groups valued both their experience of the destination and their gastronomic experience. Individuals in the two segments displayed different behaviour in terms of the status they perceived by visiting a top-level restaurant and their post-purchase recommendations and intention to return.

The analysis showed that certain customer segments were pushed by different motivations, and these motivations affected the importance that the nucleus gave them as an attraction factor (second objective). The application of the model also showed that gastronomy was not merely an external pull factor related to destinations, but also that the taste for and enjoyment of gastronomic experiences were important motivations for travellers.

Regarding relational dynamics and the development and maturity of restaurant websites (third objective), results of the evaluation revealed that 10% of the selected Michelin restaurants do not currently have a presence on the Net or their presence is completely static. The remaining 90% of high-quality restaurants analysed were found to be aware of the importance of being present on the Web, as most have access to the Internet and a website. The Michelin restaurant websites generally displayed a medium level of interactivity. However, fewer than 30% allowed the entire purchasing process to be completed via the Internet. The results further suggest that these restaurants in France, Italy, and Spain could be left behind in their development and use of the Internet compared to other sectors such as accommodation, travel agencies, and airlines. We can therefore say that they are not taking advantage of the opportunities that the Web presents as a viable tool for promotion. In addition, the results of the study provide us with information on the differing states of progress according to the country where the restaurant is located. French and Italian restaurants present a greater degree of maturity and development of content than Spanish restaurants. French restaurants are also more mature and much more adapted to e-commerce and aware of online security than their Spanish and Italian counterparts. We also observed cultural differences with respect to content, with the chef being promoted in France, the name of the restaurant in Spain, and the product in Italy.

Concerning the analysis of relational dynamics (fourth objective), the results were based on the theory of motivation related to the possibility of obtaining reputation and recognition for consuming high-end gastronomy as well as the enjoyment of the gastronomic experience. The model showed, on the one hand, that the degree of perceived reputation of participating in consumption at high-level restaurants positively influenced intentions to return and recommendations. On the other hand, the degree of the perceived experience of participating in consumption at high-level restaurants also positively influenced intentions to return and recommendations.

Theoretical conclusions
The main conclusion of this thesis is the importance of high-level gastronomy tourism and the potential it has for the promotion of destinations as a pull factor and generator of tourism flows. The results also showed the need to update the websites of this type of restaurant to current technology to promote tourist resources. This study further concludes that gastronomic experience and status positively affect the intentions of returning and recommending the consumption of high-end gastronomy.

Practical application of the dissertation

This thesis contributes significantly through these three models to improving the management and decision making of restaurant managers at a certain level as well as public managers of destinations at which high-level gastronomy is or can become a main element of attraction for tourists and thus generate tourist flows.

The results may also be helpful for institutions and communication managers of destinations in improving their promotion and communication strategies, creating brand image, identifying target markets, attracting new tourists, diversifying supply in mature and saturated destinations, and de-seasonalising demand.

It should be considered that the most difficult task is getting customers to travel to the destination. Once there, even if their reason for travelling is to visit a single tourist attraction, synergies must be created between destination entrepreneurs and managers to retain the tourists and extend their stays. To do so, an increase in the range of activities related to the nucleus (the restaurant) is recommended, which will encourage loyalty behaviour and the development of joint promotions. We must break with the idea that the restaurants need the destinations more than the destinations need the restaurants. As shown in the thesis, this is not the case.

Synergies must be created between the destination and the restaurant managers, as the customers who visit this type of restaurant associate the destination with the establishment and, given that they have pleasant memories of the experience that stay with them in the post-travel stage, they form new motivations that make them potential prescribers to and ambassadors of the destination.

Content of the dissertation

The thesis is a compendium of five articles already published or accepted for publication by various journals.

Abstract of Chapter 1

The main aim of this chapter is to characterise tourists visiting top-level restaurants to ascertain the profile of these types of customers, their behaviours and their influence on the destinations where the restaurants are located The results reveal the existence of two segments whose behaviours differ, where the individuals of the first segment consider the culinary experience as the main reason for their tourist visit to the destination. In contrast, those in the second segment consider the main reason for their visit to the destination to be tourism. Moreover, the diners from both segments display different behaviours in terms of their post-purchase, recommendation and intention to return behaviours and the perception of the status with which their visit to the restaurant provides them (Daries, Cristobal Fransi, Ferrer-Rosell, & Marine-Roig, 2018b).

Abstract of Chapter 2

Tourists travel because they are pushed by internal motivations and attracted or pulled by certain elements and features of the destinations they select. However, a growing number of destinations have similar tourist attractions and need to differentiate them. In this chapter, we argue that certain types of businesses, such as high-quality restaurants, can generate tourism flows in their own right within a context where the role of tourists and enterprises has shifted from a passive to an active one and where companies actively seek to become destination pull factors. They also show the importance of the nucleus (restaurant) as a factor of attraction to the destination, as well as the importance of the destination/surroundings to the nucleus (Daries, Marine-Roig, Ferrer-Rosell, Cristóbal-Fransi, 2019).

Abstract of Chapter 3
High-quality restaurants have become key assets in the economies of many countries and are often considered attractors of tourism in themselves. Moreover, diners who choose high-level restaurants visit their websites before going, even before going to the destination's website, and they often book reservations without knowing where they are located. However, high-quality restaurants do not promote the tourist resources of an area. The model applied to 980 Michelin-starred restaurants in France, Italy and Spain shows that website maturity and content development are positively related, and that the aforementioned restaurants are not taking advantage of the opportunities that the Internet offers and show differences in progress depending on the country where they are located and the category (Daries, Cristobal Fransi, & Marine Roig, 2017; Daries, Cristobal-Fransi, Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2018a).

Abstract of Chapter 4
Posturing or enjoying the gastronomic experience? The aim of this study is to know if the public that recommends and is regular to this type of establishments if there are really interested in gastronomy, or really they visit this type of restaurants to be able to explain it to their friends or share it on social networks. The study confirms that the gastronomic experience and status positively affect the intentions of returning and recommending the consumption of high-end gastronomy, having the effect of creating a much stronger experience (Daries, Ferrer-Rosell, Marine-Roig, Cristóbal Fransi, 2018c).

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