



# **Food Tourism:**

A netnographic study about online engagement on food tourism communities and what to look for as a business owner

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**Title:** Food Tourism: A netnographic study about online engagement on food tourism communities and what to look for as a business owner.

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### **Abstract:**

Food tourism is becoming a relevant and developing trend in the industry of tourism. Consumers nowadays travel in order to explore and to get acquainted with cultures and realities they haven't experienced. A substantial part of this discovery is played by food. This cultural feature is one of the strongest and most representative, it has been passed on from generation to generation to, ultimately, culminate on what it is today. Considering this trend, existing academic research about food tourism with the target of understanding consumers' engagement has been conceived but is limited. Therefore, by using a qualitative method of netnography, the present thesis aims to understand users' engagement in the online food tourism community. Results show the emergence of three themes that can be related to online food tourism communities. The most evident is online leadership demonstrated by the tight relationship between the leader and followers of the community. Secondly, knowledge is a theme due to the continuous exchange of food tourism expertise within the communities. Lastly, food tourism comes hand in hand with the development of emotions and the influence of behaviours, and thus the last theme to be considered is consequences. To conclude, implications include how food tourism business owners should advertise their food experiences, how they could collect valuable insights about their target audience and why opinion leaders shouldn't be ignored.

### **Resumo:**

O turismo de alimentos está a manifestar-se como uma tendência relevante e em desenvolvimento na indústria do turismo. Atualmente, os consumidores viajam para explorar e conhecer culturas e realidades que ainda não vivenciaram. Uma grande parte desta descoberta é feita através da comida. Este aspeto é um dos mais fortes e representativos de uma cultura, uma vez que foi passado de geração em geração para, finalmente, culminar no que é hoje. Considerando esta tendência, a pesquisa acadêmica existente sobre turismo de alimentos, com a preocupação de entender a interação entre consumidores, foi concebida, mas é limitada. Por conseguinte, a presente tese tem como objetivo perceber a interação dos membros de uma comunidade online de turismo de alimentos usando um método qualitativo de netnografia. Os resultados mostram a ascensão de três temas que podem estar relacionados com comunidades online de turismo de alimentos. O mais evidente é a liderança online demonstrada pelo relacionamento acentuado entre o líder e os seguidores da comunidade. Em segundo lugar, o conhecimento surge como tema devido à troca contínua de conhecimento sobre turismo de alimentos nas comunidades. Por último, acompanhando o turismo de alimentos surge o desenvolvimento de emoções e influência de comportamentos, por tal o último tema a ser considerado é consequências. Para concluir, as implicações incluem a forma como os donos de negócios de turismo de alimentos devem anunciar as suas experiências alimentares, como podem recolher informação valiosa sobre o seu público-alvo e a razão pela qual líderes de opinião não devem ser ignorados.

**Keywords:** Food tourism, netnography, online communities, online leadership, knowledge, consequences, YouTube.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem Definition and Relevance

Since the early ages, people have had the curiosity to visit and experience other cultures different from their own. When people travel, they want to explore another continent, another country or another city, with the purpose of being in the presence of people, places and objects they cannot purchase or otherwise take ownership of except in a spiritual sense (MacCannell, 2002).

The desire to explore other civilizations has been growing exponentially and is today praised as the fastest-growing and largest economic sector in the world (MacCannell, 2002). The astronomical numbers show a total contribution of travel and tourism to the global economy of 8.27 trillion in U.S. dollars (Statista online, 2019) with over 1.2 billion international tourist arrivals registered worldwide in 2016 (Roser, 2019).

Since it is known that one of the main expenditures while traveling is food, this sector is also being exposed to major development and growth. While getting to know a destination, food plays a big role on this discovery. On average, tourists want to experience local treats to get a better sense of the culture and to have a more immersive trip. For many, food becomes highly experiential when it is part of a travel experience. Since not all travellers are alike and, therefore, not all are looking for the same food experience when travelling, it would be of interest to food tourism businesses, such as restaurants, festivals or accommodation businesses, to know how to better fit the needs of their target. It is crucial to understand, how tourists make their decisions to purchase or consume food products, and, ultimately, figuring out how to persuade them.

For a small part of the research done in past years, researchers have been adopting ethnographic research to evaluate the cultural aspects of consumer behaviour. Requiring serious time and effort, offline ethnographic research studies are constrained to geographical sites. Being food tourism a subject considered in this dissertation to be global, the research will adapt to an online setting and adopt ethnographic methods to gain insights from virtual communities regarding food tourism.

Food tourism is a trending and popular topic in virtual community debates. A person's expertise in such communities can vary from novice to specialist level and, consequently, different users disclose different aspects of food tourism concerning place, service, price and other additional

insights. Nevertheless, literature that examines users' interaction in online food tourism communities is limited and, therefore, provides an appealing field for further research.

## 1.2 Objective and Research Questions

The underlying dissertation seeks to further analyse online interactions between users in online food tourism communities. The main objective is to understand the behaviour of users, specific language, priorities and, ultimately, any insights to what the current food tourist is looking for when dining while traveling. It should provide managerial implications on how food tourism businesses, such as restaurants, festivals or accommodation businesses, could enhance their dining experience as a whole to better fit their target. As such, the following research questions were formed:

RQ1: What can we learn about the online engagement of the food tourism community through netnographic observation?

In order to understand the dynamics of interaction, the following sub-questions were raised:

RQ2: How does the community elect an expert? Who is he/she? What arguments does the expert use?

RQ3: How is knowledge about food tourism exchanged in an online-based community?

RQ4: What are the most relevant aspects of a food tourism experience for the online food tourism community?

## 1.3 Dissertation outline

The present thesis is composed of six sections. The first chapter includes the explanation and significance of the research, as well as the formulation of the research questions. Immediately after, it is presented a review of academic literature involving the topics of Food Tourism, Online Communities, Online Leadership and Netnography. Straightaway, the methodology used in the study is explained along with a clarification of how the several steps of the method of Netnography were applied. The fourth chapter presents the thematic findings that resulted from the qualitative research of the food tourism online communities. Moreover, chapter five discloses the main conclusions that encase the research questions answered, theoretical implications and managerial implications. Finally, the dissertation is concluded with limitations and some future research proposals.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Food Tourism

Food and tourism are two terms that have been associated and looked at together in the most diverse types of research along past decades (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Kline, Lee, & Knollenberg, 2018; MacLaurin, 2001). However, it has only been in the last years that the power of food in tourism has achieved relevant importance among researchers, and that food and beverage travel has been considered more than a niche activity (Stone, Soulard, Migacz & Wolf, 2018). This has happened as a result of emerging beliefs such as food being considered an important peak of tourism experience (Quan & Wang, 2004). A peak experience being a moment created when the consumer's utilitarian needs have been stimulated by the introduction of new elements (Quan & Wang, 2004). It follows that, food in tourism has been showed by researchers as the second most significant cultural element of destination attractiveness (Stone et al., 2018).

Some years ago, food tourism was far away from being considered as a type of traveling. In 2001, Turner and Witt didn't include food tourism when they broke down types of traveling into business, holiday and visits to friends and relatives. Currently, as new studies have demonstrated that tourists spend nearly 40% of their budget on food when traveling (Jandala, & Hercz, 2015), the creation of the concept of food tourism emerged.

While there is still no clear consensus of a generally accepted definition of food tourism in the literature, there seems to be two general approaches. A first approach, following the World Food Travel Association (2018), defines the concept in a broader way that leaves many aspects to be detailed. Explained by "the act of traveling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place" this definition is so vast that people might believe it comprises any dining experience during a trip, even at common fast food chain restaurants.

As a contrast, a second approach, following Long (2005), defines the term in multiple situations, scenarios and experiences. It is exclusive and narrow, and in particular, Long (2005) limits food tourism to culinary experiences belonging to another culture.

Hence, a combination of both definitions previously seen would be desirable. As such, for this dissertation it will be considered, as stated by Smith and Xiao (2008), that a tourism experience where an individual learns about, appreciates, or consumes local culinary resources is food tourism. Moreover, it comprises travel expressly motivated by culinary interests including

travel where gastronomic experiences happen but are not the primary motive for the trip (Smith & Xiao, 2008).

Although the main concept of this review is food tourism, it is necessary to take into consideration the concepts used in similar fashion, culinary tourism and gastronomy tourism (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). “Gastronomy is used to describe the study of food and culture” (Pearson & Pearson, 2017, p. 346), while culinary corresponds to the practice of cookery or the activity of cooking (WikiDiff online, 2019). Kivela and Crofts (2005) defined culinary tourism and gastronomy tourism as a way of travel having as a priority the exploration and enjoyment of a destination’s food and beverage, in order to sense unique and enduring gastronomic experiences.

## 2.2 Online Communities

In the history of communications, the Internet and the World-Wide-Web have an unparalleled history (Sindhav & Hagel, 1998). With that, and around twenty-five years ago, online communities’ rise and ascension happened (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). Since then, due to extraordinary popularity, growth and influence (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007), participation in online conversations has grown from a relatively small marginal activity to a main-stream practice (Kozinets et al., 2014). Nowadays, social media is used by over a billion people to communicate, create and share information, opinions and insights (Kozinets et al., 2014). Such activity has captured attention of marketing academicians (Sindhav & Hagel, 1998) in such manner that online research communities have been utilized as a substitute to traditional online research methods. This shift in mindset is due to the current culture that highly values listening to consumers (Bang, Youn, Rowean, Jennings, & Austin, 2018).

Since the emergence of computer-mediated communications, a definition of the concept online community has been the topic of heated debate and discussion (Dover & Kelman, 2018). An approach, following Sindhav and Hagel (1998), state that a virtual community is a group that shares interest, even passion, for a particular activity or product category. A second approach, following Mathwick, Wiertz and De Ruyter (2007), defends that a virtual community is most popularly committed to uncover solutions, exchange best practices, and assemble expertise. Meaning that any topic is valid to be discussed in online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Given these points, for the purpose of this dissertation, an online community will be denoted by “a group of people who interact digitally around a common theme, or purpose, within a relatively confined and defined context” (Dover & Kelman, 2018, p. 2).

The importance of online communities in consumer study has reached researchers' interest several years ago (Kozinets et al., 2014), however it was only later that marketers recognized the developing influence of the Internet and of consumers that operate in online communities (Kozinets, 2002).

With a boom of popularity in the last decade, online communities have become a key platform for users to share information and interests, and to engage in social interactions (Park, Rishika, Janakiraman, Houston, & Yoo, 2018). As declared previously, marketers shifted their attention and as a result, organizations did too (Bang et al., 2018). According to Bang et al. (2018), brands and organizations are increasing their investment of resources in assembling and managing online communities. As social networks are producing high levels of excitement as learning incubators for diverse consumers (Jayanti & Singh, 2009), academicians, like Sindhav and Hagel (1998), composed a viable model of a virtual community for a business. Sindhav and Hagel (1998) defined "member focus, integration of content and communication, emphasis on member-generated content, choice among competing vendors, and commercially motivated community organizers" as the defining characteristics of the model (p. 120).

Regarding the users that compose the communities, they are individuals who browse the Web with no other purpose than to get explanations to questions, which end up encountering a community with users seeking the same answers and, ultimately, settling into the community (Mathwick et al., 2007). Sense of identification and the desire for their voice to be heard are some of the reasons why a user gets involved in a community (Bang et al., 2018). Although, in an online environment several aspects such as gender, age, ethnicity, social and professional status are missing, filtered out or intentionally falsified (Brown et al., 2007), these virtual communities still have a real existence for its users, and thus generate consequential effects on behaviour (Kozinets, 1999).

Furthermore, literature on user roles in communities has been published. As an illustration there is Kozinets (1999) that classified four types of users. Consumption activity and relations with the virtual community are the two factors that base the categorization. Tourists, as the first type, represents a user who lacks strong social ties to the group and deep interest in the activity. Secondly, are the minglers who have strong social ties but have shallow interest in the consumption activity. Next, devotees symbolize users who cultivate strong consumption interest but have few social connections to the group. Finally, insiders are those which have

strong attachments to the group and to the consumption activity, and usually represent referenced and well-established members of the community (Kozinets, 1999).

### 2.3 Online Leadership

In recent years, users have been generating and publicly showcasing personal content, pictures and videos, due to the variety of facilities provided by social media websites (Erkan & Evans, 2018). Accompanied with this immense boom, there has been an exponential growth in the volume and significance of online communities (Lee, Yang, Hsu, & Wang, 2019). By connecting with known or unknown others in these communities, users have to be conscient that their knowledge can be publicly visible through online content posted and shared by themselves (Lee et al., 2019). When reaching the stage where they describe a product or service experience and provide an online rating, the reviewer becomes, in fact, a member of the community (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012).

As seen in the previous topic of online communities, Dover and Kelman 2018 have defined what these online communities are. One important aspect that should also be referenced, is that these communities emphasize the dependence of one's decision on the decision of others (Mu, Thomas, Qi, & Tan, 2018).

Nowadays, it is also possible to see an increase in consumer reliance on online information such as user reviews, opinions of friends or opinion of experts (Mu et al., 2018). A relevant aspect in this matter is also the amount of information as it plays a critical role to cover the anonymity issue (Erkan & Evans, 2018). Meaning that consumers only believe in anonymous reviews if they are in great number.

Consumers have access to new interpersonal sources of influence, which can provide customized or non-customized product knowledge and recommendations (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Results have shown that consumers are influenced in their online product choices by online recommendations (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Accordingly, the role of traditional indicators like brands, loyalty and marketing persuasion is being diminished by this online information (Mu et al., 2018). This consideration of the power of online group influence as led marketers to show interest on the matter not only because of its ability to rapidly disseminate product knowledge and influence consumer choice (Mu et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019), but because it sits outside of a firm's control (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012) unless they start to use these opinions leaders to beneficially influence their social circles (Yang, Mai, & Ben-Ur, 2012).

Managers and marketers have found useful to analyse these online reviews to understand how their products' or service's characteristics affect their online product ratings. Additionally, they search for insights that include how to use online product ratings as a marketing communications element (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). As such these opinion leaders should not be ignored (Yang et al., 2012). As defined by Lu, Jerath and Singh (2013), opinion leaders are individuals who apply a significant quantity of influence on the opinions of others (Lu et al., 2013). A characteristic that defines them is their affective, assertive and linguistic diversity in their online messages (Huffaker, 2010). To community participants, a reviewer with established expertise is a leader they will pay closer attention (Yang et al., 2012). Curiously, online reviewers, who are opinion leaders for future consumers, are themselves influenced by information provided by other opinion leaders (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012).

Lastly, coming back to leadership, it is shown by data that different types of online leadership can be found in different online communities and that the level of participation defining an online leader remains an open question (Lee et al., 2019).

## 2.4 Netnography

Catterall and Maclaran (2002) define ethnography as a marketing research method, predominantly used in the last twenty years, that is grounded on participant observation with the purpose of exploring and understanding culture phenomena and behaviour of communities and its members.

Netnography is defined by Kozinets (2002) as ethnography on the Internet. Netnography is “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). As a research technique, netnography utilizes information found publicly in online communities to classify and comprehend the decision influences and needs of significant online user groups (Kozinets, 2002).

In order to ensure a successful netnographic study, Kozinets (2002) states there are 5 procedures a researcher should follow.

First, at the stage of the *Entrée*, after determining research questions and identifying online communities fitted to answer those questions, the researcher must acquire as much information as possible, such as most discussed topics, distinctive language or specific interests, about the

community and the individuals active in it to become familiar with the forum as a whole (Kozinets, 2002).

Next, the researcher is ready for *Data Collection and Analysis*, that will consist of data directly retrieved from the online communities and the researcher's annotations on the analysis of the group. Data selection should be done taking into account the research questions. At this stage, users should be categorized as regards to their participation and their devotion to the community. Before further interpretation, the data needs to be contextualised, classified and coded (Kozinets, 2002).

Afterwards comes the *Providing Trustworthy Interpretation* step. Here, the researcher must take "precautions" to assure the data collected is trustworthy. In a netnographic study, additionally to collecting data the researcher also needs to recontextualise users' interactions since they are influenced by the virtual environment in which they take place. To overcome this challenge, Kozinets (2002) suggests the triangulation method in which the data is "validated" through interviews, focus groups, surveys or other ethnographic studies.

Subsequently, the researcher can advance to *Research Ethics*. As there isn't a clear consensus on whether internet data should be public or private, and what informed consent includes specifically in the cyber space, Kozinets (2002) suggests four ethical research conducts to follow on a netnographic study. "They are: (1) the researcher should fully disclose his/her presence, affiliations and intentions to online community members during any research, (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants, and (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched." (Kozinets, 2002, p. 9). The fourth procedure includes the researcher contacting the members of the community and acquiring their permission to directly feature their quotes on the research, if that is the case (Kozinets, 2002).

Lastly, *Member Checks* include the presentation of the final analysis to users of the studied community to ensure suitable interpretation of the data collected. Extra insights, assurance of ethical standards and further exchange of information can be led by this suggested contact and even be useful for future research within the community (Kozinets, 2002).

## 3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions of the present dissertation, a methodological approach has been chosen and established in this chapter. By overviewing the process, this section will describe the development of obtaining consumer digital insights from the selected online communities and how managerial implications were drawn from it. In the end, the findings are aimed at helping food tourism business owners to better understand the consumer's view and perception, with the goal of enhancing their targets' dining experience.

### 3.1 Netnography

The focus of the present thesis is to analyse online communities where the food tourism topic dominates interactions between users. In the case of favouring a qualitative research method, and with the purpose of better understanding food tourism stakeholders' interactions, a netnographic research approach was preferred.

As mentioned before in the literature review, netnography was initially developed and proposed by Kozinets in 1998. Later in 2002, Kozinets defined it as a qualitative research method used with the purpose of studying virtual communities which communicate entirely through text (Kozinets, 2002). Some of the advantages of the method that led to choosing it over more traditional and market-oriented ethnographic methodologies were the reduced time consumption, the shorten elaboration and its ability of being unobtrusive in a community environment.

As previously stated, the dissertation is a form of ethnographic study and will, then, advance to a grounded knowledge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method known as grounded theory is a qualitative research method that allows insights collected from the analysed data to inductively lead to theories and implications about a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### 3.2 Description of communities

Either using "food tourism", "gastronomy tourism" or "culinary tourism", an initial search for virtual communities was done using Google and, also, across various social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. A few types of communities were discovered and after eliminating some groups due to factors like low number of users, the research revealed three possible online communities, all of them in the YouTube domain.

All three communities are YouTube channels administered by individuals that travel the globe in order to experience food from other cultures and at different levels, from street food to fine dining. In a simplistic way, the usual script for a video starts with some sort of context, e.g. the individual reveals where he is and what he is going to explore, then there is at least one food experience and, to conclude, the YouTuber speaks his thoughts and opinions about the adventure. Important to refer that all videos are in English.

The first channel is called “Mark Wiens” which is the name of the youtuber itself. Mark established the channel in 2009 but only started having more consistent content and growth since 2013. As of today, he has little over four million subscribers<sup>1</sup>, his views normally vary between five hundred thousand and three million, with some exceptions, he publishes videos that last around twenty-five minutes every Wednesday and Sunday, and he mainly covers southeast Asia as he is based in Bangkok, Thailand.

The second channel is called “The Food Ranger” and is conducted by Trevor James. The channel was born in 2013 and currently has over two million and eight hundred thousand subscribers. The typically twenty-minutes videos are published on a random format but on average once a week and hit high numbers of views between five hundred thousand and two million views with some outliers occasionally. As he is based in Chengdhu, China, most of his videos are Asia centred.

At last, the third channel is named “Best Ever Food Review Show” and is directed by Sonny. The channel was created by the north-American in 2010 but it was only in 2016 that videos started to be published. Nowadays, he has two million and two hundred thousand subscribers to the channel who experience new content on average every week at least. His fifteen minutes videos get typically between six hundred thousand and one million and five hundred thousand views. He states that he currently lives in Vietnam thus most of his videos being about the surrounding area.

All channels combined surpass the extraordinary mark of one billion views for videos on food tourism. With this great number of spectators comes along a great community that expresses its thoughts, perceptions and reflections on the comments’ section. This section is from where the data will be retrieved and later analysed.

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<sup>1</sup> Subscribers means the YouTube users that have sign up to a YouTube channel, meaning that new videos from the channel will appear on their YouTube homepage and that they will have easier access to the YouTube channel itself.

### 3.3 Data collection and Analysis Procedures

The data collection took place during a three-month period from March 2019 to May 2019. During this period a total of nine videos and four hundred and seventy-six comments, were analysed based on the video which they belonged to. The YouTube channels' postings were posted between November 2016 and February 2019. In order to keep the data equally divided between the three sources and at a limited and manageable amount, the analysis included three videos from each channel and a selection of around fifty comments per video.

With the data collected through netnography, an approach for the analysis was required. The collection of netnographic data is described by Kozinets (2002) as a collage, which includes different forms, items and images. For the process of interpreting the data an inductive manner was used, where, with a focus on the language and context, individual observations were tracked and sorted according to the general statement about the detected phenomenon.

For the coding of the data, netnography does not imply the use of any help of software, such as, e.g. ATLAS.ti or NVivo. As such, the option of manual coding was preferred. This method involves using evaluations and judgements based on the criteria of the researcher (Kozinets, 2015). One of the main decisive factors was the use of manual coding was that using software increases the risk of the researcher admitting the output without acquiring full awareness and comprehension of the culture of the chosen online communities.

For the development of producing theory out of the analysis, and as stated previously, the method of grounded theory was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To build a thematic network based on quotations, this concept is initiated by steps of coding and conceptualizing, pursued by a stage of generating categories which ultimately lead to a few main themes (Appendix A).

### 3.4 Access to Community and Participants

Access to the community was gained by subscribing to the YouTube channels, watching the videos and observing the comments' section. The researcher had already been familiarized with YouTube and this type of community regarding similar topics. Since YouTube is a public domain platform, all data could be seen regardless of subscribing to the channel or not and information could be drawn from it freely.

To allow for feedback, the researcher shared the study's final findings with some community members. This technique is named member checks and it is encouraged by Kozinets (2002). This approach has proven to be valuable, especially in the case of a netnography, since it can

provide additional insights to consumer meanings and add opportunities for further development Kozinets (2002). For this purpose, three individuals, participants of at least one of the three communities, were interviewed. First, a synthesis of the research findings was shown to the participants, followed by a set of questions that were posed in a way that could facilitate the disclosure of their opinion on the results presented.

### 3.5 Ethics

In order to comply with the four ethical research procedures elaborated by Kozinets (2002) some precautions were taken. Firstly, the researcher identified himself and his intentions to the communities, provided information about the study and the methodology used. Secondly, for the protection of identification, any information from any post or participant of the community was excluded from the dissertation. To ensure the third procedure, three member checks were conducted with participants of the communities. In this step, the participants were treated with respect and were free to abandon the procedure at any point of the process. Finally, as the data gathered from the online communities is open to the public, only the data retrieved from the member checks had to follow the last step. Meaning, it was requested and agreed with the participants that their quotes and data could be featured in the present study.

## 4. Thematic Findings

The following chapter of the dissertation attentively investigates the collected data, including the qualitative results of the analysis in the form of a netnography covering a thematic network (Appendix A) and the outcome of grounded theory.

### 4.1 Online Leadership

The first theme to emerge from the netnographic study is the theme of online leadership. In this sense, the definition of a leader considers an individual that is in control and gives guidance to a group. In the specific set of this dissertation, online leadership is set in an environment where the YouTube channel owner is the leader, leading through his adventures, and the community that views and/or comments his videos, and/or is subscribed to the channel are his followers. As it will be later demonstrated, this leadership is mainly displayed by the followers with the emotion and energy that ascends and is transmitted from their comments<sup>2</sup>, where they showcase how they have been influenced by the leader (Lu et al., 2013). Throughout the netnographic research, enthusiastic statements were found in users who were trying to increase their proximity to the leaders and to raise admiration about them. Members of the community were keen on attracting the leaders' attention by every sort of comments and to even view their videos without understanding the language they are speaking in:

Participant 1:

*“Always enjoy your videos. I would love to meet you sometime && you show around the best spots for food. I've been subscribed since less than 60k!!<sup>3</sup>”*

Participant 2:

*“Even without understanding English, I can still perceive what an amazing experience it is to go to a restaurant like that one!!<sup>4</sup>”*

#### 4.1.1 Increasing Proximity

When trying to increase their proximity to the leader, the users' devotion would be showcased in comments where they tried to emphasize something that would stand out from the rest of the

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<sup>2</sup> Unless stated, all comments quoted on this dissertation have been kept unchanged from its original form thus possibly containing grammatical errors.

<sup>3</sup> Since this leader has now millions of subscribers, this participant is stating he has been following him since the beginning.

<sup>4</sup> This quote has been translated due to being in another language than English.

members and get the attention of the leader, they have the desire to get their voice heard (Bang et al., 2018). Notably, the fact that they were an early comment in one of the leader's video.

Participant 3:

*"69th comment!<sup>5</sup> Never been so early! Great show Sonny, you made my day 🥰"*

At a first glance, several members of the community tried, on a lighter level, to relate themselves or experiences they had with the ones the leader is displaying in the video. Such actions are displayed below:

Participant 4:

*"So excited you're going to Laos Mark! My family is from Vientiane (we now live in the states) and I'm looking forward to seeing all the food you'll be trying out! I heard its beautiful there!"*

Participant 5:

*"Man i've been watching you since 20k subs. Now it's almost 2 mil. Time goes fast."<sup>6</sup>*

The comments shown above are typical examples of users seeking a deeper relationship with the leaders. Participant 5 indicates that he has been around and supporting the leader for a long time, a common type of comment throughout the data as followers want to be considered long-time followers in order to get some sort of attention, benefit or reply from the leader. On a more personal level, participant 4 tries to relate to the leader, who acknowledges he is going to Laos, by stating his family has Laotian roots thus being excited about the upcoming videos.

On an attempt to be more specific than, for example, participant 5, some users apply the technique to specifically address the leader and suggest him a travel destination, most of the times their hometown or country, which they believe he would like based on his personality and the food he could encounter. The following posts demonstrate it:

Participant 6:

*"Come to Nepal. I can give you company for joining your new nepalese food quest 🇳🇵"*

Participant 7:

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<sup>5</sup> By this, the user means he is the sixty-ninth person to write a comment on a video posted by the leader.

<sup>6</sup> "Subs" means subscribers, in this case, to a YouTube channel. "20k" means twenty thousand. "2 mil." means two million.

*“You should come over to Finland - in the middle of the winter :D -35c at coldest might be a interesting experience for you. + all the food what we have here”*

As demonstrated by participant 6 above, on top of what was mentioned before, the user is emphasizing even more his suggestion by declaring he would be available to go along with the leader. A demonstration of how committed users are to meet the leader. The other participant mentions the leader should visit his country as it would be a good experience for him, implying that he knows the leader’s personality and preferences on possible countries to travel.

Moreover, participants don’t stop here, they go on a deeper level of attempt to relate with the leader by engaging in memories associated with the content showed. Some examples follow:

Participant 8:

*“Damn after watched your show it's make me miss my old country more. Thanks Sonny”*

Participant 9:

*“I tried Currywurst for the first time back in October 2017 on a trip to Berlin Germany and loved it. I would love to go back one day and have it again so proud for you Mark and Ying<sup>7</sup>!”*

Participant 10:

*“Very appetizing video, thx a lot. By the way many people in Germany have a recepy for Eierlikör from their grandma :-). I used to lick out the glasses in the kitchen, when the adults had finished. I still love that Liquor!!!!”*

In situations like the ones above, users write about a detail on the video that made a memory come back to life, making them more understanding of the leader’s occurrence and more enthusiastic about their subject.

Lastly, to further increase their proximity to the leader and to share their interest with the other users, some participants don’t focus on themselves, as per quotes previously shown, but on the leader. More specifically, on the leader’s reactions. The online communication thread quoted below is an example of online users demonstrating how well they know the leader and what type of fan they are. Participant 11 manifests how he is an addicted admirer by enumerating ten levels of reactions the leader, in this case Mark Wiens, has while trying out several foods that he named the Mark Meter:

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Wiens’ wife that occasionally joins his videos.

Participant 11:

*“markmeter: level 1: nod level 2: nod+mmmmm level 3:nod+oh yeah level 4:nod+wow level 5:nod+widen eyes level 6:widen eyes level 7:widen eyes+mmm/wow level 8:widen eyes+tilt level 9:widen eyes+tilt+dragon breath level 10:widen eyes+tilt+dragon breath+laugh+wow+comments”*

[Reaction 1] Participant 12:

*“(Participant 1) if only I could love this comment 😊😊😊”*

[Reaction 2] Participant 13:

*“Totally spot on hilarious total fans right here 🤔😊😊😊”*

[Reaction 3] Participant 14:

*“acurate, lol”*

Fellow online members react to it by commenting positive reinforcements of how well participant 11 portrayed their leader. This type of comment showcases how enthusiastic the users are about the leader’s content and personality, and how close they are to the leader. This behaviour was further discussed in the member checks:

Member Check 1:

*“Ahahah... I could see this one coming. It is just a classic from Mark, you only need to see like four or five videos from him to understand this scale and his reactions. And I bet the situation is pretty similar for the other youtubers studied, right? This happens since apart from words it is the only way for the youtubers to make people as close as trying the food themselves. And also a bit for the show, definitely for the show to make people more engaged.”.*

The member check above reinforces that viewing the videos consistently, therefore becoming a fan, will increase the proximity to the leader as it will be easier to understand the leader’s reactions. Equally, it is stated that the leaders make an effort on this matter, so they can transmit better to the viewers what they are feeling and to keep the show more appealing.

#### **4.1.2 Raising Admiration**

As part of the online influence the leader had in the community, followers also commented the video with statements that try to raise admiration about the leader. Users try to enumerate and

point out to others the leader's best attributes and qualities while displaying their love and appreciation for his work. To demonstrate, this participant claims he will never get fatigued by his show:

Participant 15:

*"Love all your videos, I will never get bored watching them... 😊"*

On a first moment, it is noted that community members showcase the appreciation they feel towards the leader's work and what are some characteristics of the leader's personality that can be perceived in the videos. Such behaviours are presented below:

Participant 16:

*"I'm a Chinese and even me want to follow your map to explore food in Chengdu as your demonstrations are just so good and so satisfying"*

Participant 17:

*"Congratulations Trevor and Ting! Wow your channel is growing exponentially. Love the new ideas for maps and blogs posts. Chengdu is on my to do list."*

Participant 18:

*"4:25<sup>8</sup> AHAHAHAH, you had me in tears you glorious comedic genius!"*

Apart from participant 18 who only praises the leader's humour, participants 16 and 17 not only demonstrate their appreciation but add in the comment what they are feeling on top. Participant 16 states that although he is a Chinese native he would still explore the city of Chengdu, south-west Chinese city, with the non-Chinese leader's indications and suggestions. A strong statement of acknowledgment of the admiration towards the leader since it is hard to admit a foreigner can know a place better than someone local. This refers, and is an example, to the fact that users will pay closer attention to a leader with established expertise (Yang et al., 2012). On the other hand, participant 17, on top of appreciating the leader's work, manifests the fresh travelling desire to go to Chengdu that rose from viewing the leader's video exploring the town.

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<sup>8</sup> Time for a specific moment on a video

As in many other online situations, no good project can only have positive feedback and for that some users demonstrate envy or, even, hate. These actions are illustrated by the comments below:

Participant 19:

*“I envy Sonny so much 😞😞😞”*

Participant 20:

*“Her<sup>9</sup> personality is a bit bland. No yummy face or expression. Doesn’t vibe well together”*

As there are people on the extreme end of the negative side, there also exist fanatic admirers that are on the extreme of the positive side. The latter are users in the community who demonstrate their admiration with love and by putting the leader on a hero level. Some of them, even take a stand against members that are trying to taint the leader’s image:

Participant 21:

*“I love ur channel it's better than mostly all food shows, u put so much of your personality into your YouTube channel and your channel always makes me laugh 🍷”*

Participant 22:

*“I don't always watch 20 minute YouTube videos, but when I do, they are uploaded by Mark Wiens. Great video, as always!”*

[Reaction 1] Participant 23:

*“True Heroes not always wear capes 🦸”*

[Reaction 2] Participant 24:

*“(Participant 21) true... Mark Wiens Is Definitely Our Hero.”*

Participant 25:

*“he is paid for eating there”*

[Reaction 1] Participant 26:

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the leaders have people co-star with them in the videos, this time it was a female friend.

*“(Participant 23), Mark is always gracious no matter what he eats but we, his long time subscribers, KNOW is true critique just by his facial expressions and signature head nod... he really enjoyed this meal.”*

Participant 21 claims its love for the leader by stating his work is better than any other food shows due to its humorous personality that is transmitted through his videos. As participant 22 says that the only twenty-minute-long videos he views are exclusively from the leader Mark Wiens, other participants pitch in by supporting his comment and agreeing the leader is a hero to them. Lastly, as participant 25 is insinuating that the leader is being paid to eat at the restaurant and therefore is not making a real critique but a paid critique that benefits the restaurant’s image, another member angrily defends him by stating he was honest on his review and that only true subscribers, members that follow and know him, could see that through his reactions.

As demonstrated above, the theme of online leadership appears in different forms across discussions regarding food tourism through online communities. It seems online food tourism can be closely tied to both online leadership and influence.

#### 4.2 Knowledge

The second and common theme that emerged from the netnographic study is the theme of knowledge. In the setting of online food tourism YouTube channels, knowledge takes form as comments that participants post in the comments’ section of a video published by their leader. Across the netnographic analysis, statements were found where users would express their knowledge through several different forms such as expressing food culture expertise or, simply, travelling knowledge where they invite the leader to visit their home country:

Participant 27:

*“Vietnam has the best cuisine in the world. The amount of fresh veggies and herbs in every meal is just insane. Look I love meat, but the combination of spices, meat, and veggies is just amazing. Plus Pho<sup>10</sup> is food of the Gods. I love this Country.”*

Participant 28:

*“Hello Mr Mark im your fan i always watch your video.. pls come and visit Yerevan Armenia .. its a beautiful country .. thankyou :)”*

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<sup>10</sup> Traditional Vietnamese dish

As said previously, there were many ways with which the members of the community transmitted their knowledge. One of them included showcasing their knowledge about the appearance of the food or the situation the leader was experiencing during the video:

Participant 29:

*“Anywho...the food looks amazing! What a spread! I am not familiar with Sri Lankan food and would love to try some after watching this. I love how your guest dished you a plate. That's hospitality 😊”*

Participant 30:

*“You have really gone to the deep of Srilankan foods, and cultural styles. It's glad to see that you got the real experience. I'm from Downsouth Sri Lanka too. Cheers!!!”*

Participant 31:

*“That was one of those food experiences you would never forget and so awesome to see all the love that was put into the preparation. That's definitely food for the soul 🍴🍴🍴”*

As it can be seen above, the participants are giving their opinion on the adventure the leader is taking on. Participant 29 is so impressed with the appearance of the food and with the experience itself that he reveals the desire to travel and have this experience in first hand. Similarly, participant 30 argues the leader had the real experience and he justified his judgement by letting everyone know he is from Sri Lanka, country the leader was visiting.

In contrast with what has been demonstrated above, some participants instead of giving their belief they ask about the leader's knowledge. This situation establishes the fact that the leader is someone that has gain credibility and trust from the followers, that there is a consumer reliance on online information coming from experts (Mu et al., 2018). Such actions are exemplified below:

Participant 32:

*“I use your videos to show the Oriental culture in my history classes here in Brazil. Could you sugest one of your videos to show the most traditional chinese good? My kids loves your reactions and your "Wooooow" 😊”*

Participant 33:

*“I love ur channel mark me and 3 friends are planning a California tour of food trying ourselves we will be in LA and San Diego what do you recommend..... Have you ever gotten sick eating any kind of foods”.*

The most common type of comment asking for advice is well illustrated by participant 33 where the user inquires the leader about food recommendations for a future trip. Additionally, a rare and fascinating case that demonstrates the strength of the leader’s credibility is participant 32’s quote. The community member refers he uses the leader’s videos at an educational level in Brazil to showcase Oriental culture and that he needs a recommendation on which video to show about traditional Chinese food. This behaviour was further clarified in the member checks:

Member Check 2:

*“His credibility is definitely high. You have to be conscient that he has been doing this for a while now and that he is now doing it full time! And for sure the subscribers, you can’t get those millions of subscribers just because, you have to be doing something right! And in the videos he often mentions that someone has recommended the place he is going to, I think he has a pretty good network and, for that, he goes to the best spots.”.*

The member check above enumerates some of the factors that have gained credibility for the leaders. Doing it for some time, doing it full time and having that many subscribers are some factors considered before. This interview added on top of those, the reality of the network of contacts built by the leaders along the years on the job. Viewers must think leaders are a source of information, getting from others and displaying for them, in what concerns food tourism, and, ultimately, taking them to the best spots.

Moreover, on the circumstances of disclosing knowledge, some users go into deeper food descriptions to express their expertise:

Participant 34:

*“Trevor, you must go into Gansu into the Western region heading into into Shaanxi towards Baoji (2 hrs west of Xi’an). They have the most incredible cold rice noodles with shredded cucumber & carrot and gluten. I would live on this for days at a time when I lived there! Great video, made me miss Xi’an all over again, the Muslim Quarter is amazing!”<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> In this description, all names are either regions or cities of China.

Participant 35:

*“Its amazing that vietnam still preserved their food culture. Poverty, wars and western imperialism almost destroyed cultures of countries in southeast asia. Good job vietnam!”*

Participant 36:

*“I love your videos But one advice Please never eat pork its haram<sup>12</sup> You can search about it It is filthy n disease full”.*

The first participant above gives an extent description for a travelling suggestion the leader should follow. The explanation involves describing the location by indicating distances and nearby areas, a description of a personally preferred dish that can be found there and, to conclude, a statement referring that he lived there in order to give him credibility. Participant 35 is amazed with the Vietnamese food culture displayed by the leader in the video due to the adversities the country went by in past centuries as he refers. Finally, participant 36 is trying to educate the leader on what he should not eat according to religion as it can be harmful. This attitude of expressing knowledge was reinforced in the member checks:

Member Check 3:

*“I think it is pretty natural for people to comment on this situation. I have also felt this feeling of wanting to comment, although I never have, because it comes from the video either being in my country or being somewhere I have visited. I can just relate so much more! Also, if it is one of those cases, the video is much more entertaining because I try to see if I have passed through the spots the leader is going through, it is just the best part to be able to compare travels like that. Instead of discovering the place with the leader’s video, I am reliving my own experience!”*

As the member check emphasizes above, viewers relating to the leaders’ experience makes them feel in need of commenting the adventure. On top, the member check highlighted the fact that when he hasn’t been to the place showcased in the video, he is discovering as he is watching, and when he has been to the place he is reliving the experience and memories of his travel. A distinction not shown by the archive data.

### 4.3 Consequences

The last theme identified through the research is the theme of consequences. Consequence is normally considered the outcome of a specific action or situation. When it came to analyse the

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<sup>12</sup> Haram is an Arabic expression meaning forbidden.

data, consequences came up frequently as a consumer attitude. In the specific setting of this dissertation, consequences are outcomes people have or feel due to the viewing of the leaders' YouTube videos. In the current section, these consequences will be illustrated with comments from participants that include behaviours and emotions they developed and ended up sharing with the community (Park et al., 2018; Erkan & Evans, 2018). The example below shows us how a participant is deeply enthusiastic and pleased with the leader's video to the point of comparing it with sexual pleasure:

Participant 37:

*"Forget porn sites!!!...The Food Ranger can give more pleasure...!!!!"*

#### **4.3.1 Influencing Behaviour**

Virtual communities can generate consequential behaviours on participants since they have a real existence for them (Kozinets, 1999). When trying to share with the community the behaviour influenced by the leader, the participants showcased the fact of becoming hungry or food craving as one of the most common:

Participant 38:

*"I eat, watch this video... get hungry... watch it again when eating."*

Participant 39:

*"Kinda craving some Vietnamese clam ramen! I'd assume it'd pair well with a cold beer!"*

As it can be seen above, participant 38 states he gets hungry by watching the video but also mentions a routine that indicates that he re-watches the video while eating, after viewing it a first time. It seems he has introduced the viewing of the video in his eating routine. On the other hand, participant 39 declares he intensely desires the food the leader is showcasing in the video and even tries to innovate by suggesting a beverage to pair with the dish.

On a deeper level, some participants described extreme behaviours and consequences from watching the videos. In this specific case, the behaviours of seeing the videos are being compared to an orgasm or a coma:

Participant 40:

*"this video was such a foodgasm. Put some warning before starting the video please, people are not ready for this"*

Participant 41:

*“Just amazing...i'm in a seafood coma only by watching u!”*

Participant 40 states he had a “foodgasm” from seeing the video, meaning an orgasm because of the food displayed in the video. He even states there should be a warning for this high level of food content. Participant 41 believes that the feeling from seeing the video was so strong and incredible that he compares it with being in a coma. In this case, a coma due to all the seafood featured in the video. Both these examples show how deeply tuned into the show the users are to get to this level of consequences.

Differently to what was just described above, some participants commented their desires after seeing the videos. In this dissertation, desires are regarding to travel, restaurants and content:

Participant 42:

*“Addicted to these appetizing videos, me and my wife have decided to visit Lisbon just because of this particular video 😊”*

Participant 43:

*“I will be there in a week. I am going to try and follow your blog for places to eat and also this place. From Los Angeles!”*

Participant 44:

*“Upload more often 🙏 I need more videos in my life! I've already watched every single video 10 times on every device 🙏 TREMENDOUS”*

From the comment of participant 42, it is clear that the leader inspires a travelling desire so strong that there are even cases, as this one, where participants schedule trips due to experiences the leader displays in the videos. They want to experience first-hand what the leader is showing. As for participant 43, he acknowledges that he will visit the city the leader is showing and that he will use the video as a guide for his trip. Specifically, he will go to the same restaurant as the leader. These two attitudes go along with Senecal and Nantel (2004) as he states that consumers are influenced by online recommendations. Lastly, participant 44, emphasizes how he is craving and desiring more content from the leader in his life. He also lets everyone know how big of a fan he is as he writes he has seen every video ten times. All three comments are a

few of the examples found in the community that represent the high credibility earned by the leaders.

#### 4.3.2 Developing Emotions

As part of the consequences inflicted by the leader, part of them were found to be emotions. As members see the videos from the leaders, they develop emotions that they want to share with the community and, for that, share it with comments. Users mainly want to thank the leader for his work and demonstrate how it makes them feel. To demonstrate, this participant is being grateful by thanking the leader for having the show as it is the only way for him to experience that kind of adventures, through the eyes of the leader:

Participant 45:

*“Your food videos are as close as I will get to experiencing these flavors, places, people and food for myself. thank you for sharing you life and passion. All the best.”*

On a first segment of disclosing their emotions, it is distinguished that community members are claiming how excited and grateful they are from seeing the leaders' videos. Such behaviours are presented below:

Participant 46:

*“Never have i felt so happy when this pop<sup>13</sup> on my notification :)”*

Participant 47:

*“Awww you've just reminded me to be grateful to be here in malaysia.”*

Participant 48:

*“Oh my God. I love him for making things like that for us to enjoy. 😊 god is good. I love ya too mark. Thank you for doing this.”*

Participant 46 claims his excitement as he states that he has never felt so happy and he, also, demonstrates he is a passionate fan by letting the rest of the community know he enabled the notifications and views the videos as soon as they are released. As the video in question is about the country he is living in, participant 47 realized by the video the great food culture and by being comprehensive of the situation feels he should be grateful for being there. In the same

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<sup>13</sup> When subscribing to a YouTube channel, there is the option of enabling pop-up notifications for when new videos are released.

fashion, participant 48 on top of thanking god and being grateful, remarks that he feels love towards the leader for making the videos of his adventures and experiences.

On the contrary to what was just showcased, some of the participants also describe in the comments negative reactions to the videos. Something that happen during the video didn't please them and they were sad about it:

Participant 49:

*"I felt so sad about the garbage 🤔🤔..what are we really doing to mother earth???"*

Participant 50:

*"I like the effort they put together pulling the net, but when i saw what they caught, it saddened me 😞, thanks Trevor for saying a few reminders to keep our environment clean."*

In the particular case of these two comments, the video shows a moment were some fishermen are retrieving a net they had casted previously that has fish but also a lot of garbage. For that reason, the comments from the participants were about sharing their sadness towards the scenario and the current global environment situation.

Equally important, were some members' comments that tell what the viewing of the leaders' videos triggered them to do. Being part of the community made some of the members inspired to take actions they wouldn't take before:

Participant 51:

*"I love this program. Making the love of food so exciting, And it even inspired me to make my own YouTube channel exploring food in awesome places. Thank you for the inspiration, keep up the great work."*

Participant 52:

*"Being back home rocks. Glad you had safe travels. Keep it up. Thank you for awesome content. Have cooked many dishes I find here on this channel. Thanks again Mr. James"*

Participant 51 enjoyed and was so excited about the leader's channel that he felt inspired to create his own YouTube food tourism channel. As for participant 52, he was inspired to try and cook the dishes that the leader covers on the videos. These examples show the deep impact that the leaders can have on the subscribers' life and how they can inspire others just through videos.

Furthermore, for the last of emotions developed by viewing the videos there is a sense of community, of belonging when finding like-minded people (Bang et al., 2018). In this situation, people are discussing about a routine involving the leader's video:

Participant 53:

*“lunch + mark wiens videos = good lunch.”*

[Reaction 1] Participant 54:

*“Lol I thought I was the only one to do that. I do it when I eat steamed veggies, haha”*

[Reaction 2] Participant 55:

*“Yes !!! I can eat even the crappiest of lunches while watching Mark !”*

Participant 53 starts this discussion thread by stating that a good lunch includes lunch and a Mark Wiens video. Meaning that the part that makes it good is the video. Participant 54 reacts with relief since he thought he was the only one with the same mindset, and, even, includes on top the particularity that he has that routine when eating steamed vegetables. Lastly, participant 55 reinforces positively and adds an explanation that any type of food is pleasantly edible while watching the leader's video. This discussion thread is a good example of how the leader develops a sense of community between his subscribers and how he can improve their lives.

In conclusion, with the analysis of the data and the listing and elaboration of the three themes that emerged from grounded theory, it can be said that online leadership, knowledge and consequences can be associated with online food tourism communities.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

This segment will conclude the netnographic analysis by replying to the research questions that were posed at the beginning of the dissertation. Subsequently, the main findings will deliver and introduce managerial and theoretical implications.

The existing literature debates about Food Tourism, its emergence, its increasing relevance, its challenges, and opportunities to already established businesses from an academic point of view. Taking into consideration these prior research findings, this thesis has the purpose of producing a glimpse of the food tourism community and its online engagement. The research was managed by analysing three online food tourism communities that were all set in the YouTube environment. “The Food Ranger”, “Mark Wiens” and “Best Ever Food Review Show” are the three YouTube channels analysed where the owners post videos about their food tourism adventures. The research objective was to interpret the participants’ interactions in the videos comments’ section, develop applicable grounded theory and define insights about online engagement in these communities. Consequently, the following research questions were answered.

RQ1: What can we learn about the online engagement of the food tourism community through netnographic observation?

This study revealed three main consumer themes present in online food tourism communities. The first theme identified was the theme of online leadership. In the context of the three YouTube channels, the three owners of the channels are the leaders and the followers are users who subscribe to the channel and/or view and/or comment the videos. The results of analysing the enthusiastic comments of the followers lead to discovering that to praise their leader the followers engage in two types of comments. First, they try to increase their proximity to the leader by writing something that will stand out from others’ comments and relate them to the experience shown on the video. Secondly, they voice their admiration for the leader by accentuating his personality, his work and, ultimately, the love they have for the hero he is to them.

The second theme that emerged through the research was the theme of knowledge. The progress and the development of the experience in the videos are accompanied by a range of expertise sharing on the followers’ side. Results show a desire by some participants of the community to be more deeply involved. These members of the community were passionate to share

knowledge with other online users. The concerns of the users when expressing their knowledge or asking the leader for an opinion lies in the occurrences of the videos, the personal food culture they want to express and suggestions for the leader to take into consideration in the future.

The third and final theme was consequences. A range of feelings and emotions on the followers' side is triggered as the experience evolves. The research showed that online users were developing emotions and being influenced into behaviours as a reaction to the watching of their leader's videos. This attitude resulted in online users expressing themselves with comments with references to what the leader evoked on them during the viewing of the videos. On one hand, participants would disclose emotions such as excitement, sadness or inspiration. On the other hand, participants would reveal being influenced into behaviours like wanting to travel somewhere or craving to try a certain dish or type of food.

RQ2: How does the community elect an expert? Who is he/she? What arguments does the expert use?

On the present thesis, the experts were known from the moment the communities were chosen since it was them who created, sustained and nourished the communities. The communities elected these leaders of the online food tourism community by subscribing and, thus, joining their respective YouTube channels and/or viewing their videos. The leaders demonstrated to be different amongst them, but a certain set of skills were common on all three, implying that these are triggers in increasing a food tourism community to several million users. They are: adventurous, hard workers, expressive, empathetic and good story tellers. Their credibility is further enhanced by the fact that they work full time on these channels, they have a track record of several years and they have been to a significant number of different places, which gives them experience. Furthermore, they have created a network, due to their job, that gives them hints about the best spots to explore and to try food.

RQ3: How is knowledge about food tourism exchanged in an online-based community?

In the three communities analysed in the present dissertation, knowledge was exchanged by the users exclusively through video and comments. The videos could only be posted by the leader, so this was his way of sharing knowledge about food tourism on a mass-scale level. Although extremely rare, the leader would also sometimes answer comments from users in order to thank or give feedback on the matter of food tourism raised. On the other hand, participants of the community only had the option to write comments or answers to other participant's comments.

As it has been shown throughout this thesis, single comments or discussion threads were created to exchange knowledge about food tourism.

RQ4: What are the most relevant aspects of a food tourism experience for the online food tourism community?

Regarding the most relevant aspects, the data highlighted the following three:

The most outstanding aspect is the leader's opinion. Participants of the communities analysed would consider the leader's assessment showcased in the video above everything else. If the leader would say that a restaurant was very much worth visiting, the comments' section would be flooded with users expressing their desire to travel to the spot and experience the same establishment.

Secondly, are the leader's reactions. This aspect, only caught by the more observants, has great importance in the community since some members believe that they can only get the "real" food review from the leader's reactions. This subject is also the target of heated discussions since a small part of the members think the leaders always have good reactions just to keep the show interesting and engaging, consequently questioning the authenticity of the leader.

At last, the authenticity of the food presented by the leader in the videos is also considered a relevant aspect for the food tourism experience. The data shows that the community expects the video to contain local and traditional food that represents the region, the city and the country that the leader is exploring at its best.

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

This dissertation contributed to the academic knowledge of food tourism by expanding qualitative research of this concept onto the online environment (Stone et al., 2018; Long, 2005; Smith & Xiao, 2008). The participant's posture in online food tourism community can be characterized by the three main themes of online leadership, knowledge and consequences.

The study also contributes to the online leadership literature (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012; Yang et al., 2012). It is demonstrated that a form of online leadership to be considered is the one showcased throughout the dissertation, YouTube channel owner and its followers.

Results of the study also showed how online leaders can be more than just an online figure that users seek to improve their familiarity about a subject (Lu et al, 2013; Huffaker, 2010), it revealed that they can be adored as heroes, idols and models of a desired life.

In like manner, the present dissertation reinforces the importance of netnography by showing its diverse use as a methodology for online research (Kozinets, 2002). This study demonstrated, that by associating occurrences and facts across several online communities, it is possible to acquire intricate knowledge about a particular phenomenon.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

Throughout the results it is noticeable that authenticity is one of the most preferred and requested aspects by the community, both for the leader and the food. Focusing on the latter, business owners that wish to attract food tourists should emphasise the authenticity and originality of the food experience they have to offer. When food tourists travel somewhere they are in a pursuit of having the best traditional and local food, they want to explore the deep roots of the food of the city, region, country, they are visiting. Therefore, business owners should implement marketing strategies that have authenticity as main guideline and food tourists as the major target.

From the present research and from past literature (Kozinets et al., 2014), it is clear that the data that can be found online is valuable. Users are having insightful engagements and interactions on online settings and one of the subjects is food tourism. Therefore, businesses should facilitate the occurrence of these computer-mediated communications that can bring them valuable insights to apply to their business from a platform they can easily reach. As a successful example of this strategy there is the community that Samsung created. In the platform, users can discuss any topic regarding their products and Samsung can have direct access to the conversations. It would be of much interest to food tourism businesses if they could set up something similar, where users bring the data, containing possible insights, to them to, ultimately, help their food tourism business thrive.

As referred in past literature, the role of traditional indicators like brands and loyalty are being diminished by online information (Mu et al., 2018). This last one is growing exponentially and driving it are opinion leaders that should not be ignored (Yang et al., 2012). Accordingly, and as illustrated by the present thesis, one the most relevant aspects for the online food tourism community is the leader's opinion. The members of the communities consider the leader's evaluation above everything else. Therefore, in order to gain visibility and reputation, businesses should have partnerships with the leaders for them to review their food tourism experience. This strategy should be conducted very carefully since one setback to take into consideration is the fact that the leader would most certainly impose his authenticity, as it is

critical for his audience, and thus putting the business's image in jeopardy as the review can have a positive or negative outcome.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

### 6.1 Limitations

This dissertation was conveyed to understand online engagement within three online food tourism communities. Therefore, the insights gained from this limited scope analysis cannot be instantly generalised to other online groups as they can be different in various aspects. Furthermore, the projection of the online results to the general population, outside the online community, can be difficult. With that intention of applying the findings to another group, there is the need of running careful evaluations of similarity and employment of diversified methods of triangulation (Kozinets, 2002).

Secondly, within the data collected there is a large quantity of noise, spam and other irrelevant data, and as the researcher decided to conduct a qualitative analysis in the form of a netnography, the interpretation of the data is subjective to the researcher interpretive skills, which should be considered as a limitation since the quality of the results might be biased.

Thirdly, the data used was only archive data as it was gathered and only later analysed. In the environment of the online communities studied, the researcher never participated in the discussions or engaged with any participant. Meaning all data collected was already created at the time of the compilation.

Lastly, being the data mainly in English it could mean a bias of the findings towards Western culture. The results could differ if the online communities chosen had the majority of the engagements and discussions in other languages than English.

### 6.2 Future Research

As there is still a lot to explore to what concerns online food tourism communities, it would be beneficial if a broader and longer research was conducted. A research with more types of data collected and analysed is advisable.

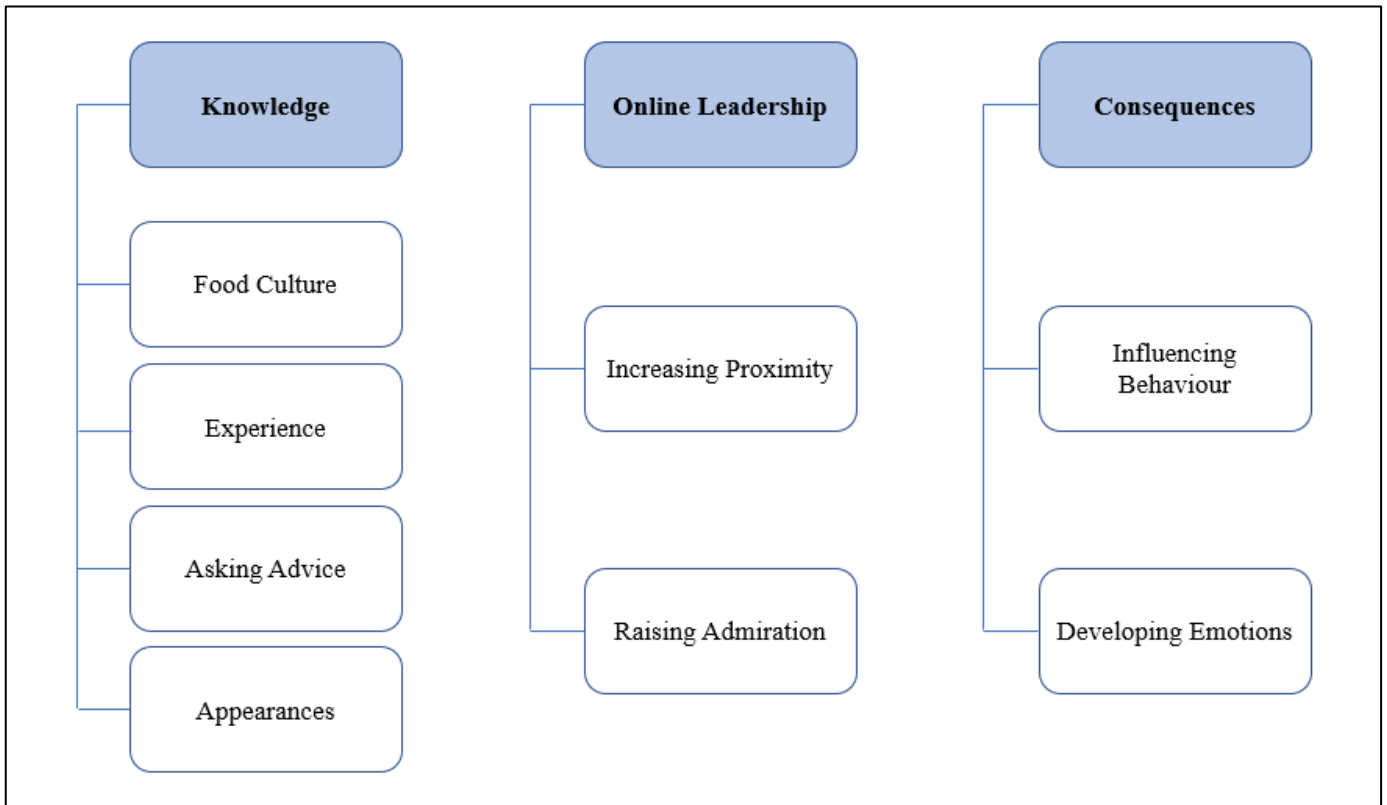
It would also be interesting to change the scope's research and do a quantitative analysis. With this in mind, it would be appealing to conduct a study to find the correlation between the quality of participants' comments, interactions and engagements, and how much food tourism they have done. The main issue the researcher would have would be to define what quality is when it comes to food tourism comments.

As the present dissertation was only in a YouTube environment, it would be of interest to conduct a similar study in another online setting to see how much results would differ or coincide. Some other platforms could be Reddit, Facebook or independent blogs.

Finally, as mentioned in the limitations there wasn't any kind of participation in the community from the researcher, therefore it would be interesting to include a more active netnography approach in a further research.

## 7. Appendices

Appendix A:



## 8. References

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