

## **An ethnographic study of the motivations of foodstagrammer tourists**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The proliferation of social media platforms for sharing and posting photos is radically changing the experiences of foodies and food tourists, and businesses are becoming increasingly dependent on them. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the modifications of the motivations of foodies and food tourists caused by the intensive use of Instagram, who are referred to using the moniker foodstagrammers. We used ethnography to explore, over the course of six months, the motivations of foodstagrammer tourists visiting the city of Barcelona, a very popular food-tourist destination. We performed observations and completed immersion experiences in six food tours with 48 participants, most of whom were using Instagram. The data collected were analysed and interpreted regarding the actions, people, and activities, both live and online. Our data suggest that motivations usually associated with foodies and food tourists become secondary in the case of foodstagrammer tourists, for whom the primary motivations are related to information sharing and taking photos. It offers new insights into the effects of social media on the tourist experience that are relevant for managers interested in marketing food-related business and destinations, since the momentum for experience-socialisation platforms is widely expected to continue expanding.

### **Introduction**

The founder and executive director of the World Food Travel Association (WFTA), Erik Wolf, defines food tourism as 'the act of travelling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place'. According to the WFTA, food tourism has risen in prominence in the last decade with the help of social media and television shows that now include myriad experiences, such as cooking classes, producer visits, street food experiences, etc. Food has become a primary criterion for traveller destination selection, and the numbers of food tour companies, events, and experience focused marketing efforts have increased globally (<https://worldfoodtravel.org>).

Similarly, food tourism has been a notable tourism research area with significant increases over the last two decades. Hall and Mitchell (2001, p. 308) provide a general framework for food tourism as 'visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist regional food production are the primary motivating factor for travel', which has been adopted by many authors with different approaches. This definition does not mean that any trip or event is food tourism, but rather that the desire to experience a particular food must be the major motivation for such travel (Hall et al., 2003); in other words, it is consumers who decide if the travel or tourist experience is food tourism, according to their primary determinant when making the decision. Some academics have argued that culinary tourism, food tourism, and gastronomic tourism are very similar terms that are often used interchangeably (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Stone et al., 2019). However, according to Ellis et al. (2018), these terms appear to be used in different contexts with

different perspectives (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Hall & Sharples, 2003). In addition to the different terminology that may have been used in the food and tourism research literature, Ellis et al. (2018) described different disciplinary approaches that are to be expected given that tourism is a multi-disciplinary field: management and marketing (the most common), social and cultural studies, and geography, with multiple intersections among the three. In recent years, there has been a shift in research interest towards a cultural anthropological perspective where food is an expression of cultural identity.

The rise of social media in recent decades represents one of the most significant changes in tourism, and businesses are increasingly dependent on social media to manage and market tourism (Hays et al., 2013). Changes in tourism caused by social media, as with information technologies in general, are complex and can be conflicting, as the implications for social, environmental, and economic sustainability may contradict each other. Social media can promote sustainable tourism choices, help small businesses reach out to global consumers at low cost or reduce the number of long-distance movements as they connect virtually over distances, for example, but they could also foster a consumer preference for luxurious brands and forms of resource-intense consumption or unsustainable products and services (Gössling, 2017).

Social media platforms enable an exponential increase in knowledge on tourism, since this knowledge is able to be digitalised and shared, as well as the associated emotions and related experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Volo, 2010). There is emerging research around the use of platforms to create and share user-generated content and tourism, but there is still a need to increase knowledge regarding their effects on both consumers and businesses (Williams et al., 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). In this context, the objective of this study is to increase knowledge of the motivations and patterns of behaviour of foodstagrammer tourists and to contribute new insights about this phenomenon. In the first part of the article, therefore, we establish the framework for the characteristics and motivations of foodstagrammer tourists. We then describe the ethnographic methodology employed in this study and present our detailed fieldwork. Finally, we explain our findings and discuss the phenomenon of foodstagrammer tourists and their managerial implications.

### **Theoretical framework**

There is a mature body of research about food tourism, mostly focusing on its supply side, but less attention has been paid to the category of food tourists, as well as to foodies, defined as 'a person who devotes considerable time and energy to eating and learning about good food, however good food is defined' (Johnston & Baumann, 2015, p. x). The term foodie may be somewhat pejorative, but it is used to capture the predominant role of food in someone's life. Many food tourists are not foodies, and vice versa, but they both share an interest in food and previous research has aimed to target foodies as a potential tourism market (e.g., Cairns et al., 2010; Getz & Robinson, 2014a; Robinson & Getz, 2016). Foodies are described in the literature as people with a passion for eating, experiencing, and learning about food that should taste good and be visually pleasing on the plate; they share a cultural identity and integrity; they love cooking and eating, alone or in groups; and they are conscientious about the quality of food, its use, and its presentation. They look for authenticity, geographic specificity, simplicity, personal connection to the producer, and they also look for exoticism, broadening the culinary canon and forming intercultural connections. In sum, food is an important way through which many people establish their identity, channel their creativity and form social connections (Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

### **Instagram as a visual narrative of user-generated content**

It now appears that eating is more about gathering, sharing, and socialising online than offline. The internet and social media offer an increasing number of sites for virtual food communities to easily connect: foodie blogs, foodie applications, websites and social media photosharing platforms that enhance the sense of belonging to a community (Lofgren, 2013). In the particular case of social media platforms, they generate an increase in knowledge created and shared online about restaurants, chefs, and food, as well as the emotions, moments of experience, and feelings through all the linguistic markers available (Baym, 2015; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Volo, 2010). These experiences and content are shared synchronously and with an increasingly visual content better suited to sharing experiences than text communication, which is usually related to information sharing (Liu et al., 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). While it has received limited academic attention and remains a relatively unexplored source of data for research, Instagram is an interesting case for scholars of tourism that is gaining momentum (Smith, 2018; Tenkanen et al., 2017).

Instagram is one of the major experience-socialisation platforms (Shang et al., 2017). It was launched in October 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and was sold to Facebook in April 2012. It currently dominates social media platforms globally as the most popular and intuitive application for sharing images online and connecting people with similar interests and passions. The community of foodstagrammers on Instagram is formed by sharing images, stories or videos and browsing hashtags (#vegan, #vegetarian, #foodblogger, #dutchfoodie, etc.) to find and follow people, brands, or businesses that are posting content with the same hashtags. Interaction and engagement are made visible by adding content such as captions, mentions about other users, positive feedback, likes, and tags that intensify a sense of community. Photos are usually changed or altered in order to earn more likes from peers and followers. The success of Instagram, which currently has over one billion active users, is largely due to a growing demand for access to social media and the widespread use of smartphones.

The visual narrative user-generated content of Instagram has made it not only one of the most widely used platforms in the world (Chaffey, 2016), but it is also a priority for marketing managers because of its three different formats: posts, stories and videos. It also appears to be among the four most valued platforms by influencers (Mediakix, 2019). It is highly valued for acting as a relevant source of word of mouth, as it generates communication from many to many through the sharing of opinions and experiences and amplifies the power of visual content (proven to be more communicative than text). Instagrammers are able to search for information before, during, and after an experience, or to give and share it with friends and acquaintances, and this makes this information more trustworthy and reliable than official messages (Erkan & Evans, 2016). It can achieve greater reach at a much lower cost than traditional marketing, and it influences consumer behaviour more effectively. Hence, it is powerful for brand awareness, lead generation, and audience engagement, and it is a relevant factor for influencing consumers' image of a destination (Cox et al., 2009; Frías et al., 2008; Hanan & Putit, 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008).

### **Foodie and food tourist motivations and behaviour**

Foodie culture, understood as the phenomenon surrounding food, is becoming exponentially more popular. Food is a fundamental cultural marker that underlines similarities and differences among social groups and cultures and defines trends and lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984). From theories of social psychology regarding social influence, the foodie phenomenon can be

constructed both by using social identities related to collective groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and by using personal identities, which are perceptions of one's own attitudes, feelings, and behaviour (Bisogni et al., 2002). Being a foodie has grown into a substantial self-identity practice, where cooking, eating, and drinking are not merely about consumption, but further embody intellectual and reflective activity (Bisogni et al., 2002; Richards, 2002). Both social and personal identities are now constructed in completely new and nonlinear ways because of the existence of social media.

Serious leisure theory by Stebbins (1992) offers useful additional insights to better understand the food tourism related activities and the underlying motivations we are studying (Pearce, 2011; Tsaor & Huang, 2020). According to Stebbins's theory, serious and casual leisure are types of activity that individuals may engage in during their free time and which exist at the opposite ends of the leisure spectrum. Serious leisure is further segmented into amateurs, hobbyists and volunteers. A serious leisure activity implies commitment and perseverance, a development of the participant's involvement, and a significant personal effort based on the need to gain skills, knowledge or training. Its durable benefits include self-actualisation and feelings of accomplishment, the development of a unique ethos within a subculture and a strong identification by participants with this subculture. Most of these elements can be found in both foodie and food tourist activities.

Many publications have explored the behaviour and motivation of food tourists. These studies emerge from various disciplines and are based on their most relevant theories: see Maslow (1943), Katz (1960), Katz et al. (1974), McIntosh et al. (1995), and Deci and Ryan (1985), among others. Previous research approaches to understanding behaviour have been diverse and are still open to debate: from observable action to intention; referring to experiences, ordinary or extraordinary, or as the experience-seeking behaviour; and from the psychological components of behaviour, such as enjoyment, escape, and intellectual search (Pearce, 2011; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). We outline the research on food tourism motivations by Tikkanen (2007), based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Similarly, the proposal by Kim et al. (2009), following the categories of McIntosh et al. (1995) (physical, motivators, interpersonal, and status and prestige motivators), found nine motivational factors driving food tourists to consume local food and beverages at a destination: exciting experiences, escape from routine, health concerns, learning knowledge, authentic experiences, togetherness, prestige, sensory appeal, and the physical environment.

### **Social site user motivations and behaviours**

In the sphere of social sites, some research is noteworthy; again, approaches have been diverse and remain open to debate, but there are certain common elements such as the individuality/community duality. One of the most cited articles by Munar and Jacobsen (2014) supports the idea of two types of motivations present in sharing information online: self-centred motivation leading to personal gain (reputation) and community-related motivation leading to certain help or assistance for local communities (altruism). Wu and Pearce (2016), in their research about tourism blogging motivations in China, provide useful classifications for their identified motivations: positive self-enhancement through online social connection, altruism, being helpful to fellow travellers, issues of social status, personal status and achievement, self-documentation and sharing, and hedonic enjoyment of blogging. Another interesting report by Westbrook (2016) followed the dichotomy of intrinsic-extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985); the first refers to performing an activity to experience the pleasure and satisfaction inherent in the

activity, and the second, the extrinsic motivation, refers to behaviours where the goals of action extend beyond those inherent in the activity itself. He proposed four extrinsic drivers: the rise in popularity of foodies; the growing relevance of social media in society; the trend to promote one's life and lifestyle to a public audience; and the view of food as an effective means to express one's desirable lifestyle.

Of significant relevance for our study is research focused on the particular use of Instagram, such as that produced by Sheldon and Bryant (2016). Their study, based on uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1974), revealed that the main reasons for Instagram use are surveillance/knowledge about others (creativity and narcissism) as a way to have complete power over self presentation, as suggested previously by Buffardi and Campbell (2008). Research by Wang et al. (2017) on travellers' food experience sharing on social network sites is based on Katz's (1960) functional theory, which explains individual motivations: ego-defensive function, knowledge function, value expressive function, and utilitarian function. Wang et al. (2017) concluded that motivational forces behind posting travel food experiences can be understood as a two-dimensional plane along two continua of sought benefits (psychological vs. functional benefits) and intended direction (towards self vs. towards others), similar to Munar and Jacobsen (2014). Shang et al. (2017) studied the effects of social media platforms on information-sharing continuance based on the cognitive evaluation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and identified six factors: perceived usefulness, community identification, social interaction (extrinsic) and altruism tendency, perceived enjoyment, and self-efficacy (intrinsic). Finally, research by Sebastian and Crossler (2019) analysed risks associated with sharing private images on social media and the factors that make Instagrammers share images despite the dangers.

Based on this framework, it is evident that, despite the increasing popularity of food, food tourism, and the online image-sharing community, few studies have provided a clear understanding of the motivations behind the phenomena. Furthermore, the need to conduct research through participant observation and other ethnographic methods has already been anticipated by previous research (Getz & Robinson, 2014b; Liu et al., 2012). Therefore, it seems appropriate to research the area of motivations primarily influencing foodstagrammer tourist enthusiasm for sharing food photos and participating in virtual communities.

## **Methodology**

### **Empirical context**

To examine the on-the-ground activities and patterns of behaviour of foodstagrammer tourists, thus identifying their main motivations, we focus on the case of organised food tours in the city of Barcelona. Consistent with contemporary inductive and qualitative methods, our study was exploratory, and we therefore made trade-offs that favoured exploration over confirmation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lawrence & Dover, 2015). We chose a research context – Barcelona – where foodie culture has bolstered interest in fine cuisine as well as in everyday foodie-ism. According to the municipal census from March 2020, the city had 9,359 bars and restaurants, approximately one for every 172 residents. Barcelona has been the most highly awarded Spanish city according to the TripAdvisor category of 'restaurant services', making it a popular food-tourist destination. Barcelona additionally contains a plethora of quality restaurants, and many restaurants in the city have been awarded Michelin stars. With 31 stars distributed among 29 restaurants, Barcelona was the city with the most Michelin stars in Spain at the time of our study. A close examination of foodstagrammer tourists among tourists participating in the chosen food

tours in Barcelona over a period of six months provided a foundation for better identifying and understanding the motivations behind their behaviour. As with any ethnographic study, the selection of a research context imposes limitations and cannot offer a comprehensive articulation of all of the motivations and behaviours, but rather it defines a set of behaviours that are important in the cases we examine. However, we suggest that this context is worth exploring as an exemplar and for its potential applicability in other contexts.

### **Data collection**

Ethnographic data. Ethnographic data were collected over six months by two of the authors, referred to here as 'the ethnographers'. The ethnographers participated as covert participants in the activities of two food-tour companies specialising in tourism who mention on their websites the suitability of their offer for photographers and instagrammer clients. We refer to the companies as DB and SF (arbitrary identifiers used to retain anonymity). The ethnographers fully participated in six tours, which included a total of 48 participants, among whom 35 were classified by the ethnographers as foodstagrammers because of their intense use of Instagram during the tours (details of participants per tour are shown in Tables 1 and 2). The data collected consisted, first, of observation notes collected during the six tours. The ethnographers also used online ethnography, a complementary technique of online participatory observation that, according to Kozinets (2002, p. 13), is 'an ethnography conducted on the internet and a qualitative interpretive research methodology'. This technique enabled us to observe and gain a complementary understanding of the behaviour of foodstagrammers through the notes obtained from a follow-up of the Instagram pages of participants made after the tour. Both techniques were chosen due to their ability to utilise unobtrusive data collection, since the researcher may access data without revealing their presence (Bartl et al., 2016).

Our objective was to obtain a deeper understanding of the motivations of foodstagrammer tourists during an important consumer experience (Spradley & McCurdy, 1980) with a high level of detail and to explore their different patterns of behaviour, following a standard ethnographic tradition that suggests that ethnographers should 'spend time in the field to hear and see what happens' (Van Maanen, 2011). The ethnographers focused, using the criteria described by Lofland (1995), on the actions, people, and activities for subsequent analysis and interpretation and investigated, during the tour experience, the actions and reactions of posting videos, photos, and stories on Instagram (during and after the tour). To do so, covert and full participation during the tours offered the most lived experiences (Burawoy, 1998), given that it permits a complete immersion in the group being studied (Gephart, 2004) while the researchers conceal 'their true identity and purport to play some other role' (Vinten, 1994, p. 33). We are, of course, well aware that covert participant observation has sparked important debates in various fields of the social sciences. These studies have often been challenged as unethical, suggesting that participants are 'manipulated' and 'conned' (Erikson, 1995, p. 9). However, as suggested by many scholars, covert participant observation can be virtuous in many ways, providing access to otherwise unavailable data (Lauder, 2003) alongside opportunities to interpret and understand these data first-hand (Bulmer, 1982; Sullivan et al., 1958). This approach also reduces the risk of disturbing or inhibiting the natural behaviour of participants (Homan & Bulmer, 1980), as some behaviours might not be exhibited by the participants if they know they are being observed. As explained by Denscombe (2010), when participants think they are interacting with one of 'their own', they will behave in a more natural way. To maintain ethical research standards, we acted with a cautious approach to safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (Kozinets, 2002; Morgan, 2006),

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taking into consideration that we were in an environment that was nonrestricted with regard to consumer activity with open access and no restrictions. This also meant that the ethnographers did not record the conversations; consequently, they took notes before, during, and after the experiences (Spradley & McCurdy, 1980). We considered preserving anonymity to be critical in reducing any possible harm to the participants (Roulet et al., 2017).

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Operator & Date	Group/Tour	TOURIST	Profile			Foodstagrammers
			Gender	Nationality	Others	
DB 27/10/2018	G1	T1	Female	Italian	Housewife	X
		T2	Male	Italian	Salesman	X
		T3	Male	Argentinian		X
		T4	Female	Argentinian	Lawyer	X
		T5	Male	British	Professional	X
		T6	Male	Spanish		X
		T7	Male	British		
		T8	Male	Spanish	Heavy user	X
DB 28/11/2018	G2	T1	Male	British		X
		T2	Female	British	Professional	X
		T3	Male	Italian		
		T4	Female	French	Wine Sector	X
		T5	Male	British	Food critic	X
		T6	Male	German		
		T7	Female	German		X
		T8	Female	German		X
SFT 07/02/2019	G3	T1	Male	Belgian	Manager	X
		T2	Female	Belgian	Housewife	X
		T3	Female	Dutch	Housewife	
		T4	Male	Dutch		X
		T5	Male	Taiwanese		X
		T6	Female	Taiwanese		X
		T7	Female	Swedish		
SFT 08/02/2019	G4	T1	Male	Spanish	Student	
		T2	Male	Brazilian		X
		T3	Female	Brazilian		X
		T4	Female	Brazilian	Journalist	X
		T5	Male	Spanish		
		T6	Male	French	Journalist	
		T7	Female	Spanish	Professional	X
		T8	Male	French	Chef	
		T9	Female	French		X
SFT 23/02/2019	G5	T1	Male	Spanish	Professional	X
		T2	Male	German	Lawyer	X
		T3	Female	German		
		T4	Female	Spanish		X
		T5	Female	Spanish	Student	X
		T6	Female	Spanish		X
DB 09/03/2019	G6	T1	Male	Spanish	Professor	X
		T2	Male	Croatian	Doctor	
		T3	Male	Croatian		
		T4	Female	German		X
		T5	Female	Dutch	Retired	X
		T6	Male	Italian	Commercial	
		T7	Female	Italian		X
		T8	Female	Italian		X
		T9	Female	Portuguese	Artist	X
		T10	Male	Portuguese		X

\*For each participant, only a broad, primary description is provided, in order to retain anonymity and due to covert limitations.

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Table 2. Professional profiles.

Professional & Day Interview	Profile
P1. 30/10/2018	Restaurant manager, Spanish, visited in previous tour
P2 29/11/2018	Food critic, British,
P3 12/02/2019	Chef, Spanish, visited in previous tour
P4 12/02/2019	Sommelier, Italian, recommended by the tour operator
P5 18/02/2019	Food blogger, food critic, previously chef with a Michelin star
P6 01/03/2019	Restaurant Employee, Spanish
P7 12/03/2019	Restaurant manager, French, recommended by food blogger previously visited

\*For each professional interviewed, only a broad, primary description is provided, in order to retain anonymity.

Regarding the online participatory observation, access to public Instagram accounts with content visible on the investigator's personal Instagram accounts can be considered in the public domain and therefore are permissible to investigate without informed consent (Ess, 2012). In addition, when preparing our research plan, we requested and received the approval from our university ethics board.

Other data. In addition, following suggestions by Roulet et al. (2017), we also collected data beyond covert participant observation. We complemented observational data with seven ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) that lasted from 40 minutes to two hours after leaving the field with several of the restaurant managers, employees, chefs, and food critics. When possible, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. We used our observation to guide our interviews, whereas the ethnographers more overtly asked the participants to discuss some aspects of their experience. With these multiple methodologies, we achieved a reduction in the drawbacks of other qualitative methodologies, such as respondent inhibition (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003) and researcher influence (Curtin, 2005).

### Data analysis

We have followed Langley's (1999) approach as the standard in contemporary qualitative analysis and conducted our analysis in multiple stages and moved iteratively between the data, emergent ideas, and the literature to build a theory (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). This process, referred to as 'inspiration' by Langley (1999, p. 707), involves drawing inferences from our observational data such that they hold up to credible theoretical claims (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). This required a thoughtful role from researchers: observing, deliberating, and going back to the fieldwork to verify their conclusions. Throughout this iterative process, we actively and continually deepened our emerging theoretical understanding by subjecting it to further data analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) until a more profound and empirically grounded explanation of how people refer to and practice their involvement with the foodie culture emerged (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

### Findings

Our findings highlight the motivations behind foodstagrammer tourist behaviour when attending organised food tours, where they can take food related photos and share them on social media. Three main drivers of foodstagrammer behaviour have been identified from our fieldwork: the search for extraordinary and shared experiences, an interest in amateurism and serious leisure, and the pursuit of personal status and social identification. These motivations appear in prior work, as detailed in the framework, but the intensive use of social media platforms depicts a novel



scenario that modifies and leads specifically to its prominent role in foodstagrammer tourist motivation.

In the following paragraphs, we present the motivations deduced from our fieldwork. We use some citations that begin with an identification from Tables 1 and 2, where GX is the number of the group (tour), TY is the number identifying the tourist, and PZ is the number identifying the professional interviewed.

### **The search for extraordinary and shared experiences**

Foodstagrammer tourists perceived their activity as something unique and distinctive, similar in nature to the idea of an extraordinary experience, as proposed by Abrahams (1986). Experience is a term Abrahams applies to both the flow of life and a specific event; an extraordinary experience is distinguished from everyday experiences and includes a dynamic interpersonal interaction and immersion in an intensely framed environment and expectations of authenticity; it also allows the capturing of an extraordinary experience, a moment of self-authentication, and of celebration in community (Carú & Cova, 2003). The narrative described by the foodstagrammers of the tours frames their desire to search for extraordinary experiences related to food, restaurants, and the city itself. The events are even more extraordinary, however, because Instagram can extend the experience cycle. Foodstagrammers look for information for weeks, follow food tours, look for influencers linked to the city, and review the map of Instagram, and so the experience is different and linked to enjoyment. This is in line with the intrinsic influence of enjoyment that motivates such behaviour (Shang et al., 2017; Wu & Pearce, 2016).

In our fieldwork, we observed that experiences are lived as an absolute immersion in extraordinary events based on the self-centred motivations of tourists who are seeking psychological benefits (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Wang et al., 2017). For instance, during a conversation on the bus when travelling from one restaurant to another, G3/T2 explained to one of the ethnographers that for her: *'It's four times a year' and that 'these are unique experiences.... I wouldn't do it at home. I prepare for them months ahead of time...If my family saw me, they wouldn't believe it's me.'*

Interestingly, we saw how some of the foodstagrammers developed specific rituals on how to take pictures: 'camera eats first'. They use filters to identify themselves with their vibe. Photography, ideas, and the construction of stories magnify the experience and make it multidimensional. An excerpt from our field notes of our first tour describes an extraordinary experience as the ritual of one participant (G1/T5) who shot more than 100 photos in the tour before eating anything:

*"I could see how they behave freely with their cameras. One man (G1/T5) ceremoniously put the tripod on the table every time. I asked why, and he told me, laughing loudly, 'you noticed it, uh?' Then, another man (G1/T8) next to him joined the conversation. He explained that, for him, it was important not to appear in the pictures; 'I NEVER – he added, with emphasis – appear in my photos. It's a ritual, and there are norms. It's not my life; this is not how my normal life is, and I don't want to be seen in the shot.' Once the tripod was mounted, we noted that he was looking for several frames, not only of the plate but of the environment; we noted that he was looking for what we called 'his gaze'. 'Wait! Let me take a picture before we start eating'."*

Today's digital era has magnified this sense of living extraordinary experiential consumer activities. Transferring these experiences to social media seems to increase perception that they

were living moments that go beyond the normal, events that are far removed from the simple consumption of food. For example, one participant (G5/T1) said: *'Here and now... this is me... a different me, you know? .... I can't be that way at work... because this is going to be seen and shared.'*

Participants on the tours saw their activities as more extraordinary insofar as they undertook them not only for the pleasure itself, but rather to share the experience in the digital and social domains. They optimised their posts to obtain the maximum number of 'likes' or followers, so that the experience became intensely 'shareable' because of Instagram.

The food and the restaurants seemed to lose importance (as did the city itself), while the activity becomes an experience to be shared. An excerpt from our fieldnotes follows:

*"The conversation broke up when someone asked for the recipe and called the chef. There were faces of interest, but other people looked away trying to find another topic of conversation. Someone (G5/T2) said that he was not interested in learning to cook sardines that day, while at the same time, a Spanish tourist (G5/T1) asserted that there were three books by Ferran Adria that were a must. Several asked for the name of the books. Another woman (G5/T6) said that she didn't know who the cook was, nor did she care much. She was sitting next to the Spanish tourist and looked away to avoid discussing the topic of cooking."*

The sense of an extraordinary experience that is shared with friends and followers coincides with the sense of belonging or the moments of experience and feelings (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Lofgren, 2013) and links to the pursuit of social identification described below. Instagram is perceived not only as an explanatory documentation of the experience, but as a vector in itself through which the experience can be shared and carried out. It is a way to share the extraordinary experience with a community of peers and like-minded individuals with an eminently extrinsic motivation where the objective goes beyond the experience itself (Westbrook, 2016).

### **The interest for serious leisure and amateurism**

As a leisure-time activity, participants showed that the activity carried out was a unique conjunction of specialised consumption and a dedication to sharing with those who respect their passion, generating a non-objective viewpoint and opinions that others can see, can like and can follow. Instagram magnifies their experience: *'We noted several times this tension between the enjoyment of the meal and concerns for their followers.'*

The permanent presence of social media and cameras presents some tensions in its development, as they are sometimes very welcome and even promoted by some restaurants, while other restaurants no longer allow the use of smartphones or cameras in order to not disturb the experience of other customers or to protect the privacy of the waiters and cooks. Two excerpts from our field notes for the third and fifth tour follow:

*"I was at the young people's table, and I saw how they looked for each other at the beginning of the tour; they made some comments about technology while standing. At the table, they talked about technology. One of them (G5/T2) referred to the origin of foodies, describing how Paul Bocuse in Lyon, with his three Michelin stars, began to lend cameras to customers."*

*“The conversation changed when a participant (G3/T5) asked permission to take pictures of their table companions in a gesture that seemed more fraternal, or complicit, than a real request for authorization. While preparing the tripod, he explained that Elon Musk said that on Instagram people look like they have a much better life than they really do. They all laughed.”*

Participants’ interests are in line with Stebbins’s (1992, 2007) criteria for serious leisure activities, such as commitment, involvement, a significant effort to gain skills, and feelings of accomplishment. They referred to an amateur activity, which is a segment of serious leisure activities according to Stebbins. For instance, a couple of excerpts from our field notes of our third and fourth tours note that:

*“Customers were completing the satisfaction survey that the tour operator had given them at one of the tables. They already knew each other. A man (G3/T4) explained how, before joining the group, he had looked at who we were from afar, because he decided that he would never again join a group of amateurs, cooks, or gourmets. One day, some scolded him for taking pictures, and he got angry and decided never to mix again.”*

*“Just at the end of the meal, during the coffee, when they had already changed their seats to interact with different people, I heard (G4/T7): ‘They should pay us!! NOOO... we’re free, we’re amateurs but we’re free, my filter is my vibe!’ They said proudly that this was their hobby, their money, and their decision. The words ‘being happy’ came out, ‘it is our passion’ (G4/T2), ‘are we proud or not?’ (G4/T9).”*

The activity is completely unrelated to their professional endeavours or careers; an activity for which they had to prepare and develop specific skills related to food, wine, and nutrition; but more importantly, they need skills related to food and location photography – not of themselves, as they usually do not appear in the photos – as well as the use of filters. Even more importantly, they need skills related to technology that are obvious for young people, but not so obvious for older generations. All of these skills enable them to have complete control of their selfpresentation, in line with Buffardi and Campbell (2008). An excerpt from our field notes remarks:

*“The G1 tourists said goodbye and exchanged some cards. They talked about their activities when they return home: they talked about happy hours and about the work they have done. A foodstagrammer explained (G1/T4) in detail what she calls her mass: sorting the photos on her computer, uploading the selection to Instagram, and spending some time each day following up on the likes and comments. The rest laughed and used phrases like ‘same’, ‘me too’, or (G1/T1) ‘my partner tells me that he wonders whether I have a better time during the meal or later, when sharing photos and uploading it.’ The dinner was coming to its end. Attendees talked about everything they would do from then on, while already starting to manipulate their photos to achieve the best look & feel, posting their photographs, and tagging and reposting.”*

### **The pursuit of personal status and social identification**

For foodstagrammer tourists, sharing photos of what and where they eat during their free time is a way of describing their lifestyles, their attitudes, and their values. These are ideas that Westbrook (2016) defines as extrinsic drivers: food as a means to express one’s lifestyle. Photos of nice places, new restaurants, fashionable drinks, famous cooks, etc., return us to the idea of the ‘camera eats first’. A lifestyle and personal status are depicted that enables a social

identification that would not be obtained in any other way. Two excerpts from our field notes convey this idea:

*“The chef (P3) looked after us by standing next to the table; there were no more tables, and he came out to talk to us because he noticed we spoke Catalan. He said that at the end of the day, the only thing he perceives is the pride they show, that they really seem to need these dinners to reaffirm themselves and that sharing the photos is their way of enjoying food, even if he does not fully understand them.”*

*“He started talking with a German tourist (G6/T4) and her friend (G6/T5) about using their real names on Instagram, being Igers, and, suddenly, the cook started to share his surprise about the increasing number of likes his restaurant was getting in recent months. He also tried to get some feedback from the participants. The others looked at them with a bit of disbelief, as it seemed that they did not want to explain in public what they do.”*

The social identification of foodstagrammer tourists coincides with one of the dimensions described by Stebbins (2007) of serious leisure activities. We can assess this by the relations detected among the participants at each dinner we attended (finished with the sharing of member handles). For example, a relevant insight is (G6/T1) ‘Gerd, give us your contact details...the good stuff starts now... we’ll follow each other, okay?’ This motivation is an identification and a distinct characteristic of millennials and generation Z (who are considered intense Instagram users and individuals with a high level of opinion-seeking behaviour). An excerpt from our field notes details that they look for followers, reposts with tags, etc., to show that they are not alone:

*“They begin to use the word ‘follow’. Three of them opened a round of naming those who each followed. (G2/T5) asked us to notify him of other tours that we take in the future. He said, looking for complicity in the way he talked and approached us, that Steve Hanen’s followers were his friends.”*

Foodstagrammers share a sense of belonging to a tribe and have their own culture, the concept of community identification (Cova & Cova, 2002; Shang et al., 2017). Being a foodstagrammer identifies them. Instagram can be used by professionals for marketing communications, as it is a potent source of word of mouth, but what we observed from our fieldwork was more about real-life sharing and identification than about consciously promoting a restaurant or a place.

This social identification provokes a certain degree of narcissism, especially among people who, like foodstagrammer tourists, make interpersonal interactions with high degrees of social activity as suggested by Sheldon and Bryant (2016). Foodstagrammer tourists share similar traits with those who attend events, group activities, and travel for leisure. However, Instagram allows them to document these experiences, and their excessive complacency with their own traits leads them to believe that these experiences must be shared. This occurs even when the desire to share their leisure activities through social media requires them to weigh the inherent dangers of sharing these private acts with the benefits they gain from sharing them, as pointed out by Sebastian and Crossler (2019). An excerpt from our field notes of the first group includes:

*“One of the attendees (G1/T6) started wondering if he would do all of this without Instagram, or without the possibility to post it. His expression was one of doubt, of a recurring question asked many times. The answer was that basically everyone does it to show off: (G1/T3) ‘Of course! We have to admit it’. ‘If I can’t exhibit it, why would I do it?’*

*The person in front of him (G1/T8) approached him, whispering that, deep down, they all attend the tour because they want to be seen.”*

We can interpret from our observations that the motivations of foodstagrammer tourist have some elements in common with previous research on food tourism (e.g., Kim et al., 2009), but they share much more in common with previous studies on social sites (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Shang et al., 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Westbrook, 2016). There are also some motivations that were not perceived in our observations. First, related to food tourism motivations, we did not notice any comment or action showing interests in health or togetherness during the dinners. We noticed that some participants followed vegan restaurants (flakeandkale, blossom, or l’arpege), waste food initiatives (olio, stopfoodwaste), or food influencers (davidchange, joeybabywong, yumna/feel good foodie, and jamieoliver), but the range of influencers being followed was huge and diverse and was not only related to food. Our understanding about why participants did not show any explicit interest in togetherness during the activity and in the group itself: they did not know each other before and had no interest in becoming friends, and more importantly, relationships on Instagram are carried out on the internet, so the driver for attending these tours is not to share with the other participants on the tour, or to meet new people in situ, but to share the experiences with their friends and followers on the internet. Secondly, related to social site users’ motivations, we did not perceive altruism, maybe because in the case of Instagram, compared to other social platforms, recommendations and opinions are not the main function.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The observation of the foodstagrammers raises the question of whether they are primarily motivated by looking for ‘a sense of place’, defined as food tourism, or for ‘good food’, defining them as foodies. Do they follow motivations traditionally identified for foodies and food tourists, or, on the contrary, are these ones secondary motivations and the primary motivations are closer to information sharing and taking photos regardless of the object? Food, restaurants, and cities seem to lose importance, while the activity of sharing stunning photos, attractive stories, and inspiring videos becomes the important part of the experience. Instagram then becomes not only a communication channel but also the main motivation. In other words, the motivations of foodstagrammer tourists seem to be closer to the general motivations of social site users than food tourist or foodie motivations. They are still consumers of food tourism and food services, but they have modified the way they relate to food. The challenge is to understand the different order of their motivations and the inherent tensions.

The main motivations for the foodstagrammer participants of our fieldwork are, first, the search for extraordinary and shared experiences, with the components of authenticity, immersion, and celebration that is inherent to food tourism. However, such experiences become even more extraordinary because of an amplification on Instagram through sharing on the internet and the development of specific rituals for photography or videos. Photography, ideas, and the construction of stories magnify the experience and make it multidimensional. The second main motivation according to our fieldwork is the interest in serious leisure and amateurism that is revealed in the commitment and involvement of participants in gaining skills and their feelings of accomplishment, both related to food and, probably more importantly, to photography and technology. The third relevant motivation is the pursuit of personal status and social identification. This is to be expected for a serious leisure activity such as food tourism, but it is intensely amplified by the use of Instagram; sharing photos of what and where people eat during their free

time is a way of describing lifestyles, attitudes and values that allow them to position themselves as a person, even if this is somewhat narcissistic, and as part of a group of peers.

Our study contributes to an understanding of customers that may enable establishments and destinations to offer a uniquely memorable experience. The desire for a new experience replaces the gourmet customers of yesteryear with a new type of customer, whose interest is driven primarily by their need to signal social standing through social media. Furthermore, because of the rise of social platforms such as Instagram, a well-managed Instagram channel, achieving a good reach through the appropriate use of hashtags and re-posting of user-provided media, can positively influence restaurant and destination images and should be included in marketing strategies when targeting digital natives. Firms can monitor and analyse content on social media to understand how consumers view a firm, and therefore assess consumer expectations and integrate these into future strategies.

This article contributes to food tourism and social platform research, as few studies have provided a clear understanding of the phenomena. By applying an ethnographic methodology, our research analyses and interprets the actions and activities of a sample of foodstagrammer tourists attending food tours in the city of Barcelona with the aim of identifying their key motivations. This qualitative approach has allowed us to obtain a deeper comprehension and provide essential insights than we would otherwise have obtained with quantitative methods. Our role as covert participants provides us with solid advantages, as we did not rely only on foodstagrammers' words, but on other evidence as well. Our study offers an exploration in a real-life setting that points to a limitation from a methodological perspective of other studies, namely, the common use of hypothetical scenarios and self-reporting surveys. There are also some limitations associated with the use of ethnography. Such an approach is positioned within an interpretive paradigm; consequently, researchers using ethnographic techniques must manage a commitment to subjectivity. We have addressed this problem in two ways: first, through the methodology of immersive participation, using two researchers in each experience with involvement in observations as participants while maintaining positive social relationships with participants in ethnographic studies; and, second, by using a combination of different methods regarding fieldwork and observation that reduce drawbacks such as researcher influence.

Finally, there is considerable scope for future research in this area. Our study was exploratory, and therefore we made trade-offs that favoured exploration over confirmation; a confirmation study of our findings could be a logical continuation. Another line for research that we find theoretically and practically interesting would be to carry out comparative and cross-cultural analyses of foodstagrammer tourist motivations. Another proposed area is to explore motivation driven groupings as a food tourism segmentation strategy and study if the same motivations are found when using other social networks. Other areas of interest are the measurement of the effects of Instagram on the image of some attributes of destinations or restaurants; in the big data domain, social media platforms are a particularly promising source of information because data are easy to collect and rich in content.

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