



### **Who killed food tourism? Unaware cannibalism in online conversations about travelling in Italy**

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## Who killed food tourism? Unaware cannibalism in online conversations about travelling in Italy

### Abstract

#### *Purpose*

A food tourism destination can fully exploit its competitiveness if food-related attributes are consistently highlighted both in its promotion and in user-generated content and spontaneous conversations among travellers. However, in the context of food tourism research, a possible image incongruence has not yet been studied. Tourism destination image incongruence occurs when different travel information sources, such as destination management organizations and travel-related blogs and forums, reflect inconsistent representations of a destination's attributes. This study addresses this gap, focusing on Italy, for which official destination promotion materials, tourist guides and web influencers indicate food and wine as crucial drivers to attract visitors. However, it is not clear to what extent travellers really consider food-related attributes as key factors when they enquire or report about their journey to Italy. This study examines whether food-related attributes are present in such conversations and are perceived differently by people with and without knowledge about the destination.

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

Content analysis based on a Bayesian machine-learning technique utilizing Leximancer software was applied to analyse questions and answers posted on TripAdvisor forums by potential and past visitors of four destinations in Italy (Naples, Florence, Parma and Ferrara). Questions and answers expressed by people with different knowledge in Italian and English were analysed separately to gain deeper understanding.

#### *Findings*

Contrary to expectations, food-related themes were almost completely absent in the conversations analysed, with only a few exceptions in Italian question sections. This situation depicts a sort of "cannibalism", in the sense that the centrality of food-related attributes is engulfed by other, less sensorial, enjoyable and memorable aspects of the travel experience.

#### *Research limitations/implications*

Analysis suggests that hype may exist in food tourism promotion related to destination image incongruence. However, while based on a large volume of conversations, the analysis covers only four Italian cities.

#### *Practical implications*

Destination management organizations should develop their strategy and communication considering internal and external elements: their marketing targets on one side and the local culture and attractions' perceptions on the other. Standard marketing processes (segmenting, targeting, positioning) and theories should be put in place. The application of standard marketing dynamics and studies should push the DMOs to understand that the internally perceived cultural values of the touristic destinations could not be known or joint univocally by the global external customers and that a local promotional activity should start with branding and not commercial activities.

#### *Originality*

This is the first study to suggest the existence of hype in food tourism promotion of Italian destinations and to provide evidence supporting this argument.

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5 *Keywords*

6 Content analysis, Food destinations, Food tourism, Italy, Traveller-generated content  
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9 *Article classification*

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British Food Journal

## Introduction

Destination image is a key factor influencing tourist destination choice (Pan et al., 2021; Phau et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, building an attractive destination image represents a priority for destination management organizations (DMOs) (Molinillo et al., 2018). The process through which a destination image is formed in tourist's minds is complex and results from a personal elaboration of information absorbed from multiple sources which encompass not only the marketers (i.e., the DMOs) but also resellers, third-party and interpersonal sources (Kim and Chen, 2016). In particular, user-generated content posted in travel-related blogs and forums are gaining stronger impacts and have reduced DMOs' control over destination image (Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015).

Prior research found that DMOs and travel-related blogs and forums often convey different representations of a tourism destination image and attributes (Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). As a result of this destination image misalignment, DMOs may overemphasize some attributes and attractions and overlook others that are relevant for tourists (Lojo et al., 2020). The issue of destination image misalignment has not been studied in the context of food tourism destinations. Our study addresses this gap in the Italian context. There is little doubt that in the travel market competition, Italy can count on food and wine as distinguishing features to attract visitors (Cardoso et al., 2019). Italian enogastronomy is indeed celebrated by destination promotions, tourist guides, and news reports. However, aside from official communication channels, it is not clear whether food and wine are actually central attributes in travellers' spontaneous conversations about specific Italian destinations. In fact, a that hype might exist in food tourism promotion, in the case of a territory so rich in attractions such as Italy.

Therefore, the purpose of this work is to answer to the following research question: when travellers enquire or report about their journeys to Italian destinations, do eating, drinking, tasting, cooking and other food-related experiences actually receive the same emphasis conveyed by official channels? For this purpose, we examine traveller-generated content posted on TripAdvisor about four Italian cities (Florence, Naples, Ferrara and Parma) that include food and cuisine as central topics in their promotion and on the destinations' websites.

To gain a more in-depth understanding, we explored online conversations' content and whether food-related attributes of a destination are central in such conversations, making a distinction between people without knowledge about the destination (typically tourists who are planning their stay) and people with good knowledge of the destination. Making this distinction is fundamental because previous research has shown that familiarity with a place largely influences the perception of a destination's attributes and image (Tan and Wu, 2016). Specifically, people with low knowledge of a destination tend to develop simplistic destination images based on a few stereotypes, while people with higher knowledge have more complex images based on multiple attributes (Stylidis and Cherifi, 2018).

Finally, to explain the findings highlighting image misalignment, this work brings about conceptual arguments related to the potential effect of ethnocentrism, thus enriching destination food research, which has not yet considered the role of this factor (Lyu et al., 2020). Ethnocentrism indicates a person's biased beliefs in favor of her/his home country products and services (Sharma and Wu, 2015). This paper argues that in Italy, tourism authorities, companies and official communication channels tend to hold highly favourable views of domestic food heritage and of its importance as a naturally embedded driver to attract tourists. This perception clashes with the findings from the analysis of the online conversations presented in this study, suggesting that the official destination marketers reliance on food attributes may be overemphasized.

Therefore, by directly examining spontaneous online conversations (Fait et al., 2015), this study will clarify to what extent food- and wine-related activities are actually central topics when

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3 potential visitors and local experts exchange comments and opinions about Italian destinations  
4 and will provide implications and suggestions for both theory and practice.

5 The remainder of this paper is set out as follows. First, we provide an overview of prior studies  
6 about destination image, food tourism destinations and misalignment between projected and  
7 received images. Next, we introduce our empirical study, describing the methods and findings.  
8 Finally, we present and discuss the results and draw conclusions.  
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## 10 11 12 **Literature review**

### 13 14 ***Destination image building and food tourism destinations***

15 Destination image is the set of ‘attributes, functional consequences, (or expected benefits) and  
16 the symbolic meanings or psychological characteristics that consumers associate with a specific  
17 destination’ (Govers et al., 2007, p. 15). Destination image plays a fundamental role in creating  
18 place awareness and in driving tourists’ destination choice, attachment and satisfaction  
19 (Gallarza et al., 2002; Veasna et al., 2013). Therefore, tourism destinations should adopt a  
20 proactive approach to build and manage their image (Croy, 2010). As emphasized by available  
21 conceptual models about tourism destination image formation, the starting point to build a  
22 specific destination image is to clarify the destination identity to be communicated and to  
23 anchor it to the (real or staged) authenticity of the place (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Govers  
24 et al., 2007).

25 Specifically, drawing on their food attributes and heritage, several destinations strive to  
26 establish an attractive food destination image (Okumus, 2020). The DMOs of these destinations  
27 aim to establish an attractive destination’s foodscape, which can be conceptualized as the  
28 “dynamic food-related environment that is constantly being produced and reproduced in staged  
29 and non-staged foodscapes by a varying set of actors” (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019,  
30 p. 473).

31 Food tourism – sometimes also referred to as gastronomic tourism, gourmet tourism and  
32 culinary tourism (Ellis et al., 2018) – can be defined as “the act of travelling to get a sense of  
33 place via its local foods” (World Food Travel Association, 2019). While food tourism is not a  
34 new phenomenon and has been researched since the 1970s, the number of destinations focusing  
35 on food-related attributes to establish their destination image as well as the number of academic  
36 articles on this topic has boomed in the last two decades. Articles address issues such as the  
37 role of food as a tourist motivation to visit a destination and to support valuable tourism  
38 experiences, and the use of food in destination marketing activities and place branding (Lyu et  
39 al., 2020; Okumus et al., 2020).

40 Prior studies have highlighted that food is a factor that, indeed in combination with other  
41 factors, influences tourists to visit a specific destination (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen,  
42 2016a; Su et al., 2020). When selecting a destination, a tourist may anticipate food experiences  
43 and therefore “seeks out food, meals and food-related activities offered at the destination”  
44 (Andersson et al., 2017, p. 1). Food plays different roles in influencing tourism experiences: it  
45 can either enable the peak tourist experience or contribute to support consumer experience  
46 (Mkono et al., 2013). In the first case, food is one of the attractions that constitute major travel  
47 motivations, while in the latter case, food contributes to satisfying basic consumer needs (e.g.  
48 eating, sleeping, transport) on the journey (Quan and Wang, 2004). Similarly, Björk and  
49 Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016b) identified three groups of tourists – survivors, enjoyers and  
50 experiencers – depending on the influence that food has on their tourism behaviours. For  
51 survivors, food should satisfy only physiological needs to support their daily tourism activities.  
52 Enjoyers consider food an important factor to travel; while for experiencers, food is a  
53 fundamental motivation to select a specific destination. Moreover, experiencers rely more  
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3 heavily on anticipated food experiences at the destination and make more extensive use of  
4 TripAdvisor and other web sources to collect information about local food before travelling  
5 (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016b).  
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### 9 ***Food destination image formation and misalignment***

10 Destination image formation in people's mind is the result of a complex and dynamic process  
11 and many factors outside the control of DMOs contribute to this process (Blain et al., 2005). In  
12 fact, people receive information and stimuli about the destination from multiple sources beyond  
13 the promotional efforts of the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). An individual's  
14 perceived destination image evolves over time from organic image into induced image as the  
15 result of her/his engagement in an active information search process (Fakeye and Crompton,  
16 1991). In addition, induced image evolves into a complex image when an individual has had  
17 experience with a destination (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). Therefore, different levels of  
18 familiarity with a destination lead to different perceptions of a destination's attributes and image  
19 (Baloglu, 2001; Hu and Ritchie, 1993; Tan and Wu, 2016). Phelps (1986) distinguished  
20 between the primary and secondary images of a destination developed respectively by people  
21 with experience with the destination and people who are new to the destination. More precisely,  
22 people with a higher familiarity with a destination have more detailed and specific knowledge  
23 of its attributes (Ceylan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019).

24 Among the sources of information shaping a person's perceived destination image, electronic  
25 word-of-mouth (eWOM) and user-generated content are emerging as highly influential but also  
26 as the less controllable by destination marketers (Tseng et al., 2015). In particular, food-related  
27 digital content and e-word-of-mouth shared through social media have a primary role in shaping  
28 a food destination image and travel decisions (Bu et al., 2020). Social media influences  
29 travellers' shopping process (Sparks et al., 2013): it is a space where users can share  
30 experiences, make recommendations and express preferences (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017;  
31 Parent et al., 2011; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Indeed, the amount of relevant information  
32 regarding travel and tourism has dramatically increased on the web, together with the level of  
33 uncertainty and complexity (Sciarelli et al., 2018).

34 According to a study, in 2016, 95% of tourists read reviews on destinations before booking  
35 their vacation, and 70% of travellers read up to 20 reviews in the planning phase, spending on  
36 average 30 minutes to read comments from other users (Franzoni and Bonera, 2019). Digital  
37 travellers are increasingly connected and need an increasing quantity of information to perfect  
38 the purchase of a tourist product (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

39 Leung, Law and Lee (2011) specifically studied food evaluations shared by visitors on a travel  
40 blog and their role in influencing a destination image. Meanwhile, Tseng et al. (2015) assessed  
41 the image of China as a global tourism destination by examining a large number of travel blog  
42 entries through the software Leximancer. Their analysis revealed that food was the fourth most  
43 crucial theme. This study indicates the usefulness of analyzing eWOM to understand the  
44 perceived destination image.

45 Some works specifically found that the destination image that emerges from user-generated  
46 content posted in travel-related blogs and forums is different from the destination image  
47 conveyed by DMOs (Lojo et al., 2020; Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). This  
48 phenomenon is known as destination image misalignment, indicating a gap between the  
49 projected and the received images, which emerges when comparing user-generated content and  
50 organization-generated content (He et al., 2021). Given that through word-of-mouth and user-  
51 generated content tourists have a remarkable role in shaping a destination image in other  
52 people's minds (Camprubí et al., 2013), it is extremely important for DMOs to assess the  
53 destination perceived image. Specifically, DMOs should understand the perceived importance  
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of food-related attributes to avoid a misalignment between the projected and received images and to improve their selection of destination marketing content (He et al., 2021).

To explain the misalignment between the projected and the received images, in this study we draw on the concept of consumer ethnocentrism, which indicates the beliefs held by consumers “about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign-made products” (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). More precisely, research has shown that ethnocentrism comprises both rational and emotional components which make people perceive domestic products as superior to foreign products (Sharma, 2015). Hence, ethnocentrism is a source of systematic bias in the perception and evaluation of domestic and foreign products (Acharya and Elliott, 2003).

The strong effects of ethnocentrism have been proved specifically in studies about food purchase decisions (Xin and Seo, 2019). Similarly, many studies in the tourism field have researched the impacts of such home country bias on tourist and resident behavior (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2020; Hyun, 2009; Kock et al., 2019). However destination food research has not yet examined the effects of consumer ethnocentrism on marketers policies (Lyu et al., 2020) and specifically has not related it to the destination image building activities of DMOs.

## Methodology

Social media and user-generated content have revolutionized tourism and hospitality communication and are viewed as rich sources of information for destination analysis (Ukpabi and Karjaluo, 2018). In the past, researchers typically analysed small samples of population-representative travel diaries (tens or hundreds of files), using a manual content analysis process. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from such texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2013). However, the enormous growth of online travel reviews we have experienced in the last years requires both the operationalization of the analysis through computerized methods, and the identification of a correct data source that can provide the researcher with a huge amount of data to collect and analyse (Marine-Roig and Clavé, 2016).

To perform our analysis, we collected user-generated content from Tripadvisor destination forums. The forums are divided by city and designed to give a user the possibility to ask a question related to the forum specific destination. Other users (that, therefore, self-identify themselves as local experts) try to answer the questions. The data collected were divided into two different datasets (questions and answers) and were examined using a content analysis software, Leximancer, extracting themes (groups of concepts) both for the “questions” dataset and the “answers” dataset. Successively we examined the themes and studied the presence of food-related ones.

**TripAdvisor is a leading traveller-generated content platform** founded in February 2000. TripAdvisor has a “what to do” section, where travellers can review specific activities and experiences instead of tourism business like hotels and restaurants. TripAdvisor also includes forums and a specific section dedicated to local food attractions, namely, “Food and Travel Trip Reports”.

This paper draws data from TripAdvisor for three reasons. First, TripAdvisor is one of the most popular sources of travel suggestions on the internet, with 456 million people visiting it every month (Kinstler, 2018), which in 2019 generated approximately 859 million user reviews and opinions (Statista, 2021). This platform contains reviews of experiences that cover the territory in the broadest sense. In particular, the platform is the leading review portal for “what to do” worldwide, and it has expanded (in 16 years) from a hotel review site to a “site of destinations”.

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3 It is the eighth site in the world for number of visits and the first in its industry; it is available  
4 in 28 languages and operates in 48 countries (Franzoni and Bonera, 2019). Collecting data from  
5 such a popular platform facilitates findings that could hold practical significance.

6 Second, among the scholarly community, TripAdvisor represents one of the most widely  
7 investigated consumer generated media – media that provides users with just-in-time access to  
8 up-to-date, aggregated, and ranked information on the quality of products, services and  
9 destinations, as perceived by a large number of consumers (Filieri *et al.*, 2015). It has been the  
10 website chosen for data collection in numerous studies over the years (Ganzaroli, De Noni and  
11 Van Baleen, 2017).

12 Third, TripAdvisor has an unusual forum section developed as a question and answer (Q&A)  
13 area for travel destinations and cities, in which potential travellers can ask for suggestions from  
14 destination experts. This was particularly important for our research, which explores  
15 conversation topics among people with different levels of knowledge about a specific  
16 destination. The availability of these functionalities renders the website particularly suitable for  
17 the context of this paper. To achieve the objective of this research, qualitative data collection  
18 and analysis of Q&A postings of potential and past visitors on TripAdvisor forums on four  
19 destinations in Italy were conducted. **Several studies have already examined food tourism in  
20 this specific research context (Cafiero et al, 2019; Festa et al., 2020; Presenza and Del Chiappa,  
21 2013). Among the others,** an analysis of tourists' food destination imagery among a large  
22 sample of people from multiple European and Asian countries indicated that Italy was the  
23 favourite food destination for respondents from both continents (Cardoso et al., 2019). The  
24 same study revealed that the top words associated with Italia food imagery were pasta, pizza,  
25 wine, delicious and culture. Food is also a recurrent theme used by Italian regional DMOs to  
26 promote their destinations through social media (Mariani et al., 2016).

27 Data were manually extracted, similar to Franzoni and Bonera's (2019) method, from  
28 TripAdvisor forum pages for four Italian cities with a strong food culture in Italy, both in the  
29 Italian and English languages. The basic unit of analysis in this study was the questions posted  
30 originally and the answers in the thread. A thread is made up of a question posted by a potential  
31 traveller requesting information about a destination, followed by responses from previous  
32 travellers or local experts for the destination selected. We assumed that the questions were  
33 asked by not expert people and that the answers were written by what we defined local experts.  
34 Our assumption has the basis in self-identification theory. Self-identification and customer  
35 engagement are widely studied topics in the marketing literature (Cheng, White, & Chaplin,  
36 2010; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Moliner, Monferrer, & Estrada, 2018; Moore & Homer, 2008;  
37 Van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Self-identification is positively  
38 related to both overall satisfaction and visitor engagement and visitor engagement enhances  
39 destination loyalty intended as a recommendation and repeat visit (Alrawadieh et al., 2018).  
40 We adopted this classification because social identity theory suggests that an individual's sense  
41 of identification with a group encourages participation in a brand community (Algesheimer et  
42 al., 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and because there is growing evidence of the effects of  
43 social network media in disseminating such organic information. In particular, it has also been  
44 noted that the opinions of local residents are perceived to be particularly useful sources of  
45 information about a tourism destination (Crick, 2003).

46 We decided to collect only 2019 data to avoid any influence related to the COVID-19 pandemic  
47 situation. The data from the forum section were divided into two sections for every city, a  
48 section for the questions and a section for the answers. For each question, all related answers  
49 were collected to facilitate consistency between questions and answers. For each city, we  
50 collected user contributions using a systematic sampling approach, and we limited the data  
51 collection to a maximum of 50,000 words for the answer section of every location because for  
52 every city this section was always longer than the question section.  
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The data for 2019 were collected for the destinations of Naples, Florence, Parma and Ferrara. For the selection of the cities, we started with the UNESCO lists. We considered the World Heritage List, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/en/news/1049/en/list&order=country>, which includes 55 heritage sites in Italy, to select relevant destinations for culturally motivated visitors. To enlarge our selection range, we considered in addition the UNESCO creative cities network, <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/creative-cities-map>. The latter list embraces 11 Italian cities that have identified creativity and creative industries such as crafts and folk art, design, film, music, literature, media arts and, of course, gastronomy as drivers of their sustainable urban development. In this highly inspiring assortment of cities, we stratified our choice to include:

- a hallmark international destination for heritage tourism, namely, the city of Florence
- a national destination, off the beaten path of mass tourism, namely, the city of Ferrara
- a previous kingdom's capital, or a landing place in the past for grand tour travellers, namely, the town of Naples
- a recently developed creative city for gastronomy, namely, the city of Parma.

Two of our chosen destinations are able to attract visitors on their own and have developed huge tourist flows: in 2019, Florence received more than 5 million arrivals and Naples received approximately 4 million arrivals.<sup>1</sup> The remaining two destinations (Ferrara and Parma) are preferred by travellers for short visits and day trips, and their incoming flows are much lower (700,000 tourists for Parma in 2019 and 600,000 for Ferrara).<sup>2</sup>

In selecting the final shortlist of four cities, we dismissed other possible areas of interest, such as the Langhe region, because of the low number of comments available on TripAdvisor. Ultimately, we selected four different destinations inside one of the most acknowledged countries worldwide for the richness of its gastronomy. At the time of our analysis, Florence, Naples, Ferrara and Parma included food and cuisine as hot topics in their promotional material and on the destinations' websites. Therefore, their substantial visibility in terms of local food in online conversations was probable.

As the extracted data were generally unstructured, cleaning was undertaken. The text was examined, commercial post and links were deleted and technical TripAdvisor notes, page numbers, usernames and other repetitive details outside the scope of the study were also deleted. At the completion of the process, 16 files, 8 for the English language and 8 for the Italian language, were available for analysis.

## Results and Analysis

To analyse the data, we prepared a form of content analysis based on a Bayesian machine-learning technique utilizing Leximancer software ([www.leximancer.com](http://www.leximancer.com)). Leximancer is a tool for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner.

It analyzes the content of textual documents in electronic format and explores the extracted information statistically and visually without pre-existing assumptions about the meaning of the words, and therefore, it reduces the possible subjective bias from the researcher.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://dati.istat.it/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://dati.istat.it/>

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3 The software uses a machine-learning technique to determine the main concepts in a text and  
4 how they relate to each other (Rooney, 2005). It allowed us to perform two types of content  
5 analysis: conceptual (thematic) and relational (semantic) (Smith and Humpreys, 2006). In the  
6 conceptual study, texts were analysed according to the presence and frequency of the concepts  
7 contained within them; these concepts could be words, phrases or more complex definitions,  
8 such as a set of words representing a concept. However, the relational analysis measured how  
9 specific concepts related to one another within the text. In this instance, Leximancer measured  
10 the connections between the concepts identified in the text and extracted information  
11 representing them through conceptual maps. Themes that were physically closer together or  
12 overlapping on the map were more closely linked in the text, and brighter circles on the map  
13 indicated the increased importance of that concept (Robson *et al.*, 2013).

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16 Owing to the nature of Leximancer, no initial coding was required. Given the advantages of  
17 Leximancer approach, it overcomes some common problems of qualitative research, such as  
18 subjective coding, doubtful inter-coder reliability and disputable interpretations because it is  
19 highly consistent in the analytical process and requires minimal manual intervention from  
20 researchers.

21 The files were cleaned of repetitive and out-of-scope text. The analysis started with 16 files, 8  
22 in English and 8 in Italian. Each couple of files was analysed to determine the differences  
23 between the questions and answers in the forum related to the cities examined. The main themes  
24 identified in the analysis are provided in Table I. The elements in Italian language have been  
25 translated into English for clarity. The original language table (Table III) is present in Appendix  
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30 (INSERT TABLE I HERE)

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32 The table provides the themes ranked by their relative importance. The numbers in  
33 parentheses denote the number of context blocks (and not the frequency of the terms of the  
34 theme) in the project associated with the theme. A context box is the basic element for the  
35 analysis, usually composed by two sentences, used by Leximancer. The concepts are clustered  
36 into higher-level 'themes' when the map is generated. Concepts that appear together often in  
37 the same pieces of text attract one another strongly, and so tend to settle near one another in  
38 the map space. The themes aid interpretation by grouping the clusters of concepts, and are  
39 shown as coloured circles on the map. Each theme takes its name from the most connected  
40 concept within that theme represented in the concept map. One of Leximancer's main features  
41 is that it can automatically extract its own dictionary of terms for each document set using this  
42 information.  
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44 Tourists generally tend to search for new experiences, which includes tasting new local foods  
45 (Ji *et al.*, 2016) and Italy is by far the favourite food destination in the world both for Asian and  
46 European tourists (Cardoso *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, we assumed that the food topic would  
47 represent a relevant part of the content both in the questions and the answers for both languages.  
48 However, the results of our analysis were different. The food themes were present only in a few  
49 Italian question sections (a higher percentage for Ferrara, a small city), and they were absent  
50 both in the Italian answers (except for Parma) and in the entire English analysis. As an example,  
51 Figure 1 provides the results of our research for the questions regarding the city of Florence in  
52 English.  
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56 (INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)  
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3 The concept map clearly demonstrates that questions were related to practical suggestion about  
4 travel (Florence concept), accommodation (staying and hotel concepts) heritage (ticket and  
5 museum concept), city visits (look, place, walk) and planning (day, time, advance, line).  
6 However, no questions related to food, restaurants, cooking, eating and so on. More or less the  
7 same occurred for the remaining cities, languages, questions and answers data groups.

8 We developed Table I to show the food-related content in the TripAdvisor forum posts  
9 analysed. As previously illustrated, the data were divided by language, destination and user  
10 destination knowledge. We assumed that questions were posed by users without prior  
11 knowledge of the destination and that answers were provided by users with good knowledge of  
12 the destination. To investigate further the presence of food concepts, we decided to increase the  
13 granularity of our analysis by studying not only the themes present in the concept map but also  
14 the concepts that were the foundational elements of the themes.

15 As stated, a Leximancer ‘theme’ is a group or cluster of concepts that have some commonality  
16 or connectedness, as evident from their close proximity on the concept map. Prevalence was  
17 determined by the number of concepts present in the theme, and this is indicated in the thematic  
18 report. For every combination, we analysed the concepts and identified the food-related  
19 concepts and their weights, as defined in Table II.

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24 (INSERT TABLE II HERE)

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26 Thus, the extended granularity of our analysis only revealed in addition a limited presence of  
27 food concepts in Italian language conversations about the cities of Naples and Parma. The  
28 absence of food concepts in English conversations was also confirmed and was striking.

## 29 30 31 **Research and Theoretical contribution**

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33 Our empirical research aim was to understand the importance of food for leisure and business  
34 travellers in the initial phase of their travel information search process and identify the different  
35 themes between the expert and the non-expert contributors for specific destinations. Despite the  
36 importance of the topic stressed by DMOs, we could not find any relevant conversations on  
37 food for the destinations studied. As identified in Table I, only a few themes were food-related,  
38 and these were mainly in the Italian language question section. To analyse the topic further, we  
39 decided to increase the granularity of our analysis, and we searched for relations by expanding  
40 the focus of the investigation, examining not only food-related themes but also food-related  
41 concepts; even so, few food-related elements were found and not in any relevant position. We  
42 interpret this by metaphor as a kind of “cannibalism” between attributes of the destination, to  
43 the detriment of food tourism.

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45 Regarding food, we conclude that we are facing the phenomenon of tourism destination image  
46 incongruence. The local DMOs overestimate the overall importance of Italian food in visiting  
47 decisions; neither the English-speaking and Italian-speaking potential travellers nor the  
48 destination experts consider food a central element in travel decisions. Our analysis considered  
49 different realities, from bigger cities to smaller ones, with a common feature – food quality –  
50 to enforce our conclusion further. We did not find any relevant difference in, only the absence  
51 of, total or partial, any food-related query.

52  
53 Analysing these results, we further studied this phenomenon’s origin to open the door for future  
54 investigation. We can assume that the situation just described may be due to an ethnocentric  
55 bias that occurs when the culture of its ethnic group influences perceptions of a particular group  
56 of people (Xin and Seo, 2019). The Italian destination decision makers assume that the  
57 importance of food, common in Italian culture, automatically has the same significance for  
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3 tourism or people with different backgrounds, and our analysis confuted this approach. These  
4 findings are consistent with the gap between food destination identity and image reported by  
5 Lin et al. (2011), who argue that this inconsistency may be caused by the absence of a clear  
6 food destination identity from the supply side actors (such as DMOs) when targeting  
7 international tourists. Overall, our study enhances the current understanding of ethnocentrism  
8 in food tourism, by suggesting that this phenomenon does not only affect the demand side but  
9 also the supply side. In fact, prior studies examined how tourists' ethnocentrism effects their  
10 behaviours such as their willingness to try local food (Kock et al., 2019), but available research  
11 did not consider the impacts of ethnocentrism in food destination management. By addressing  
12 this gap, our study highlights the potential biases that ethnocentrism can stimulate in destination  
13 decision makers and marketers, as well.

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16 Finally, our work contributes to the stream of studies about the analysis of online conversations  
17 to detect customer views of specific and emerging topics in tourism. Recent research has shown  
18 how the in-depth analysis of online conversations make it possible to capture the essence of  
19 public opinion and discourses about topics such as environmental sustainability in tourism  
20 (Borghi and Mariani, 2021a) or customer evaluation of service robots deployed in hospitality  
21 services (Borghi and Mariani, 2021b). Our work suggests that the in-depth analysis of online  
22 conversations may be particularly useful also to confirm or disconfirm established assumptions  
23 about tourism phenomena, such as the importance of food in influencing travel decisions.  
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### 26 27 **Practical implications, limitation and research agenda**

28 Our research underlines the importance of understanding customers' perceptions of tourist  
29 destinations' attributes, avoiding biases related to the observer's national culture. Italian  
30 tourism destinations have been often promoted by DMOs as food destinations, with huge public  
31 and private investments (Mariani et al., 2016). The results, as seen in our analysis, are not  
32 visible when the tourists are planning their visit. Food is not one key element examined when  
33 a journey is planned. Therefore we assume that a standard message based on ethnocentric values  
34 (in our case food) can be ineffective and waste both energy and economic resources. It has to  
35 be clear that, although the importance of food tourism, the food promotional communication,  
36 at the moment, looks ineffective and that food is not one of the main aspects investigated by  
37 the visitors. Our findings have to be studied further, even because they have to be correlated to  
38 the importance attributed to the food by Asian and European tourists that consider Italy as the  
39 preferred food destination in the world. (Cardoso et al., 2019). Further analysis should focus in  
40 particular, in designing the communication strategies of the DMOs of Italian destinations.  
41 Generic food-related communication strategies are ineffective and DMOs should find the right  
42 balance between food-related attributes and other attributes. It looks clear that other aspects  
43 related to tourism catch the attention of tourists and that the food-related communication  
44 strategy is cannibalized by the presence of stronger cultural and artistic elements.

45 DMOs should differentiate their promotional messages based on the different cultures and  
46 nationalities of incoming visitors and different internal destinations have to be promoted using  
47 carefully identified key elements in order to avoid the cannibalism effect we have identified in  
48 the food tourism promotion. Finally, some limitations should be mentioned. First, we analysed  
49 traveller-generated content from one platform only and related to selected cities. Future  
50 research could consider other cities and rely on additional data sources to corroborate our  
51 findings further. In addition, we did not evaluate travellers' perceptions based on their country  
52 of origin. Addressing this gap may represent another research opportunity. Future research  
53 could then identify the perceived importance of food-related attributes of Italian cities according  
54 to different cultural or national groups and develop a model for identifying the different values  
55 of and the correct value propositions for the various segments.  
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## 43 **Appendix 1**

44 (INSERT TABLE III HERE)

Table I

Ferrara (Ita)		Ferrara (Eng)		Parma (Ita)		Parma (Eng)		Florence (Ita)		Florence (Eng)		Naples (Ita)		Naples (Eng)	
Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers
Ferrara (52)	Ferrara (72)	Ferrara (89)	Ferrara (249)	Parma (71)	Parma (79)	Parma (283)	Parma (594)	Firenze (98)	find (80)	Florence (231)	Florence (334)	Napoli (324)	square (732)	Naples (545)	Naples (470)
dinner (22)	suggestion (57)	train (44)	train (150)	parking (16)	parking (37)	visit (154)	car (401)	suggestions (68)	ticket (68)	day (130)	time (245)	suggestions (159)	city center (566)	train (325)	train (418)
restaurant (18)	well (48)	walk (18)	visit (115)	site (10)	city center (36)	train (116)	time (270)	tickets (53)	city center (67)	time (98)	tickets (139)	to visit (140)	Napoli (451)	visit (214)	Sorrento (286)
to visit (11)	to visit (46)	place (12)	city (110)	to eat (9)	city (28)	tour (84)	train (253)	visit (48)	well (58)	staying (76)	places (104)	to stay (135)	days (216)	bus (170)	station (276)
				days (7)	trattoria (22)	car (77)	visit (235)	site (42)	Firenze (54)	ticket (62)	posts (72)	to arrive (103)	station (177)	need (121)	day (268)
beautiful (4)	time (37)	hours (8)	trip (52)	good (6)	restaurants (18)	city (27)	tour (147)	parking (16)	nice (28)	looking (59)	looking (42)	evening (40)	public transportati on (138)	area (96)	city (207)
door (4)	nice (12)	recommend (8)	use (47)	Suggestions (5)	historical (6)	place (25)	look (83)	bed (11)	seats (22)	walk (36)	different (22)	Pompei (34)	parking (110)	tickets (62)	people (120)
friends (4)	on foot (10)	open (8)	tickets (46)	restricted traffic zone (3)	far (5)	looking (24)	Modena (82)	morning (11)	on foot (17)	advance (27)		to eat (26)	evening (77)	suggestions (55)	car (70)
firsts (3)	quick visit (5)	people (7)	Italy (40)		museums (5)	Modena (21)	morning (34)	city center (10)	Santa Croce (12)	line (25)		visit (26)	church (66)	transport (51)	hotel (48)
greeting (3)		nice (5)	interesting (22)		offers (3)	factory (19)	website (32)	new year's day (10)	overground (10)	museum (24)		site (21)	good (59)	recommend (43)	days (47)
		Spal (5)	Venice (21)			airport (16)	link (26)	sunday (10)		hotel (23)		napolitan (20)	hours (49)	coast (29)	cities (43)
		card (4)	best (15)			buy (15)	English (26)	view (6)		best (21)		to reach (20)	night (46)	old (21)	ticket (41)
			website (15)							wife (14)			first (43)		info (35)
													sea (40)		passport (26)
													saint (39)		
													years (31)		

Table I: Main themes of questions and answers in Italian and English (English translated)

Figure 1

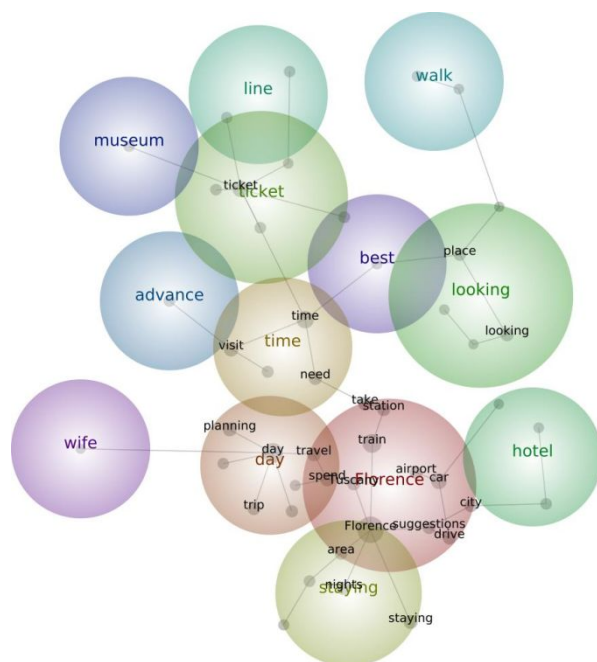


Figure 1: Florence questions in English: concept map and themes

British Food Journal

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Table II

<b>Destination and language</b>	<b>Food concepts present in questions and relative weight</b>	<b>Food concepts present in answers and relative weight</b>
Naples in Italian	Limited (26 out of 324)	No
Naples in English	No	No
Florence in Italian	No	No
Florence in English	No	No
Parma in Italian	Limited (9 out of 71)	Yes (22 out of 79) and (18 out of 79)
Parma in English	No	No
Ferrara In Italian	Yes (22 out of 52) and (18 out of 52)	No
Ferrara in English	No	No

*Table II: Food-related concepts and their relative weights*

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Table III

Ferrara (Ita)		Ferrara (Eng)		Parma (Ita)		Parma (Eng)		Florence (Ita)		Florence (Eng)		Naples (Ita)		Naples (Eng)	
Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers	Questions	Answers
Ferrara (52)	Ferrara (72)	Ferrara (89)	Ferrara (249)	Parma (71)	Parma (79)	Parma (283)	Parma (594)	Firenze (98)	trovi (80)	Florence (231)	Florence (334)	Napoli (324)	piazza (732)	Naples (545)	Naples (470)
cena (22)	consiglio (57)	train (44)	train (150)	parcheggio (16)	parcheggio (37)	visit (154)	car (401)	consigli (68)	biglietto (68)	day (130)	time (245)	consigli (159)	centro (566)	train (325)	train (418)
ristorante (18)	bene (48)	walk (18)	visit (115)	posto (10)	centro (36)	train (116)	time (270)	biglietti (53)	centro (67)	time (98)	tickets (139)	visitare (140)	Napoli (451)	visit (214)	Sorrento (286)
visitare (11)	visitare (46)	place (12)	city (110)	mangiare (9)	città (28)	tour (84)	train (253)	visitare (48)	bene (58)	staying (76)	places (104)	alloggiare (135)	giorni (216)	bus (170)	station (276)
				giorni (7)	trattoria (22)	car (77)	visit (235)	posto (42)	Firenze (54)	ticket (62)	posts (72)	arrivare (103)	stazione (177)	need (121)	day (268)
bellissima (4)	tempo (37)	hours (8)	trip (52)	buon (6)	ristoranti (18)	city (27)	tour (147)	parcheggio (16)	bella (28)	looking (59)	looking (42)	sera (40)	mezzi (138)	area (96)	city (207)
porta (4)	bella (12)	recommend (8)	use (47)	Consigli (5)	storico (6)	place (25)	look (83)	letto (11)	posti (22)	walk (36)	different (22)	Pompei (34)	parcheggio (110)	tickets (62)	people (120)
amici (4)	piedi (10)	open (8)	tickets (46)	ztl (3)	distante (5)	looking (24)	Modena (82)	mattina (11)	piedi (17)	advance (27)		mangiare (26)	sera (77)	suggestions (55)	car (70)
primi (3)	un'occhiata (5)	people (7)	Italy (40)		musei (5)	Modena (21)	morning (34)	centro (10)	Santa Croce (12)	line (25)		visita (26)	chiesa (66)	transport (51)	hotel (48)
saluto (3)		nice (5)	interesting (22)		offerte (3)	factory (19)	website (32)	capodanno (10)	tramvia (10)	museum (24)		sito (21)	buona (59)	recommend (43)	days (47)
		Spal (5)	Venice (21)			airport (16)	link (26)	domenica (10)		hotel (23)		napolitana (20)	ore (49)	coast (29)	cities (43)
		card (4)	best (15)			buy (15)	English (26)	vista (6)		best (21)		raggiungere (20)	notte (46)	old (21)	ticket (41)
			website (15)							wife (14)			primo (43)		info (35)
													mare (40)		passport (26)
													san (39)		
													anni (31)		

Table III: Main themes of questions and answers in Italian and English (original language)