THE FOODIE SUBCULTURES: FROM THE UNDERGROUND TO THE MAINSTREAM. A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Abstract

Food represents one of the most discussed topics on social networks, arriving at giving voice to real virtual communities, vertically specific or transversally generic, with reference to peculiar food behaviors and / or food preferences. This study aims to understand if and how social networks can contribute to bringing out subcultures, food subcultures in this specific case, from underground situations to mainstream levels. The survey was carried out on Instagram, with a focus on the vegan subculture and with an emphasis on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing Instagram posts from mid-October 2020 to mid-November 2020. The results show that the Instagram users associated with posts that can be classified as "#vegan food porn" show traits of content and sentiment in line with an emerging subculture, finding a sense of identity and affirmation in their posts and in those linked by consistent hashtags. Despite the limitations that are pointed out in the research, the study is specifically intended for enterprises in the food sector that seek to develop consumer marketing actions on social networks with a predominantly cultural and subcultural slant.

1. Introduction.

Food has always been a fundamental factor for the people culture, both at identity and commercial level, in terms of purchasing behavior. In more recent years, by virtue of the resounding success of social media, food has further increased its cultural sense among individuals, groups, and cultures, to the point of being one of the topics that are most dealt with in discussions on major social networks, arriving, in a vision of exalting the role of food in everyone's lives, both as individuals and as consumers, to the expression of "food porn".

The study in question aims to analyze the dynamics of food porn on social networks and more specifically in this case on Instagram, given the fundamental importance of food & beverage on this social network, trying to understand if the meaning of food porn on social networks can allow the emergence of psychographic traits that are characteristic and characterizing the

individual behaviors of consumers, consumer groups, and subcultures. The analysis has been carried out starting from a specific focus, namely that relating to the vegan world, which in recent years has been interested by particular interest and attention, also in quantitative terms (i.e., number of adherents to this food vision).

The survey, implemented using descriptive statistics on a conspicuous series of posts assimilable to the food porn theme concerning food from the vegan world, even if with a mainly exploratory intent, demonstrates how effectively sharing food porn via social media can allow to reconstruct traits in common between posts that are published and subjects who publish them, even arriving at identifying a subculture, allowing enterprises in the sector to be able to reconstruct for consumer marketing purposes cultural aggregation paths for the promotion, as responsibly as possible, of their products.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After the literature analysis, the main research questions are formulated; subsequently, it is specified how the posts on "vegan food porn" from Instagram were identified and analyzed, with the subsequent evidence that is discussed in terms of results, with subsequent scientific and managerial implications, in the presence of some research limitations and in the process of future investigative developments.

2. Literature review.

Firms and consumers act in a more and more dynamic and polarized corporate and social environment. In that context, social media, often charged to stoke egocentric attitudes, may offer on the contrary a great opportunity to ameliorate social isolation of the users. The debate on more or less relevant questions on the virtual square makes media reality able to contribute to creating a crowd conscience or a common ethos. Even in the consumption system, social media and digital communication technologies affect the shopping experience by shaping and sharing a prevalent brand sense and a social products acceptance. Tribal marketing (Cova and Cova, 2002) studied micro-social fusion of individuals, a lattice of societal micro-groups in which consumers interact each other using strong emotional ties, shared passion, and ilk experiences. Firms approach these tribes by means of rituals and shared storytelling, while these groups act as collective actors in the marketplace, sometimes excluding marketers (Cova & Shankar, 2020) and becoming very hard to control.

In the digital space and with the surfacing of the Web 2.0, online consumers appear to be more active, participative, communitarian, and savvy (Kucuk and Sandeep, 2007). They can translate their expertise via a range of collective learning systems, imbuing online tribes with

legitimacy in production of brand and providing products with sense and value (Cova and White, 2010). In some cases, user-generated content (UGC) from social media lead to the media developing of new expressions of culture – more often a sub-culture – using consumer practices and conversations as a kind of self-representation. In other terms, by means of these fluxes of communication, individuals show their rational and emotional viewpoints on topics that are relevant for them, finding a freer space of expression compared to the real world. In addition, the interaction among knowledge, passion, opinions, and community in the social space may transform the underground sub-culture – when correctly managed by individuals and firms – into a mainstream culture, provoking a virtuous circle built on passion, experience, and sharing, inspiring new consumers behaviors and new business models (Cuomo et al., 2017). In other words, this emotional and rational collective comparison represents the prerequisite to shift from a marketing and communication process based on firm ability to a more update one, based on consumer competences.

Starting from the above considerations, this study deals aims to investigate, by the support of social data, how consumer passion and competences can affect the birth of new business models, committing firms in a new debate for value creation. More specifically, the field analysis concentrated on UGC regarding the foodie culture, to trace valuable insights for the firms.

Both from a functional and cultural viewpoint, food has a prominent place in people's lives. Sharing food is central to people's culture. Cookbooks, TV cooking shows, and food websites help shape people's identity (Lofgren, 2013). Thus, writing about food or being part of a community of foodies gives people a sense of place, belonging, and achievement in a comfortable, authentic, and stimulating environment (Mohsen, 2017). Food's status provides a source of energetic creativity to interpret the topic in an innovative manner. Foodies are people who love and have a passion for eating, have a high food-involvement level, and are interested in learning about food (Johnston and Baumann, 2010). Foodie social media provide an alternative narrative about food, concerning distinguished offerings. So, on these networks, foodie culture becomes an intensely aestheticized form of food consumption (Atkinson, 2013), often giving rise to the trend of the so-called "food porn", i.e., a set of visual aesthetics that emphasizes the pleasurable and sensual dimensions of food (McDonnell, 2016). Within the digital domain, images play a central role in communicating cultural meanings associated with the presentation of food. Consequently, food porn, by providing attractive narratives, increases the viewers' engagement and their consciousness about moral, ethical, and healthy

questions related to food, as yet prerogative of identified tribes. In this vein, it facilitates the social acceptance of some niche topics, normalizing them.

With even further focus, this study analyzes the niche of dietary veganism, that involves a cultural and ethical perspective that can be considered an underground phenomenon on the food culture. More specifically, the research posits food porn as a proxy of the normalization of niche and underground consumptions (in this case, veganism).

In other words, the study aims at understanding the process by which trends from an underground culture, like veganism, are integrated into the "main" production system (as a foodie culture) becoming mainstream. From a business viewpoint, it wants to investigate if social media, based on consumer competencies, may represent a potential partner to favor the identification of new emerging markets. In addition, a strategic content planning may favor the "normalization" of such markets, to avoid social and offering biases and favor inclusion and acceptance of minorities, which represent the main challenge of the future for both enterprises and governments.

3. Research objectives and methods.

The study is intended with an eminent exploratory intent. However, moving from the previous analysis, the following research questions have been formulated.

RQ 1. *"Do social media narratives affect the normalization of underground phenomena like food subcultures, avoiding polarization and social isolation?"*.

RQ2. *"Can social media favor the surfacing of a new consumer-competence-based marketing in food subcultures?"*.

RQ3. *"Can this new consumer-competence-based marketing provoke the normalization of niche markets like food subcultures?"*

Adopting a qualitative perspective, to conduct the empirical investigation in question a nethnographic analysis was carried out (Kozinets, 2002, 2012, and 2015), a methodology that offers an empathic approach to publicly accessible data by users' conversations on food, extracted in this case from Instagram, to derive community insights. The interpretative study (Hacket, 2016) investigated the narratives on the part of the Internet users relative to food.

Even though Instagram represents a social network characterized by exponential growth in terms of number of users, it remains scarcely exploited as a platform for data collecting, despite the evident potential for communication and its character of ideal habitat for foodies. Furthermore, food photography is a growing trend, so widely spread that the term "food porn", as abovementioned, has been coined to indicate a certain voyeurism linked to food. These considerations also led to the choice of hashtags (labels) used to select the posts that have been analyzed in the current analysis.

Data collection included a very high number of posts, but it stopped until new posts were not useful to the research purposes. At last, 602 posts on Instagram were collected during the period middle October / middle November 2020 (which in general globally represented the start for the second lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Posts were collected by means of Netlytic, a cloud-based text and social networks analyzer that can automatically summarize textual data and discover communication networks from publicly accessible social media posts (Meneses, 2019; Santarossa et al., 2019). Each post uploaded by the users to their Instagram profile represents a unit of analysis, with one of the following hashtags: #veganfoodporn; #veganfoodspot; #whatveganseat. By means of a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000), in conjunction with a discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2008; Jones and Dye, 2018), the narratives of the Internet users relative to the vegan eating were reconstructed, according to their content underlining normality, niche, or separation on the topic.

3.1. Measures.

The concept of 'normalization' has been operationalized adopting some measurable observations. This sense making process has allowed researchers to interpret information and assign meaning to Instagrammers' behaviours on both an individual and collective scale (Dervin, 2003; Weick et al., 2005; Lynam et al., 2015).

Thus, the posts were examined and classified using the heuristic categories of *content* and *sentiment* (Gee, 2014; Rogers, 2009), by means of semantic tags describing:

a) the text content, in terms of: information, as transfer of commercial news, technical advice, product indications, offers, and so on (events or advertisements on the vegan universe; description of the pictures; recipes); narration, telling of personal or emotional aspects

(personal/ethical comments; personal/food love comments; creative representations with hashtags on the vegan universe);

b) the text sentiment, in terms of tone of voice, divided into positive, negative, and neutral posts (according to tags like adv, yummy, emphatic, normal, argumentative, and so on).

4. Results.

The study revealed that the foodie culture is a trend topic on the web and more particularly on social media. On average, 140.000 posts for #veganfoodspot, more than 2 million for #veganfoodporn, more than 6 million for #whatveganseat, all of them in conjunction with #foodporn, are published on Instagram every day, testifying the increasing diffusion of veganism, also through the trend of food porn.

Despite the huge number of posts, however, only 602 were considered in topic, i.e., in line with the previous criteria about text content and text sentiment, A preliminary analysis (cf. Table 1) shows a predominance of posts 'describing' vegan food, without using especially emphatic tones or exhibitionism.

Text		Sentiment	
Category	*Frequency (%)*	*Category*	*Frequency (%)*
Description	65.78%	Positive	60.13%
Personal / food love	12.96%		
Personal / ethical	9.63%	Negative	11.96%
Event / initiative/ adv	6.98%		
Recipes	3.32%	Neutral	27.91%
Art / creativity	1.33%		

Table 1. Text and sentiment about #vegan food (authors' calculations).

Notwithstanding a large presence on Instagram, vegan users do not aspire to show themselves as "saviors of the world" or absolute holders of the truth. On the contrary, even when 'not negatively' posing their two viewpoints (cf. Figures 1 and 2), they try to show the enjoyable and tasty aspects of the vegan cooking, as the most part of foodies.
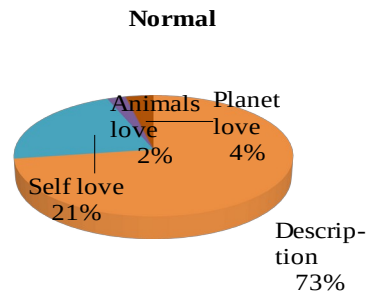
Normal

Figure 1. Data comparison for 'normal' sentiment (authors' elaboration).
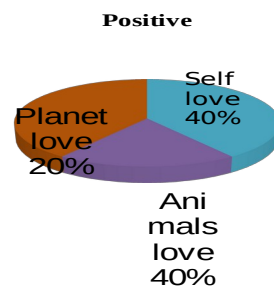
Positive

Figure 2. Data comparison for 'positive' sentiment (authors' elaboration).

As a matter of fact, even in posts with a more emphatic tone of voice, the content is linked to enhance love for themselves (40%), for the animals (40%), and for the planet (20%). In other words, the main representation of veganism seems to be very similar to the whole foodie culture on the web, based on an individual choice of attention for nutrition and care for food; ethical themes are relevant as consequence and not as primary reason to follow the vegan lifestyle.

Finally, the posts considered in topic were analyzed according to their "visual modus narrandi", i.e., the visual ways typically used by Instagrammers to communicate vegan cooking and consequently, to provide a representation of themselves. From this viewpoint, three categories were defined, namely, as 1) selfie (when the portrait had a focus on oneself for a self-presentation, according to the categories personal / food love and personal / ethical); 2) narrative (when the picture pinpointed the ingredients of the dishes, with an extensive description or giving the recipe); and 3) yummy (when the pictures focused on an aesthetic representation of the vegan food, even though using an original semantics to narrate something).

In contrast with what was expected about a stereotypical representation of the vegan universe, according to these issues an emotional narration prevailed over an educational one. Most of in-topic pictures concentrated on the descriptive side (the category named narration), with a

pleasant and tempting presentation of food (yummy). Evidently, the visual narration of the experience was clearly focused on the main dimensions of emotion and proposal, with the aim of communicating a more fun and simpler vegan consumption, without giving up on tasty and on pleasure-loving. The selfie category was fewer represented; it seems that Vegans prefer describing themselves by means of their cooking creations, without showing off themselves. In accordance with the trend of #foodporn, pictures seem to be very accurate, with professional framing, brilliant colors, attention to details, and sometimes a human presence. Finally, as shown by the findings, considering their core or marginal awareness concerning the impact of their nutritional choice on themselves, other people, and the planet, vegan Instagrammers were classified within two main types: 1) Funny or 2) Inner Vegans (cf. Figure 3). Such identities correspond to exemplars, but also effective food targets, and their analysis may reveal valuable insights for marketing and communication stagies in the food industry, and not only.
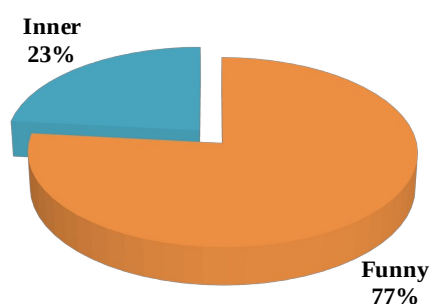

Figure 3. Funny and Inner vegan Instagrammers (authors' elaboration).

Funny vegan Instagrammers demonstrate a marginal awareness towards the effectiveness of their dietary behaviors in favor of a sustainable living. Driven by simple enthusiasm, they prefer vegan food because it is a "new fashion", as a kind of entertainment. The storytelling is cheerful (about 77% of posts), without any educational intent. The emotional dimension of their narration is linked to an overall positive feeling of the vegan universe.

Instead, the Inner vegan Instagrammers expresses an effective and aware interest for vegan culture (about 23% of the posts). Their dietary choices are not occasional or for fashion but testify a way of living. The narration has often an educational intent, as demonstrated by storytelling focused on love towards animals and the planet with a serious tone of voice (negative sentiment). They tend to manage the topic in a rational manner, with attention to

practical provisions, which are functional to sustain their opinions. The emotional dimension of the posts is strictly linked with the redeeming value ascribed to the vegan universe.

In sum, even though the qualitative study has an exploratory nature, it seems that there is sufficient evidence for providing affirmative response to all the three research questions, suggesting a profitable perspective for future research to investigate this topic more in detail.

5. Discussion.

Social networks represent a virtual space in which users can create and share multimedia content and interact with other users who are interested in the same topics, brands, or goods (Cuomo et al., 2016). To deeply understand the above results, it is to mention that Instagram is a multimodal social networking platform that combines online mobile photo-sharing and video-sharing, providing users with an instantaneous way to capture and share their life moments through a series of (filter manipulated) pictures and videos (Hu et al., 2014). Hence, it seems to be suitable in grasping perceptions of the users. In this respect, data suggest that posting pictures of food is a widespread activity in the vegan universe, clearing it from a stereotypical representation and contributing to normalize this dietary practice.

In addition, most part of the analysis on user-generated content concentrated on the way participants generate value via their contents. Even though they impact on brand value and product value, in the "like economy" – an emerging practice on social networks – also the act of giving result to a content is a form of value creation (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). Thanks to the user engagement – summarized by the liking, a so-called predefined communicative act that has created a recommendation and like culture – a topic or a brand become popular and socially accepted, increasing its value (and revenues). Therefore, by means of this participative evaluation, people's collective preferences are collected, producing a new form of value, linked to the spread ability of elements and to advertisers' investments (Veszelszki, 2018). In this vein, the Instagram presence of the vegan topic contributes generating a like-economy value. Naturally, even the content is relevant. Therefore, the well-known claim of firm communication, according to which "make known" is relevant as "know to make", is not pertinent, due to the cultural, ethical, and emotional value attributed to the food universe and to the vegan one more specifically. Authenticity, quality, artisan food, but also healthy-chic cooking are the main topics linked to the vegan communities, as observed in the analyzed posts, to build a more inclusive and simpler market positioning, able to engage an increasing

number of consumers. In fact, the results show a more update storytelling about veganism, based on emotional and funny ties, even though with environmental and social responsibility.

Finally, interpreting the data summarized above, the active presence of foodies on Instagram triggers the emergence of a new consumer. While one-to-one marketing (Peppers et al., 1999) or relational marketing (Grönroos, 1997; O'Malley, 2014) celebrated the individual dimension of the customers and experience marketing (Schmitt, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pine et al., 2011) stressed their hedonistic attitude, the patterns based on a collaborative marketing approach (Prahalad &Ramaswamy, 2004) claim the creative character of consumption as a new form of competence.

In sum, Web 2.0 constitutes the ideal stage to develop a new consumer-competence-based marketing (in line with the creative consumer) provoking more in general the normalization of niche markets and underground phenomena, avoiding polarization and social isolation that could affect subcultures.

6. Implications.

From a theoretical point of view, it is to highlight that in the food sector, which is one of the most relevant in the global economy, an increasing number of people are becoming foodies and food-lovers, thus deserving specific attention, analysis, and interpretation. The increasing interest for food, its production, and meal receipts are leading towards a transformation in consumption that, in turn, is generating several clusters among consumers. An increasing number of food-lovers construct their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about food moving from cultural values, with psychosocial factors that are contributing to shape their food choices. Many consumers are often interested even in adopting conscious consumerism models. That means they are willing to adopt ethic buying practices, driven by a commitment to making purchasing decisions that have positive social, economic, and environmental impact (Crespi-Vallbona and Dimitrovski, 2016).

In this scenario, firms in the food industry are required to understand and react to the several changes that are affecting their customers. In fact, consumers are becoming more analytical, they have an increased knowledge about the products they buy, and they are more determined to get the most value for their purchases. All these practices are even more enhanced by social media and a large amount of evidence suggests that word of mouth and social interactions among peers significantly contribute to affecting people preferences. Social media, by enabling users to share their preferences and acquire information about their interests, are

radically changing the way people and companies interact. At the same time, social media represent for firms also a useful tool to establish relationships with those underground market niches made of customers with new interests, desires, and exigencies. This appears to be particularly true with reference to the food industry, since in the last years consumers not only have altered their relationship with food, but they are also spending more and more time on social media to discuss with peers about food, their habits, and their preferences.

From a managerial point of view, the omnipresence of food on social media and the rising of several foodie online communities require firms to understand how to exploit these tools and the data derived from community interactions to shape customer preferences and to engage with them. The role of online communities is still an important, but often underappreciated, driver of the growth of the food industry and firms in this market could gain a competitive advantage if they are able to identify solutions that allow them to become active members of these communities (Balakrishnan and Foroudi, 2020). Since each underground foodie culture has its peculiar traits, which could vary significantly from one to another, and their members tend to have a distinct style of personality (as underlined for Funny and Inner vegan Instagrammers), managers could gain several benefits if they recognize the importance of being accepted within these communities. In fact, this allows to better understand the set of factors that weight more heavily in the purchase of each underground foodie culture and consequently, supports firms to develop customer-centric strategies that elevate the customer experience, drive customer engagement, and contribute to enhance their brand awareness.

7. Limits.

As stated in the representation of the research methods, the investigation was realized with an eminently exploratory intent, to provide initial confirmations for some concepts, represented by the research questions, which could be useful for carrying out subsequent investigations in with major detail. However, despite the exploratory intent, the study in question presents some limitations.

The first concerns the social media platform that has been chosen to investigate; Instagram is most likely the most used social network in terms of food and maybe specifically of food porn, but there are other important social networks (for example, Facebook, Pinterest, Tik Tok, and others) that in any case are populated by users who experience the theme of food porn with considerable intensity. Therefore, a cross-analysis between multiple social networks could undoubtedly allow for a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

Another limit of the research is the period under investigation, namely the interval between mid-October and mid-November 2020. The intent of the choice of this period, which substantially coincides with the second lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, is clear and motivated; however, the time under analysis is very limited. Therefore, a broadening of the time horizon of the research, despite all the problems related to a probably dizzying increase in the number of posts to be analyzed, seems to be desirable.

Last limit of the research in question, at least among those that seem most evident, finally concerns the subculture that is the specific object of investigation, namely the vegan world. It is undisputed that even in this context an essential psychological trait relating to food porn can be traced, although this food subculture tends to be much healthier than others and therefore probably less sensitive to "spectacle", but it is possible that other food subcultures may develop food porn on social media in a different, perhaps more marked, way; however, a cross analysis of the different food subcultures (or at least some of them) seems necessary to try to broaden as much as possible the understanding of the phenomenon under study.

8. Conclusion.

The study remarks the importance of social media not only as digital places where firms can discover new trends and habits that are rising among food lovers, but also as powerful tools that firms could deploy to establish stronger relationship with the members of foodie communities (Cuomo et al., 2020). The increasing number of underground foodie communities requires managers to be aware of the importance of this new kind of communities in enhancing customer relationships, useful to drive their buying behaviors. By creating a direct relationship with these members, firms could get a direct contact with potential customers to develop a strong relationship with their brands. Firms have to exploit their relationship with foodie underground communities' members to fully understand their needs and exigencies and, in turn, efficiently satisfy them.

Finally, social media appear to be a powerful tool also to support underground foodie cultures acceptance within the society. In this context, firms that understand the underground foodie cultures market potentialities could implement social media activities to enhance their awareness among the society and consequently, contribute to develop a positive attitude. This aspect is particularly significant for managers since it highlights the importance not only to establish relationship with underground foodie communities' members but also to endorse these communities to make them accepted and well-known among the civil society. A lack of

social acceptance by local community represents a barrier to the development of these communities that, in a mid-term perspective, will obstacle the growth of the number of underground foodies and, in turn, it represents a limit to firm potential demand. Hence, enterprises should use social data they obtained by interacting with these communities to promote and support their social acceptance and sustain their transformation from underground to mainstream culture.

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