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From armchair to table: online supermarkets as potential post-pandemic tourist attractions

Abstract. Food consumption is one of the most popular leisure and tourist activities, and is essential when traveling. This article discusses online supermarkets as a food tourism attraction in the context of the pandemic-related crisis, which is increasingly dominated by digital tourism and virtual travel. The study specifically focuses on online cheese tourism. The author analyses the cheese offering of an online supermarket in Spain, consisting of 120 kinds of cheese products. Results reveal the potential of online cheese tourism, predominantly based on quality cheeses. Various types of cheeses are described, with emphasis on their country of origin. The article contributes to the conceptualisation of digital food tourism practices in post-pandemic tourism. Online supermarkets are not only potential tourist attractions but they could also contribute to the growth of specific forms of food tourism, such as cheese tourism. The author argues that virtual experience is a driver of future trends in food tourism.

Keywords: cheese tourism, digital tourism, gastronomy, regional development

JEL Codes: L83, M31, Z32

1. Introduction

This following study examines virtual food tourism during the pandemic, in particular, cheese tourism, which is a segment of culinary tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2015), looking at supermarkets as potential tourist attractions. The purpose of the article is to discuss the role of online shopping as a way of obtaining gastro-

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nomic knowledge. In recent years, cheese has emerged as a significant element of identity, leisure and tourism. Cheese has become an important part of the offering of many tourist destinations and can be enjoyed in the context of various kinds of experience, such as festivals, markets or restaurants. At the same time, shopping for food is an essential activity for all tourists.

Nowadays, as a consequence of the spread of the Covid-19 all over the world, many countries were severely affected by the second wave since late summer 2020, and travel restrictions are still in effect. Social distance measures are changing hospitality and tourism industries and urging them to be creative and resilient. Both public and private tourism businesses are updating their operations and are increasingly offering virtual experiences – for example, food services and restaurants are reimagining the gastronomic experience in response to the crisis. While international tourism activity is limited because of borders closures (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020), actions taken by regional and national governments to stimulate the recovery of tourism have contributed to the development of domestic tourism which, in turn, represents an opportunity to make the tourism industry more sustainable (Chang, McAleer, & Ramos, 2020). One way this manifests itself is through growing online presence (see, for example, Konys, 2020; Pencarelli, 2020), with e-commerce having an increasing impact on tourism and tourist behaviours (Majeed et al., 2020; Petr, 2009). The following study is based on the analysis of the cheese offering of an online supermarket in the context of virtual food tourism.

The main aim of the study was to find out if online supermarkets can function as tourist attractions in the post-pandemic world? The rest of the article is divided into 4 parts. The following section provides the theoretical background. The next two parts describe the research method and the results, which are followed by the conclusion, which provides limitations and implications of the study as well as opportunities for further research and practice.

2. Theoretical background

Food is a meaningful expression of culture and nature, and a significant identity marker (see Berno & Fountain, 2020). According to Sims (2009), food can symbolise specific places, and various forms of culinary heritage communicate and promote community lifestyles. According to the World Tourism Organization, "food-making as well as wine-making represent an integral part of their history and identity and have become the key element in the nation's brand image. Gastronomy and wine tourism represent an opportunity to revitalize and diversify tourism, promote local economic development, involve many different professional sectors and bring new uses to the primary sector" (UNWTO, 2012). The

same report affirms that "gastronomy and wine tourism contribute to promoting and branding destinations, maintaining and preserving local traditions and diversities, and harnessing and rewarding authenticity". According to the World Food Travel Association, food tourism can be defined as "the act of traveling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place" (WFTA, 2020).

Looking for connections between food and culture has become an increasingly valorised leisure practice (in recent decades Jones & Taylor, 2013; Ravenscroft & Van Westering, 2001). Food tourism refers to the discovery of a culture through its food (Long, 1998; Henderson, 2009), which is placed at the centre of tourist experiences and motivations (Kim, Park, & Lamb, 2019; Su, Johnson, & O'Mahony, 2020). In this sense, Hall and Sharples (2003) described the 'food tourism' concept as the journey to culinary and gastronomic regions in order to visit food producers, farmers markets, food fairs and festivals, to taste food products or participate in other food-related activities. This also includes supermarkets. While very few researchers have previously investigated supermarkets as potential tourist attractions, some studies have discussed their role in food and gastronomy tourism (Bertella, 2011; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Fusté-Forné, 2020a). By taking an innovative approach to the study of cheese tourism, this article contributes to this research field.

Food tourism has been widely investigated and recent publications have been devoted to exploring various dimensions of food tourism (Ellis et al., 2018), addressing such topics as authenticity and culture, motivation, and destination management and marketing. The tension between 'local' and 'global' and 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' is recurrent in food tourism research (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Jolliffe, 2019; Zhang, Chen, & Hu, 2019). Also, the role of food tourism in regional development is acknowledged by previous publications (see, for example, Rachão et al., 2019) in different geographical contexts all over the world. In relation to the visitor motivation, McKercher (2020) identifies tourists with a strong cultural motivation as *purposeful* tourists. This term can also be applied to food tourists: food as part of cultural tourism "is the primary motive for visiting a destination and the individual has a deep cultural experience" (McKercher 2020, p. 127). In this sense, Okumus (2020) notes that food tourism research must delve into aspects such as the design of *unique* local food and beverage tourism experiences, culinary events, the significance of sustainability, and the effects of social media and technology on the promotion of food tourism experiences.

Nowadays, food tourism is not limited to hands-on experiences enjoyed in specific destinations and gastronomic knowledge can be acquired without physical mobility (Fusté-Forné & Masip 2019). Connections between food and tourism can be discovered through lifestyle and travel journalism (Hanusch, 2012; Pirolli, 2019), food journalism (Fusté-Forné & Masip, 2018; Hughes, 2010; Naulin, 2012) and, recently, armchair tourism (Damkjær & Waade, 2014). It can be argued that reading

a cookbook or watching a television show are also examples of food tourism activities. The same can be said about digital tourism practices (Benckendorff, Xiang, & Sheldon, 2019), where the Internet and social media are popular and useful sources of knowledge for tourists (see, for example, Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012).

Being a specific example of food tourism, cheese tourism explores links between places and people and reflects an integration of multiple landscape values through cheese. Cheese tourism is the process of awarding tourism value to cheese (Fusté-Forné & Mundet, 2020). Cheese tourism "comes from the concern with the process of developing a product closely linked to a territory, and drift towards a typology that includes not only the tourist visit to the craft workshop, but also a set of synergies from complementary food consumption and leisure" (Fusté-Forné, 2015, p. 91). While previous studies have approached cheese tourism from a territorial perspective (see, for example, Ermolaev, Yashalova, & Ruban, 2019), no attempts have been made to study supermarkets as a specific asset of cheese tourism.

In a 2016 article published in *Time*, Ross describes the origin of supermarkets as we understand them nowadays. According to her account, the first modern supermarket (Piggly Wiggly) was opened in America more than a hundred years ago in 1916. While old-style groceries relied on shop-assistants to complete orders, customers at Piggly Wiggly did the shopping directly on their own. This caused a radical change in how customers bought foods and goods. This new model requires that companies to devise new ways of attracting customers' attention while they are shopping. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that businesses started to offer products online, which slowly triggered a revolution.

While the impressive increase that online grocery shopping has seen during the last couple of decades, this is still an area with growth potential (Wegener, 2017). The current situation makes this analysis even more relevant in the context of the health crisis caused by the spread of Covid-19, followed by severe lockdowns and travel restrictions all over the world, with a wide impact on the tourism industry (Hall, Scott, & Gössling, 2020; Jamal & Budke, 2020). As a consequence, two factors can be identified as growing trends: digital tourism and virtual travel (Kwok & Koh, 2020; Thomas 2020), and e-commerce and online supermarkets (Keyes, 2020; Stern, 2020). The current study focuses on Spain, where these trends can also be observed (Sevillano, 2020; Tomasi, 2020).

3. Research objective and method

Recognising the phenomenon of cheese tourism and understanding online visits to supermarkets as a digital form of food tourism, the following study aims to analyse the cheese offering in the Spanish e-commerce market. For this purpose,

the author studies cheese products sold online by Mercadona, the most successful supermarket chain in Spain (Moreno, 2020), with the largest share (25%) of the domestic grocery market (Forte, 2020). According to Forte (2020), Mercadona is the country's leading supermarket with a growing number of stores in recent years. It "grew from 1.3 thousand in 2010 to over 1.6 thousand shops in 2018, which represents an increase of more than three hundred stores during the period considered". In addition, "sales value of the Spanish supermarket chain has only increased in the past years, peaking in 2018 at approximately 22.26 billion euros". During the lockdown period purchases made at Mercadona accounted for about 40 per cent of total supermarket sales in Spain (Europa Press, 2020).

Mercadona was founded in 1977 (Mercadona, 2020) and it has 1,636 stores. They are mostly located in Spain, but the company also has ten stores in Portugal. It was only in 2018 that it started selling its products online. This study focuses on the supermarket's online offering of cheese products. The data were collected by entering the term 'cheese' in the search field of the supermarket website on 6 May 2020.

The collected data included information about product name, brand, weight and price. The most significant issue is where cheese sold online comes from (Fig. 1), which is a critical attribute for analysing the connection between cheese and tourism in the digital environment – in this case, in an online supermarket. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between food and tourism are manifested in the case of cheese sold online and how cheese products communicate the taste of place.
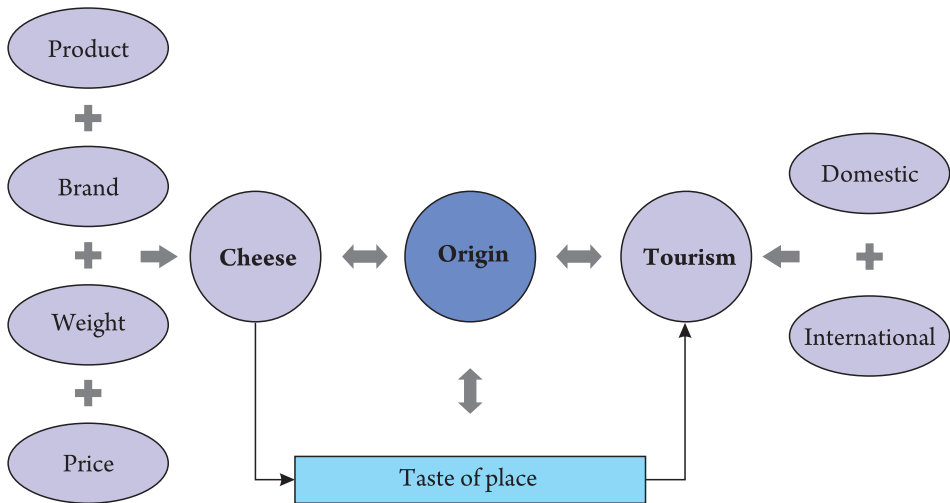

Fig. 1. A proposal to study online cheese tourism in Spanish supermarkets

Source: own research.

4. Results

The search carried out on the supermarket website returned 120 kinds of cheese (Table 1). This study focuses on the role played by cheese sold online in food tourism, with emphasis on its place of origin.

The mean weight of a cheese product was 347,60 grams and the mean price – 3.78 €. The largest piece on offer is cured sheep's milk cheese (1.6 kilograms) and the smallest – a Roquefort style cheese (100 grams). The most expensive cheese is old sheep's milk cheese (13.13 €) and the cheapest – a 180-gram cheese cake (0.89 €). A total of 50 cheeses (41.6%) are sold under the supermarket own brand (*Hacendado*) and 26 (21.6%) are made by a national cheese company (*Entrepinares*). Altogether, 25 different brands are on offer and one-fifth of them are sold in slices. Cheese products also include frites (2.5%), pizzas (4.16%) and sauces (1.6%).

As regards the geographical origin of cheeses, there are several examples that are associated with different local traditions of cheese-making in many European countries. However, first of all, the offering of Spanish cheeses must be highlighted. Some of them are identified with Protected Designations of Origin (PDO), such as the Galician Arzúa-Ulloa and Tetilla cheeses. Another example of a Spanish cheese on offer is Tronchón, an artisan cheese from the Maestrazgo area, which was referenced in the work *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Cheese is not only an element of national identity but also a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and natural idiosyncrasies of a given territory. On the one hand, cheese-making and its culinary uses communicate a cultural tradition based on heritage and history. On the other hand, there is a close relationship between cheese and landscape, because of the connection between animals that produce milk for cheese production and the environment where they live and graze. These characteristics are the basis for the attractiveness of cheese.

Those interested in products of other origins can explore the supermarket's cheese offering as if participating in a virtual tour across Europe. From the Mediterranean area of Greece, with Feta cheese, customers are taken to Italy to taste Mascarpone or Mozzarella, and then up north to Switzerland, the home of famous cheeses such as Emmental, Gruyère or Raclette. The European cheese making tradition would not be complete without French brands, like Brie, Camembert and Roquefort or without a selection of famous Dutch cheeses, such as Edam, Gouda and Maasdam. As previously mentioned, the local environment is key to the creation of a strong cheese brand, and many cheeses in Europe have achieved an international relevance, not only in terms of the sale of their local cheese varieties, but as significant gastronomic destinations, which rely on cheese to offer a selection of activities and experiences, exemplified for example by Dutch cheese markets. This creates both a motivation to visit and to taste a *unique* place.

Table 1. Cheese types sold online

	Product name		Brand	Weight (g)	Price (€)
Cheese	petit blu	soft white and blue	Bergader	150.00	1.85
Cheese		fresh	Burgo de Arias	216.00	2.19
Cheese	0% fat	fresh	Burgo de Arias	216.00	2.19
Cheese		Roquefort	Cantorel	100.00	1.45
Frites	Pandilla	cheese flavoured	Cheetos	100.00	1.20
Frites	Pelotazos	cheese flavoured	Cheetos	130.00	1.20
Cheese	slices	tender Gouda	Corona	300.00	1.70
Cheese	slices	Edam Holland	Corona	300.00	1.70
Cheese		Maasdam Holland	Corona	400.00	2.50
Cheese	slices	Gouda semi-cured Holland	Corona	300.00	2.00
Cheese 'bola' (ball-shaped)		Edam tender Holland	Corona	455.00	2.90
Cheese 'bola'		Edam semi-cured Holland	Corona	430.00	3.65
Cheese	slices		El Caserío	300.00	1.83
Cheese in portions			El Caserío	375.00	2.50
Cheese in portions		light	El Caserío	250.00	1.70
Cheese	slices	Raclette	Entremont	400.00	3.85
Cheese	slices	tender	Entrepinares	250.00	1.90
Cheese	slices	semi-cured	Entrepinares	210.00	2.03
Cheese		semi-cured	Entrepinares	350.00	2.62
Cheese	slices	goat	Entrepinares	220.00	2.46
Cheese		cured	Entrepinares	350.00	2.99

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Table 1 – cont.

	Product name		Brand	Weight (g)	Price (€)
Cheese	cut into wedges	semi-cured	Entrepinares	300.00	3.18
Cheese	slices	light	Entrepinares	210.00	2.13
Cheese	cut into wedges	cured	Entrepinares	280.00	3.29
Cheese	slices	tender cow's milk	Entrepinares	320.00	2.21
Cheese		cured sheep	Entrepinares	350.00	3.41
Cheese	la reserva	old sheep's milk cheese	Entrepinares	340.00	3.69
Cheese	cut into wedges	tender cow's milk	Entrepinares	300.00	1.92
Cheese	slices	Sheep's milk	Entrepinares	210.00	2.32
Cheese	cut into wedges	tender	Entrepinares	330.00	3.22
Cheese	30% less fat	light	Entrepinares	330.00	2.82
Cheese		tender	Entrepinares	1200.00	7.68
Cheese		old sheep's milk cheese	Entrepinares	350.00	3.88
Cheese		semi-cured	Entrepinares	1000.00	7.40
Cheese		semi-cured	Entrepinares	1600.00	2.72
Cheese		cured	Entrepinares	1000.00	8.50
Cheese		old sheep's milk cheese	Entrepinares	1500.00	13.13
Cheese		cured sheep's milk cheese	Entrepinares	1000.00	9.10
Cheese		Gran Reserva	Entrepinares	400.00	4.46
Cheese		low-sodium	Entrepinares	330.00	2.66
Cheese		cured sheep	Entrepinares	1600.00	13.04
Cheese	creamier	tender	Entrepinares	360.00	2.47

Category	Brand	Type	Form	Weight	Price
Cheese	Flor de Esgueva	old sheep's milk cheese		265.00	4.35
Cheese	Formatges de Valencia	blue	sheets	220.00	2.53
Cheese	García Baquero	semi-cured		320.00	3.84
Cake	Granja Rinya	cheese classic		180.00	0.89
Cheese	Hacendado	Havarti	slices	300.00	2.50
Cheese	Hacendado	Havarti light	slices	300.00	2.58
Cream cheese	Hacendado	soft	white pasteurized	300.00	1.00
Cheese	Hacendado	fresh	Burgos natural	375.00	1.49
Powedered cheese	Hacendado	special pasta		150.00	1.30
Cheese	Hacendado	Mozzarella	slices	200.00	1.35
Melted cheese	Hacendado	sandwich	slices	200.00	1.00
Cheese	Hacendado	goat	roll	200.00	1.90
Diced cheese	Hacendado	Feta		370.00	1.70
Cream cheese	Hacendado	light	white pasteurized	300.00	1.00
Cheese	Hacendado	Cheddar	slices	200.00	1.59
Melted cheese	Hacendado	soft	slices	555.00	1.85
Cheese	Hacendado	fresh	Burgos natural	500.00	1.59
Cheese	Hacendado	Mascarpone		250.00	1.70
Cheese	Hacendado	fresh goat		250.00	2.20
Cheese	Hacendado	without lactose	slices	150.00	1.80
Cheese	Hacendado	fresh	skimmed-milk Burgos 0% fat	375.00	1.49
Melted cheese	Hacendado	burger	slices	300.00	1.40

Table 1 – cont.

	Product name		Brand	Weight (g)	Price (€)
Cheese		fresh skimmed-milk	Hacendado	480.00	1.49
Cheese		Riccota	Hacendado	200.00	1.80
Cheese		cured cheddar	Hacendado	300.00	2.30
Diced cheese		for salads	Hacendado	200.00	1.60
Cheese		blue	Hacendado	180.00	1.75
Melted cheese	slices		Hacendado	300.00	1.40
Cheese		fresh Mató	Hacendado	200.00	1.20
Cream cheese	white pasteurized	without lactose	Hacendado	200.00	1.25
Cream cheese	white pasteurized	with fine herbs	Hacendado	200.00	1.25
Cheese		fresh light	Hacendado	250.00	1.80
Cheese		fresh Burgos without lactose	Hacendado	250.00	1.55
Cheese		old Gouda	Hacendado	250.00	3.00
Cheese	Burgos low-sodium	fresh	Hacendado	250.00	1.29
Cheese		grated Emmental for au gratin	Hacendado	200.00	1.15
Cheese	0% fat	skimmed-milk fresh Burgos	Hacendado	500.00	1.59
Powdered cheese		Grana Padano	Hacendado	100.00	1.50
Grated cheese	special for melting		Hacendado	200.00	1.00
Grated cheese	pizza-Roma	Mozzarella	Hacendado	200.00	1.20
Grated cheese		without lactose	Hacendado	150.00	1.65
Cheese	0% fat	fresh skimmed-milk	Hacendado	500.00	1.09
Frites	Cuquitos	cheese flavoured	Hacendado	100.00	0.90

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Pizza		family-size with 4 kinds of cheese	Hacendado	580.00	2.99
Pizza		4 cheeses	Hacendado	410.00	2.39
Flan		cheese	Hacendado	400.00	1.69
Diced cheese		cured and Cheddar	Hacendado	125.00	0.99
Cream		Camembert	Hacendado	150.00	1.35
Sauce		fresh cheese	Hacendado	180.00	1.29
Pizza		4 cheeses	Hacendado	420.00	2.35
Focaccia		cheese, rosemary and thyme	Hacendado	300.00	1.50
Sauce		cheese	Hacendado	300.00	1.25
Pizza	deep-frozen	4 cheeses stuffed with Gorgonzola	Hacendado	540.00	2.99
Pizza	deep-frozen	4 cheeses without gluten and without lactose	Hacendado	410.00	2.99
Cheese		tender Gouda	Holland	450.00	2.60
Roll		pineapple cheese and almond	Liptana	100.00	1.20
Cheese		Camembert	Marcillat	240.00	1.25
Cheese		semi-cured goat's milk	Montesinos	360.00	4.16
Cheese		tender Tronchón	Montesinos	260.00	2.56
Cheese		goat's milk	Montesinos	200.00	2.70
Cheese		Emmental	Natual	350.00	2.15
Cheese	slices	Emmental	Natual	200.00	1.60
Cheese		Gruyère	Natual	200.00	2.60
Cream cheese	white pasteurized		Philadelphia	270.00	2.10
Cream cheese	white pasteurized	light	Philadelphia	270.00	2.10

Table 1 – cont.

Product name		Brand	Weight (g)	Price (€)
Cheese		Plaisir de Roy	200.00	1.10
Cheese	snack	Président	180.00	2.38
Mediallon	goat's milk cheese	Président	200.00	2.65
Cheese	Tetilla	Punteiro	700.00	5.18
Cheese	Arzúa-Ulloa	Punteiro	800.00	5.88
Cheese	in portions	Quesilete	375.00	1.39
Cheese in portions	light	Quesilete	250.00	1.25
Cheese in portions		Quesilete	250.00	1.00
Cheese	sheep's milk cheese	Valle de San Juan	375.00	4.11
Cheese	smoked cured cheese	Valle de San Juan	330.00	3.88
Cheese	old intense flavor	Valle de San Juan	350.00	3.32
Cheese	Grana Padano	Zanetti	230.00	3.45
Cheese	slices Provolone	Zanetti	200.00	1.95

Source: own research.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The study described above has analysed the potential role of digital food tourism as a practice in post-pandemic tourism. Recent studies have highlighted the growing role of slow food tourism (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020), which can be expected to increase even more as a result and in the aftermath of the pandemic (see, for example, Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Stankov Filimonau, & Vujičić, 2020). The analysis of the cheese offering of a Spanish online supermarket shows that the country of origin could be a key factor in making food products attractive for online food tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2020b). While the author argues that online supermarkets can potentially function as food tourist attractions in the post-pandemic context, this assertion needs to be confirmed by taking into account customer opinions and data from other supermarkets and other product categories.

This study has both theoretical and practical relevance in the context of domestic online tourism. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis of an online supermarket's offering as a potential food, and cheese, tourism attraction is relevant during the pandemic. From a more practical point of view, the study provides a preliminary conceptualisation of online food tourism as exemplified by the cheese offering. Also, results of this study could be of interest to public and private tourism organisations, which are planning and promoting food-related activities. As pointed out by Okumus, "the tourism industry has witnessed the latest trends among tourists who are willing to spend more time and money on unique food and beverage experiences through food tours, food- and beverage-focused events and marketing efforts" (Okumus, 2020, p. 2). It can be expected that social media and technology will play an increasingly crucial role in food tourism.

While the type of cheese sold is a key determinant in consumers' purchasing decisions, the demand aspect requires further investigation. Previous studies have focused on the relationships between e-commerce and tourism. In particular, recent research has reviewed the impact of online information on tourist behaviour (see, for example, Xiang et al., 2020). Further analysis of this problem would help to understand the online grocery experience taking into account customers' purchasing decisions (see Damkjær & Waade, 2014) and motivations. In addition, it is evident that cheese offers multiple opportunities for tourism-like experiences, associated with domestic and foreign destinations (depending on the brand of cheese) that could enable consumers to engage in the act of virtual travel. Another question worth investigating in future research is how cheese or cheese-based products offered online communicate a specific place of origin?. As shown in this study, the online supermarket offering is an opportunity for customers to discover regional cheeses, made from the milk of different animals, in addition to well-known national and international brands.

The potential of cheese in online food tourism fits in well with the growing demand for 'online' food products in the context of consumption displacement (Hall, Prayag, Fieger, & Dyason, 2020). As a very recent study has acknowledged, e-tourism must lead the recovery of the industry (Gretzel et al., 2020). Future research is expected to further engage with the implications of online tourist attractions for the development, planning, management and marketing of food tourism, in an ever evolving local-global environment where new food experiences are rapidly emerging to transform the future of food tourism.

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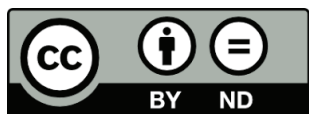
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Od fotela do stołu: supermarkety internetowe jako potencjalne atrakcje turystyczne w dobie pandemii

Streszczenie. Konsumpcja żywności jest jedną z najpopularniejszych form spędzania czasu wolnego i aktywności turystycznej oraz niezbędnym elementem podróżowania. Tematem artykułu są supermarkety internetowe jako potencjalna atrakcja turystyczna w dobie pandemii, kiedy wzrasta rola turystyki cyfrowej i podróży wirtualnych. Opisane w artykule badanie dotyczy wirtualnej turystyki serowej. Autor analizuje ofertę serów w hiszpańskim supermarkecie internetowym, która obejmuje 120 rodzajów wyrobów serowych. Badanie pokazuje potencjał wirtualnej turystyki serowej, głównie na podstawie oferty serów wysokiej jakości. Opisano różne rodzaje serów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem kraju pochodzenia. Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję praktyk wirtualnej turystyki żywnościowej w warunkach pandemii. Supermarkety internetowe nie tylko stanowią potencjalne atrakcje turystyczne, ale także mogą się przyczynić się do rozwoju określonych form turystyki spożywczej, np. turystyki serowej. Zdaniem autora doświadczenia wirtualne to czynnik kształtujący przyszłe trendy w turystyce kulinarnej.

Słowa kluczowe: turystyka serowa, turystyka wirtualna, gastronomia, rozwój regionalny