6 An analysis of meal-sharing reviews to explore serendipity

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The objectives of this chapter are to:

☐ Understand meal-sharing dynamics.

☐ Explore the dimensions that promote serendipity in meal-sharing experiences.

☐ Analyse online guest reviews through a content analysis technique.

☐ Present hospitality, food and tourist-tourist interaction as the most prominent dimensions of serendipity in meal-sharing experiences.

☐ Provide insights to improve marketing strategies of platforms and hosts.

Keywords: tourism, sharing economy, meal-sharing, serendipity

Introduction

In the period 2008-2018, the positive variation of tourism industry receipts was higher than the worldwide GDP growth (UNWTO, 2019a). In 2018, the European Union was the region with the highest total tourist receipts, while France and Italy were amongst the top six tourism earners in the world (UNWTO, 2019a). In the case of France, "consumer foodservice

accelerated its digitalisation in 2018, which allowed for improved customer experiences and/or production optimisation. Whilst operators widely innovated in terms of digital tools to consolidate or gain share, digital usage varies significantly between channels" (Euromonitor International, 2019a: 45). The mentioned adaptation is not only related to the use of new technologies, but to the experience itself. In the Italian market, for example, "consumers are also showing themselves to be increasingly willing to try new products, ingredients and flavours" (Euromonitor International, 2019b: 33). Cross-cultural empirical studies confirm that novelty-change is a fundamental dimension inherent to innovation in food products (Guerrero et al., 2009). Another important aspect for travellers' food experiences is surprise, which was related to the simplicity, complexity and genuineness of these moments (Goolaup, Solér & Nunkoo, 2018).

In recent years, the number of innovative tourism experiences in terms of sharing economy initiatives has increased (WEF, 2019). Amongst the factors that influenced the growth of sharing economy after 2007 were the reduction of consumer trust in corporations and the purchasing power of consumers (European Union, 2013). In this context, some activities emerged and became key sectors in this area, such as home and car-sharing (Sigala, 2015), which is expected to present a revenue variation from USD 15 billion to USD 335 billion in the period 2014-2025 (UNWTO, 2019b). Concerning meal-sharing platforms, they are considered a potential market, which is currently underdeveloped (UNWTO, 2019b).

Conceptually, the sharing economy can be defined as "individuals offering their underutilized assets to others using digital platforms" (Bakker & Twining-Ward, 2018: 13). Thus, amid the aspects that differentiate sharing economy practices from traditional markets are the digital technologies that are used to match consumers and sellers, as well as the word of mouth reviews (Schor, 2014; WEF, 2017). Furthermore, the sharing economy is used to be related to eco-friendly initiatives, like the circular economy (OECD, 2019).

In tourism, the sharing economy represents a new way to increase the possibilities of connection between tourists and hosts (UNWTO, 2017): in these immersive experiences, tourists have the opportunity to enjoy a more local connection and interact with the hosts (Guttentag, 2015).

The expectation of unique experiences (Mao & Lyu, 2017) reinforces serendipity as an important enabler of sharing practices, including the meal-sharing sector. The term serendipity, which can be defined as the ability of

making unexpected discoveries and finding interesting or valuable things by chance while travelling (Cary, 2004), has already been addressed by social scientists, medical humanists, and in applied research (Merton & Barber, 2006). Some of these studies have been conducted with organizations operating under the concept of the sharing economy. Mody, Suess and Lehto (2017) analyzed Airbnb and considered that the activity can create landscapes that offer serendipity. In turn, O'Regan and Choe (2017: 169), analyzing Airbnb and cultural capitalism, acknowledged that the new "market morality encourages tourists to seek the ease of market exchanges for experiences over serendipity". Boswijk (2017) suggested that Airbnb's success can be explained by a creative vision that resulted from serendipity. Although some research can be found in the context of the sharing economy, meal-sharing dynamics and serendipity can be considered an understudied subject.

By identifying this aspect, as well as the gap in the literature related to meal-sharing and serendipity, this chapter explores the dimensions that promote serendipity in meal-sharing experiences. To achieve this objective, a content analysis was performed through online reviews on the EatWith website, one of the main food service platforms (OECD, 2016). A deeper understanding of the main aspects that promote serendipity in sharing experiences can enhance the value created to consumers and sellers through food sharing experiences.

Literature review

Meal-sharing experiences and serendipity

Meal-sharing platforms have been designed to provide travellers with the possibility to connect with local residents and to engage in an overseas culture at the meal table (CNBC, 2015). This practice can become popular, similarly to other sharing economy practices such as home-sharing and car-sharing. Notwithstanding being widely discussed after the success of online platforms, the meal-sharing model was already addressed in the past as actions of eating a meal with family or drinking a beer with friends (Felson & Spaeth, 1978). The concept of meal-sharing relates to the supply of food and drink through online platforms connecting hosts to consumers looking for catering (UNWTO, 2017).

Meal-sharing organizations help residents to offer meal experiences to guests in their homes (Heo, 2016), becoming a way to connect individuals from all over the world. Furthermore, meal-sharing is recognized as