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Marketing of luxurious gastronomic experiences on social media: The visual storytelling of luxury hotels

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Abstract

The role of luxury as a source of tourism experiences is gathering growing attention, with special attention to the foundations of the relationships between gastronomy and social media marketing. Drawing from a visual methodology, this study analyses how luxury hotels (Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace, St. Regis Saadiyat Island, and Atlantis) in the UAE promote gastronomy by identifying visual features of social media posts ($N = 1866$) to manage their image of luxury. Results show that the most relevant drivers of luxury gastronomy are the discovery of cultures, experiences in the hotel environment, novelty and hedonism, and promotion of a luxurious place and lifestyle that is seen as authentic, prestigious and sophisticated.

Spanish

El papel del lujo como fuente de experiencias turísticas está atrayendo cada vez más atención, y especialmente las relaciones entre la gastronomía y el marketing en redes sociales. A partir de una metodología visual, este estudio analiza cómo los hoteles de lujo (Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace, St. Regis Saadiyat Island y Atlantis) en los Emiratos Árabes Unidos promocionan la gastronomía al identificar las características visuales de las publicaciones en las redes sociales ($N = 1866$) para gestionar su imagen de lujo. Los resultados muestran que los impulsores más relevantes de la gastronomía de lujo son el descubrimiento de culturas, las experiencias en el ambiente del hotel, la novedad y el hedonismo, y la promoción de un lugar y un estilo de vida lujoso que se percibe como auténtico, prestigioso y sofisticado.

KEYWORDS

digital marketing, food tourism, instagram, luxury experiences, United Arab Emirates, visual methods

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy is an increasingly important element of tourism experiences (Richards, 2021), with tourists becoming increasingly interested in luxury gastronomic experiences (Chen & Peng, 2018). This study

understands a fine dining experience as an 'experiential luxury' (Atwal & Williams, 2017) and luxury gastronomy as a driver of luxury tourism (Barrère et al., 2009). Recent years have witnessed an increase in luxury consumption due to a growing 'luxurification of society' (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006) and the progressive

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relevance of social media (Leung et al., 2017) in luxury narratives. In the framework of social media marketing, as reported by Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019), photographs play a pivotal role in brand communication, and they have proven to be more effective than textual content (Mak, 2017). Visual materials capture the relationships between people and places (Edensor, 2000), and they are powerful storytelling tools. In particular, luxury brands are increasingly participating in social media conversations (Kim & Ko, 2010) to portray their uniqueness (Park et al., 2021).

Food tourism is a relevant segment of the tourism industry (Ellis et al., 2018; Fusté-Forné, 2020; Okumus et al., 2021). The relationship between food and tourism is acknowledged as an avenue for tourists to discover the dynamics of a culture through food (Belisle, 1983; Long, 2004; WFTA, 2018). Food contributes to the configuration of a destination's image and how it is perceived by visitors (Chen & Peng, 2018; Hsu & Scott, 2020; Kivela & Crofts, 2006), often based on user-generated content (Lin et al., 2022; Mariné-Roig et al., 2019). However, in gastronomy, there is paucity of studies investigating online content generated by consumers and marketers as a source of data (Lin et al., 2021). This study adds texture to this conversation by investigating the food image attributes (Lai et al., 2018) of the gastronomic experiences provided by luxury hotels in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through visual narratives displayed through their social media marketing strategies.

Previous studies have acknowledged social media's potential for luxury brand management (Atwal et al., 2019; Jin, 2012; Park & Ahn, 2021), focusing on the relevance of online marketing for luxury brands (tom Dieck et al., 2017); how it directly affects brand preferences and loyalty (Godey et al., 2016); where social media enhances customer experiences in hospitality (Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015); and luxury brand purchase intentions (Park et al., 2021). Despite such wide research, academic literature on marketing opportunities for luxury brands related to the strategic use of social media is still underdeveloped and fragmented, and the relationship between social media and luxury remains unexplored (Arrigo, 2018). This study aims to fill this gap and contribute to the scholarly understanding of the digital promotion of gastronomic experiences in a luxury setting. Luxury hotels were selected in this study because of their role in the protection and promotion of the gastronomic features of a destination (Franco et al., 2022). Luxury hotels focus on luxury food marketing because luxury-dining options are part of the general features of luxury hotels and, also, because of the power of personalization of gastronomic experiences (Campbell, 2021). In this sense, the marketing strategies of luxury hotels must offer high levels of personalization to target their audiences (American Express, 2021), and gastronomy is a pivotal element in the luxury experience. This is also relevant in relation to specific targets, where Millennials and Generation Z people are a growing market segment (Deloitte, 2018).

This paper departs from the understanding of the relevance of social media in luxury tourism (see Thirumaran et al., 2021) to the development of a co-created relationship between businesses and customers (Leung et al., 2017; Wu & Gao, 2019). According to Harkison (2018), who studied the luxury accommodation sector, 'active

interaction between a company and a customer creates value, and this value is centred on the customer's experience' (p.11). In this sense, the co-creation of experiences is a source of competitive advantage in terms of luxury experiences. In line with Klaus (2020), this study examines the influence of social media platforms as a part of the creation and expression of a customer luxury experience in digital tourism marketing, from the perspective of the symbols embedded in their digital storytelling.

2 | THE LINKS BETWEEN LUXURY AND GASTRONOMY IN DIGITAL TOURISM MARKETING

2.1 | An approach to food in luxury

The notion of luxury is subjective (Amatulli & Guido, 2011) and relies on both individual and social interpretations (Nuevo & Quelch, 1998). Luxury is often associated with exclusivity and status (Atwal & Williams, 2017), and strategies for luxury marketing usually rely on the notion of a unique 'experience'. A luxury experience is based on 'high quality, expensive, and non-essential products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through customer experiences' (Tynan et al., 2010, p.1158). This definition can also be applied to the luxury gastronomic experience, which consists of "experiential offerings that focus on satisfying the tangible (functional) and intangible (emotional, social, symbolic) needs of customers by proposing healthy, creative, sensory, and pleasurable dishes within distinctive places that involve exceptional services" (Batat, 2020, p. 6).

In particular, a luxury gastronomic experience is embedded in a dining setting, where a luxury restaurant is regarded as 'a restaurant that delivers excellent and expensive food, a high quality of full table service, distinctive presentations and a sophisticated physical environment (atmosphere, décor, lighting, furniture, etc.)' (Yang & Mattila, 2016, p. 1850). Previous studies have considered luxury foods as a source of distinction (Van der Veen, 2003). This distinction does not only come from food itself, but also from the broader environment where food takes place (i.e., the atmosphere or the service), which sets the framework for customers to be engaged in a unique experience (Yu & Sun, 2019). In the framework of luxury consumption, luxury consumers seek hedonic constructs (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), which may be based on different factors, such as creativity (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019) or novelty (Ramírez-Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

Experiences of luxury are driven by the creation of narratives around the advertised products (Freire, 2014) that seek to provoke customers positive emotional reactions (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). Fine dining and luxury restaurants play a pivotal role in creating meaningful food tourism experiences (Batat, 2020) and understanding customers' motivations to enjoy luxury gastronomic experiences (Cervellon, 2013; Chen & Peng, 2018). The current study explores how luxury restaurants successfully promote social influence

(Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019) in the context of their digital marketing strategy. Previous research has also investigated how restaurants and their dishes can capture not only the essence of a particular cuisine, but also a culture and sense of hospitality (Baldwin, 2017). It has also examined the role of luxury gastronomic experiences in the development of food tourism for a specific destination (Batat, 2021).

According to previous research, food creates a tourism attraction focused on culinary traditions embedded in local identity (Ueda & Poulain, 2021), which also becomes sophisticated when marketed as part of a luxury experience (Park et al., 2021). The role of luxury hotels in the development of local gastronomy is vital for the creation of relationships between local stakeholders and the promotion of a destination through the tradition of local products (Franco et al., 2022). In this sense, previous research has also identified 'art' as a source of luxury (see Miller, 2016), which is especially manifested in the menus of celebrity chefs and their Michelin starred restaurants (De Albuquerque Meneguel et al., 2019). A luxury dining experience is not only crucial for the development of food tourism, as de Albuquerque et al. (2019) claimed, but also for generating customer involvement (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019; Park & Moon, 2003). According to Batat (2020), the relevance of luxury food experiences in the food tourism sector relies on five drivers (the five P's); these are manifested in the relationships between Place and People, the Plate ('the experience'), and the Pleasure of food experiences (e.g., embedded in food storytelling), which in the context of sustainability, respects the Planet.

2.2 | Luxury gastronomic experiences and digital tourism marketing

A digital marketing strategy refers to the use of online channels to develop relationships between businesses and customers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Social media marketing is one facet of digital marketing, other popular aspects include content marketing, influencer marketing, ecommerce marketing, and e-mail direct marketing (Bala & Verma, 2018). The role of the digital marketer is to expedite customer engagement and interaction using social media, for instance Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (Zahay, 2021). Within the tourism service context, digital marketing is defined as a digital tourism marketing strategy (see, e.g., Camilleri, 2018). Social media outlets are not only important sources of tourism information (Leung et al., 2013; Mehraliyev et al., 2021; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) but also of social interaction (Atwal et al., 2019; Hall, 2018; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Moreover, customer engagement is assisted by social media, an area that remains under-researched within the tourism setting. The social media environment also permeates a reciprocal communication environment between customers and businesses, allowing customers to provide their opinions and analyse, generate, and share content across different social media support systems (Chau & Xu, 2012; Dijkmans et al., 2015; Harrigan et al., 2017). This study is timely in that it is placed within the 'contemporary hyper-attention to food' (Calefato et al., 2016, p.372), where social media is regarded as a

trumpet of gastronomic-based values (Dupuis et al., 2020; Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2021; Ramírez-Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

According to Atwal et al. (2019), 'luxury restaurants need to consider how to tailor a social media-friendly experience that reflects the attitudes and behaviours of the postmodern consumer'. In this sense, Kiatkawsin and Han (2019) suggest that gastronomic involvement—both from visitors being involved in the gastronomic experiences and destinations being involved in creating these experiences—affects customers' willingness to pay higher prices, which in turn, is influenced by the overall dining experience. Previous research has also found that luxury dining is a service with a high hedonic and symbolic value, which is an antecedent of consumers' experience involvement (Park & Moon, 2003).

Food is not only a source of visitor experience, but it also promotes the destination's identity (Stano, 2016). Thus, it is crucial to understand the image of a destination (Seo et al., 2017), drawing from the nature of the information sources (Lojo et al., 2020) and the potential relationship between destination image and visitor satisfaction (Marine-Roig, 2021). In this sense, visual materials that communicate fine dining experiences 'can include both tangible attributes, such as the sophistication of the food being offered, but also intangible attributes such as the physical dining environment' (Atwal et al., 2019, p. 461). For example, Atwal et al. (2019) analysed the reasons that motivated users to post photos of their food on social media during fine dining experiences. They found that this motivation relies on both experiential and symbolic benefits, where hedonism and uniqueness could be highlighted. Heine and Petersen (2015) reveal that authenticity and prestige are also crucial symbolic features of luxury brands, which is also observed in the digital narrative of the hotels analysed in this study.

2.3 | The foundations of visual methods in food tourism research

A visual methodology is used to examine, interpret, and construct social reality from a variety of visual forms (e.g., images and photographs) represented in print and online media environments (Barbour, 2014; Hunter, 2015). These images convey signs that represent several denotative (literal) and connotational (implied) meanings. While the use of visual methods in tourism is still scarce, the interest towards this approach is growing because of the relevance of visual materials in tourism management and marketing. Within the tourism context these meanings are explained through either quantitative or qualitative analyses. The qualitative approaches include methods, such as content analysis, semiotic analysis, or other visual methodologies, to understand the visual representations published in the social media environment (Hunter, 2015). Semiotics is an important and relevant methodology that has applications in tourism research (Zhang & Sheng, 2017). However, studies applying semiotics in relation to social media-based visuals within tourism remain scarce (Ge, 2019). The use of a visual approach in food tourism research is useful to understand the promotion of gastronomy through pictures (Hunter, 2012), the

gastronomic experiences within a particular cultural and social landscape (Atwal et al., 2019) and its potential for destination management and marketing. In this sense, visual materials contribute to the formation of destination image (Volo & Irimiás, 2021).

According to Gartner's (1994) image information process theory, images come from induced, autonomous and organic agents. Within the hospitality and tourism context, induced images are used by the supply-side, intended to influence audiences. In terms of autonomous images, the supply-side has no control over production, as they are created or interpreted by independent information agents. Organic images are the authentic representation of the viewer's perspective (demand-side) of the attributes of the experience (Çakici et al., 2017); for instance, Instagram posts involving photos and videos with captions. In our research, Instagram posts are regarded as induced images because the author of the posts is the hotel, and the posts are analysed as firm-generated content.

The content-semiotic analysis method, which is used in this study, is often focused on visual content analysis (Spencer, 2010). Semiotics involves the study and interpretation of signs or symbols that communicate meaning (Arefieva et al., 2021). There are two schools of semiotics theory; one, according to De Saussure's (1916), which states that a sign is described as having a relationship between the signifier and signified. While a sign is an image, sound or gesture, the signifier is the physical form of the sign, which can be seen, heard, or touched, and the signified is the mental concept or meaning surrounding it (Chandler, 2007; Hjelmslev, 1961). De Saussure's model follows a more linguistic approach intended to explain language as a system of signs and as a social phenomenon. The other school is Peirce's theory of signs, which is more flexible as he treats the interpretation of signs outside of text and language and considers both the social and cultural context of the phenomenon under review. Peirce's theory involves a triadic relationship theory between a sign or representation, an object, and the interpretant (Metro-Roland, 2009).

According to Peirce, objects are 'existent individuals (whether things or facts)' (Peirce, 1931). The sign represents its object—provided that it is an object about which the interpreter has information, knowledge, or experience to interpret the meaning (Nöth, 2011). Peirce's triadic relationship theory can also be applied to food images (Fusté-Forné, 2022; Herman, 2019) in the context of luxury experiences. In this sense, factors that shape luxury dining experiences include service quality, celebrity chefs, and fine dining menus featuring items that offer different cuisines, for instance French, Italian and Arabic cuisines (Yang et al., 2021; Yang & Mattila, 2016). Furthermore, the study of luxury value factors of restaurants includes dimensions of luxury dining such as prestige, quality and status symbols (Wirtz et al., 2020).

3 | METHOD

Drawing from a visual methodology, which relies on content-semiotic analysis, this study analyses the Instagram accounts of four hotels in the UAE. These are the Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace, the St. Regis

Saadiyat Island and the Atlantis. Instagram was selected for this study because of its relevance in marketing (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015), particularly gastronomic marketing (Vila et al., 2021). In this study, the researchers examine the Instagram posts posted by hotels showcasing gastronomic experiences at four luxury hotels using content-semiotic analysis. While all the posts include pictures as induced images, a look at the copyright information reveals that the hotels used organic images from guests as induced images. When the pictures are posted on their Instagram accounts, all of them arrive to us as induced images.

This study adopts Peirce's theory for semiotic analysis and food images are explored using Instagram posts, which are the object. The sign is what the object represents, which is interpreted by the interpretant. Thus, for instance, the analysis steps involved selecting an Instagram post (object) showing caviar, blue cheese, and lobster (sign) interpreted by the interpreters (in this case the two researchers) as signs of luxury (see the post by The St Regis published on 27 January 2021). This interpretation is based on the background knowledge, information and experience of the two researchers. It is important to note that connotational meanings interpreted from any sign are neither complete nor correct (Barnard, 1996; Chandler, 2007).

Also, adopting Hunter's (2015) visual methodology analytical process, the analysis process of this study adapted Hunter's three inter-linked steps: (a) selection of study sample; (b) content analysis for classifying the denotative type; and (c) semiotic analysis – identify the connotative meanings.

3.1 | Step 1: Selection of study sample

During this stage, the study employed an exploratory sampling procedure to gather the Instagram posts from four luxury hotels from two UAE cities: Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The procedure in the sampling process included two steps:

3.1.1 | Time period

The sampling of the Instagram posts selected for analysis were chosen over a period of 2 years, between 11 March 2019 and 11 March 2021, to embrace the visual narrative pre- and post-COVID-19, with aim of finding out the evolution of Instagram post activity during this period. The cut-off date chosen was based on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic.

3.1.2 | The process of the luxury hotel selection

Abu Dhabi is the capital city and was recently rated number one on Euromonitor's Top 100 City Destinations of 2021 for five-star places to stay. Dubai is now known for hosting many luxury hotels (Nadkarni & Heyes, 2016). Three of the hotels were selected based on their branding of luxury and opulence and for being listed in the Forbes

Travel Guide (2021) these included: Abu Dhabi's St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort, branded as 'inspired sea views in the lap of island luxury' (Forbes Travel Guide, 2021); the Burj Al Arab Jumeirah in Dubai, which is branded as 'a luxury icon on Dubai's coast' (also classified in the UAE as a seven-star hotel); and The Atlantis, quoted as 'Dubai's exciting family-friendly island destination' and an icon of Dubai. The fourth hotel, that is, the Emirates Palace, in Abu Dhabi, although was not on the Forbes Travel Guide list, this hotel was selected based on its branding description of luxury described as 'stunning Arabian interiors and legendary five-star service, the resort brings a new experience of luxury' (Emirates Palace, 2021a). Furthermore, in terms of gastronomic luxury, the Atlantis Palm and Burj Al Arab are classified as Dubai's iconic hotels.

These hotels are luxury rated and they also host luxury dining experiences. The Atlantis is known for its award-winning celebrity chef restaurants. For example, the Ossiano—classified as a progressive fine dining restaurant—provides an immersive romantic underwater restaurant experience featuring stingrays, sharks, and fish gliding past one's table. The restaurant serves caviar and avant-garde creations by their chefs (Atlantis, 2021). Meanwhile, the Burj Al Arab is known for luxurious and fine dining experiences, including French and Italian cuisine prepared by acclaimed Chef Saverio Sbaragli, who has a Michelin star status. It is also home to Capri's Two-Michelin star 'Ristorante L'Olivo'. The Burj Al Arab is classified as Dubai's most prominent

culinary destination (Jumeirah, 2021; Walker, 2020). The St. Regis Saadiyat Island has received awards and accolades for its culinary excellence. In particular, the restaurants offer a variety of exotic dishes and nuances served in mystical restaurant environments, such as floating pavilions (Marriott, 2021). The Emirates Palace claims that its dining experiences are award winning, legendary, innovative, and inspired by different parts of the world. For example, the Hakkasan an award-winning cuisine restaurant known for its signature dishes like Peking Duck with caviar. The restaurant is designed with embroidered furniture and marbled Chinese forms (Emirates Palace, 2021b). Such luxury branding of these hotel restaurants aligns with the aim of this study in investigating experiential luxury.

3.1.3 | Sampling the Instagram posts

This stage of the process involved the researchers manually compiling the Instagram posts, one by one, for each hotel in a spreadsheet, which was also split according to 'pre-COVID' and 'post-COVID' posts. The posts were labelled and grouped with the name of the hotel, date of publication and features of the visual representations. From this step, the researchers tabulated the total number of posts published on the four hotels' Instagram accounts over the two-year period, which was 1866 posts (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 The number of posts published by the analysed hotels on Instagram between 11 March 2019 and 10 March 2020, and 11 March 2020–11 March 2021

	Pre-COVID between 11 March 2019 and 10 March 2020	Post-COVID between 11 March 2020 and 11 March 2021	Total between 11 March 2019 and 11 March 2021
Burj Al Arab	174	109	283
Emirates Palace	360	154	514
St. Regis Saadiyat Island	280	152	432
The Atlantis	342	295	637
Total	1156	710	1866

3.2 | Step 2: Content analysis for classifying the images by denotative type

The content analysis focused on the quantitative categorisations of the Instagram posts by denotative meaning, that is, the direct and rational elements represented (Hunter, 2015; Wegerer & Volo, 2021). The visual representations of the Instagram posts were identified and coded by denotative type as demonstrated in earlier studies (Akkol, 2021; Atencia et al., 2020; De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Yu & Sun, 2019) under (a) hotel (these posts represented hotel related features), (b) people (grouped as staff and customers), (c) gastronomy (the content that represented the direct denotative elements of gastronomy were coded as food, multiple food products, beverages, multiple beverage products, dishes, and multiple dishes), and (d) others

TABLE 2 The number of posts with gastronomic content published by the analysed hotels on Instagram between 11 March 2019 and 10 March 2020, and 11 March 2020–11 March 2021

	Pre-COVID between 11 March 2019 and 10 March 2020		Post-COVID between 11 March 2020 and 11 March 2021		Total between 11 March 2019 and 11 March 2021	
Burj Al Arab	13	7.47%	25	22.94%	38	13.43%
Emirates Palace	43	11.94%	101	65.58%	144	28.02%
St. Regis Saadiyat Island	65	23.21%	131	86.18%	196	45.37%
The Atlantis	40	11.70%	29	9.83%	69	10.83%
Total	161	13.93%	286	40.28%	447	23.96%

TABLE 3 The presence of food, beverages, and dishes on Instagram between 11 March 2019 and 10 March 2020, and 11 March 2020–11 March 2021

	Food	Multiple food products	Beverage	Multiple beverage products	Dish	Multiple dishes	Total
Burj Al Arab	20	12	16	8	9	8	73
Emirates Palace	109	63	60	33	67	68	400
St. Regis Saadiyat Island	142	78	60	29	106	66	481
The Atlantis	43	37	24	21	32	29	186
Total	314	190	160	91	214	171	1140

(grouped as information and hotel promotion). To minimise bias the second step also involved both researchers in the segmentation of all the posts with gastronomic content; this led to the identification of 447 posts (see Table 2) which were selected for data analysis.

3.3 | Step 3: Semiotic analysis—Identify the connotative meanings

This step of the process involved identifying the connotative meanings embedded in the denotative elements established through the sampling and content analysis (Hunter, 2015). Furthermore, according to Hunter, connotative elements supplement reality and rely on context. The context of this study was to establish gastronomic luxurious experiences as signs represented in an object, that is, the Instagram posts of four luxury hotels in the UAE.

This stage was guided by the following process: (1) to ensure the intercoder reliability verification, both researchers worked together online via virtual meetings to carefully discuss and analyse the connotative meanings of the gastronomic content embedded in the Instagram posts. The total of 447 gastronomic pictures that were identified in the previous step were reviewed by the two researchers and led to the identification of 1140 representations (signs) of gastronomy within the posts (see Table 3). This means that the posts included representations of food, beverages or dishes, or any combination of these elements (e.g., a table with pastry and tea counts as two representations in a single post).

(2) to identify the signs of gastronomy, the researchers worked in line with Barthes' (1964) parameters, to generate a conceptual map (see Figure 1) based on relevance and symbolic value—in this case, relating to gastronomic elements of luxury, namely, the relevance of the data gathered related to theory. Specifically, this includes a unified homogeneity of the content in terms of its gastronomic substance; time period of selection; plane of immanence, in terms of the appearance of the posts; and the luxurious gastronomic elements of food experiences.

(3) in semiotic analysis, representations' connotative messages are identified as being symbol sign-object relationships which convey information about how a sign in an object is perceived, experienced or visually consumed to produce a cultural narrative (Hunter, 2015). In this study, the following visual storytelling of luxurious gastronomic experiences was described (see Figure 1) and it is based on: (a) cultural heritage; (b) environmental factors; (c) promotion of the

hotel; and, (d) a unique experience classified as novel, hedonist and sophisticated.

4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 | The hotels' Instagram content

Table 1 shows the total number of posts published by the hotels in this study. The results show that social media activity on Instagram decreased (−38.58%) after the start of the pandemic. All hotels showed a decrease in frequency in the context of pandemic tourism.

Within the sample, the researchers identified all publications that included some gastronomic content, based on the incorporation of foods, beverages and dishes. Table 2 displays the number of posts with a gastronomic visual narrative and the proportion within the entire sample. The first relevant result is the weight of gastronomic content in relation to the total, and Table 2 shows the proportion for each hotel. In this sense, gastronomic-based content doubled in the pandemic, and luxury hotels paid increasing attention to food as a hospitality and tourism attraction factor. The growing presence of gastronomy is especially relevant at the Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace and the St. Regis Saadiyat Island hotels.

Table 3 shows that food and dishes predominate over beverages, and it reveals that Emirates Palace and the St. Regis Saadiyat Island have a higher focus on gastronomy, which plays a pivotal role in their social media marketing of luxury. Among the food examples, most specifically, there are many fruits and desserts. In relation to the beverages, there is a predominance of cocktails, coffees and teas. Finally, the presence of dishes is diverse, and the publications show examples of local and international cakes, American burgers and Japanese sushi, and the presence of meat-and-fish-based dishes.

The content in the images primarily provides a representation of creative tourism experiences through food (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019), where pictures also acknowledge the participation of people, both hotel staff and customers, enjoying the experience. However, how they are negotiated and what meanings they communicate still warrants a separate investigation.

Overall, the results indicate that the most relevant attributes of luxury gastronomy visually manifested in the Instagram posts convey meanings that describe the discovery of cultures, experiences in the hotel environment, a taste of novelty and hedonism, and the

promotion of a luxurious place and lifestyle that is seen as authentic, prestigious, and sophisticated. These attributes assist in defining how the food dining experience is visually told.

4.2 | The visual storytelling of luxurious gastronomic experiences

4.2.1 | Discovery of cultures

The food tourism experience relies on the exploration of culture through food (Long, 2004). In this sense, culinary traditions (Ueda & Poulain, 2021) are primary examples, where some hotels convey their own culture, in this case, the food traditions of Arabic and Middle Eastern countries (as published by Emirates Palace on 2 May 2020), with popular examples such as baklava (published by the St Regis on 16 June 2019). Food identity is also presented as a fusion experience within the framework of Mediterranean flavoured dishes. In addition, these narratives offer plenty of content that evoke international cuisines, from western to eastern. Western cultures are represented through elements such as an American breakfast style menu (published by Emirates Palace on 6 November 2020) or Mexican tacos (published by the Atlantis on 11 March 2021). However, Eastern cultures are also represented, and especially in the visual storytelling of the St Regis, we observe the diverse tastes of Southeast Asia. In line with this, previous research acknowledges that ‘when using food in destination marketing, some expertise and knowledge are essential not only in marketing destinations but also in local and international cuisines as well as in socio-cultural characteristics of potential tourists’ (Okumus et al., 2007, p. 253).

4.2.2 | The hotel environment promotes exclusive spaces

The creation of the visual narrative also includes a strong promotion of the hotel spaces marketed through the consumption of gastronomy. From diverse food venues to room service, hotels use food to attract customers and advertise experiences in a luxurious atmosphere and environment. In this sense, hotels highlight gastronomic experiences such as dining with breath-taking views. Here, the digital narrative focuses on scenarios where the food and background create a unique experience (Yu & Sun, 2019). Food experiences in luxury settings may also rely on foods and ingredients that denote luxury specifically, such as caviar, blue cheese and lobster (see the post by the St Regis published on 27 January 2021). The exclusive environment is also contextualised beyond the hotel walls, and the uniqueness of food and beverages is represented in this way, for example, as part of a place where food products are sourced. A post by the St Regis, published on 15 December 2020, shows an exclusive champagne that is bottled from its own vineyards. In addition, older traditions such as high tea can be promoted as something special, modern, and sophisticated (Park et al., 2021) or tagged as legendary or timeless (see posts

by the St Regis on 2 October 2019 and 17 March 2020), thereby being presented as a way to enjoy a ‘passion for the sweeter things in life’.

4.2.3 | A taste of novelty and hedonism

While a tea experience may be part of the daily routine of some guests, novelty emerges as a dimension of luxury (Ramírez-Gutiérrez et al., 2021). The hotels aim to create specially curated moments (as posted by the Emirates Palace on 1 February and 2 February 2021). High tea is a luxury hospitality experience and is portrayed as a unique, novel, and hedonic activity through the gastronomic experience. After all, it is hedonism (Ramírez-Gutiérrez et al., 2021) that is a pivotal dimension of luxury gastronomy. The analysed visual storytelling offers a close look at certain hedonic moments, such as conveyances of love or delightful experiences, often based on chocolate (Burj Al Arab on 29 February 2020) and colourful meals (the St Regis on 23 October 2020), which offer guests a touch of warmth and a sense of local hospitality. On special days, this is particularly shown, such as on Valentine's Day, where the food experiences posted include the food (a signature meal) and beautiful views (a sunset) and a live show (a violinist), as detailed in a post by the St. Regis published on 3 February 2020. According to previous research, ‘if restaurants can enact additional positive emotional responses that are difficult to rationalise, they would command a high hedonic force that encourages consumers to visit’ (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019, p. 211). In this context, extravagance is also a feature that is prominent in complex meals with many different drinks and finger foods (a publication by the St Regis on 13 February 2021).

4.2.4 | Towards a sophisticated lifestyle

Similarly, the communication of luxury also reflects the process of crafting the look (Miller, 2016) of a lifestyle that customers aspire to obtain. For example, it can create a path towards sophistication (Atwal et al., 2019), referring to the elaboration of food, service, and the environment, as previously described. Moreover, other authors have linked sophistication with large and gourmet meals (Ueda & Poulain, 2021), which is also a recurrent visual narrative observed in the publications. For example, the celebration of special days such as Christmas (the St Regis on 26 December 2020) or New Year's (the St Regis on 28 December 2020). The majority of banquets remind us of the festivity of food (the St. Regis on 20 November 2020) attached to the pleasant qualities conveyed by a place (Pan et al., 2014) and ephemerally acquired through its food (Berno & Fusté-Forné, 2020). Sophistication can also be expressed through ‘art on a plate’ (e.g., as observed in posts by the St Regis on 14 September 2019 and 26 October 2020), which is in line with the type of experience provided by fine dining and Michelin-starred restaurants (Aulet et al., 2016; Myhrvold, 2011).

The relationship between art and food also reveals the significance of ‘colour’ and creative design, especially with desserts (a post

by the St Regis on 13 December 2020). As supported by previous research, the 'colour' of the gastronomic experiences in luxury gastronomy acts as a driver for appetite and joy (Chen et al., 2019). According to these authors, 'gold' plates have the largest influence, as observed with golden cappuccinos. These luxury food tourism experiences evoke a 'slowness' in partaking in the experience in an 'intimate' and 'unique' environment. These elements construct a specific lifestyle of authenticity, prestige and sophistication. Time stops when 'gold' comes to the table in a genuine cultural setting, surrounded by stunning landscapes; this configures an overall dining experience, which is a source of customer involvement (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019; Park & Moon, 2003).

4.3 | The luxury values attached to food

In summary, this study is also in line with previous studies that have identified the values of luxury as built on four notions: products, creation, narratives and advertising (Freire, 2014). Among the food image attributes (Lai et al., 2018), this study revealed that the promotion of the UAE's gastronomic luxury relies on the food products that can be experienced within the hotels, which are crafted as unique experiences that represent a sensory window (Telfer & Hashimoto, 2003) to

experiential luxury (see Figure 1). This is developed as a part of the advertising strategy of the hotels.

This figure acknowledges the dimensions of this study. First, the discovery of cultural heritage through culinary heritage and traditions, which refer to both the manifestation of one's own culture and the cultures of others, and to the fusion of cultures as a dialogue and exchange of food knowledge and idiosyncrasies between places and people. Second, the luxury food experience heavily relies on environmental factors, which rely on the promotion of hotel facilities and location. Food is contextualised as a relevant ingredient of the hotel-based experience, which takes place in the room, food venues or swimming pool. In addition, this happens within the natural landscapes that surround the hotels, especially the sea landscapes that create the framework for a unique experience. Guests enjoy food in a luxury setting (a hotel) surrounded by a pleasant environment (the sea). In terms of food, this unique experience is based on three elements: exclusive ingredients (from chocolate to lobsters), signature dishes (artwork), and crafted moments (special events), which promote the quality of the place and engage visitors with the quality of their lifestyles.

The tea experience elevates a daily cup of tea to an unforgettable event, and the festive banquets combine flavours and colours. The novelty of these experiences creates a full sense of hedonism, which

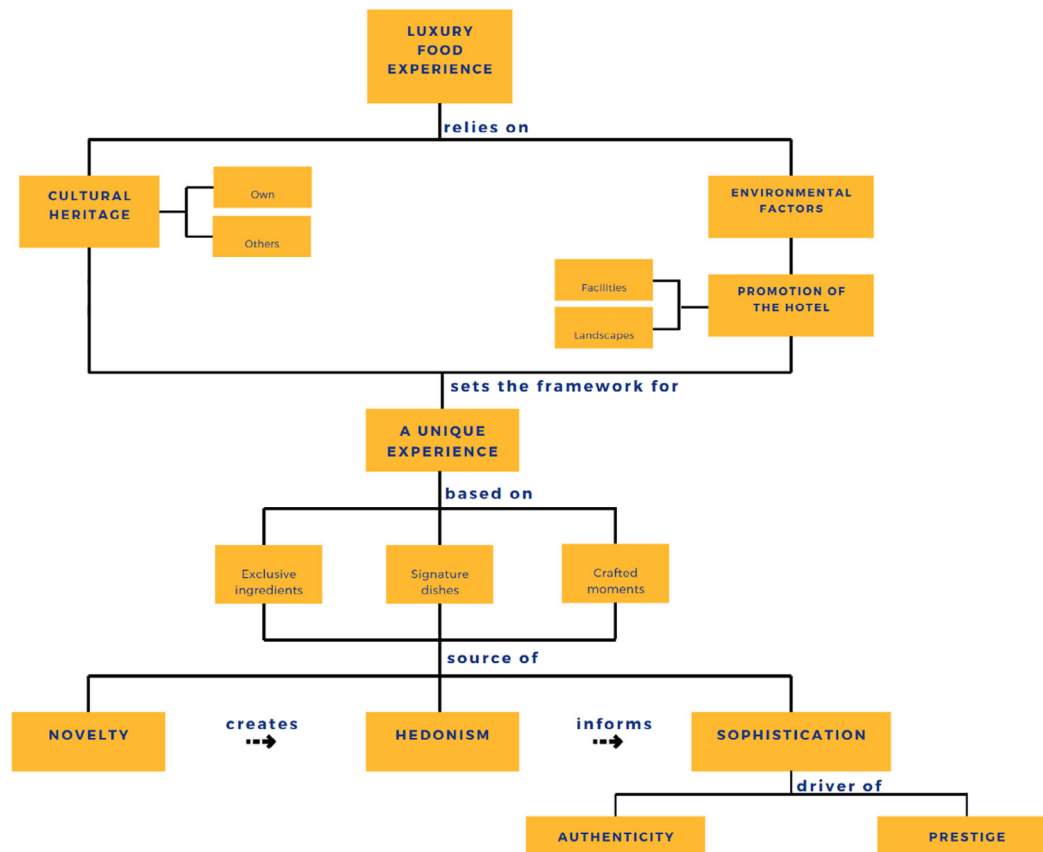


FIGURE 1 Attributes of the luxury storytelling based on gastronomic experiences [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

enhances an atmosphere of friendliness and love. In this sense, 'love' is a recurrent ingredient needed to value luxury from a shared perspective. In addition, sophisticated meals are promoted—that is, meals that are accessible only to a few people. These meals rely on the authenticity of the experience (the meanings attached to luxury authenticity fit with their own values) and provide prestige to those who are able to enjoy them, as described in the theoretical framework. This sophisticated experience often relies on 'art'. As pointed out by Okonkwo (2009), 'luxury is art'. Art is the ultimate source of experiential luxury: all the ingredients mentioned above are used by the 'artists' (designers of the dishes and the experience), to create a masterpiece (full of heterogeneous colours and forms) that is a perfect mix of culture, landscape, and service quality. This, ultimately, communicates the luxury lifestyle pursued by the guests of luxury hotels through luxury gastronomic experiences.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to explore how a food dining experience is visually manifested and which drivers of luxury are conveyed from a supply perspective. The study highlights the attributes of luxury storytelling based on the features of visual representations of gastronomic experiences conveyed by hotels through social media marketing. To achieve this objective, this study analysed how luxury hotels promote gastronomy on Instagram, in the UAE, a lesser-known gastronomic destination. This study analysed the Instagram posts published by four hotels in the UAE: the Burj Al Arab, Emirates Palace, the St. Regis Saadiyat Island, and the Atlantis Hotel. The analysis took place from 11 March 2019 to 11 March 2021. This time frame allowed the researchers to observe if there were any differences between the visual narratives pre- and post-COVID-19. It is noteworthy that the dining experience has changed since the pandemic outbreak, while results show a decrease in the number of published posts, the visual storytelling remains.

Social media has been identified in previous literature as a crucial element to understand how brands orchestrate their image, reach a larger audience and meet consumer demands to promote the purchase of luxury products and services (Oliveira & Fernandes, 2022). Moreover, luxury brands use social media to create and build an emotional bond of loyalty and trust with consumers (Eastman et al., 2020). This study contributes to the literature on the role of gastronomy in promoting luxury experiences (Batat, 2020), which ultimately develops culinary tourism (Batat, 2021). In particular, this study analyses the digital storytelling created by luxury hotels in the UAE to understand the meanings attached to the visual materials in social media. The results indicate the following significant dimensions: the discovery of culture, gastronomic experience in hotel facilities, human and environmental context, and quality of the place and lifestyle promoted through experiences that are described as unique, novel and hedonic, and also as authentic, prestigious and sophisticated—artfully crafted to highlight not only a luxurious moment, but also a luxurious lifestyle (Atwal et al., 2019).

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Previous findings (see, e.g., Park et al., 2021) show that social media elicits luxury consumption and influences the different stages of the travel experience. Luxury services have increased their social media exposure because of the marketing potential, customer engagement, influence on brand equity, and opportunities for innovation and co-creation (Arrigo, 2018) between hosts and guests (Wu & Gao, 2019) in the context of food and beverage experiences (Bresciani, 2017). Understanding these luxury gastronomic experiences, and how they are represented from a visual perspective, is the main theoretical implication of this study. Luxury gastronomy promotes special ingredients and signature dishes and the identity of a luxury brand based on the heritage, environment and service (Fionda & Moore, 2009). These are used to plan and develop the social media marketing of gastronomic experiences in luxury settings (Atwal et al., 2019).

5.2 | Practical implications

From a practical perspective, the results of this study inform luxury hospitality firms regarding the most relevant aspects of digital storytelling, which can be a source for the co-creation of experiences and act as a path to attract customers to the business and visitors to the destination. In this sense, this research provides luxury hotels with avenues to develop more effective digital marketing strategies based on special gastronomic offerings, the environment where the food is embedded and the unique experience attached to the luxury service. For example, the digital story selected can depict crafted moments through sophisticated meals that show exclusive ingredients and signature dishes within a physical environment that engages guests with novel and hedonic, and unique experiences. This study contributes to the advancement of the research on food in luxury tourism (Correia et al., 2020), in the context of social media marketing. The promotion of luxury restaurants increases destination attractiveness and may lead to the gastronomisation of certain destinations (Batat, 2021). The relationships between food and luxury in a tourism system are diverse and may have heterogeneous effects on marketing strategies. The values of luxury have a short-term golden flavour and a long-term golden lifestyle.

5.3 | Limitations and further research

The main limitation of this study is that it relies only on the supply perspective in a particular cultural and territorial setting. Further research must expand the analysis into different cultural and geographical regions to observe similarities in the promotion of luxury gastronomic experiences. In addition, further research must also provide a comprehensive analysis from a demand perspective to critically review how guests identify hotel luxury and to understand the generated meanings (Maman Larrauffie & Kourdoughli, 2014) and emotions (Pan et al., 2014), and their influence on the tourist experience. As

gastronomic images of a destination convey a place's identity, further studies should also analyse the promotion of luxury on other social media platforms (Leung et al., 2017). Furthermore, academics and practitioners are urged to further analyse the luxury food experiences in a pandemic environment. Future research should also consider the devices used by potential visitors (Mariani et al., 2019) to provide a more robust picture of the digital marketing strategies of luxury hospitality.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is contained within the article.

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