THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN PROMOTING LOCAL GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCES IN ROMANIAN TOURISM

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze how social networks contribute to the promotion of local gastronomy in the context of contemporary Romanian tourism. In a period when tourists are no longer looking for just destinations, but authentic and culturally relevant experiences, gastronomy is becoming a central element in the process of selecting and valorizing the places visited. Social networks play an increasingly important role in this process, providing not only inspiration, but also direct influence in decision-making regarding culinary and tourist consumption. A quantitative methodology, implemented through the use of a structured questionnaire, was employed to support the analytical approach. Its goal was to record the respondents' sociodemographic traits as well as their attitudes and behaviors regarding food consumption in tourist settings and the impact of social networks. The research instrument was applied online and was completed by a number of 137 people. The results obtained show that the vast majority of respondents prefer authentic traditional food during the holidays and appreciate local restaurants, agrotourism guesthouses and regional street food. Regarding the digital environment, Booking, Facebook, Instagram and Tripadvisor are the most frequently used platforms for tourist inspiration, and the types of content considered to have the greatest impact are stories about local producers and reviews from other tourists. Over 78% of respondents say that they have chosen a restaurant or guesthouse based on the visual or narrative content found on social networks, which confirms the direct influence of the digital environment on tourist consumption behavior. The conclusions led us to the idea that the research conducted confirms that social networks represent an essential channel in promoting local gastronomy, not only from a commercial perspective, but also as a vector of cultural identity. The consumer public is increasingly attracted to authenticity, stories, the relationship between the product and the place of origin, and social networks facilitate precisely this closeness. From this perspective, tourist communication must be strategically rethought, so as to combine visual professionalism with narrative sincerity, and local gastronomy becomes an integral part of the image and attractiveness of each destination.

Key words: social networks, tourism, gastronomy, influencers, authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformations of the last decades have profoundly reshaped the dynamics of the tourism industry, creating an interactive ecosystem, centered on the active participation of consumers. Digital promotion has thus become a key element of the communication strategies of destinations, gradually replacing traditional channels with interactive, customizable and globally accessible digital media [16, 18]. In this new context, gastronomic tourism is emerging as one of the most dynamic forms of experiential tourism, capable of creating emotional connections between tourists and local culture through food. [10, 20].

The rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook has radically reconfigured the way food destinations are promoted, with these platforms enabling not only the rapid dissemination of visual content but also the creation of authentic narratives around the culinary identity of the places visited [5, 27, 30]. According to recent research, user-generated content has a much greater impact on travel decisions than conventional advertising

materials, due to perceived authenticity and the trust relationships developed between users [15, 33].

In this context, digital marketing in tourism takes on a deeply relational dimension, oriented towards stimulating emotional involvement and creating memorable experiences [3, 32]. Gastronomic tourism, by its multisensory and narrative nature, lends itself ideally to promotion in the online environment, where the story of a local dish or a meal in a picturesque village becomes a tool for attraction and loyalty [21, 29].

A central component of this digital ecology is represented by social media influencers, who have become trusted vectors in promoting tourist destinations and local gastronomic products. Influencers are distinguished by their ability to create attractive content, build communities of followers and significantly influence consumption behaviors and travel intentions [17, 28, 31]. Unlike traditional celebrities, digital influencers base their social capital on authentic interactions and a high level of engagement with their audiences [1, 9]. More than just a source of visual inspiration, social media has become a channel for local gastronomic branding, helping to build and strengthen the image of regions through traditional dishes [12, 30]. Place branding strategies can integrate culinary storytelling into digital campaigns to differentiate rural destinations and combat the effects of over-tourism in urban centers [4].

At the same time, gastronomic experiences promoted online contribute to the consolidation of tourist memory, as local food is perceived as an essential component of cultural authenticity [19]. Unique culinary experiences, photographed and shared online, become symbols of the destination and contribute to attracting new visitors [2, 6]. The Fear of Missing Out phenomenon, supported by social media, fuels the desire to reproduce experiences seen online, especially in the gastronomic field, where "foodstagramming" is becoming a common social behavior [14, 24]. At the same time, the use of influencers in tourism promotion campaigns has proven to be an effective form of open innovation for the HoReCa sector, offering quick and efficient access to diverse target audiences [7, 8, 16].

Because social media gives small farmers, farms, and traditional restaurants more prominence, promoting local cuisine there helps the local economy in addition to boosting tourism [13, 25]. This sustainable and participatory tourism model supports cultural heritage and promotes social cohesion [11, 23, 26].

The accelerated development of gastronomic tourism increasingly requires an integrated vision, in which digitalization is correlated with sustainability, cultural identity and the participation of local communities. In the post-pandemic era, tourists are looking not only for safe and attractive destinations, but also for authentic, personalized and visible experiences in real time on digital platforms. From this perspective, local gastronomy becomes not only an object of consumption, but also an educational tool and a form of intangible heritage promoted through technology. Digital platforms offer the ideal space for local stories to be told visually, emotionally and creatively, with a direct impact on the travel decision. The integration of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality or virtual tours, brings innovative perspectives on how gastronomy can be experienced and promoted. At the same time, the dialogue between tourism and local gastronomy is becoming a form of cultural diplomacy, in which each destination expresses its identity through taste, aesthetics and story [22].

Therefore, social networks, digital marketing and influencers form an integrated and dynamic ecosystem, which is becoming increasingly important in the context of the development of contemporary gastronomic tourism. These tools do not work in isolation, but are interconnected in a complex way, influencing consumer perceptions, generating the desire to explore and facilitating the decision-making process of the modern tourist. Social networks allow the rapid and amplified circulation of visual and narrative content, creating emotion, anticipation and attachment to a specific destination or culinary experience. Digital marketing, through personalized targeting techniques, storytelling and sensory

branding, manages to transform apparently common elements of local gastronomy into differentiating and attractive attributes at an international level. At the same time, influencers act as cultural mediators and credible promoters, facilitating the public's access to authentic experiences and validating through their own example the authenticity of the products and services promoted.

By promoting authentic local experiences and valorizing elements of culinary identity, these communication channels contribute significantly to the strategic repositioning of tourist destinations. They not only promote, but also generate content with symbolic and affective value, capable of creating a deep relationship between tourists and the cultural space visited. Thus, gastronomy is no longer perceived as a simple functional component of a vacation, but becomes a form of cultural expression and a bridge between visitors and local communities. In this sense, the intelligent and coherent use of social networks and digital marketing can transform gastronomy from a secondary element into a central identity vector, with an impact on the image, competitiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To analyze the role of social networks in promoting local gastronomic experiences in Romanian tourism, we opted for a mixed methodological approach, with an emphasis on the quantitative component, by applying a sociological questionnaire, considering that this method is the most appropriate in understanding the behaviors, attitudes and perceptions of Romanian consumers and tourists in relation to the influence of the digital environment on culinary choices in a tourist context.

The main purpose of applying this questionnaire was to identify: how often and in what way social network users allow themselves to be influenced in choosing local gastronomic experiences; which platforms are perceived as the most relevant in promoting culinary tourism; which types of content are considered attractive for tourists interested in gastronomy.

The questionnaire was structured into five thematic sections, with a total of 12 questions, both closed and open:

1. Basic demographic data, with questions related to age, gender, level of education and recent travel experience in Romania;

2. Tourist consumption behaviors, with questions regarding respondents' preferences in choosing restaurants and the importance given to local food;

3. Use of social networks, with questions regarding the platforms used, frequency and types of content that influence gastronomic consumption decisions;

4. Influence of the online environment, with questions regarding the role of influencers, perception of the impact of social media in promoting gastronomy;

5. Personal perceptions and experiences, with questions regarding culinary preferences and experiences related to traditional Romanian food.

The questions were formulated in a way that allowed for both quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretations for the open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was designed to be administered online, via Google Forms and Facebook, and distributed to social media users. The target group included people over 18 years old, from different regions of the country, who had traveled at least once in the last 12 months and had contact with gastronomic experiences during their holidays. The sample was non-probabilistic, self-selective, and the number of respondents was 137 people.

The collected data were processed using Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets, and the analysis included: descriptive statistics, comparative graphs for questions related to social networks and preferred platforms; simple correlations between variables such as: age - platform used, gender - type of preferred content, tourist experience - social media influence; qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, to identify themes, key phrases and possible relevant case studies.

To support the interpretations obtained through the survey, the research was complemented by a documentary analysis based on the specialized literature on gastronomic tourism and digital marketing, international studies on the influence of social networks on consumer behavior in tourism, scientific articles and case studies published in tourism, marketing and sociology journals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The application of the questionnaire and the collection of responses allowed us to cover the real needs of understanding the dynamics between new communication technologies and emerging tourist behaviors, especially regarding the consumption of local gastronomic experiences. We consider the subject to be all the more relevant as social networks have become, in recent years, a key tool in influencing travel decisions, from choosing a destination to selecting restaurants or authentic culinary products. Using a questionnaire as a research method has the advantage of obtaining direct and structured data, which allows a quantitative analysis of public trends and preferences, while also ensuring an updated perspective on the role of digital content in valorizing the Romanian gastronomic heritage.

It was designed to capture both the socio-demographic profile of the respondents and their behaviors, perceptions and preferences related to tourism and gastronomic consumption. Its structure was divided into several sections, starting with general questions on age, gender and level of education, followed by aspects related to the frequency of domestic travel and the importance given to local gastronomy. Special attention was paid to how social networks influence tourists' culinary choices, so a significant part of the questionnaire included questions on preferred digital platforms, types of content followed (photos, reviews, stories about local producers, etc.), as well as direct experiences related to choosing a restaurant or guesthouse following exposure to online content.
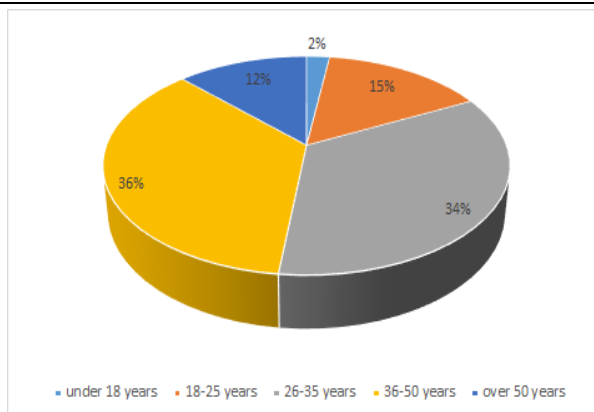

Fig. 1. Structure of respondents, by age
Source: own processing.

The structure of respondents by age highlights a balanced distribution, but with significant accents among active adults. The largest category is represented by respondents aged between 36 and 50 (36%), followed by the 26–35 group (34%). This concentration around adult segments reflects an economically active population, with access to technology and a high predisposition towards travel and consumption of personalized experiences, including gastronomic ones. The 18–25 age group is also well represented, indicating a significant involvement of young people in the culinary tourism phenomenon, influenced by online trends and the increased consumption of digital content. The age categories under 18 and over 50 have lower shares, either due to lower interest in answering questions, but also to a more limited exposure to social networks. We thus find that the most active audience in the digital environment is also the most receptive to gastronomic experiences in a tourist context.

Of the total respondents, 63% were women and 37% were men (Fig.1).

The structure of the respondents, by level of education, highlights a predominance of people with higher education, which indicates a high educational profile of the research participants, this being due to the fact that this questionnaire was distributed through social networks within the Faculty of Management and Rural Development Bucharest. This structure is relevant in a context in which tourist consumption, especially that oriented towards authentic gastronomic experiences, is frequently associated with a higher level of

education, cultural openness and capacity to appreciate local values.

This aspect offers an analytical advantage, as this segment is more active in digital environments, more receptive to online promotional messages and more prone to informed choices in culinary and tourism terms.
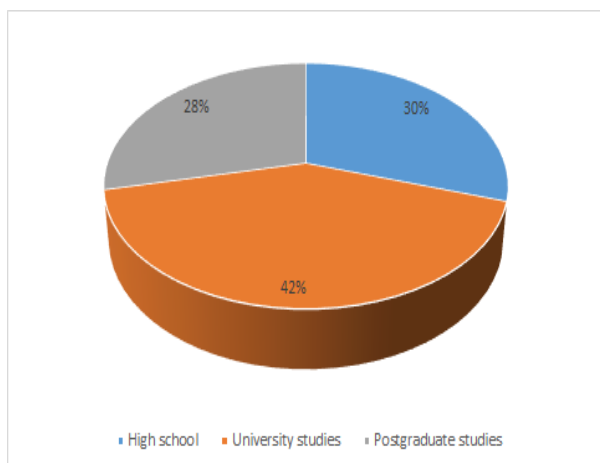

Fig. 2. Structure of respondents, by level of education
Source: own processing.

The distribution by educational level supports the idea that promoting local gastronomy through social networks is effective among an informed public, capable of valuing authenticity, sustainability and cultural identity (Fig. 2).

From question no. 4: *Have you traveled to Romania in the last 12 months as a tourist?* it resulted that the majority of respondents (73%) traveled in the last year, confirming their interest in tourism and offering us the possibility of conducting an analysis of the influence of local gastronomy.

The analysis of the questions in Category II, Tourist behavior and gastronomic preferences, provided us with information on how culinary experiences influence travel decisions.

Respondents' perception of the role of local gastronomy in the context of tourist travel is an important indicator for understanding the potential that the culinary component has in valorizing destinations in Romania.

Thus, from the answers provided to question no. 5: *How important is local food to you when traveling? (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important)* it resulted that the majority of

respondents attach high importance to local food, which confirms that gastronomy is not just an adjacent element, but a determining factor in shaping the tourist experience (Fig. 3). This trend highlights a paradigm shift in the behavior of the modern tourism consumer, who seeks authenticity, tradition and cultural connection through food.
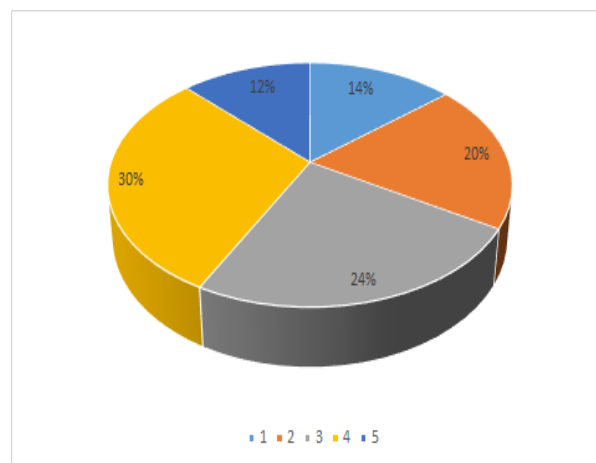

Fig. 3. Importance of local gastronomy for respondents
Source: own processing.

Moreover, this increased appreciation of local gastronomy can be interpreted as a strategic opportunity for Romanian tourism actors to capitalize on the local culinary identity, through storytelling, branding and digital promotion, which can become a competitive vector in attracting and retaining tourists.

The answers provided to question no. 6: *What type of restaurants do you prefer on vacation? (choose a maximum of two)*, highlighted the fact that Romanian tourists show a strong attraction for traditional gastronomy and authentic experiences. The most frequently chosen options are traditional Romanian restaurants and local street food, both indicating a desire to reconnect with regional specifics and local dishes.

The increased interest in agrotourism guesthouses and international diversity completes this picture, demonstrating that the contemporary tourist is open to new experiences, but particularly appreciates local culinary identity. Fast food, although present, is marginal in the respondents' choices, which reinforces the idea that holidays are a context in which culinary authenticity takes

precedence over standardized solutions (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' preferences regarding restaurant category

Restaurant category	No. respondents
Traditional Romanian Restaurants	73
Fast Food	31
International Restaurants	49
Local Street Food	67
Agritourism Guesthouses	44

Source: own processing.

In Section III, questions were asked about the social networks used by respondents.

The answers provided to question no. 7: *Which social networks do you use most often for tourist inspiration? (choose a maximum of two)* demonstrate that there is a diversity of digital channels used for inspiration and information in the tourist context, with a clear dominance of platforms focused on utility and reviews. The most frequently mentioned is Booking (63 respondents), followed by Facebook (46), Instagram (45) and Tripadvisor (42), which leads us to the conclusion that there is a combination of functional platforms that support practical decisions (accommodation, reviews), and visual and social platforms that offer emotional and aesthetic inspiration (images, personal recommendations) (Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents' preferences regarding the tourism-related social networks used

Network	No. respondents
Instagram	45
TikTok	39
Facebook	46
You Tube	36
Tripadvisor	42
Booking	63

Source: own processing.

The significant presence of Instagram and TikTok confirms the increasingly important role of visual content and influencers in shaping tourist choices, especially among younger generations.

YouTube remains a valuable channel through its extended narrative format. We believe that promoting local gastronomy in tourism should combine inspirational visual content with useful information and trusted reviews, to meet both the emotional and pragmatic needs of digital tourists.

The answers provided to question no. 8: *Have you ever chosen a restaurant or a guesthouse based on what you saw on social networks?* show that 78% of respondents did so, which highlights the major impact of social networks on tourism and gastronomic consumption decisions.

This significant proportion confirms that digital platforms are not only sources of inspiration, but also true instruments of influence and conversion in the real choices of users, shaping a new type of behavior: the informed and visually stimulated tourist, who acts based on recommendations from the online environment.

The answers provided to question no. 9: *What type of content influences you the most when choosing a gastronomic experience? (choose a maximum of two)* provided us with information regarding the forms of content that most influence tourists' gastronomic choices.

The most appreciated type of content is the story about local producers, with 71 mentions, signaling a trend towards authenticity, transparency and the valorization of the short food chain and reflecting the desire of respondents to understand the origin of products and the culinary identity of the place visited, not just to consume. In second place are tourist reviews and comments (59 respondents), confirming that decisions are influenced by the experiences of other visitors, perceived as more credible and closer to reality.

Food photos (52 respondents) and culinary videos (43 respondents) are also strongly represented, highlighting the power of visual content in triggering the desire to explore a gastronomic experience.

At the same time, recommendations from influencers (42 respondents) are appreciated, but not dominant (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents' preferences regarding the tourism-related social networks used

Content Category	No. respondents
Food Photos	52
Recipe or Dining Videos	43
Influencer Recommendations	42
Tourist Reviews/Comments	59
Stories About Local Producers	71

Source: own processing.

Moreover, from question no. 10: Have you followed Romanian influencers who promote local culinary tourism? it resulted that only 28% of respondents follow influencers.

The last 2 questions aimed to measure respondents' perceptions regarding their culinary and recreational preferences, forming part of the last section of the questionnaire.

Thus, the answers given to question no. 11: *How much do you think social networks contribute to the promotion of Romanian gastronomy?* (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) highlighted the fact that there is a predominantly positive perception of respondents regarding the role of social networks in promoting local gastronomy in Romania (Fig. 4). Most survey participants considered that these platforms contribute to the visibility and appreciation of traditional dishes, thus confirming the importance of the digital environment as a tool for cultural and tourist valorization. This generalized opinion supports the idea that social networks are not only entertainment channels, but effective means of educating, influencing and connecting the public with local culinary identity.
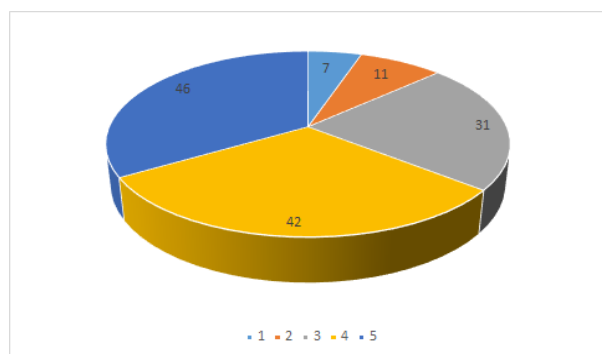

Fig. 4. Respondents' perception of the contribution of social networks to the promotion of local gastronomy in Romania
Source: own processing.

The answers provided to question no. 12: *On your holidays, do you prefer authentic local food or modern dishes?* demonstrate the fact that there are preferences for culinary authenticity, with most respondents opting for traditional local food to the detriment of modern reinterpreted dishes, which shows that Romanian tourists value local specificity and want their gastronomic experiences on holiday to reflect the cultural identity of the region visited (Fig. 5).
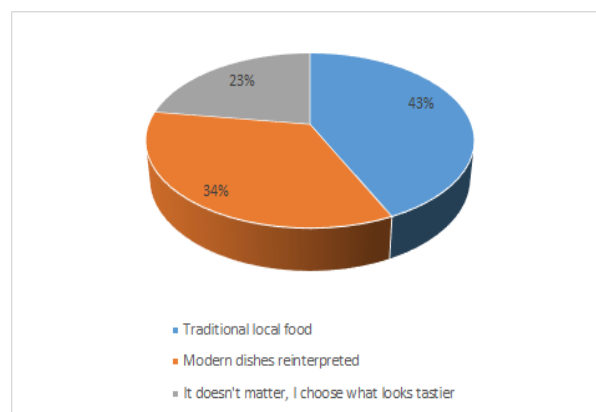

Fig. 5. Respondents' preferences regarding the restaurant category
Source: own processing.

This orientation towards authenticity proves that traditional gastronomy can become a strategic element in the development of Romanian tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study analyzes an increasingly relevant area for contemporary tourism: the role of social networks in the valorization and promotion of local gastronomy. In a context in which travel is no longer motivated exclusively by classic tourist attractions, but by authentic multisensory experiences, gastronomy becomes a strategic element of differentiation, with the potential to consolidate cultural identity and stimulate the sustainable development of destinations.

Social networks have significantly changed the way tourists are informed, choose and evaluate tourist and gastronomic services. They offer an accessible and dynamic platform for interaction, influence and storytelling, facilitating the connection of consumers with

local products, culinary traditions and regional producers. Thus, local gastronomy is no longer just an act of consumption, but a narrative experience, loaded with cultural and affective significance, transmitted and amplified through the digital environment.

This research highlights the fact that the current tourist audience is increasingly receptive to this type of content, and consumption decisions are often influenced by the online presence of destinations and local actors. This trend highlights the need for a strategic and professional approach to communicating gastronomy through social media, focused not only on visual promotion, but also on authenticity, traceability and emotional connection.

We believe that exploring the relationship between social networks and gastronomic tourism represents a current and pertinent research approach, with theoretical but especially applied implications, being a direction that deserves further in-depth study, both through qualitative and quantitative studies, in order to support the sustainable development of local tourism and to consolidate Romania's positioning as an emerging gastronomic destination in the European landscape.

Given the results obtained, several essential strategic directions are outlined for capitalizing on the potential of social networks in promoting local Romanian gastronomy, targeting both institutional and private actors in tourism, as well as local communities, influencers and digital content creators.

We believe that a professionalization of gastronomic communication in the digital environment is necessary, so that beyond occasional posts or commercial images, the current audience is receptive to narrative, visually well-structured and authentic content, which manages to convey a story, either about a traditional dish or about the cultural context in which it is prepared and consumed. Therefore, restaurants, guesthouses, local producers and tourism promotion authorities should invest in digital content that not only informs, but also creates an emotional connection with the user.

Moreover, collaborating with local or regional influencers involved in promoting tourism and gastronomy can bring added visibility and credibility to local culinary brands, and when choosing these partners, it's critical to consider the audience's demographics, the message's consistency, and—most importantly—the genuineness of the influencer-sponsored space relationship. Promoting traditional recipes, lesser-known places and the people behind the products can generate a positive impact on public perception. In addition, we think that local cuisine should be incorporated into destination narratives as a component of the area's tourism identity. Food should not be seen as a separate component, but as part of a complex tourist experience, which includes landscapes, people, traditions and local customs. Through intelligent use of social networks, these stories can be amplified and disseminated to a wider audience, contributing to the differentiation of the destination in a competitive landscape.

In addition, a direction with high potential is the development of participatory campaigns, which involve not only tourists, but also local communities, from traditional producers to chefs, artisans or local storytellers. This type of initiative strengthens the relationship between locals and tourists, supports the local economy and contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Last but not least, we believe that it is essential that small entrepreneurs in rural and gastronomic tourism benefit from support in digital training. The use of social platforms, the creation of relevant visual content and efficient online interaction with potential customers must become basic skills, accessible to all. This type of education can reduce the visibility gaps between developed and peripheral areas, stimulating inclusion and diversification of the Romanian tourism offer.

In this way, an integrated and sustainable vision of Romanian gastronomic tourism can be outlined, in which social networks are not just a promotion channel, but a strategic tool for cultural connection, local development and regeneration of interest in the authentic values of the local culinary space.

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