





21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

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4. The "Instagrammability" effect: a new mass tourism or a digital panacea?

The case of bakeries in the Sicilian landscape

Sonia Malvica

4. The "Instagrammability" effect: a new mass tourism or a digital panacea?

The case of bakeries in the Sicilian landscape

Sonia Malvica 1

Abstract

The effects of social media on marketing and business support sparked multidisciplinary interest and generated interdisciplinary collaborations for investigations on such a new form of digital culture. In particular, Instagram's photographic communication can help tourists insert themselves into the flow that is most suitable for personal experiences and expectations and then, live the identity of the place. This phenomenon could lead to the socalled Instagrammability, which indicates a large-scale appreciation and sharing through the appealing aesthetic of clusters of pictures. Although sharing photographs could favour including places otherwise out of tourist choice in the destination circuit, some critical issues could be solved. In the most extreme cases, we witness an authentic reconstruction of the destination, configuring a digital landscape that does not necessarily correspond to the place identity. The present work focused on the relationship between bakeries (i.e., American pastries-type businesses with specific dishes and visual aesthetic choices) and the city of Catania as an example of local identity strongly connected to culinary tradition. More precisely, it will highlight two cases of bakeries whose web reputation is firmly related to post sharing on Instagram to analyze how such photo sharing impacted the city's gastronomic reputation.

Keywords: Food, Local Identity, Catania, Marketing.

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1. Introduction

In a scenario of conveying online information on a global scale with easyto-use tools, marketing strategies are increasingly linked to the use of social media. Such a topic involves observing a revolution in the classic marketing concept, increasing the range of action and reducing the time for conveying the message (Srivastava et al., 2020). By sharing content, entrepreneurs can insert themselves into an electronic word-of-mouth circuit, such as exploiting visual involvement to create a community of support and visitors. Among the most powerful marketing channels, Instagram stands out, and sharing visual material makes it a relevant branding opportunity in social media. Instagram allows users to immediately identify the content with the most outstanding consumer involvement, proving more effective than other social media (Singh, 2020). Those who are mainly involved are Generations Y and Z, for whom SMEs could sponsor their offer through attractive photographs. It is then firmly recommended to embrace the potential of the new digital era, which allows companies to have continuous monitoring and constant interaction with users, who, through comments, posts and shares, contribute to the marketing phenomenon and the creation of trends (Rummo et al., 2020). This phenomenon is called *Instagrammability*, i.e., the qualification of a photo through respect for a contemporary aesthetic based on the ability to attract appreciation and sharing on a large scale (Unger & Grassl, 2020). Instagrammability has become a fundamental marketing concept, supporting businesses in promotion and visibility. An example of popular content in this sense is food, whose evocative power requires full awareness of the components that correctly attract the social media audience: images constantly uploaded to social media are often the reason why users decide to visit a particular bar or restaurant (Philp et al., 2022). In recent years, interdisciplinary scientific research focused on this phenomenon (Contois & Kish, 2022), demonstrating how small restaurants, in particular, benefit from the sharing of information on social media to obtain powerful low-cost advertising, increasing the wordof-mouth and suggesting a more targeted use of online content (Lepkowska-White, 2017). In compliance with this communicative logic, the culinary realities related to Instagrammability are those whose products stand out for a particular aesthetic beauty: this is the case of bakeries, whose origins can be identified in American pastry shops based on products baked goods, such as cupcakes, brownies, cheesecakes, milkshakes and other desserts that have all the requirements to stand out on the social network. The present work was driven by the awareness of the diffusion of bakeries on a global scale,

their evocative power on social media for food consumption, and the interest in gastronomic tourism promotion in contexts where food is an influential factor of local identity. More precisely, concerning the rampant phenomenon of glocalization², the research was aimed at understanding wether bakeries' evocative online presence of bakeries could support place's gastronomic tradition or end up establishing itself as an online reality separate from the local reality, creating a digital landscape utterly separate from the physical one. With these premises, it is here exposed the case study of the Catania metropolis (Sicily, Italy): although the city is firmly anchored to the Sicilian culinary tradition, in recent years, there has been a growth in bakeries, which managed to attract residents and visitors due to the aesthetic appeal of the locations and the dishes. Through a field investigation of two pivotal cases of bakeries in the city, it was analyzed how much photo sharing has influenced the gastronomic reputation of the urban context and whether changed it.

2. Food and local identity

Shifting attention to branding with tourism-related promotional interests, an example of the Instagrammability effect, also occurs in food and wine tourism (Spence, 2022). The focus on this topic is motivated by the strong impact that food and wine tourism plays on a global scale: according to the fourth edition of the Report on Italian Food and Wine Tourism 2021, in Italy, food and wine tourism represents a growing trend, in the sample of participating interviewees to research, from 21% in 2016 to 30% in 2018 and 45% in 2019, reaching 55% in 2021; these results were supported by the World Food Travel Association, whose research returned a percentage of 92% of tourists participating in food and beverage activities in 2020 and 2021, despite the pandemic crisis (Borsa Mediterranea del Turismo, 2021). Recent research confirmed the role of social media in delineating the destination (Abbasi *et al.*, 2023; Messina, 2020) and supporting tourists through sharing experiences. In particular, Instagram's photographic communication can convey the offer of destinations and help tourists identify the various types of

² Glocalization is a concept whose origin is a matter of debate. It could be the result of a translation of the Japanese term *dochakuka* into American English in the 1980s, and the term *glocal* was first used in the 1990s (Roudometof, 2016a). In the complex interpretations of the relationship between globalization and glocalization, this work supports Roudometof's thesis (2016b, p. 403): «Glocalization is [...] defined as the refraction of globalization through the local».

tourism (Le Busque et al., 2022), inserting itself into the flow most suitable for personal experiences and expectations. Considering the importance of food and wine tourism in defining a place's brand, food is an excellent tool for understanding local identity. A visitor can get to know a place through the culinary experience. For this reason, sharing related content on social media can prove fundamental for city marketing, especially in places where the food tradition is solid. The power of social media to change tourist behaviour can trigger a case of overtourism (Basarangil, 2022; Solanky & Gupta, 2022), as well as the development of new mass tourism that disrespects the requirements of responsible and sustainable tourism. On the contrary, sharing destinations on Instagram could lead to an opposite flow: through appropriate trends (e.g., "Instagram vs. Reality"), visitors unmask the fiction of some scenarios and help to visit crowded destinations in an alternative way. Furthermore, hashtags connect tourists with similar interests and, consequently, similar destinations (Sormaz & Ruoss, 2020). So, online sharing is intended to help the tourist peer community prevent the tourist trap, i.e., the choice of destinations because of qualities not corresponding to reality (Capolupo et al., 2020).

3. The impact of bakeries upon food-place identity: the case of Catania (Sicily)

Tourism promotion through food is conducted not only by guaranteeing the good quality of the food but also by the visitor's experience, falling within the scope of destination branding and marketing dynamics in all respects. Accordingly, restaurants are also called upon to present a culinary presentation of the dishes capable of activating word-of-mouth, which will outline the aesthetic quality of the experience and, with it, the destination image. Food-and-wine tourism is closely linked to experiential and creative tourism, starting from the awareness of how food has the role of place marker. A similar argument applies particularly to those activities strongly connected to the aesthetic satisfaction of food: the bakeries. This type of activity brings together what is, in fact, currently required of a tourist experience: a multisensorial and experiential approach. The term bakery derives from to bake/baker, which refers respectively to cooking in the oven and to the figure of the baker: a bakery, therefore, stands out for the sale of baked products. However, such a characteristic is not enough to create a bakery scenario: bakeries as we know them derive, in fact, from a particular type of American restaurant in which the sense of smell and taste are preceded by visual satisfaction. Design in a bakery is fundamental: both the location and the desserts must be colourful and fun, and the food must reach a high level of perfection in presentation. Bakery desserts are often an explosion of colours. A pivotal case is provided by red velvet, a cake with a voluptuous consistency and a bright red colour. Although created previously, red velvet became famous with a 1989 movie, *Steel Magnolias* (directed by Herbert Ross), where the cake is presented during a wedding party in the bizarre shape of an armadillo (Fabricant, 2007). The bakeries represent a case of made-in-the-USA import that occurred mainly thanks to cinema and TV series: a famous example (in addition to the already mentioned *Steel Magnolias*) is the series *Sex & The City*, in which the *Magnolia Bakery* (recalling the 1989 movie) appears among the protagonists' favourite places for a tasty break and consists of a bakery whose red velvet has excelled in popularity since the activity opening in 1996.

The basis of a bakery is the sharing of a precise approach to food: the quality of the experience must be slow (i.e., the food should not be consumed at the counter), aesthetically attractive (i.e., the products a bakery stand out for the beauty of the creations) and quiet, far from the idea of overcrowding and a chaotic place (i.e., bakeries are normally distinguished as very small contexts, with very few seats). It is a place of homage to the freshness of food, with the possibility of visually accessing the kitchens where the products are created. Due to a great aesthetic strength, bakeries are strongly present on social media and are therefore inclined to develop an Instagrammability effect. This scenario can cause a phenomenon of weakening the catering activities that are more linked to the culinary tradition of the specific place. In this case, the products are more characteristic but more limited, resulting in less frequent posting on the official channels. Consequently, visitors following the flow of posting and sharing could be directed to visit quality activities that are not strictly linked to what can be defined as a food tourism destination. This concept is fundamental in the case of a country like Italy, where food and wine production is significantly anchored to the place's identity, so the choices of catering activities require pivotal attention to the communication context. The bakery trend entered Italy in Milan and then spread throughout the country. While the Italian pastry chef is linked to culinary tradition, bakery products represent a different output (Red Academy, n.d.). Italy stands out as a European country with excellent foods provided with recognized geographical certifications: tourism is then closely linked to the local gastronomic experience nationally and internationally (Privitera, 2020). An istance is given by Catania, a metropolitan city in Sicily,

as well as a case of an identity tradition strongly linked to food, in which a foodification phenomenon maintains the communicative power of local culture (Graziano, 2020). Its historic centre is characterized by catering activities linked to the singularity of the city's products, so much so that historic pastry and gastronomy businesses (such as *Savia* and *Prestipino*) are recognized as landmarks. It has actually been demonstrated that tourists in Catania search for food experience as a pivotal part of overall cultural knowledge (Privitera, 2020). Given these premises, we should highlight how much the new online communication typologies can develop a distorted image of such a local culture. So, two cases of bakeries in Catania are illustrated below, showing a pioneering case of non-connection to the place food identity and a will of enhancing communication between American and Sicilian pastry making. The information collected results from ethnographic research with participatory observation, therefore including constant attendance of the two places over the years since the first years of activity.



Figure 1 - Map of Catania with geolocation of the two case studies, as well as other pastry shops and places mentioned in the work. (Source: Elaboration of the Author)

3.1 A non-place identity case

In 2013, the Bisou the Bakery business presented itself with a delicate

pink logo to define a cake design reality, focusing mainly on selling cakes on commission. The first post on Instagram dates back to 12 March 2013, with a close-up of a white forest cake. At first, the images posted on Instagram were mainly linked to cupcakes, brownies and cookies, showing a context on the colours of pink, with glasses, cutlery, plates, cups and sugar bowls typical of a world built on satisfaction aesthetic and almost fairytale-like (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2 - Pictures of Bisou the Bakery: (a) details of the bakery-type dishes (date: 14 October 2017); (b) part of the pink-shades interior settlement (date: 6 April 2019). (Source: Author's personal archive)

Subsequently, following the start of online sharing of the beauty of the location and the food offered, the very few tables in the restaurant became increasingly popular, with a mainly female audience who, attracted by the pastel colours and the beautiful pastries, chose more and more often to spend the afternoon chatting with friends, hot chocolate and herbal teas. From that moment on, *Bisou* increased the availability of seats (albeit always very limited), welcoming its new identity as a magical place in the Catania context: more and more titles were entrusted to the media venue, from «a pink apostrophe between via Milan and via Dalmazia» to «la vie en rose». A community of *Bisou lovers* emerged, whose photos were re-shared on official channels while the business offered the chance of a free cupcake on future visits. This phenomenon of community creation was visible from the content on Instagram, which often consists of close-ups of the dishes served at the tables, denoting a sharing of the sweet moments between visitors. Over the years, there was a constant tendency to photograph the pink environment and

the ordered dishes. The business time slots were also starting to expand, with some days in which visitors were invited to reach Bisou until 1 am for a tasty break. A merchandising offer also opened, allowing customers to buy mugs and tasty objects. Interesting, in particular, is what was stated on the *Iodonna* (i.e., an Italian magazine distributed as a supplement of Corriere della Sera) page: «If you love desserts but want to take a break from Sicilian cassata and cannoli, try this place». Bisou entered the scene precisely as an alternative to Catania's food identity: those who go there do so to take a break from purely Sicilian cuisine. The basic idea was to claim a peaceful contradiction, still placing itself in the centre of the city but making that pink world a parenthesis of total Instagrammability, where the people of Catania (and all visitors) could play on such a surprise effect with courses beautiful and impactful. In 2018, Bisou participated in the Best Bakery program broadcast on the TV8 channel in competition with other pastry shops highly linked to the Sicilian culinary tradition, such as (but not only) Savia, Ernesto, I Dolci di Nonna *Vincenza*. What appeared, therefore, was the presence of two parallel worlds that equally publicly claimed to be spokespersons of "bakery" in Catania, with the risk of creating confusion in the definition of the original American concept. Bisou, in particular, showed no desire to mix the reality of a bakery with Sicilian cuisine: even the cappuccinos were creamy and served in large cups, more closely resembling non-Italian-style beverages (Figure 3).



Figure 3 - Pictures of Bisou the Bakery: (a) example of bakery-type sweets and beverages (date: 10 July 2018); (b) cupcakes and bakery-style cappuccinos (date: 28 October 2017). (Source: Author's personal archive)

It could be claimed that people looking for culinary traditions in Catania should not certainly choose Bisou. Over the years, it happened that some visitors requested typical products of the Sicilian/Italian tradition, such as granita (i.e., a Sicilian cold spoon dessert consisting of a semi-frozen liquid mixture prepared with water and sugar, with the addition of other ingredients according to taste) and panettone (i.e., a Christmas-period Italian sweet bread); however, Bisou confirmed the idea of maintaining its identity as a classic bakery, while still guaranteeing the seasonality and locality of the products used (such as Mount Etna's blackberries for some types of cakes). In Bisou's case, the Instagrammability effect leads to rapid overcrowding: the queue to grab a table became frequent, and people were increasingly eager to share the atmosphere of the place and some happy shots to publish on social media. Added to this difficulty is the chaos of the city context, which made problematic for drivers to find a parking space. To manage the flow increase, Bisou responded by expanding the offer, offering sporadic savoury dishes during lunch, such as pancakes and salad. A turning point took place when Bisou abandoned Via Milano to choose a more extensive context on Piazza Verga, more central and closer to Catania's business centre: the opening was declared with an Instagram post on 10 September 2019, but the start of the new activity took place about a month later: from that moment on, the bakery expanded its menu also focusing on lunches; also, the coffees and cappuccinos ultimately responded (in appearance) to the demand of the Catania bars and the restaurant, although maintaining the imprint of a bakery, it abandons the shades of pink, adapting to a broader audience. The reality of the bakery continued to be respected. Under the banner of new hashtags such as #bakerysicilia, it probably aimed not to experience a total detachment from the Catania context. However, this new choice was destined for a short presence. Through the image of a red velvet cupcake (an iconic sweet) published on social channels on 1 November 2022, Bisou declared the definitive cessation of the activity. With the excellent quality of its products and respect for the basics of creating a typical bakery location, Bisou indeed started an era in Catania urban scenario more than ten years ago; still, from a tourist point of view, it did not use food as a marker of the city of Catania. On the contrary, Bisou contributed to attracting mainly residents for an experience far from the logic of a tourist who would like to get closer to the reality of the urban destination. If Bisou attracted tourists, it certainly did so in the logic of almost a non-place, not desiring any contamination with the gastronomic spirit of Catania. Therefore, Bisou should not be identified as a case of re-introducing tourist flows among the restaurant activities most anchored to the identity of the Sicilian city.

3.2. A "glocalized" bakery



Figure 4 - Entrance (a) and interior settlement (b) of Cake Amore di Zucchero Bakery in the Christmas period (date: 17 December 2022). (Source: Author's personal archive)

Cake Amore di Zucchero Bakery (Figure 4) is an active enterprise located on Corso delle Province street, close to Via Milano, where Bisou initially opened. Its first appearance on Instagram dates back to 7 November 2016, with a view of the restaurant that immediately conveys the aesthetic qualities of a bakery, with pastel blue tones and a showcase full of sugar paste cakes. The invitation to visitors is evident on the profile page: «Explore the kingdom of sweets with us!»: It focuses on pastel shades of blue to propose an integrated settlement alternative on Sicilian soil. Like Bisou, Cake presents itself mainly as a cake design business. Currently, Cake seems to concretize the best compromise between a bakery and a city closely linked to its culinary tradition, maintaining its essence. However, in the spirit of glocalization and in a scenario that visually respects the basics of constitutions of a bakery, Cake decided from the beginning to include the Sicilian tradition in its menu, with both a tasteful and aesthetic agreement that works and is never off-topic. For example, in November, it is possible to find, (alongside cupcakes, brownies and cakes) the rame di Napoli, typical sweets

of Catania which characterize the All Saints' Day period; also, it is possible to enjoy the artisanal production of *panettone* for Christmas and *colomba* for Easter, as well as *granita* and brioche during the summer season (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5 - Pictures of Cake Amore di Zucchero Bakery: (a) bakery-type dishes and Italian coffee (date: 5 July 2019); (b) ice cream, pistachio-flavour granita and Sicilian brioche, known in a folkloristic way as brioche col tuppo (date: 4 July 2019). (Source: Author's personal archive)

The example of the availability of *granita* is emblematic, as it is strongly linked to the Sicilian culinary tradition: for example, in a post on the official Instagram page from June 2018, the quality of the products is guaranteed through local provenance, offering granita with toasted almonds from Avola, Bronte pistachio (Protected Designation of Origin - DOP product), Modica chocolate (Protected Geographical Indication - IGP product), Maletto strawberries, Sicilian lemon; all accompanied by brioche col tuppo, i.e., a particular Catania-Sicilian round shape pastry with a small hat in the centre. In general, the hashtags connected to such content clearly show the local trend of the depicted storytelling: #cataniafoodporn, #sicilyfoodporn, #sicilianfood, #granitasiciliana. In sum, Cake provided a revisitation of the bakery concept, combining the interest in American pastry making with promoting some of the typical Catania and generally Italian products. Therefore, a potential tourist could enjoy both gastronomic readings without conflict and alleviate the sense of displacement through a more international approach (playing a bit according to the mechanisms of the "environmental bubble"). Finally, although the integration of Sicilian cuisine is evident, Cake remains a beautiful and high-quality bakery, both in appearance and in the main courses.

4. Conclusions

Food can represent a critical factor in establishing a territory identity, contributing to the diffusion of the culture of a city: it is not just an experience of taste but the component of an experience that contributes to the configuration of destination branding (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019). Studies on the marketing strategies confirmed the high impact of food component in the manifestation of the destination, contributing to the delineation of an authentic brand and local cultural knowledge (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2021; Lin et al., 2011; López-Guzmán et al., 2018). In the case of social media use with immediate impact, such as Instagram, posting images supported by appropriate hashtags could convey the image of a reality which, although satisfying, risks not focusing on the true identity of the place. The present investigation suggested that the Instagrammability effect applied to bakeries could not be integrated into the conveyance of a tourism brand. Although the application of glocalization requirements is possible, a bakery is visually and qualitatively too decontextualized to engage with the local culinary tradition, which instead requires both specific dishes and visual feedback linked to the folklore of the urban context (as in the case of the Savia and *Prestipino* mentioned above). Therefore, if the Instagrammability effect emerges as an excellent marketing tool for the individual company, it may not always positively impact local branding and image in the food business. Social media should be seen as a powerful tool but with contrasting effects: in fact, it generates mass sharing, which could constitute a digital landscape utterly different from the identity of a place, leading visitors towards businesses that, even if of excellent quality, could distort the genius loci. On January 14, 2024, a comparison of numbers on Instagram seems to show a specific trend clearly: Savia counts 399 posts for a total of 11.200 followers, Prestipino 592 posts and 3.695 followers; instead, Cake Amore di Zucchero Bakery reports 6.236 posts for a total of 9.686 followers, and the Bisou the Bakery page closed its business with 1.001 posts and 6.764 followers. The difference in posting between a bakery and a gastronomic activity linked to the urban context historicity is clear, and this has repercussions on what the social algorithm will return in searches with appropriate hashtags linked to the city.

In conclusion, it is strongly recommended to control the Instagrammability effect within the culinary promotion of a place, especially when the latter is strongly anchored to the value of food and tradition. The risk could be

that tourists may choose their stops starting from the web reputation of the businesses. However, this could contribute to creating a contradictory digital landscape and not appropriately inserted into the local culture. It is necessary to implement an appropriate training plan on digital storytelling for food and beverage companies to establish themselves online and effectively make Instagrammability a digital panacea.

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Territories continue to transform due to endogenous and exogenous development drives. The thickening of logistics and transport networks, large commercial hubs, energy supply options, agricultural and industrial policies, tourism and migrations constitute then, individually and in a systemic sense, some of the lenses available to read the transformative dynamics of territories in the crucial current geopolitical context. In addition, the increasing reach of digital technologies in the spaces and practices of our daily lives, has changed the way we perceive and use the landscape. These transformations find a reified outcome in landscape transitions, becoming a foothold for a trans-scale geographical reflection. We therefore want to insert this volume on this horizon. In fact, we have wanted to stimulate the geographical community to try their hand at landscape analysis to identify, through methodological and/or applied research contributions, problems, practices and trajectories inherent in the transformative dynamics of territories, compressed between the urgency of development and the need to change the energy and consumption paradigm.

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