

Beyond the authenticity– standardisation paradox in international gastronomy retailing: Twisting the hosting city brand with the place of origin

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to frame the authenticity–standardisation relationship in international gastronomy retailing and explores how and to what extent the food place of origin and the urban context in which the gastronomy stores are located shape customers' in-store experience.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper analyses the case of Eataly, which combines specialty grocery stores and restaurants disseminating the Italian eating style, quality food and regional traditions internationally. Facebook reviews (1,018) of four Eataly stores – New York City, Rome, Munich and Istanbul were analysed, adopting a web content mining approach.

Findings – Place of origin, quality and hosting city categories frame the gastronomic in-store experience. Standardisation elements (shared across the four analysed stores) and authenticity elements (specific to a single store) are identified towards defining three archetypical authenticity–standardisation relationships, namely originated authenticity, standardised authenticity and localised authenticity.

Originality/value – This study proposes original modelling that disentangles the authenticity–standardisation paradox in international gastronomy retailing. It provides evidence of the intertwining of the place of origin and the city brand in customers' in-store experience.

Keywords Gastronomy, Retail, Place of origin, City brand, Authenticity, Standardisation, Eataly, Internationalisation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the increasing international expansion of food and gastronomy stores and restaurants created relevant business opportunities. However, it also posed significant challenges, reshaping the relationship between food, local culture and society (Hjalager and Richards, 2002).

While food retailing became a consolidated area of investigation, devoting attention to internationalisation processes (Stanton, 2018), i.e. international gastronomy, has remained largely unexplored. In this field of enquiry, the relationship between local identities and internationalisation is particularly salient (Bellini *et al.*, 2018). In the Cambridge dictionary, gastronomy is “the art and knowledge involved in preparing and eating good food”, with an emphasis on food and eating culture beyond the food product. Internationalising gastronomy



stores implies transferring and translating the local cultural experience that is intrinsic to gastronomy into distant and diverse geographical markets.

Since the internationalisation of gastronomy businesses has generated growing standardisation (Edensor, 1998), a McDonaldisation of food production, distribution and consumption emerged (Ritzer, 1992), reshaping interactions between the local (food and culture) and the global (Richards, 2003). At the same time, consumers have been increasingly demanding authentic food products and unique gastronomic experiences (Chousou and Mattas, 2019; Iaia *et al.*, 2016; Riefler, 2020). As a result, the literature recognised authenticity and standardisation as contradictory forces that might pose a managerial paradox, providing a need to investigate their relationship within specific cultural settings and food venues, such as restaurants (Zeng *et al.*, 2012).

Although authenticity and standardisation have been extensively studied in various fields of research (e.g. tourism and local development) (Chousou and Mattas, 2019; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; MacCannell, 1973; Zeng *et al.*, 2019), only limited research has focused on their combination in the international gastronomic store experience. The literature focusing on the multifaceted role of place in the gastronomic experience is even more limited. If food origin has drawn much attention, the geographical context of purchase and consumption remains largely overlooked.

Addressing this gap, this paper aims to frame the authenticity–standardisation relationship in international gastronomy retailing and explores how and to what extent the food place of origin and the urban context in which the gastronomy store is located contribute to shaping customers' in-store experiences.

The case of Eataly, an international gastronomy chain with headquarters in Italy that combines gastronomy retail and restaurants in an innovative business model (Barrère, 2013), supports this investigation. With the declared mission of disseminating the Italian eating style, Italian quality food and regional agri-food products and traditions, Eataly offers “travel to an imaginary Italy”, proposing “a form of culinary nationalism” (Colombino, 2018, p. 67) around the world. Four Eataly stores in different city contexts (i.e. Rome, New York City, Munich and Istanbul) will be under scrutiny. Based on the analysis of consumers' Facebook reviews, providing consumers' accounts of their Eataly experience, three emerging archetypical authenticity–standardisation relationships will be discussed, opening routes for future research in international gastronomy retailing and offering managerial implications.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Internationalising gastronomy

Gastronomy has been extensively investigated in diverse theoretical domains as a complex and multidisciplinary research field, one that does not wholly overlap with food research (Bellini *et al.*, 2018; Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Lyu *et al.*, 2020). It combines high-quality food with knowledge about the origin, recipes, cooking techniques, nutritional qualities, sensory characteristics and practices of food consumption. A fine food product becomes a gastronomic experience if narrated through its geographical provenance, evoking the regional landscape and heritage, the preparation process and chefs' know-how, the eating habits of the community of origin and the unique sensory experience.

One example is the creation of the Parmesan cheese gastronomic experience by the Parmigiano Reggiano Consortium (www.parmigianoreggiano.com). Official communications and promotional campaigns narrate the bond between the product and its region of origin and its contribution to the region's biodiversity. Detailed product guides are meant to educate consumers about product selection and eating style, and producers and sellers about “the art of making”, “the art of hand cutting” and storing the cheese, creating a unique cultural aura around the product experience.

The literature has interpreted gastronomy as “the system of discourses and imaginaries constructed upon agricultural food products and their culinary transformations, upon the relations to the table, and upon the cultures of the food put into the mouth” (Bellini *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). Gastronomic products and experiences were interpreted as bundles of social meanings, such as rules, codes and rituals shaping the connection with a physical territory (e.g. place of origin), and symbolic representations of those local identities embodied by localised food production (Fiamor, 2018).

Internationalising gastronomy replicates or adapts localised food production (Fiamor, 2018) and experience to distant and diverse geographical markets, facing the challenge to recreate the social and symbolic dimensions of gastronomy. The “local social food space” (Fiamor, 2018) – at the core of the gastronomy concept – needs to be transferred, translated and, finally, understood and appreciated by consumers in distant and different geographical contexts, through processes of re-contextualisation.

When gastronomy is analysed in relation to tourism, as a local attractor of gourmet tourism (Ferrerol, 2018), the challenge of re-contextualisation does not apply, as travel provides a first-hand physical experience of the “local social food space” (Fiamor, 2018). Instead, it is central to international gastronomy retailing, for which an immersive encounter has to be recreated.

In this regard, new international retailing models have emerged (Barrère, 2013; Huddleston and Whipple, 2009), although these remain a largely unexplored field of academic inquiry.

2.2 Authenticity and standardisation in global-local contexts

The tension between globalisation and localisation has shaped the gastronomic landscape creating new challenges and opportunities for firms and destinations (Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Riefler, 2020; Zeng *et al.*, 2012). The local–global debate is embedded in the gastronomy literature, which has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the authenticity–standardisation paradox. Diverse relationships between food, local culture and place were investigated, including the association of authentic food with the region of origin (Hughes, 1995; Iaia *et al.*, 2016; Kuznesof *et al.*, 1997) or the demand for food embodying place images and a related perceived higher quality (Chambers *et al.*, 2007). The mobility of food and culinary styles has challenged the food–place association, increasing the de-differentiation of dishes and cuisines (Hjalager and Richards, 2002). The “McDonaldisation” of culture and economy (Ritzer, 1992) warned against the growing standardisation of food production, distribution and consumption.

Authenticity is a fuzzy concept that presents a multidimensional, multidisciplinary and polysemic nature (Leigh *et al.*, 2006; MacCannell, 1973). In agreement with the literature, authenticity can be considered as a socially constructed concept (Leigh *et al.*, 2006) that describes a particular identity of an object or subject (Zeng *et al.*, 2019).

The assessment of authenticity is primarily based on individuals’ perceptions (Chousou and Mattas, 2019) of originality, quality, uniqueness and inimitability, which drive trust, loyalty and commercial value (Iversen and Hem, 2011; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2005). Originality is one of the main properties of food authenticity, refers to a genuine version of a product and is closely related to a specific place of origin and process of production.

Authenticity is associated with quality as a differentiating factor (Groves, 2001; Liao and Ma, 2009; Sims, 2009). However, the notion of quality presents degrees of indeterminateness. Quality gastronomy is identified with authenticity concerning product provenance and local heritage, driven by local skills, know-how, productivity and raw materials which characterise a territory (Pike, 2015). On the other hand, quality links with the notion of product and service standardisation, concerning “codifiable and measurable” features and certifiable standards

(Bellini *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). High standards justify high prices for food (Ehrmann *et al.*, 2009), implying prestige and the capacity to convey deluxe and gourmet experiences (De Albuquerque Meneguel *et al.*, 2019).

For some scholars, the attempts to combine authenticity and standardisation may be like mixing water and oil: two opposites that fail to blend. The phenomenon of standardisation (De Vries, 1999) was defined as a threat to local identity and culture, resulting in an erosion of authenticity (Zhou *et al.*, 2015). Other scholars, however, tried to reconcile the authenticity–standardisation paradox by stressing how degrees of standardisation can support the projection of local heritage and culture in global and mass markets (Sedmak and Mihalič, 2008). The process of standardisation enables product/service affordability and homogeneous quality (Zeng *et al.*, 2012) while making authenticity accessible and understandable for consumers. Standardisation may also facilitate the brand experience, not without the risk of value destruction (Pasquinelli, 2018). It leads to forms of “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973), which “reduce consumer uncertainty and anxiety towards the perceived risk of not being able to infiltrate the back region and not grasping the taste of the place” (Pasquinelli, 2018, p. 241).

2.3 *The place of origin and the place brand*

The food–place relationship has been discussed in the literature, mostly drawing attention to food’s contribution to tourism destination brands and place-based images that enrich food origin perceptions. The literature has identified three strategic areas of articulation of the food–place brand relationship: the local food industry can be promoted by emphasising the products’ place of origin; preserving and reinvigorating the local culinary heritage can strengthen place identity; local food and culinary heritage can be used to explicitly change the image of places (Berg and Sevón, 2014).

Two research streams, the country/place of origin literature and place branding literature, have addressed the food–place relationship, advancing separate agendas. The country of origin, leveraging geographical associations and stereotypes concerning the country where a product is made (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Johansson *et al.*, 1985), is a consolidated area of investigation in international marketing, framing the positive effects of country images in consumers’ mindset, attitude and attachment to product brands.

Beyond the country of origin, the place of origin (Atkin and Newton, 2012; Giacomarra *et al.*, 2020; Melewar and Skinner, 2020; Orth *et al.*, 2020; Pike, 2015; Pucci *et al.*, 2017; Spielmann *et al.*, 2019; Van Ittersum *et al.*, 2003) applies to the food and beverage sectors. The place of origin highlights that “smaller sub-national places” (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2018), such as cities, regions, districts and neighbourhoods participate in the creation of the perceived origin. Rural and regional areas can mobilise tangible and intangible attributes, echoing heritage and local culture (Atkin and Newton, 2012; Melewar and Skinner, 2020; Pucci *et al.*, 2017; Van Ittersum *et al.*, 2003). A substantial difference between the country of origin and the place/region of origin was argued for the latter, providing higher place-specificity, creating the conditions for consumers to attach more importance to the regional origin than the country origin (Pucci *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, place branding represents a fast-growing multidisciplinary field of research and practice addressing a set of complex themes regarding the construction and exploitation of place images (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010; Lucarelli and Olof Berg, 2011; Giovanardi *et al.*, 2013). The place brand is “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place and its stakeholders”, and it may play a role in shaping consumers’ attitudes and behaviour (Zenker *et al.*, 2017, p. 17).

Some linkage between the construction of the place brand and the construction of the origin was suggested, leveraging the notion of brand origin as “the place, region, or country to

which the brand is perceived to belong by its consumers” (Thakor and Kohli, 1996, p. 27). That is, the origin is a narrative setting, not only about the place of production but also about the “usage context” (Ger *et al.*, 1999) and the place of the “lived experience” (Tokatli, 2013; Bellini and Pasquinelli, 2016). The usage context and the place of experience may participate in the complex spatial circuits of the local origination of products (Pike, 2015). This perspective remains largely overlooked in food retailing and gastronomy studies.

The place-branding literature has focused on gastronomy and food as essential elements for branding places, a strategic asset creating a distinctive image in tourists’ minds and articulating place identity (Gyimóthy, 2017). Food is intertwined with specific social, cultural and natural characteristics of place (Lin *et al.*, 2011) at country, region, city or neighbourhood level. Such an intertwining concerns not only food products but also food practices (eating and meals), the art and customs of preparing and eating (gastronomy), sensory elements (taste, smell, touch, visual), origin (organic food, ethical cuisine, locally produced food, etc.), preparation (ways of cooking), serving (fast food, slow food, street food, etc.) and the context in which food is served and consumed (Richards, 2015).

3. Research design

This study explores the relationship between authenticity and standardisation in international gastronomy retailing through an empirical analysis of Eataly customers’ in-store experience in four different urban cultural contexts (New York City, Rome, Munich and Istanbul). A web content mining approach was carried out on 1,018 Facebook reviews that narrated customers’ Eataly experience.

In the food sector, reviews have been gaining attention for their influence on consumption decisions and the capability of generating revenues (Onorati and Giardullo, 2020). Reviews on social media provide spontaneous and insightful feedback that is freely available online (Guo *et al.*, 2017) and represent a useful tool to investigate customers’ perceptions (Pantelidis, 2010; Ryu and Han, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2010) and food product attributes (Samoggia *et al.*, 2020). They reflect consumers’ delight or discontent with their experiences (Banerjee and Chua, 2016), express emotions, describe real experiences and offer recommendations (Ye *et al.*, 2014). Consumer-generated reviews provide reliable information regarding the perception of product and service quality and consumer satisfaction with a brand (Ye *et al.*, 2014).

Accordingly, research on food, beverage and gastronomy has relied on social media as repositories of customers’ reviews, such as travel review sites like Tripadvisor (Pasquinelli, 2018; Onorati and Giardullo, 2020) and social networking sites like Facebook (Gaber *et al.*, 2019) and Twitter (Samoggia *et al.*, 2020), to source information on customers’ experience, satisfaction and behaviours.

The reason for selecting Facebook business pages for this study was threefold. It is a social networking site where users tend to engage with brands (the focus of this research, i.e. the Eataly brand). Users search for information, express their opinions, emotions and complaints, as on travel review sites, but they also seek socialisation, brand advocacy and personal social image enhancement (Gaber *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, they show more trustworthy behaviours when generating content (Feng *et al.*, 2021). Second, a social networking site was selected, instead of a travel review site like Tripadvisor, to collect reviews, balancing the two dimensions of the Eataly brand, gastronomy retailing and the restaurant chain. Previous studies on Eataly have suggested the prevailing attitude to review this brand on Tripadvisor as a restaurant chain and, particularly, as a restaurant for tourists in line with the travel focus of the website (Pasquinelli, 2018). In contrast to other social networking sites like Twitter and Instagram, Facebook provides reviews as a star-based comment system, allowing users to rate a product or service, write reviews and comments on other users’ reviews, leaving room for open and public discussions about a brand.

The selection of Facebook implied limitations. Other platforms may provide important additional perspectives such as catalysing the attention and actions of different users. Facebook is not a specialised platform for discussing food and gastronomy; other social media are increasingly important, especially among younger generations and in different geographical contexts. However, the selected four stores are located in countries where Facebook is still a relevant social network site, while selecting other contexts – such as Asian ones – would have made this choice inappropriate.

3.1 The case of Eataly

Eataly is an international gastronomy chain brand which disseminates the Italian eating style and experience, bringing Italian regional agri-food products and traditions to geographical and culturally distant markets. Offering “travel to an imaginary Italy”, proposing “a form of culinary nationalism” (Colombino, 2018, p. 67), Eataly is considered to be a “new” model of Italian gastronomic export, with significant organisational, logistical and marketing innovations (Barrère, 2013). It combines the specialty grocery shopping mall with a range of restaurants, from Italian fast-food restaurants to haute cuisine, coexisting in megastores where visitors receive detailed information, attend workshops and courses and participate in indoor festivals and events. The company defined an innovative business model for the distribution of gastronomic products and codified a modality of value creation for the Italian food system (Barrère, 2013). Eataly owns 16 stores in Italy (including the Italian food park FICO Eataly World in Bologna) and 24 stores worldwide [1] (Europe, US, Canada, Russia, Brazil, United Arab Emirates, Japan, Turkey and South Korea), of different sizes, in addition to corner shops and restaurants hosted by other food and hospitality chains.

The four selected Eataly stores – New York City, Rome, Munich and Istanbul – are flagship stores in the hosting countries, comparable in size and variety of on-site restaurants, range of food selection and hosted events. This criterion, along with localisation in different countries and the availability of reviews on the same platform (i.e. Facebook), guided the selection of these cases.

3.2 Data collection

This study explored Eataly customers’ experiences in the four selected stores (i.e. New York City, Rome, Munich and Istanbul) through an analysis of customers’ reviews retrieved manually from the official Facebook business pages in December 2019. All the available reviews from January 2017 to December 2019 were part of the analysed sample (the focus was on the pre-COVID-19 in-store experience). To facilitate data elaboration and guarantee adequate coherence in the interpretation, all the reviews in languages other than English were translated into English using the automatic translation service provided by Facebook. The sampled reviews were inserted into a Microsoft Excel file, recording the Facebook institutional store account, review text, date and star rating score for each retrieved review.

The final dataset included 1,018 reviews and was structured as follows (Table 1). For each review, information was collected about the publication date, likes, shares, number of comments, rating score and name of the reference store. As for the content, the title and the textual part of the review were included.

3.3 Data analysis

Figure 1 summarises the research procedure. After data gathering, the main steps of the analysis consisted of: first, a qualitative content analysis identifying three conceptual categories under which all the sampled reviews were grouped; second, a sentiment analysis providing insight into reviewers’ positive or negative attitude to the Eataly in-store

experience; and finally, a co-occurrence analysis providing insights into themes and co-occurring descriptors explaining each conceptual category.

A qualitative content analysis (Bell *et al.*, 2018) identified the conceptual categories (i.e. *Place of origin*, *Quality*, *Hosting city*) presented in Table 2. Content analysis is a consolidated method in food marketing and branding research (Wheeler, 1988; Onorati and Giardullo, 2020; Samoggia *et al.*, 2020), with an exploratory orientation to the “real phenomenon” (Hays *et al.*, 2013). A qualitative approach to content analysis consisted of partitioning the corpus text into the three identified categories, rearticulating the whole text (Krippendorff, 2004). The category building procedure combined a mix of inductive and deductive approaches (Berg, 2001). It was an open process to follow the explorative rationale of the empirical analysis but also relied on the literature supporting the relevance of the three emerging categories (i.e. *Place of origin*, *Quality*, *Hosting city*).

The second coding round was carried out to manually insert each review under the identified categories for the four stores. This second loop confirmed the good fit of these categories to cluster the collected texts. The human coding method allowed researchers to have insights into the raw data, an advantage in light of the explorative nature of this study. The manual effort was feasible for the relatively small sample size resulting from the research design.

After categorisation, data cleaning (natural language pre-processing transformed the text into a usable format for text analysis, Feldman and Sanger, 2007; Gensler *et al.*, 2015) was carried out before the further analysis steps. Tokenisation, a standard method of cutting text in a set of tokens, such as words, sentences, paragraphs (Feldman and Sanger, 2007) and a stop word list (Gensler *et al.*, 2015), were applied. This preceded the sentiment analysis and

Store	Facebook business page	No. of followers	No. of reviews	Overall rating score
Istanbul	Eataly Istanbul	23.822	517	4.2
New York Flatiron	Eataly NYC Flatiron	147.329	239	4.7
Munich	Eataly Munchen	19.702	176	4.1
Rome	Eataly (Roma)	134.099	86	4.2

Table 1.
Sample description

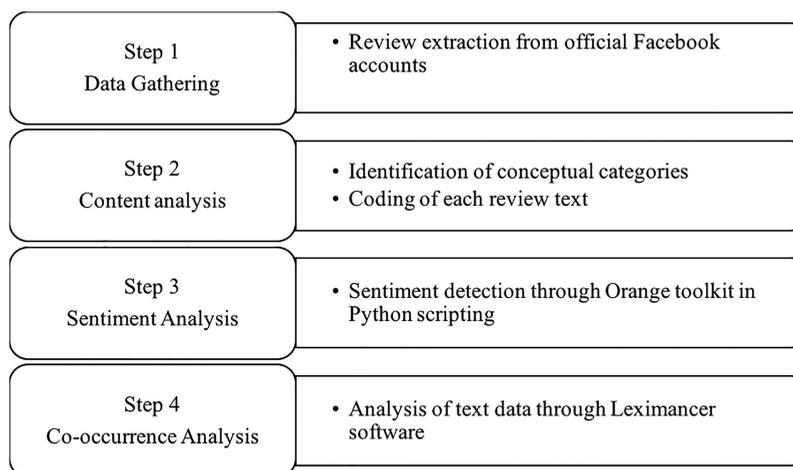


Figure 1.
The process of data
collection and analysis

Category	Description	Example
Place of origin	Text fragments about the geographic origin in reviewers' accounts of their experience	"Stop by to eat vegetable with family and friend! It can remind of Italy or make you wish to visit one of the most beautiful countries in the world!"
Quality	Text fragments assessing the quality of the product, service and overall experience	"We enjoyed a delicious and relaxing lunch at La Pizza and La Pasta. Our waiter was excellent. We then enjoy gelato and walking around the marketplace. Overall a great experience and it was out first time there"
Hosting city	Text fragments highlighting the specific localisation of the store to capture the urban context in the reviewers' experience	"When you first met eataly in Rome, the expectations of Munich are only partially fulfilled. This affects both the location as well as the range of offer and service. Everything is a little tight and crowded, queuing at the espresso bar is obviously a standard in Munich. [...] Nevertheless: Eataly is certainly a profit for Munich, even if the overall concept in Rome is clearly better and more attractive"

Table 2.
The coding scheme

co-occurrence analysis which provided insight into the meaning and structure of the three identified categories (i.e. *Place of origin*, *Quality*, *Hosting city*).

The sentiment analysis was carried out using Orange, a toolkit for machine learning, data mining and visualisation that combines Python library for scripting (Demšar *et al.*, 2013). Sentiment analysis is a consolidated method widely used in food and marketing research (Mostafa, 2018; Nakayama and Wan, 2018; Samoggia *et al.*, 2020). It is a data mining technique that automatically classifies a text corpus by indicating whether it tends to be positive, negative or neutral (Liu, 2012; Ravaglia *et al.*, 2016). This type of analysis went beyond the star rating scores given by reviewers on Facebook to focus on the sentiment inferred by the software from reviewers' way of speaking about their in-store experience. The VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner) lexicon, a rule-based model for sentiment analysis, was used (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014) to calculate the sentiment scores. This was explicitly conceived to analyse sentiments expressed in social media, characterised by the use of informal and poorly structured syntax (Boiy and Moens, 2009).

Finally, Leximancer was used to develop a co-occurrence analysis explaining the structure of the three identified categories (i.e. *Place of origin*, *Quality and Hosting city*). It is a software for analysing natural language text data, widely adopted for academic research in various fields (Tseng *et al.*, 2015). The specificity of this software is analysis of "the meanings within passages of text by extracting the main concepts and ideas" instead of applying word frequencies (Tseng *et al.*, 2015, p. 350). The unsupervised seeding option was set (Nanayakkara *et al.*, 2018), validated by previous studies (Smith and Humphreys, 2006), and the software automatically scanned textual data producing descriptors and associating them to build themes. Leximancer labelled the emerging themes in light of the most co-occurring descriptors.

4. Findings

4.1 Review categorisation and sentiment

Customers mainly described the overall in-store experience in relation to quality, such as quality of food, service and experience (70.7%, 720 reviews). In contrast, the place of origin

(country and regional origin, see Table 2) (15.2%) and the hosting city (13.9%) were generally less relevant (Table 3).

Eataly Istanbul deviated from the other stores. It was characterised by the marginal role of quality (11.6%) and the significant role of the hosting city in customers' description of their experience (76.7%).

The overall sentiment of the reviews (Table 4), regardless of the store focus, was mainly positive with a positive peak under the *Place of origin* category (78%) and a negative peak under the *Hosting city* category (13%); the *Place of origin* scored the lowest negative sentiment (5%).

Looking at one single store, it is worth noticing that the lowest positive sentiment scores for *Place of origin* and *Quality* concerned Istanbul, where the *Hosting city* reached the highest positive score among the three categories. The New York Flatiron store achieved the highest positive sentiment under all the three categories.

4.2 Place of origin, quality and Hosting city: The co-occurrence analysis

Analysis of the keywords/descriptors under *Place of origin*, *Quality* and *Hosting city* revealed common themes across the four cities and some relevant differences (Table 5).

Store	Quality (% tot)	Place of origin (% tot)	Hosting city (% tot)	Total
Eataly New York Flatiron	404 (78.1%)	75 (14.5%)	38 (7.4%)	517
Eataly Rome	189 (79.1%)	27 (11.3%)	22 (9.2%)	239
Eataly Munich	117 (66.5%)	43 (24.4%)	16 (9.1%)	176
Eataly Istanbul	10 (11.6%)	10 (11.6%)	66 (76.7%)	86
TOTAL	720 (70.7%)	155 (15.2%)	142 (13.9%)	1,018

Table 3.
Distribution of the reviews per category

Sentiment	Place of origin	Quality	Hosting city
Positive	78%	75%	72%
Negative	5%	11%	13%
Neutral	17%	13%	15%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
<i>New York</i>			
Positive	83%	78%	83%
Negative	3%	13%	6%
Neutral	14%	9%	11%
<i>Rome</i>			
Positive	77%	64%	70%
Negative	7%	28%	10%
Neutral	16%	8%	20%
<i>Munich</i>			
Positive	79%	68%	60%
Negative	6%	12%	22%
Neutral	15%	20%	18%
<i>Istanbul</i>			
Positive	60%	60%	65%
Negative	14%	0%	18%
Neutral	26%	40%	17%

Table 4.
Sentiment analysis

Table 5.
Main themes and a
selection of descriptors
for each category
and store

Store	Place of origin (<i>selected descriptors</i>)	Quality (<i>selected descriptors</i>)	Hosting city (<i>selected descriptors</i>)
Eataly New York Flatiron	Italian (<i>pasta, pizza, meats, fresh ingredients, Nutella, home, pizza, market</i>), Italy (<i>experience, visit, service</i>), Eataly (<i>products, authentic, hours, atmosphere</i>), Love	Food (<i>excellent, selection, experience, fun</i>), Place (<i>shop, restaurant, variety</i>), Delicious (<i>wine, cheese, recommend, fresh</i>), Dinner	NYC (<i>rooftop, visit, favorite, vibe</i>), Eataly (<i>amazing, experience</i>), Best (<i>food, service, wine</i>)
Eataly Rome	Food (<i>excellent, restaurant, taste, shopping, Italian, pizza, different, authentic</i>), Italy (<i>best, shopping</i>), Quality (<i>fantastic, selection</i>), Product, Supermarket	Excellent (<i>products, restaurant, food, delicious, recommend, staff, quality, supermarket</i>), Place (<i>beautiful, evening, festival, Rome</i>), Eataly (<i>taste, Italian, home, products, prices</i>), Service, Lunch	Annoying (<i>parking, Rome, pollution, vehicles</i>), Stolen (<i>service, things, place</i>), Quality (<i>dinner</i>)
Eataly Munich	Italian (<i>Home, atmosphere, feel, lovers, authentic, products</i>), Italy (<i>choice, selection, product, cheese, wine, taste</i>), Eataly, Pizza, Everything	Service (<i>Time, order, waiter, shopping, food</i>), Nice (<i>staff, selection, people</i>), Products, Excellent	Offer (<i>difference, concept, better, predecessor, Munich</i>), Location, Italian
Eataly Istanbul	Authentic (<i>food, excellent, unbeatable</i>), Istanbul, Chef	Service (<i>price, staff, pizza, food</i>), Pleasant (<i>atmosphere, recommend, beautiful, food</i>), Employees	Location, Istanbul

Italy as a country of origin was central in the three stores located in western capitals (Eataly New York, Eataly Rome and Eataly Munich), although in different ways. Italian food and gastronomic excellence (pasta, pizza, Nutella and other regional products) and “Italianness” (home, atmosphere, shopping, experience, etc.) represented recurrent themes explaining the place of origin category. “Authentic” was a frequent keyword in the reviews under the *Place of origin* category in all the analysed stores (except for Rome), signalling an identification of authenticity with the notion of origin in reviewers’ minds, reinforcing the idea of Italian food and gastronomic style.

Eataly Istanbul consumers’ narration of place of origin deviated from the other international Eataly stores, neglecting an explicit association with Italian food and style. Although authentic food excellence represents a central theme, it was highly correlated with the Istanbul city name and the local chef. Accordingly, the origin in Eataly Istanbul represents a hybridisation between two different countries: Italy (typical Italian food) and Istanbul (city identity, heritage and local culture). Turkish elements, such as *Turkish food, Turkish music* and *Turkish taste*, represented the link with local culture in the Eataly experience, not always resulting in an entirely positive experience, according to the reviewers (“We went with a couple of foreign friends, they liked it, but I don’t think the Turkish taste is suitable for the taste of a pasta”).

The Quality of the store service (including *employees*) that prevailed in the consumers’ narration presented significant recurring aspects across the four Eataly stores. In all the stores, the reviewers reported a high level of satisfaction for both the *variety* and *selection* of retail products and the *tasty* freshly cooked dishes in the restaurant. The *enjoyable* and *pleasant* atmosphere, the *service*, the festivals and the overall experience were positively valued in all the stores and the intention to return emerged in several reviews (“Been here several times now. Yesterday I came to celebrate my birthday and it was excellent again”;

“I’ve been to the Cacio e Pepe festival. I didn’t have to queue and both the quality of the food and the staff were excellent! We had a beautiful evening in a relaxing atmosphere!!”), as well as the intention to recommend the experience to others (“Such an amazing time! We made pasta and we had a delicious pasta dish to eat. Luca was so knowledgeable and entertaining. He is obviously a master pasta maker. My husband and I talked about it all the way home. I would highly recommend anything at EATALY!”).

In contrast, regarding negative quality associations, consumers complained of long *waiting* times, unfriendly and unprepared *staff*, poor service and too high *prices* (Eataly Munich and Eataly Istanbul). As one reviewer stated “The service is poor. It’s the second time in a few weeks that someone in the staff argues with me. Maybe they are under pressure, but it’s evident that despite the professional look and the prices of the place many of the employees are the average student/part-time worker that you expect to find in a different type of shops.”

Some reviewers related that the *Hosting city* was an amazing experience (Eataly New York and Eataly Istanbul). The location as a recurrent theme produced opposite perceptions: either negative experiences (safety, traffic and parking issues as *annoying* and *stolen*, in Eataly Rome) or enjoyable in the heart of the city (Eataly Munich in the historic *Schrannenhalle* district). The *Hosting city* themes also referred to the relation between the store and the city. The store has become a must-do attraction as a tourism destination in the city (Eataly New York, “Should be a stop on everyone’s NYC things-to-do list!”, “Truly NYC experience” and “typical NYC tourist attraction”) and a unique place for the “magnificent view of the Bosphorus” (Eataly Istanbul), which has become part of the overall Eataly experience.

5. Discussion

The findings provided a fresh insight into disentangling the authenticity–standardisation paradox and framing three archetypes in international gastronomy retailing. These archetypes recombine the standardisation elements that are shared across the four analysed stores, with the authenticity elements characterising one single store.

The recurrent descriptors of the *Place of origin*, *Quality* and *Hosting city* categories across the four stores (New York City, Rome, Munich and Istanbul) identified the standardisation elements of Eataly’s international gastronomy retailing. This interpretative criterion mirrors the forms of gastronomic de-differentiation (Hjalager and Richards, 2002) and codification of product and service standards (Bellini *et al.*, 2018) discussed in the literature.

Elements of standardisation were the Italian food and Italianness (*Place of origin* category) intrinsic to Eataly’s brand promise (Colombino, 2018). Homogenising Italian food and Italianness facilitate the consumer’s decision-making process, build customer confidence and enhance the brand experience (Zeng *et al.*, 2012, 2019). As additional elements of standardisation, quality products, services, staff and servicescape (*Quality* category) were recurrent across the four analysed stores. Besides, the reference to the location of the store (*Hosting city* category), its physical features (e.g. *rooftop*, *parking*) and its experiential character (e.g. a *vibe*, a *place for dinner*) enrich the elements of Eataly’s standardisation.

On the other hand, authenticity elements were identified for each Eataly store in the four different cities/countries, considering the specific descriptors of *Place of origin*, *Quality* and *Hosting city* categories characterising one single store. This criterion mirrors the various definitions of authenticity, focusing on originality, uniqueness and inimitability (Iversen and Hem, 2011; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2005).

By combining the shared elements of standardisation with the specific elements of store authenticity, three archetypes were identified: originated authenticity, standardised authenticity and localised authenticity.

Originated authenticity frames the case of Eataly Rome. This store is the only one where the specialty grocery store side of Eataly (e.g. *excellent food supermarket, food shopping*) and the restaurant side received equal attention in reviewers' comments. "The Bulgari of the supermarket", one reviewer stated, connecting the Italian food with an iconic Italian luxury brand.

The agri-food production quality was "certified" by the Italian origin, while the diverse regional origins (Atkin and Newton, 2012; Melewar and Skinner, 2020; Pucci *et al.*, 2017) of gastronomic products and dishes were not the focus of reviewers' comments. Authenticity elements emerged concerning the in-store Roman atmosphere, experienced through the diverse gastronomic events and festivals (the potato and "Cacio e Pepe" festival, a traditional Roman recipe), recreating the unique quality of the Roman authentic gastronomic experience.

These reinforced the place-specificity of the originated authenticity at Eataly, leveraging the Roman atmosphere to evoke the rituals, codes and rules of food cooking and consumption, representing the social meanings of gastronomy (Fiamor, 2018). Not only the Italian food origin (an element of standardisation across the Eataly stores) but also the origin of these rituals, rules and codes (an element of authenticity) frame this archetypical authenticity–standardisation relationship.

Standardised authenticity frames the cases of New York City and Munich Eataly. The country of origin is at the core of in-store reviewers' experience, the driver of consumer preferences, attitude and attachment (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Johansson *et al.*, 1985). *Fresh* products and *ingredients* and unique Italian traditional and "stereotype" food (i.e. *pasta, Nutella and pizza*), along with "homogeneous" (Zeng *et al.*, 2012) quality, uncritically taken for granted, recreate the Italian experience. Additional aspects of the authentic gastronomic experience relate to the store's connection with the hosting city (*Hosting city* category).

The hosting city contributes to the authentic Eataly experience as a central and prestigious shopping location in Eataly Munich (i.e. the Munich Schrammehalle district). The hosting city also contributes to turning Eataly into a must-do attraction in New York City, signalling the exceptionality of the authentic Italian experience in this city context. In both cases, the placement of the store in the hosting city (New York City and the Munich Schrammehalle district) turns the in-store gastronomic experience into an authentic Italian experience, exceptional for being lived away from Italy ("I'm Italian and this feels just like home", Eataly New York Flatiron).

According to this archetype, standardisation supports authenticity as a projection of the Italian heritage and cultural lifestyle in distant geographical markets (Sedmak and Mihalič, 2008), making authenticity accessible to large and (cognitively, culturally and geographically) distant audiences (Pasquinelli, 2018).

This goes with a standardised conceptualisation of authenticity, a commodified summary of the *bel paese* experience in the space of a store. The country brand strongly emerged in a stereotypical way to frame the authentic Italian experience ("The Disneyland of Italian gastronomy"; "It's the Ikea of everything Italian food"). The host city brand served as a reference for expressing the degree of authenticity of the Italian experience in New York City ("So authentic I forgot I was in New York City").

Localised authenticity, corresponding to Eataly Istanbul, frames authenticity as a hybridisation between the country of origin (described by the typical Italian food) and the hosting city brand.

Elements of the authentic gastronomic experience emerged, considering the Istanbul hosting city and the local touch and the skills of local people, overshadowing the provenance of the food products. Eataly's food product quality (Italian food) was intertwined with the quality of the skills of local people cooking in the Eataly restaurants (i.e. the *Chef*), bringing their traditions, know-how and taste, their culture and heritage (*Turkish food, Turkish music*

and *Turkish taste*). That is, the “usage context” (Ger *et al.*, 1999) and the place of experience actively participate in the local origination (Pike, 2015) of the in-store authentic gastronomic experience.

Authenticity emerged as a socially constructed concept (Leigh *et al.*, 2006), constantly built and reshaped in specific local and “social contexts” (Edwards, 2010). The hosting city actively contributes to the authentic gastronomic experience, with the city brand providing the salient emotional and psychological background to experiential consumption (Pasquinelli, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Although internationalising the gastronomic experience through diverse retailing models represents a consolidated business practice worldwide, academic research remains in the early stage of investigation in this field. This paper provides fresh knowledge to bridge the gap between practical advances and academic research, drawing some preliminary routes for the theoretical development of the international gastronomy retailing research and offering some managerial implications.

First, this paper discusses international gastronomy retailing as an area of investigation that does not wholly overlap with food retailing research. It cross-fertilises diverse streams of research (gastronomy retailing, authenticity–standardisation, country/place of origin and place/city branding) that are relevant in interpreting the gastronomic store experience in distant cultural contexts. Although preliminary, these research findings suggest the validity of this research route and the need for further research efforts in this direction.

Second, this research overcomes the authenticity–standardisation paradox (Zeng *et al.*, 2012, 2019) in the international gastronomic store experience, introducing three archetypical models: originated authenticity, standardised authenticity and localised authenticity. These explain the authentic gastronomic experience in international retail, highlighting how standardisation encourages customers to perceive, understand and experience authenticity. Specific and contextual gastronomy store models, combining standard aspects with elements of socially constructed authenticity (Leigh *et al.*, 2006), reshape the customers’ in-store experience within the specific local and “social context” (Edwards, 2010; Aaltojärvi *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, this research suggests that the cultural diversity of the hosting city matters in interpreting the international gastronomy retail experience. Conceptually intertwining the hosting city brand and the place of food origin was proved to be a valid frame to explain the internationalisation process of gastronomy retailing. The cultural diversity of the hosting city context, combined with the food place of origin, significantly contributes to calibrating the combination of authenticity and standardisation in the in-store gastronomic experience. Beyond the country/place of origin, the emphasis on the role of the city brand drew attention to the need to broaden the conceptualisation of origin in the gastronomy field, as previous studies suggested. This study provides insight into expanding the conceptualisation of origin in international gastronomy retailing studies, as “usage context” (Ger *et al.*, 1999) and place of “lived experience” (Tokatli, 2013; Bellini and Pasquinelli, 2016).

Regarding managerial implications, the research findings pointed towards new ways to define, manage and monitor the international gastronomy retail experience. First, global gastronomy brands like Eataly may sustain authentic gastronomic experiences despite the high levels of standardisation offered by their stores (Riefler, 2020). Standardisation can support the projection of country heritage and culture in global and mass markets (Sedmak and Mihalić, 2008), making authenticity accessible and understandable for consumers and facilitating their brand experience (Pasquinelli, 2018). Second, authenticity in international gastronomy retailing may be fuelled by the local context, heritage and identity (Aaltojärvi *et al.*, 2018) – in this study the city context – which contribute to customers’ in-store authentic

experience. The hosting city brand can be leveraged to recreate an emotional and psychological background for the customer, adding social meanings and symbolic values (Fiamor, 2018) to the in-store gastronomic experience.

This study has limitations to be considered in future research. The focus on a specific case study, despite its explorative value, does not allow generalisation of the research results. At the same time, a cross-case analysis might add nuanced views on international gastronomy retailing and further express the authenticity–standardisation relationship. Facebook reviews represent just one viable information source. Additional online and offline sources can help reach more exhaustive and broader insights into consumers' in-store gastronomic experience. Diverse methodologies, then, may reveal behaviours, emotional and performative reactions, beyond the rationally mediated form of review text writing. Finally, while this research focused on pre-COVID-19 customers' experiences, future research should investigate the impact of the pandemic crisis on international gastronomy retailing concerning the possible changes in gastronomic consumption practices and preferences in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Note

1. <https://www.eataly.com>, last accessed 30 March 2021.

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