

THESIS COLLECTION

Orsolya Szakály

**How do gastronomic influencers affect consumer
decision?**

The role of consumer activity in the decision-making
process in gastronomic tourism, via the example of
Instagram

for her Ph.D. thesis

Supervisor:

Ivett Pinke-Sziva, PhD

Associate Professor

Budapest, 2022

Department of Tourism

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1. Research background and justification of the topic

The focus of the present dissertation is on gastronomic tourism, which focuses on the role of consumer participation in social media, especially in terms of the impression of influencers.

The emergence of the Internet and social media has a prominent impact on consumer behavior from a sociopsychological perspective. Consumer communication in virtual communities also has an impact on the tourism industry. In my doctoral research, I examined the influencing effect of gastronomic influencers, specifically in terms of their impact on gastronomic consumers when choosing a restaurant. Furthermore, I also examined the role of social media activity in the decision-making process.

1.1. Purpose of the research

The academic goal of my research is to contribute to the expansion of the literature on the tourism aspects of consumer activity and the relationship between the consumer and the influencer. Therefore, the aim of the investigation is to test and model a theoretical concept based on a consumer survey. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, the research fills a gap in the tourism sector. On the one hand, gastronomic tourism is one of the new tourism trends of our time, and on the other hand, gastronomy plays an important role in social media, both in visual and textual terms. Therefore, the results of my research help to shed light on one of the leisure activities of consumers, gastronomy.

In my doctoral research, I expanded an already existing model (Theory of Planned Behavior model hereinafter: TPB model) with new moderators

(destination and Covid-19), and within the model I also examined the relationship between gastronomic influencers and gastronomic consumption intent, which is a novel approach in the field of tourism research. In this context, the main research question is:

How do gastronomic influencers affect the outcome of gastronomically motivated consumption intent on a social media platform called Instagram?

1.2. The conceptual frame of the dissertation

The theoretical conception processed in the dissertation based on the literary analysis (*Figure 1*). As described in the introduction, I was particularly interested in the role of consumer **activity** on Instagram. The research begins with e-WOM, from which the role of **influencers** emerges during the analysis, so the frame system of the research is given by the impact of the opinions transferred by the influencers on consumers' **consumption intentions**, and the attitude and perceived dimensions of behavioral control. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (**attitude, perceived behavior control**). During the literary analysis, it was highlighted that, while consumer behavior when studying tourism consumption and decision-making is generally approached from an emotional standpoint, consumer behavior research is based on rationality (DECROP–SNELDERS 2004). As a result, the phenomena studied were defined, as were the roles and **activity levels** of consumers (posters-lurkers, consumption-participation-production).

Gastronomic products can arouse two types of interest. One occurs to meet physical needs, while the other is hedonic in nature and occurs when a consumer visits a restaurant with the intention of having leisure time or going on a tourist trip (so the consumer travels to another location and leaves his or her home and work environment). Many factors can influence a customer's decision-making process, including information read on online social media sites, the opinions of other consumers, and the **destination** of the restaurant itself. The consumer's willingness to participate can also be motivated by various factors such as information seeking, information sharing, responsible behavior, and personal interaction. The primary goal of my research was to clarify the role of consumer activity and the impact of influencers on consumers during decision-making in gastronomic tourism, with a focus on various social media platforms that are becoming popular in this field as online communication devices. In addition, I wanted to reveal whether consumer intention converts into **real consumption** or **real travel** as a result of the factors mentioned above.

Covid 19 and its inclusion in my research was not the initial concept of my dissertation, but considering that the tourism industry, particularly the hospitality industry, has suffered as a consequence of the virus's appearance, its study is indispensable. As a result, in my dissertation, I raise the question of what impact the appearance of the virus has on consumer decision-making when selecting a restaurant.

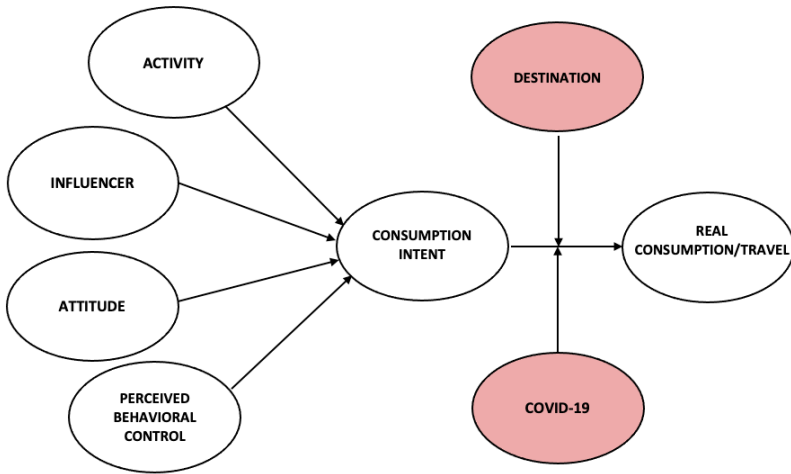


Figure 1: Theoretical concept
 Source: *Elaborated by the author*

2. Applied methods

2.1. Research process

To answer the main research question a quantitative research approach has been adopted, aimed at characterizing the studied population and quantifying the correlations. In the case of the respondents, the criteria for the selection of the sample included the use of the Instagram platform.

The research involves double sampling:

1. In the case of the selection of gastronomic influencers, sampling is arbitrary, as I did not have a statistical statement that would analyze or rank the activity of gastronomic influencers. So I used the StarNgage (2020), which is an online portal and online marketplace that helps different brands and influencers from different social

platforms collaborate. When selecting gastronomic influencers, I kept in mind the following aspects:

- the gastronomic theme of the influencer is mostly focused on restaurants – this is also important because many people share content related to cooking and lifestyle;
- the contents of the influencer related to restaurants should not be concentrated only in Budapest.

Eventually, only two influencers were selected: Judit Szauer and András Jókuti, for the following reasons:

- the active presence of both influencers on the Instagram platform, posting from restaurants even during the coronavirus,
- both influencers mention the studied restaurant in their Instagram page. The chosen restaurant is the attraction of the destination, and the tourists travel to Encs specifically for the restaurant.

2. Furthermore, as the importance of the destination in the choice of restaurant played a role in my research, in cases where the attraction of the destination is a particular restaurant, the opinion of the consumers of a restaurant were also asked. During the restaurant selection, I considered the ranking of the Dining Guide, which advertises the best restaurants in the country every year. According to the Dining Guide's evaluation, in 2020, "Anyukám mondta" from Encs was awarded as the Rural Restaurant of the Year. Prior to that, it first appeared on the Dining Guide's top list in 2010, where it earned the Second Best Small Restaurant award. So, my research

also included consumers who have already been to the named restaurant and have an Instagram user account. From the point of view of my research, this segment is important in order to include in the sample consumers who have a targeted gastronomic consumption intent.

2.2. Research methodology

As part of the primary research, I used an online questionnaire in order to test the established hypotheses and to answer my research question. In the analysis of my questionnaire, I applied the model of structured equation model (hereinafter SEM).

The formulated hypotheses were tested using the SEM modeling method. SEM modeling differs from mathematical and statistical methods in that it can be used in the case of a model based on some theoretical relationship and construction, during which it allows the exploration of the relationships observed in the data. The method is suitable for testing several regression calculations in parallel, so it can be considered as an extension of linear models, which can be used to model a more complex relationship between variables (SIMON 2016). We can use two models to solve the correlations:

- covariance modeling (CB-SEM): common variance is analyzed,
- variance-based modeling - partial least squares structured model (PLS-SEM): all three types of variance (common variance, individual/specific variance, error term) are analyzed (SIMON 2016, KAZÁR 2014).

Due to the causal and predictive nature of my research, I used the PLS-SEM method. Unlike covariance-based SEM, variance-based SEM is able to estimate common factors and composites that make it suitable for behavioral constructs as well as design constructs (HENSELER 2017). Starting from the nature of the construction, the latent variables indicate a behavioral construction, and the epistemic relationship of the indicators is consequential, so I used the reflective measurement method (HENSELER 2017). In addition to latent variables and indicators moderating variables were used in the model during PLS-SEM modeling, which is a third variable (MOD) directly affects the strength between the two constructs, or even the direction of the relationship between the two other variables (MANLEY et al. 2021, BECKER et al. 2018). Scale development was key in the process of my research as it determined the content validity of my research. In terms of validity, I used scales that are validated during scale development.

2.3. Research questions and hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned research question, the following sub-questions and hypotheses were formulated:

Q1: How does user activity affect propensity to consume on Instagram?

H1: Consumer activity on Instagram is positively related to gastronomic intent.

Q2: What effect does the gastronomic influencer have on gastronomic consumption intent?

H2: The gastronomic influencer has a positive effect on gastronomic consumption intent.

Q3: How does the consumer's consumption attitude in a restaurant affect gastronomic consumption intent?

H3: Consumer consumption attitude in a restaurant is positively related to the gastronomic consumption intent.

Q4: How does the perceived behavioral control of the consumer affect the intent of gastronomic consumption when consuming in a restaurant?

H4: Perceived behavioral control of the consumer towards consumption in the restaurant is positively related to the intention of gastronomic consumption.

Q5: How does the intention to consume affect actual consumption and travel of gastronomic origin, and what is the impact of the characteristics of the destination and the emergency factors due to Covid-19 on this relationship?

H5a: Gastronomic consumption intent has a positive effect on the real gastronomic consumption and travel.

H5b: The role of destination has a positive effect on the relationship between the intention of gastronomic consumption and the real consumption and travel.

H5c: The Covid-19 epidemic negatively affects real gastronomic consumption and travel of consumers.

3. Results and conclusions of the dissertation

The questionnaire was collected in two stages:

- Shared by the influencers: between 26.04.2021 and 29.05.2021, during which 335 questionnaires were completed.

- Shared by the restaurants: between 06.07.2021 and 31.07.2021, during which 133 questionnaires were completed.

Incomplete questionnaires were withdrawn during the data clean-up. After this process, the final number of questionnaires in the database generated through the influencers Instagram interface was 329. The number of questionnaires generated through the restaurant's Facebook group was 131. However, respondents that gave a negative answer to the filter question - Do you use Instagram? - were also deducted from this number. Thus, 92 questionnaires shared by the restaurant remained in the database. Eventually, the total number of items in the analysis is 421. I created the questionnaire using an online questionnaire program called Qualtrics.

3.1. Results of the PLS-SEM analysis

I used SmartPLS 3.0 software to perform the PLS-SEM analysis. The evaluation consists of two parts: the evaluation of the measurement and the structural model.

During the analysis of the measurement model, I examined the fit of the model (SRMR value must be less than 0.08), the reliability of the constructs and indicators (Cronbach α és CR threshold value of 0.7; Dijkstra–Henseler féle rho_A should be greater than 0.7), the similarity (AVE must be greater than 0.5), the discriminant (Fornell–Larcker construct must be higher than the quadratic correlation of all, and HTMT value significantly less than 1), and the validity of the content. The values of the research corresponded to these criteria (HENSELER 2017, HAIR et al. 2021, HENSELER 2021).

In relation to the evaluation of the structural model, the main results are:

- I got 0.076 for the SRMR value, based on which it can be said that the fit of the internal model was satisfactory.
- R^2 is used to evaluate goodness of fit in regression analysis. The R^2 value for consumption intention is 0.700, which means that 70.0% of the variance of consumption intention can be explained by the correlation with the other constructs included in the model, and this is 74% in the case of real consumption/travel. Thus, the validity of both constructs is supported. Both values are above 70%, which is considered **medium explanatory power** (HAIR et al. 2021).
- The next step is to assess the significance of the path coefficients and the relevance of the path coefficients. This method expresses the strength of the dependencies between the constructs. By evaluating the path coefficient, we get an answer regarding the support of the hypotheses, which is explained in more detail in Chapter 3.2.
- In addition to the path coefficients, an important indicator is f^2 , which shows the strength of the effect between the constructions. Regarding the strength of the f^2 value, a distinction is made between negligible (below 0.020), weak (between 0.020 and 0.150), medium (between 0.150 and 0.350) and strong (above 0.350) effects (HENSELER 2021, BENITEZ et al 2020). The values of the research results correspond to these criteria, which are illustrated in *Table 1*.

- Based on Hair et al. (2021), the evaluation of moderating effects should focus on the results of R^2 and f^2 . In this case, the strength of the destination as a moderating effect on real consumption and travel is strong ($f^2=0.032$), even the effect of Covid-19 is negligible ($f^2=0.002$).
- I examined the predictive relevance of the model based on the blindfolding procedure. This analysis allows the calculation of Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value (HAIR et al. 2017). The test result is 0.633 for consumption intent and 0.676 for real consumption and travel, which is of high relevance in both cases. Thus, exogenous constructs have sufficient predictive relevance for both endogenous constructs.

Relationship	Path coefficient (β)	P value – Sig.	t-value	Bootstrap confidence interval percentilisei	
				5%	95%
Direct connection					
Activity → Consumption intent	-0,003	0,447	0,132	-0,043	0,041
Attitude → Consumption intent	0,018	0,272	0,607	-0,027	0,069
Influencer → Consumption intent	0,598	0,000	10,460	0,498	0,684
PBC → Consumption intent	0,271	0,000	5,007	0,190	0,363
Consumption intent → Real consumption/travel	0,834	0,000	40,693	0,797	0,867
Covid-19 → Real consumption/travel	-0,012	0,314	0,486	-0,053	0,027
Destination → Real consumption/travel	0,072	0,005	2,604	0,030	0,120
Endogenous variable	R²	Q²			
Consumption intent	0,700	0,633			
Real consumption/travel	0,740	0,668			
Real consumption/travel after moderation	0,750	0,676			
Strength of the effect	f²				
Activity → Consumption intent	0,000				
Attitude → Consumption intent	0,001				
Influencer → Consumption intent	0,354				
PBC → Consumption intent	0,073				
Consumption intent → Real consumption/travel	2,291				
Covid-19 → Real consumption/travel	0,001				
Destination → Real consumption/travel	0,017				

Table 1: Table of summarizing structural model metrics
Source: Elaborated by the author

3.2. Testing the hypotheses

After testing the hypotheses, I came to the following results:

Hypothesis	Acceptance
H1: Consumer activity on Instagram is positively related to gastronomic intent.	Rejected
H2: The gastronomic influencer has a positive effect on gastronomic consumption intent.	Accepted
H3: The consumer's consumption attitude in a restaurant is positively related to the gastronomic consumption intent.	Rejected
H4: The perceived behavioral control of the consumer towards consumption in the restaurant is positively related to the gastronomic consumption intent	Accepted
H5a: Gastronomic consumption intent has a positive effect on real gastronomic consumption and travel.	Accepted
H5b: The role of destination has a positive effect on the relationship between gastronomic consumption intent and real consumption and travel.	Accepted
H5c: The Covid-19 epidemic negatively affects consumers' real gastronomic consumption and travel	Rejected

Table 2: Evaluation of hypotheses
Source: Elaborated by the author

H1: Consumer activity on Instagram is positively related to gastronomic consumption intent.

Consumer activity for Instagram and gastrointestinal intent means that an increase in the independent variable (activity) is associated with a decrease in the dependent variable (intent to consume). Thus, there is a negative and insignificant relationship between consumer activity and gastronomic consumption intent ($\beta=-0.003$; $t=0.132$). The hypothesis is **rejected**. Thus, my assumption that more active consumer participation on the Instagram side is positively related to gastronomic consumption intentions has not been substantiated.

H2: The gastronomic influencer has a positive effect on gastronomic consumption intent.

Examining the second hypothesis, it can be said that there is a positive and significant relationship between the gastronomic influencer and the gastronomic consumption intent ($\beta=0.598$; $t=10.460$). The hypothesis is **accepted**. So, my assumption that the influencer has an effect on the consumer's decision-making process and that the effect of the influencers on the Instagram side has a positive effect on the consumer's gastronomic consumption intent has been confirmed.

H3: The consumer's consumption attitude in a restaurant is positively related to the gastronomic consumption intent.

Regarding the third hypothesis, it can be said that there is a positive, but not significant, relationship between the consumption attitude and the gastronomic consumption intention ($\beta=0.018$; $t=0.607$). The hypothesis is thus **rejected**. So, my assumption that the consumers' consumption attitude in a restaurant is positively related to their behavioral intent that affects their gastronomic consumption intent has not been substantiated. Attitude testing is an integral part of the planned behavioral model and has had a positive and significant effect on behavioral intent in other studies (CHUNG 2016 and TING et al. 2019). However, in this context, the relationship between attitude and behavioral intent is positive and not significant.

H4: The perceived behavioral control of the consumer towards consumption in a restaurant is positively related to the gastronomic consumption intent.

The relationship between the perceived behavioral control of the consumer and the gastronomic intent to consume is the fourth hypothesis, which can be examined to show that there is a positive and significant relationship between them ($\beta=0.271$; $t=5.007$). Based on this, the hypothesis is **accepted**. So, my assumption is that the consumer's perceived behavioral control over consumption in the restaurant facilitates the consumer's gastronomic consumption intent has been confirmed, because there is a positive relationship between them.

H5a: The intention to consume gastronomy has a positive effect on real consumption and travel for gastronomic purposes.

In the fifth research question, three hypotheses were formulated, the first of which tests the direct relationship between gastronomic consumption intent and real gastronomic consumption and travel. Based on the results of the hypothesis testing, it can be said that there is a positive and significant relationship between the two constructs ($\beta=0.834$; $t=40.693$). Thus, the hypothesis is **accepted**. So, my hypothesis that consumers who have a gastronomic consumption intent are realized as real consumption or travel has been proven.

H5b: The role of destination has a positive effect on the relationship between gastronomic intent and real consumption and travel.

The second hypothesis of the fifth research question focuses on the moderating effect of the destination between the constructs of gastronomic consumption intent and real gastronomic consumption and travel. The result of testing the hypothesis shows a positive and significant relationship ($\beta=0.090$; $t=4.204$), based on which the hypothesis is **accepted**. So, my assumption that destination has a positive effect on the relationship between these two variables has been confirmed.

H5c: The Covid-19 epidemic negatively affects consumers' real gastronomic consumption and travel.

The focus of the third and final hypothesis of the fifth research question focuses on Covid-19 as a moderating construct. Based on the results of testing the hypothesis, it can be said that the relationship is positive, but not significant ($\beta = 0.021$; $t = 0.934$), so the hypothesis is **rejected**. That is, my assumption that consumption patterns have changed as a result of the Pandemic and this will have an impact on post-epidemic consumption behavior and real consumption and travel has not been substantiated.

In addition to *Table 2*, *Figure 2* illustrates the acceptance of the hypotheses, where the values and significance of the standardized path coefficient are also shown.

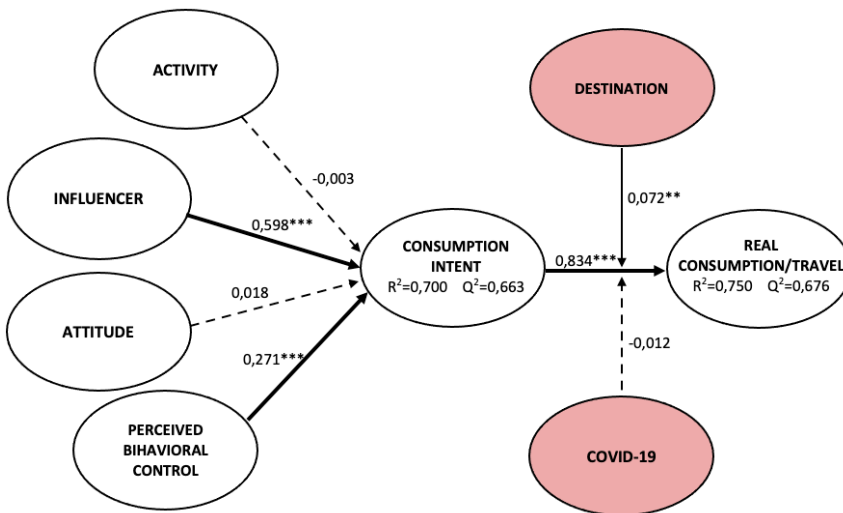


Figure 2: Result of hypothesis testing

Source: Elaborated by the author based on SmartPLS 3.0 software

Note: Bootstrapping 95% confidence interval, 4999 samples, one-tailed test. * $p < 0.05$; ** < 0.01 ; *** < 0.001 (Hernandez-Rojas et al. 2021)

Although the hypothesis regarding the activity was rejected, based on further analyses, it was also possible to uncover results that can serve as a basis for subsequent research. So, in relation to the differentiation of the activity level, it can be said that those who are more active on the Instagram page are also willing to travel in order to visit a restaurant. Gastronomic specialties have a stimulating effect on the intention to visit again in relation to all three segments. And the appearance of the coronavirus results in some level of change in the habit of going to the restaurant for 36.8% of the respondents.

3.3. Theoretical, methodological and practical significance of research

Theoretical significance of research

The results of the doctoral dissertation are in line with the current development of the domestic and international tourism literature. This statement is supported by three prominent parts of the literature in my dissertation, which greatly contribute to the expansion of the literature in the field:

1. In case of gastronomic tourism, further theoretical deepening of the topic was explored from various aspects such as definition grouping, research focus points perspectives, and the disciplinary context.
2. The placement of the influencer topic in the literature, which I start from the e-WOM literature and guide me through to consumer decision-making process, from which I consistently build the third element, which is the consumer activity. The most prominent part in the topic of influencer is the definition of the influencer phenomenon itself, as well as the mechanism of the effect of influencers on their followers, the key to which is the visualization already mentioned. Even in connection with e-WOM and online opinions, several Hungarian-language researches are known, until then there is less research on the topic of influencers (see eg. VARGA–PANYI 2018, GULD 2019a, 2019b, KOVÁCS et al. 2019, GÁLIK–CSORDÁS 2020) compared to the international literature.

3. Investigating of consumer activity, I focus on consumer social media activity. During the analysis, I describe models that contribute to the detailed analysis of the consumer activity literature. One such model is the theory of planned behavioral model designed by Ajzen (1991), which also forms the basis of the research model.

Although the summaries at the end of the chapters and the literature review were presented in a gastrotourism context, the findings can be adapted to other research areas that deal with consumer behavior.

Methodological significance of research

The methodological significance of the doctoral dissertation includes the method of analysis of structural equations and the adaptation of structural model building in the field of consumption intentions of gastronomic tourism. In researching the literature, I did not find any publications that examined the present topic using the PLS-SEM method and used the variables that I used. The process of scale development is also important in the Hungarian literature, although the scales used to measure latent variables have already been used in other international publications (CHENG et al. 2005, KIM, Y. et al. 2013, JANG et al. 2015, CHUNG 2016, JUN–ARENDT 2016, SALZBERG et al. 2019) (which supports the reliability and validity criteria), their novelty is their adaptation to the topic. The application of PLS-SEM modeling in the field of tourism research is also significant in the Hungarian literature, as only five tourism-related articles were produced using this method in the period 2016-2020 (KEMÉNY 2021). The methodological procedure is also

widely supported in the international literature, so international publications of the dissertation also support it.

Practical significance of research

Thus, the practical significance of the dissertation may be useful for the hospitality industry in the tourism and leisure sector, and for service providers who also use online media and influencer marketing. Whereas influencer marketing can be used by service providers in three areas (content creation and promotion, product launch, e.g. seasonal menu), influencers can more easily attract consumers to restaurants, which appears to service providers as a more cost-effective marketing tool. The coronavirus results can also be a valuable source of information for providers to consider reducing the potential for hygiene and health risks. The results of the research can also be of interest to service providers and TDM organizations in terms of destination development. Mainly in terms of the intention to revisit and by considering the possibility of developing a destination based on gastronomy.

In general, knowing the theoretical, practical and methodological significance, it can be said that the literature, research methodology, and results of the dissertation have met the challenges of domestic and international research and are in line with the development of tourism research trends.

3.4. Limitations of the research and future research opportunities

The biggest limitation of the research is the number of elements that could not be completed due to the appearance of Covid-19.

The research process was greatly hampered by the emergence of the coronavirus and the resulting restaurant closures and travel restrictions.

As a result, it was not possible to interview consumers at the restaurant site. Thus, the number of restaurant respondents was insufficient, and consequently, the number of items did not allow for:

- a comparative analysis between restaurant consumers and influencers' followers,
- comparative analysis among restaurant consumers who use and non-use Instagram,
- and the multi-group analysis planned on the basis of the activity level was not analyzed either.

Therefore, based on these, I would mention the extension of the research after the coronavirus and, in the case of a larger number of items, the three analysis options listed above. All three cases contain valuable results on the behavior of gastronomic consumers, and, due to the predictive nature of modeling, their important results could serve as a basis for future research and contribute to the design of the catering industry as well as the work of marketers.

In addition to the listing, travel restrictions also had an impact on the inquiry of tourism-related issues. Therefore, I did not have the opportunity to ask respondents about their travel habits, such as how far and for how long they travel. So, among the possible future researches, it

is definitely expedient to clarify these topics in connection with the behavior of gastronomic consumers.

As a further research opportunity, I would mention a deeper examination of the variables of the discarded hypotheses, thus:

- a focus group study using a qualitative research method of the relationship between consumer activity, attitude, and consumption intention,
- a wide-ranging questionnaire survey of consumers about their eating habits on their own and then supplemented with the effect of Covid-19 characteristics on the intention to consume.

The novelty of the present research is also reflected in the fact that gastronomy on social media platforms, which also serve as an important marketing tool for the hospitality industry and strengthens the camp of always interesting topics. Thus, one of my research suggestions is to extend the research to the TikTok interface (TOURISM ONLINE 2021).

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