Culinary Narratives on Instagram: The Power Dynamics and Cultural Implications of Digital Food Influencers

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Abstract— *This paper will examine the role of food influencers on Instagram in shaping contemporary culinary culture and identity. It will explore how these influencers use visual storytelling, hashtags, and self-presentation strategies to craft digital food narratives that resonate globally. The study will also address the broader cultural implications of these narratives, including their role in reinforcing or challenging traditional food norms, influencing taste perceptions, and creating digital food hierarchies.*

Keywords— *Digital Food Influencers, Hashtags, Self-Presentation, Food Hierarchies, Instagram.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The digital age has transformed the way food is consumed, not only in a physical sense but also in the virtual spaces where culinary cultures are shared, performed, and redefined. Instagram, as one of the most influential social media platforms, has emerged as a critical site for the construction and dissemination of culinary narratives, creating new forms of cultural capital and power dynamics within the global food industry. Digital food influencers, through meticulously curated images and evocative storytelling, have become powerful cultural intermediaries, shaping public perceptions of food, taste, and identity. This paper examines the cultural and historical contexts that have shaped contemporary food discourse on Instagram, exploring how digital food influencers perpetuate or challenge established hierarchies in the culinary world. By tracing the evolution of food and dining practices from medieval Europe to the present, it highlights the ongoing impact of social status, technological innovation, and globalization on food culture. It also interrogates the visual and performative aspects of online food content, revealing how platforms like Instagram have redefined the act of eating into a form of visual consumption, where the image of food can be as significant as the taste itself. As the line between personal expression and commercial influence continues to blur, this paper seeks to unravel the power dynamics embedded in digital food narratives, offering a critical perspective on how Instagram influencers are reshaping global food cultures and influencing culinary trends. In doing so, it situates digital food discourse within broader cultural and historical frameworks, providing a nuanced understanding of the social forces that shape contemporary food consumption.

II. THE GROWTH OF INSTAGRAM AS A VISUAL PLATFORM

Instagram, launched in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, began as a photo-sharing app for iPhone users, with a focus on visual storytelling and real-time updates (Laestadius, 2018). Initially promoted as a "fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures," it quickly evolved into one of the world's most popular visual social media platforms (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). By June 2016, Instagram boasted over 500 million active users, generating 95 million posts daily and receiving 4.2 billion likes (Laestadius, 2018, p. 573). This rapid growth reflected its appeal, particularly among teens and young adults, positioning it as a key player in digital culture (Duggan, 2015). Despite its popularity, academic research on Instagram has lagged that on platforms like Twitter, partly due to Instagram's relative youth and the

visual nature of its content, which resists typical "big data" analytical approaches (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). The platform's name itself reflects its founders' original mission to connect the world through instant, image-based sharing, drawing on the concept of "instant" photography and "telegram"-like communication (Instagram, 2018).

Facebook's acquisition of Instagram for $1 billion in April 2012 marked a turning point, adding features like filters, video uploads, and algorithm-based feeds that have significantly shaped user behavior (Metz, 2012). The introduction of Instagram Stories in 2016, modeled after Snapchat's disappearing posts, further shifted the platform's structure, encouraging more frequent and ephemeral content sharing (Sloane, 2017). This blend of permanent and transient media has reinforced Instagram's emphasis on visual content, setting it apart from text-heavy platforms like Twitter (Marwick, 2015, p. 139).

2.1 User Engagement and Algorithmic Timelines

Instagram's transition from a chronological feed to an algorithmic one in June 2016 sparked widespread user backlash, highlighting the tensions between platform design and user expectations (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). This shift reflected a broader trend toward algorithmic curation, where user interests, past interactions, and relationship strength determine content visibility (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2018, p. 34). These algorithms, which continually evolve, shape not only the visibility of individual posts but also the broader power dynamics within the Instagram ecosystem, influencing whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized (Gillespie, 2018).

Research suggests that algorithmic feeds can reinforce existing inequalities by prioritizing content from high-engagement accounts, often those with the financial and technical resources to optimize their visibility (Bucher, 2018, p. 112). This has significant implications for digital food influencers, who rely on platform visibility to maintain their brand identities and audience reach. Despite user protests, including the viral #RIPInstagram hashtag, overall engagement levels have remained stable, suggesting that users adapt to these algorithmic shifts over time (Bucher, 2018).

2.2 Community Guidelines and Content Moderation

Instagram's community guidelines are designed to create a "safe place for inspiration and expression," but they also reflect the platform's power to shape public discourse (Gillespie, 2018, p. 49). These guidelines regulate everything from spam to nudity, imposing a corporate vision of appropriate content that often conflicts with the diverse cultural norms of its global user base (Instagram, 2025). The platform's evolving approach to sensitive content, such as its handling of eating disorder-related

posts, highlights the complex relationship between community standards and corporate interests (Cobb, 2017). Moderation practices on Instagram, including automated content filtering and human review, illustrate the tensions between platform control and user autonomy. For instance, while Instagram has banned certain pro-eating disorder hashtags, users often circumvent these restrictions through creative tagging, reflecting the ongoing struggle between platform governance and user agency (Cobb, 2017).

2.3 Hashtags as Cultural Markers

Hashtags are a fundamental part of Instagram's ecosystem, serving both as tools for content discovery and as markers of digital identity (Laestadius, 2018, p. 576). They facilitate community formation by creating searchable, context-rich clusters of content that reflect shared values and cultural practices (Baym, 2015, p. 73). Instagram's generous hashtag limit (up to 30 per post) and its restriction on excessive tagging reflect the platform's efforts to balance user creativity with spam prevention (Instagram, 2025). Certain hashtags, like #foodporn or #tbt (Throwback Thursday), have become central to the cultural identity of Instagram, blending personal storytelling with digital nostalgia (Humphreys, 2018, p. 111). This dynamic supports the formation of micro-communities around specific food cultures, from veganism to gourmet dining, reinforcing the platform's role as a cultural archive as well as a marketing tool (Carah & Shaul, 2018, p. 69).

III.   THE RISE OF DIGITAL FOOD INFLUENCERS

Digital food influencers occupy a unique space within the Instagram ecosystem, blending aspirational branding with authentic self-presentation to cultivate loyal followings (Abidin, 2018, pp. 15-16). Unlike traditional celebrities, these influencers often engage in microcelebrity practices, using strategic self-disclosure to build intimate, ongoing relationships with their audiences (Abidin, 2018). Sponsored content, lifestyle showcases, and carefully curated feeds are all part of this influencer toolkit, reflecting a broader shift toward entrepreneurial self-branding in digital spaces (Leaver, 2018, p. 125).

3.1 Online Reputation Management, E-Personality, and Trolling in the Context of Digital Food Influencers

Social media platforms like Instagram have become powerful tools for identity construction, reputation management, and self-presentation, particularly in the context of digital food influencers. These influencers carefully curate their online personas to create desirable narratives around their culinary experiences, often using selective image display and strategic language choices to

craft a specific digital identity (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This performative aspect of social media is crucial to understanding how power dynamics unfold within digital food cultures.

The creation of a digital identity on Instagram involves a complex process of self-presentation, where users consciously select images, captions, and interaction styles to shape how they are perceived by their audience (Hogan, 2010). For food influencers, this often means highlighting aesthetically pleasing dishes, upscale dining experiences, or artisanal food preparations that signal sophistication and exclusivity (Hogan, 2010). This curated self is not merely a reflection of offline identities but rather an extension that selectively amplifies certain traits while downplaying others (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002). As Zhao et al. (2008) note, social media acts as a stage where users perform identity through a mix of visual and textual cues, creating a digital self that is often more polished and aspirational than its offline counterpart.

The concept of an e-personality is particularly relevant to digital food influencers. This term refers to the unique, often exaggerated, online persona that individuals craft to engage their audiences and enhance their digital reputations (Aboujaoude, 2011). For example, an influencer known for fine dining might emphasize traits like elegance and refinement, while those focused on street food might adopt a more playful, adventurous tone. These carefully managed personas can diverge significantly from offline identities, reflecting the performative nature of digital self-representation (Kenrick et al., 2005).

3.2 Impact of Personality Traits on Digital Narratives

Research indicates that while core personality traits are generally stable, the context of social media can lead to context-specific modifications in self-presentation (McCrae & Costa, 1987). On Instagram, where visual appeal and social validation are highly valued, food influencers might emphasize creativity, refinement, or authenticity depending on their target audience (Marcus et al., 2006; Michikyan et al., 2014). For instance, those promoting farm-to-table narratives might foreground sustainability and authenticity, aligning their digital identities with broader social movements (Amichai-Hamburger, 2005).

3.3 Trolling and the Challenge of Authenticity in Digital Food Cultures

However, the authenticity of these carefully curated online personas can be challenged by the presence of trolls—users who deliberately disrupt digital narratives for amusement or provocation (Buckels et al., 2014). Trolling can undermine the credibility of food influencers by injecting cynicism, sarcasm, or outright hostility into their comment sections (Phillips, 2015). For example, a troll might mock the perceived elitism of organic or farm-to-table influencers, exposing the power dynamics that shape online culinary cultures (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). This dynamic reflects the broader cultural tensions between mainstream and subcultural movements within digital food discourse (Coleman, 2012).

Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced approach to data analysis, as Big Data alone cannot fully capture the complexities of online identity performance (Anderson, 2008). While large-scale data analytics can identify broad patterns, the interpretive context of digital self-presentation, including the effects of trolling and e-personality construction, is essential for accurate analysis (Lohr, 2012; Lazer et al., 2014). Without this context, researchers risk oversimplifying or misinterpreting the rich, multilayered interactions that define Instagram food cultures (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006).

IV. INSTAGRAM'S INFLUENCE ON CULINARY CULTURE

Food has always been deeply intertwined with cultural identity, reflecting both the unique heritage of a region and the broader forces that shape global cuisine (Bell & Valentine, 1997). National dishes often become symbols of entire civilizations, like India's richly spiced curries or France's renowned cheeses and wines. These culinary traditions have evolved through processes of colonization, migration, trade, and cultural exchange, making food a powerful marker of identity and status (Mintz, 1986). Today, platforms like Instagram have amplified this relationship, transforming the ways food is perceived, presented, and consumed globally (Turner, 2020). Instagram, with its highly visual format, has revolutionized food culture, making local dishes globally recognizable and allowing culinary narratives to cross borders with unprecedented speed. However, this digital democratization of food culture comes with significant challenges. The platform's focus on visual aesthetics often reduces complex culinary traditions to shareable snapshots, reinforcing certain hierarchies and power dynamics within the food industry (Dyche, 2012). For instance, the popularity of certain dishes can obscure the labor and cultural knowledge required to produce them, reflecting broader inequalities in the global food system (Mintz, 1986).

4.1 The Role of Digital Food Influencers in Shaping Cultural Narratives

Digital food influencers play a crucial role in shaping these narratives, acting as cultural intermediaries who control the visibility of certain cuisines and food practices. These

influencers often present idealized versions of culinary experiences, reinforcing specific cultural narratives that may or may not reflect the reality of the foods they promote (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For example, the #AdEnough campaign led by British chef Jamie Oliver aimed to reduce children's exposure to junk food advertisements. The campaign utilized Instagram's visual culture, encouraging users to share images of themselves with their eyes covered, symbolizing the need to protect children from harmful food marketing (Turner, 2020). This campaign, which led to the banning of high-fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) advertisements on London's public transportation system, highlights the platform's power to influence public policy (Turner, 2020).

4.2 Culinary Hierarchies and Social Status

The way food is portrayed on Instagram also reflects historical culinary hierarchies. In the classical period, the diet of a society was closely linked to its social structure. The elite consumed complex, multi-course meals, while the lower classes relied on simple grains and locally available foods (Montanari, 1999). The act of sharing lavish meals was both a display of wealth and a reaffirmation of social status (Amouretti, 1999). This tradition persists in the digital age, where food influencers often emphasize luxury and exclusivity in their posts, promoting high-status foods like truffles, caviar, and wagyu beef while downplaying the value of everyday, staple ingredients (Dalby, 2000).

This digital representation of food often overlooks the economic and cultural significance of rural food practices, reinforcing long-standing power imbalances. Historically, rural communities relied on self-sufficiency and local production, while urban populations depended on market economies for their food supply (Montanari, 1999). On Instagram, this divide is often replicated, with street food and traditional dishes sometimes portrayed as more "authentic" but less prestigious than the refined, curated plates associated with high-end dining (Morineau, 1999). This dichotomy reflects a broader tendency to associate urbanity with progress and sophistication, while rural practices are seen as traditional or even backward (Heal, 1990). Beyond individual influencers, Instagram has become a significant platform for food politics. Movements like the #SugarTax and #BiteBack2030 campaigns have used the platform to build public support for policy changes, demonstrating the potential for digital food narratives to shape real-world outcomes (Turner, 2020). These campaigns challenge the dominance of corporate food producers and promote more equitable, health-focused approaches to nutrition, reflecting a broader push to democratize food systems (Mintz, 1986).

4.3 History of Culinary Hierarchies

The social dynamics surrounding food consumption have historically reflected broader societal structures, with significant implications for both the past and present. As Mennell (1996) notes, food practices in medieval Europe varied less by region and more significantly by social class, emphasizing the deeply entrenched power structures that dictated who had access to diverse and luxurious foods. For instance, Duby's (1961) study on the Knights Hospitaller at the Commanderie de Saliers in 1338 revealed stark differences in the food budgets of preceptors, brothers, and ploughmen, highlighting the material divisions in medieval society. This pattern of dietary stratification underscores the ways in which food can serve as a marker of social status, a concept still visible in contemporary digital food cultures, where the aesthetics of food can signal class and lifestyle (Mennell, 1996; Duby, 1961).

The preference for specific food items also reflected available resources. In Northern Europe, limited access to fresh ingredients led to a reliance on preserved foods, such as salted or dried meats, complemented by costly spices for flavor enhancement (Tannahill, 1975). Black (1985) further emphasizes that such spices, while rare in England due to their high cost, were more commonly used in other parts of Europe, reinforcing the idea that culinary habits were deeply influenced by both economic status and geographical location. As Spencer (2003) points out, even within this context of scarcity, Anglo-Norman cuisine incorporated sophisticated elements from Persian and Mediterranean cooking traditions, a precursor to the modern fusion trends celebrated on Instagram today, where diverse culinary influences are often showcased as symbols of cultural capital and cosmopolitan identity.

4.4 The Origins of Restaurants and Their Digital Legacy

The rise of the modern restaurant in late 18th-century France marked a significant shift in public dining, transforming both the social practices surrounding eating and the economic models that sustained them (Mennell, 1996; Spang, 2019). Before the advent of the restaurant, communal dining at tables d'hôte was the norm, where guests shared a fixed menu at a common table (Glanville & Young, 2002). This shift towards individualized dining, where customers ordered à la carte in private settings, reflected broader cultural changes towards personal choice and individualized consumption, trends that resonate with the personalized culinary storytelling found on platforms like Instagram (Brillat-Savarin, 1994). Restaurants also played a key role in the democratization of food, allowing chefs to transition from serving elite patrons to a broader, more diverse clientele (Mennell, 1996). This transition

mirrors the democratizing effect of social media, where digital influencers can reach global audiences without the gatekeeping traditionally found in the culinary world. As Mennell (1996) notes, the rise of restaurants enabled chefs to build personal brands, a process now accelerated by Instagram, where influencers can cultivate culinary personas that shape public tastes and trends.

4.5 Food Technology and the Digital Palate

The 20th century brought rapid technological advances in food production, preservation, and preparation, reshaping global culinary landscapes (Fischler, 1999). Technologies such as canning, freezing, and vacuum-packing revolutionized the accessibility and diversity of ingredients, paving the way for the convenience-driven, globalized food culture that digital influencers often celebrate (Spencer, 2004; den Hartog, 2003). For example, the popularity of sous-vide cooking, once reserved for fine dining, has now become mainstream through platforms like Instagram, where precise temperature control and visually appealing results align perfectly with the aesthetics of digital food content (Fischler, 1999; den Hartog, 2003).

As global migration increased in the late 20th century, so too did the blending of culinary traditions, leading to the rise of fusion cuisine (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998). Dishes like Tex-Mex, French Japanese, and Cal-Ital reflect the fluid nature of culinary identity, a theme that resonates strongly on social media, where global flavors are often celebrated as symbols of cultural hybridity (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998). Influential chefs like Alice Waters have championed this approach, merging local, sustainable ingredients with global techniques, thereby setting the stage for the locavore and farm-to-table movements that dominate many food influencers' narratives today (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998).

4.6 Food Porn and the Visual Consumption of Culinary Culture

The term "food porn," coined by Michael Jacobson in 1979, captures the intersection of visual pleasure and culinary excess (Turner, 2020). Today, the #foodporn hashtag is one of the most popular on Instagram, reflecting a cultural shift towards the visual consumption of food (Turner, 2020). Research shows that brightly colored, highly stylized dishes, often high in fat and sugar, dominate these posts, creating a digital hierarchy where the aesthetics of indulgence are prioritized over nutrition (Turner, 2020). This phenomenon underscores the power of visual storytelling in digital food culture, where images of food serve as both personal expression and social capital.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the historical evolution of food hierarchies, restaurant culture, technological advancements, and fusion cuisine to illustrate how these developments inform contemporary digital food discourse. In the medieval period, food choices were deeply intertwined with social status and regional availability, reflecting broader power structures that still influence culinary narratives today. The emergence of restaurants in 18th-century France democratized food consumption, creating a template for modern culinary entrepreneurship that digital influencers now leverage to reach global audiences. Technological innovations, from canning to sous-vide cooking, have transformed both professional and amateur kitchens, while the rise of fusion cuisine has blurred traditional culinary boundaries, reflecting the increasingly interconnected nature of global food cultures. These shifts have set the stage for the digital food landscape, where influencers use visual storytelling to shape public tastes and redefine culinary hierarchies. The popularity of "food porn" and the curated aesthetics of online food content underscore the power of visual appeal in contemporary food culture, aligning with historical trends that have long connected food with social status and cultural identity. As digital influencers continue to shape global food discourse, their impact on food culture and power dynamics will remain a critical area of study.

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