

Visual Semiotics in Digital Restaurant Marketing: A Comparative Study of Influencer and Institutional Food Imagery in Algeria

السيميوولوجيا البصرية في التسويق الرقمي للمطاعم: دراسة مقارنة للصورة الغذائية بين المؤثرين والمؤسسات في الجزائر

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Abstract:

This study examines the semiotic dimensions of visual communication in digital restaurant marketing within the Algerian context. Its primary objective is to analyze how food images construct meaning, shape digital food identities, and influence consumer perception. The originality of the research lies in its comparative focus on individual influencers and institutional restaurant branding, an area that remains underexplored in Algerian media studies. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive—analytical approach grounded in visual semiotics, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Barthes, Floch, and Kress and van Leeuwen. A purposeful sample of three cases—Hicham Cook, Amina Cuisine, and El Fakhama Restaurant—was analyzed based on visual composition, symbolic meaning, and persuasive function.

The findings reveal that digital food imagery operates as a structured symbolic discourse. Influencer-driven content emphasizes proximity and emotional engagement, while institutional branding relies on aesthetic control and symbolic distinction. The study highlights the central role of visual semiotics in shaping food-related perceptions and consumer behavior in Algeria.

Keywords: Visual communication; Semiotics; Digital marketing; Algerian restaurants; Food imagery.

ملخص :

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل الأبعاد السيميائية للاتصال البصري في التسويق الرقمي للمطاعم في السياق الجزائري، من خلال تفكيك كيفية تشكل المعاني والدلالات الرمزية في الصور الغذائية الرقمية وتأثيرها في تمثيلات الجمهور وسلوكه الاستهلاكي. وتكمن أصالة الدراسة في اعتمادها مقارنة مقارنة بين المحتوى الذي ينتجه المؤثرون الرقميون والمحتوى المؤسساتي للمطاعم، وهو مجال لا يزال محدود التداول في الدراسات الإعلامية الجزائرية.

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اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي-التحليلي ضمن المقاربة الكيفية، بالاستناد إلى السيميولوجيا البصرية، وتوظيف نماذج بارت، فلوش، وكريس وفان لوفين. وتم اختيار عينة قصدية شملت ثلاث حالات تمثيلية من الفضاء الرقمي الجزائري. أظهرت النتائج أن الصورة الغذائية الرقمية تعمل كخطاب رمزي منظم، حيث يركز محتوى المؤثرين على القرب العاطفي والتجربة الحسية، في حين يعتمد الخطاب المؤسساتي على الجمالية المضبوطة والتميز الرمزي، بما يؤثر مباشرة في إدراك الجودة وبناء الهوية الغذائية الرقمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الاتصال البصري؛ السيميولوجيا؛ التسويق الرقمي؛ المطاعم الجزائرية؛ الصورة الغذائية.

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1- Introduction

In recent years, profound transformations in communication practices have reshaped the ways products and services are marketed. Digital visual communication has emerged as a central mechanism in influencing consumer perception, stimulating sensory imagination, and shaping purchasing behavior. Within this evolving media landscape, the restaurant sector has become one of the most visually driven industries, relying heavily on images disseminated through social media platforms to construct brand identity and attract audiences.

In this visual economy, food imagery no longer functions merely as a representational tool but operates as a symbolic and persuasive discourse. Images increasingly “consume” on behalf of the audience by pre-constructing taste expectations, emotional responses, and mental representations through color, composition, framing, and cultural symbolism. This process is particularly evident in two dominant forms of digital food communication: influencer-driven content characterized by personal experience and immediacy, and institutional restaurant branding based on professionally curated visual aesthetics.

Within the Algerian context, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have become key spaces where food-related images circulate, gain symbolic value, and influence consumer behavior. Influencers and restaurants alike participate in shaping visual narratives that extend beyond promotion to reflect identity, authenticity, prestige, and cultural belonging. Despite the growing prevalence of this phenomenon, academic research addressing the semiotic construction of digital food imagery in Algeria remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining how visual meanings and symbolic connotations are constructed in Algerian digital restaurant marketing content, and how these meanings influence audience perception and consumer behavior. The research adopts a qualitative semiotic approach and is guided by the following central question:

How are visual meanings and symbolic connotations constructed in Algerian digital food marketing content, and to what extent do they influence mental representations and consumer behavior?

To operationalize this question, the study is structured around four subsidiary research questions:

- How is digital visual communication employed in the marketing strategies of Algerian restaurants on social media platforms?
- What semiotic differences characterize individual (influencer-based) and institutional visual food content?
- Which visual elements—such as color, composition, lighting, and symbolic markers—play the most significant role in shaping audience perception?
- How does digital food imagery influence Algerian consumers' perceptions of quality and food-related choices?

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the semiotic structures embedded in digital food imagery and to compare the visual strategies employed by individual influencers and institutional restaurant brands. More specifically, the study seeks to:

- ✓ Examine the visual signs and symbols used in Algerian digital food marketing;
- ✓ Identify differences in image construction strategies between personal and institutional actors;
- ✓ Assess the role of visual communication in shaping perceptions of restaurant quality;
- ✓ Propose a replicable analytical framework for visual semiotic studies within Arab digital environments.

Methodologically, the study is situated within a descriptive—analytical and qualitative interpretivist paradigm. It relies on purposeful sampling to select three information-rich cases that reflect diverse visual strategies in Algerian digital food discourse: Hicham Cook as an interactive food influencer, Amina Cuisine as a home-based culinary content creator, and El Fakhama Restaurant in El-Kharrouba as an institutional branding model. These cases were selected based on audience engagement, visual diversity, geographical representation, and the sustained use of visual content over time.

By integrating visual semiotics with digital communication studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how food imagery functions as a cultural and symbolic system rather than a purely promotional tool. It highlights the role of images in constructing digital food identities and offers insights relevant to both academic research and professional practice in media, marketing, and visual communication within the Algerian context.

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II. METHODS

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive—analytical research design based on a comparative case study approach. It is grounded in visual semiotics as the primary methodological framework to interpret symbolic meanings embedded in digital food imagery.

The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the nature of the research problem, which focuses on interpreting symbolic meanings, cultural codes, and visual representations rather than measuring quantifiable variables. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring how meaning is produced, circulated, and interpreted within specific socio-cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

At the same time, the study incorporates a limited systematic categorization of visual features across cases in order to enhance analytical rigor and allow structured comparison of recurring visual patterns.

Visual semiotics provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining digital food imagery, as it treats images as structured systems of signs rather than neutral or purely aesthetic representations. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how visual elements contribute to identity construction, persuasion, and cultural positioning in digital restaurant marketing.

2. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is based on an integrated semiotic model drawing on three complementary theoretical perspectives:

- ✓ Roland Barthes' model of visual meaning, which distinguishes between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (culturally embedded meaning), allowing the decoding of implicit ideological and symbolic messages conveyed through images (Barthes, 1977).
- ✓ Jean-Marie Floch's typology of advertising values, which categorizes visual communication into utilitarian, expressive, symbolic, and referential values, offering insight into the persuasive and cultural functions of food imagery (Floch, 1990).
- ✓ Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design, which provides tools for analyzing composition, camera angle, framing, color, lighting, and viewer—image interaction as meaning-making resources (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

By combining these frameworks, the study ensures a multi-layered interpretation of digital food content that accounts for both structural visual elements and broader cultural significations.

3. Sampling Strategy and Case Selection

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select information-rich cases capable of illuminating the research questions in depth. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research when the objective is to gain a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon rather than statistical generalization (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Three cases were selected to represent distinct modes of digital food communication within the Algerian context:

- 1) Hicham Cook, representing influencer-based experiential food content characterized by direct engagement and personal branding.
- 2) Amina Cuisine, exemplifying home-based culinary content with a didactic and heritage-oriented visual narrative.
- 3) El Fakhama Restaurant (El-Kharrouba), representing institutional restaurant branding through professionally curated visual aesthetics.

The selection criteria included:

- (a) sustained activity and visibility on social media platforms;
- (b) high audience engagement;
- (c) diversity of visual styles and communication strategies;
- (d) availability of visual content published consistently over the last two years.

This triadic typology—personal, domestic, and institutional—allows for a comparative analysis of how visual meaning is constructed across different communicative logics.

4. Data Collection

The corpus of analysis consists of visual materials (images and short videos) published on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube by the selected cases. The data set was constructed by selecting representative samples of posts that explicitly feature food presentation, restaurant ambiance, or culinary processes.

To ensure analytical consistency, the study focused on content that met the following conditions:

- Clear visual emphasis on food or dining experience;
- High interaction indicators (likes, comments, shares);
- Relevance to branding or identity construction;
- Visual clarity allowing semiotic interpretation (composition, color, framing).

5. Research Instrument

The research instrument consists of a structured semiotic analysis grid developed based on the theoretical frameworks of Barthes, Floch, and Kress and van Leeuwen.

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This analytical grid was designed to systematically code and compare visual elements across the selected cases, and includes the following categories:

- Visual composition (camera angle, framing, lighting, color);
- Denotative meaning (literal representation of food and setting);
- Connotative meaning (cultural and symbolic interpretations);
- Functional value (utilitarian, expressive, symbolic, referential);
- Persuasive function (emotional engagement, trust-building, symbolic positioning).

This instrument enabled a consistent and comparative reading of visual data, while also facilitating the organization of findings into structured analytical categories.

6. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed a qualitative semiotic procedure based on iterative visual reading and comparative interpretation. Each visual item was analyzed according to three main analytical axes:

- 1) Denotative and connotative meaning: identifying what is visually represented and the cultural or symbolic meanings associated with it (Barthes, 1977).
- 2) Functional and symbolic value: assessing whether the image emphasizes utility, sensory appeal, cultural reference, or symbolic distinction (Floch, 1990).
- 3) Visual composition and interaction: examining framing, angle, lighting, color schemes, and the implied relationship between image and viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

- ❖ First, an intra-case analysis to identify dominant visual patterns within each case;
- ❖ Second, a cross-case comparative analysis to highlight similarities and differences between influencer-based and institutional visual strategies.

To enhance analytical clarity, recurring visual patterns were categorized and summarized, allowing their presentation in structured tables in the results section.

7. Ethical Considerations and Research Limitations

All analyzed content was publicly accessible, and no private data were collected. The study respects ethical standards related to the use of publicly available digital material for academic research.

As a qualitative study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. However, they offer analytically transferable insights into the semiotic mechanisms of digital food marketing within similar cultural and media contexts.

3. Results

The semiotic analysis of digital food content produced by the three selected cases reveals clear differences in visual meaning construction, identity positioning, and persuasive strategies. To

enhance analytical clarity, the results are organized into three core dimensions and summarized through structured comparative tables.

1. Visual Composition and Meaning Construction

Table 1: Visual Composition Characteristics Across Cases

Case	Camera Angle	Framing	Lighting	Human Presence
Hicham Cook	Close-up / Frontal	Dynamic	Natural	Present
Amina Cuisine	Overhead	Balanced	Neutral	Partial
El Fakhama Restaurant	Frontal	Centralized	Artificial	Absent

As shown in Table 1, visual composition varies significantly across the three cases, reflecting different communicative intentions and modes of audience engagement.

In the case of **Hicham Cook**, visual composition is characterized by close-up shots, frontal angles, and dynamic framing. These choices create a sense of proximity and immediacy, positioning the viewer as a participant in the tasting experience. The frequent use of natural lighting reinforces authenticity and spontaneity.

Amina Cuisine, by contrast, adopts a more stable and instructional compositional pattern. The dominance of overhead angles, balanced framing, and evenly distributed lighting reflects a logic of clarity and control, supporting comprehension and reinforcing trust and domestic order.

In contrast, **El Fakhama Restaurant** relies on a highly structured and professional visual composition. Central framing, controlled artificial lighting, and the absence of human presence construct a formal and prestigious visual identity, presenting food as a refined object rather than a shared experience.

2. Cultural and Symbolic Meanings of Food Imagery

Table 2: Cultural and Symbolic Dimensions of Food Imagery

Case	Cultural Reference	Identity Representation	Symbolic Meaning
Hicham Cook	Urban / Street Food	Youth identity	Accessibility & pleasure
Amina Cuisine	Traditional cuisine	Family & heritage	Care & continuity
El Fakhama Restaurant	Luxury gastronomy	Prestige identity	Exclusivity & distinction

Table 2 demonstrates that food imagery functions as a culturally coded system of signs rather than a neutral representation. Each case mobilizes distinct symbolic resources linked to identity and social positioning.

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Hicham Cook’s content foregrounds popular and urban food culture, constructing meanings associated with openness, pleasure, and social sharing. Bright colors and expressive gestures reinforce an accessible and youthful culinary identity.

Amina Cuisine’s imagery is deeply embedded in cultural memory and domestic tradition. The use of traditional dishes and familiar kitchen settings evokes symbolic meanings of heritage, femininity, and intergenerational continuity.

In contrast, **El Fakhama Restaurant** constructs a symbolic discourse of luxury and distinction. Visual minimalism, refined presentation, and cinematic lighting encode high-status meanings, positioning food as a marker of exclusivity and institutional credibility.

3. Functional and Persuasive Role of Visual Images

Table 3: Persuasive Strategies Across Cases

Case	Persuasion Type	Mechanism	Communication Logic
Hicham Cook	Emotional persuasion	Sensory engagement	Experiential
Amina Cuisine	Trust-based persuasion	Instructional clarity	Pedagogical
El Fakhama Restaurant	Symbolic persuasion	Aesthetic appeal	Institutional

As indicated in Table 3, images serve distinct persuasive functions depending on the nature of the actor and communication strategy.

Hicham Cook’s visual strategy relies on emotional engagement. His interaction with food, combined with expressive reactions, transforms the image into a trigger for immediate behavioral response.

Amina Cuisine adopts a trust-based persuasive logic, where clarity and instructional value foster long-term engagement and credibility. Persuasion operates through reassurance rather than excitement.

In contrast, **El Fakhama Restaurant** employs symbolic persuasion. The aesthetic quality of images alone stimulates desire, relying on visual refinement rather than explicit promotional discourse.

Summary of Results

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital food imagery in the Algerian context operates as a structured semiotic system combining visual composition, cultural symbolism, and persuasive intent.

Three dominant semiotic logics emerge:

- **Emotional proximity**, characteristic of influencer-driven content;
- **Cultural authenticity**, dominant in domestic culinary representation;
- **Symbolic distinction**, central to institutional branding.

These findings confirm that visual communication in digital restaurant marketing is not merely aesthetic but constitutes a strategic process of meaning production that shapes audience perception and consumer behavior.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that digital food imagery in Algerian restaurant marketing operates as a complex semiotic system in which visual form, cultural symbolism, and persuasive intent are closely intertwined. Rather than functioning as purely illustrative elements, images act as structured communicative messages that actively construct meaning, shape audience perception, and influence consumer behavior.

When interpreted in light of the empirical results presented in Tables 1–3, it becomes evident that visual composition, symbolic encoding, and persuasive strategies are not randomly distributed but follow distinct communicative logics associated with different actors.

From a semiotic perspective, these findings strongly align with Roland Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation. While food images at the denotative level merely present dishes or dining environments, their connotative dimension reveals culturally embedded meanings related to authenticity, pleasure, tradition, and social status (Barthes, 1977). As shown in Table 2, influencer-driven content—particularly in the case of Hicham Cook—mobilizes connotations of accessibility and experiential immediacy. The use of close-up shots and embodied interaction (Table 1) transforms the image into a symbolic extension of lived experience, reinforcing Barthes' argument that images convey ideological and affective meanings beyond their literal representation.

The contrast between influencer and institutional visual strategies can be further interpreted through Jean-Marie Floch's typology of advertising values. The results summarized in Table 3 indicate that influencer content predominantly activates expressive and utilitarian values, as images aim to stimulate sensory engagement and encourage immediate behavioral response. In contrast, institutional branding—exemplified by El Fakhama Restaurant—relies primarily on symbolic value. As evidenced in both Tables 1 and 2, the use of controlled lighting, centralized framing, and the absence of human presence contributes to constructing a discourse of distinction and prestige. This confirms Floch's assertion that commercial imagery often functions as a marker of social differentiation (Floch, 1990).

The compositional patterns identified in Table 1 also resonate with the grammar of visual design proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. Variations in camera angle, framing, and visual distance correspond to different modes of viewer–image interaction. Influencer-based visuals reduce social distance and invite participation, whereas institutional images increase symbolic distance,

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positioning the viewer as an observer of an idealized product. This supports the argument that visual composition is not merely aesthetic but constitutes a communicative resource that structures relationships of engagement, power, and perception (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Within the Algerian context, the cultural dimension of food imagery emerges as particularly salient. As indicated in Table 2, traditional dishes, domestic environments, and street food are mobilized as visual signs of belonging, memory, and collective identity. This finding contributes to the literature by demonstrating that digital food communication in Global South contexts is deeply embedded in cultural heritage and social representation, rather than being driven exclusively by commercial imperatives. The study thus highlights how global digital platforms host locally situated semiotic practices that reflect specific cultural imaginaries.

Moreover, the differentiated persuasive strategies identified in Table 3 illustrate a transformation in the logic of influence within digital marketing environments. Influencers operate as mediators of emotional proximity and experiential credibility, while institutional actors rely on aesthetic authority and symbolic capital. This duality confirms existing research on the role of social presence and credibility in digital persuasion (Sundar, 2008; De Veirman et al., 2017), while extending it by incorporating a semiotic and culturally grounded perspective specific to Algerian food discourse.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that visual communication in digital restaurant marketing cannot be reduced to questions of aesthetic appeal or marketing efficiency. Instead, it should be understood as a semiotic and cultural process through which images construct identities, encode values, and shape consumption practices. By explicitly linking empirical findings to classical semiotic theory, this study offers a nuanced interpretation of digital food imagery as both a persuasive mechanism and a cultural signifier within Algeria's evolving digital media landscape.

5- Conclusion

This study examined the semiotic dimensions of digital food imagery in Algerian restaurant marketing through a qualitative analysis of three representative cases: an experiential food influencer, a home-based culinary content creator, and an institutional restaurant brand. By adopting a visual semiotic framework, the research demonstrated that food images on social media platforms function as structured symbolic discourses rather than neutral promotional representations.

The findings reveal that digital food imagery plays a central role in constructing culinary identities, shaping audience perception, and guiding consumer behavior. Influencer-driven content privileges proximity, emotion, and shared experience, transforming the image into a medium of trust and sensory anticipation. In contrast, institutional restaurant branding relies on controlled aesthetics and symbolic distance to convey prestige, professionalism, and distinction. These divergent strategies

reflect distinct semiotic logics rooted in cultural representation, social positioning, and persuasive intent.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the relevance of classical semiotic models in analyzing contemporary digital communication. Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation proved effective in decoding the cultural meanings embedded in food imagery, while Floch's typology of values and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design offered valuable tools for interpreting persuasion and visual interaction. Importantly, the research highlights how these frameworks can be productively applied within a Global South context, where food imagery is deeply intertwined with identity, memory, and social belonging.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. As a qualitative investigation based on a limited number of cases, the findings are not statistically generalizable. Moreover, the analysis focused exclusively on visual content and did not incorporate direct audience reception data, which could further enrich understanding of interpretation processes.

Future research could extend this work by integrating audience-centered methodologies, such as interviews or surveys, to examine how consumers decode and negotiate visual food messages. Comparative studies across different cultural or regional contexts would also help assess the transferability of the proposed analytical framework. Additionally, further exploration of emerging platforms such as TikTok could provide insight into evolving visual grammars and modes of influence in digital food communication.

In conclusion, this study underscores the necessity of approaching digital restaurant marketing as a semiotic and cultural practice rather than a purely commercial activity. By revealing how images construct meaning, identity, and persuasion, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of visual communication dynamics in Algeria's digital media landscape and offers a replicable model for future studies in visual semiotics and digital marketing.

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