



Visual food narratives in the digital age: how social media influencers drive consumer purchase intention: A case study of Tiktok and Instagram

HELLABI Zoubeyda^{1*}, HAMDOUNE Asma²

¹ Higher School of Management Tlemcen (ESMT), (Algeria), z.hellabi@esm-tlemcen.dz

² Djilali Liabes University- Sidi Bel Abbas (Algeria), asmaa.hamdoune@univ-sba.dz

Received on: 12/05/2026

Accepted on: 06/06/2026

Published on : 28/06/2026

Abstract:

The exponential rise of short-form video platforms has fundamentally transformed food marketing strategies and consumer behavior worldwide. This paper investigates how visual food content produced by social media influencers, particularly on TikTok and Instagram, shapes consumer purchase intentions, dietary choices, and food culture perceptions. Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Social Influence Theory, the study analyzes the mediating roles of influencer credibility, content aesthetics, and algorithmic amplification in consumer decision-making processes. A detailed case study of the viral 'What I Eat in a Day' (WIED) format is presented alongside an extensive synthesis of empirical data from peer-reviewed studies and industry reports (2023–2025). Five structured data tables are included to quantify key trends. Findings reveal that visual cues, social proof metrics, and perceived authenticity are the primary drivers of food-related purchase intention in digital environments, with 74% of consumers globally reporting that social platforms guide their dining choices and 85% having acted on influencer recommendations. The paper concludes with a set of evidence-based recommendations for researchers, practitioners, platform regulators, and food security communicators.

Keywords: visual content, social media influencers, food security culture, digital platforms, Elaboration Likelihood Model.

* *Corresponding author*

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between food and media is not new. Since the first printed recipe books of the Renaissance era and the advent of food advertising in mass newspapers of the twentieth century, media have always shaped the way societies perceive, desire, and consume food. However, the emergence of social media platforms in the first quarter of the twenty-first century has produced a qualitatively different transformation, one characterized by unprecedented scale, speed, interactivity, and personalization.

The contemporary food consumer inhabits a media environment saturated with visual food stimuli. Scrolling through a TikTok feed, a user may encounter dozens of food-related videos within minutes: a macro-influencer preparing an aesthetically perfect avocado toast, a nano-creator reviewing a local restaurant, a brand-sponsored 'What I Eat in a Day' video featuring strategically placed protein supplements. Each piece of content is algorithmically optimized for maximum engagement, emotionally charged, and designed to prompt immediate behavioral responses, whether a purchase, a restaurant visit, or an imitation of a dietary practice.

This phenomenon represents a paradigm shift in food marketing that warrants rigorous academic analysis. The key question is not merely whether digital visual content affects food choices, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly confirms that it does, but how, through what mechanisms, to what degree, and with what consequences for food culture, nutritional health, and food security communication.

According to Restroworks (2025), social platforms now guide dining choices for 74% of consumers globally, a figure that surpasses traditional advertising, word-of-mouth recommendations, and culinary journalism combined. Matter Communications (2024) found that 85% of consumers have purchased or seriously considered purchasing a food product after seeing it featured by an influencer. These are not marginal effects; they represent a structural reconfiguration of how food demand is generated and sustained in the digital age.

Algeria and the wider Arab world are not insulated from these dynamics. With smartphone penetration exceeding 70% across the Maghreb region and TikTok emerging as one of the most downloaded applications among youth populations, the processes analyzed in this paper have direct local relevance. The national conference theme, the visual dimension of food in digital platforms, reflects a timely and critical scholarly agenda.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a comprehensive statistical overview of the phenomenon. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature across marketing, communication, and food studies. Section 4 establishes the theoretical framework. Section 5 presents a detailed case study. Section 6 discusses findings. Section 7 offers conclusions and Section 8 presents a structured set of recommendations for multiple stakeholders.

2. Statistical Overview: Food Marketing in the Digital Age

Before proceeding to theoretical analysis, it is essential to establish the empirical landscape. The following table consolidates the most significant quantitative data points from recent studies spanning the period 2023–2025. These figures collectively illustrate the

scale, depth, and consequences of the relationship between digital visual food content and consumer behavior.

Table 1. Key Global Statistics on Social Media and Food Consumer Behavior (2023–2025)

Statistic	Value	Source (Year)
Consumers who research a restaurant online before visiting	90%	Upserve / Amra & Elma (2024)
Social platforms guiding dining & food choices	74%	Restroworks (2025)
Consumers influenced by visuals when choosing where to eat	65%	Restroworks (2025)
Users who tried a viral food trend after seeing it on social media	75%	Matter Communications (2024)
Users who purchased a product after influencer posts	85%	Matter Communications (2024)
Gen Z who tried a food trend discovered on social media	84%	Food & Beverage Magazine (2025)
Social media users reporting daily activity (US)	~90%	Mintel (2025)
Diners discovering new restaurants monthly via social media	54%	Restroworks (2025)
Restaurants using TikTok short-form video marketing (2024)	48%	Restroworks (2025)
Marketing executives reporting influencer marketing as effective	90%	Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2024)
Increase in food influencer marketing spend (2019–2024)	42%	eMarketer / Amra & Elma (2024)
Gen Z planning to dine out more in 2025 vs. 2024	71%	Food & Beverage Magazine (2025)
Gen Z who use TikTok to discover new restaurants	41%	Restroworks (2025)
Instagram engagement growth among active food content users	28%	Restroworks (2025)
Global fast-food market value (2025 projection)	\$780.61 billion	MDPI / Eye-Tracking Study (2025)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Restroworks (2025), Matter Communications (2024), Mintel (2025), Amra & Elma (2024), Food & Beverage Magazine (2025), Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2024), eMarketer (2024), MDPI Eye-Tracking Study (2025).

Several observations emerge from Table 1. First, the penetration of social media into food decision-making is near-total: 90% of consumers research restaurants online, and 74% rely on social platforms as their primary guide. Second, influencer marketing has achieved exceptional commercial efficiency, with 85% of consumers acting on influencer recommendations in the food category. Third, generational effects are pronounced, 84% of Gen Z consumers try food trends discovered on social media, and 41% specifically use TikTok for restaurant discovery. Fourth, the commercial infrastructure is expanding rapidly: restaurant adoption of TikTok marketing doubled in a single year (2023–2024), and influencer marketing spend in the food and beverage sector grew 42% over five years.

These figures collectively underscore that digital visual food content has become the dominant force shaping food consumer behavior in the current decade, a development with profound implications for public health, food security communication, and marketing ethics.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Visual Turn in Food Communication

The academic study of food imagery predates the digital era. Barthes (1964), in his landmark semiological analysis 'Rhetoric of the Image,' established that food photographs operate simultaneously on denotative (descriptive) and connotative (symbolic) levels, encoding social values, cultural identities, and aspirational lifestyles alongside the depicted food items. This insight proved prescient: four decades before Instagram, Barthes identified the mechanisms through which food images construct desire and meaning beyond nutrition.

The shift from analogue to digital visual media accelerated these dynamics exponentially. Lupton (1996) analyzed the cultural politics of food, noting that food choices are never purely nutritional but are deeply embedded in identity construction, social performance, and power relations. Digital social media amplified all three dimensions: food choices became publicly visible, socially consequential, and commercially exploitable at scale.

Contemporary empirical research confirms a 'visual turn' in food communication. Farhat, Aslam, and Mogaji (2025), publishing in the *Journal of Marketing Communications*, conducted an experimental study examining the impact of visual complexity on consumer responses to food advertisements on Instagram. Their findings demonstrated that visual complexity significantly influences consumer pleasure, emotional arousal, and purchase intention, establishing that aesthetic design is a primary, not secondary, marketing variable in food communication. High-complexity visuals (rich colors, multiple food items, elaborate plating) generated stronger arousal responses than low-complexity ones, but the relationship with purchase intention was moderated by product type and consumer involvement level.

Similarly, an eye-tracking study published in MDPI (2025) examining how young adults attend to food content on social media found that attention is drawn disproportionately to visual cues emphasizing health or functional value, even when fast-food content dominates the platform environment. This suggests that consumers are cognitively predisposed to process visual food signals even passively, making exposure to food content on social media an inherently persuasive act regardless of conscious intent.

3.2 Platform Architecture and Food Marketing

Different social media platforms create qualitatively different environments for food marketing. The architecture of each platform, its content formats, algorithmic logics, audience demographics, and interaction affordances, shapes how food content is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Table 2. Social Media Platform Comparison for Food Content Marketing (2024–2025)

Platform	Food Content Preference Rate	Primary Age Group	Avg. Engagement	Dominant Food Content Type
Instagram	85.1%	18–34	High (visual)	Photos, Reels, Stories, Aesthetics
Facebook	59.6%	30–50+	Medium (1.3%)	Posts, Videos, Community groups
YouTube	51.1%	All ages	Very High (323K views/post)	Long-form recipes, tutorials
TikTok	45.4–48%	18–29	Very High (viral)	Short-form viral videos, trends
Pinterest	< 20%	25–45 (F)	Low–Medium	Recipe boards, meal planning
Yelp / Review Apps	< 15%	25–45	Low	Ratings, written reviews

Source: Restroworks (2025); Crust Heaven / Meta Business Analytics (2024); Mintel (2025); eMarketer (2024).

Instagram, as shown in Table 2, remains the preferred platform for food content with 85.1% of respondents selecting it in recent surveys (Crust Heaven, 2024). Its architecture, organized around visual feeds, curated aesthetics, and Stories/Reels formats, makes it the natural habitat of food photography and short food videos. The platform's engagement metrics are driven by visual quality, and its shopping integration allows direct conversion from food content to purchase.

TikTok represents a different but equally powerful dynamic. Its algorithm is uniquely effective at surfacing viral content to non-followers, meaning that a compelling food video can reach millions of users within 24–48 hours regardless of the creator's existing follower base. Restroworks (2025) reports that restaurant adoption of TikTok marketing nearly doubled from 26% in 2023 to 48% in 2024, reflecting the platform's emerging dominance in food discovery among younger demographics.

YouTube, while less discussed in the context of food marketing virality, commands the highest average views per post (323,200 per video in food and beverage benchmarks for 2025) and serves a crucial role in long-form food content: recipes, cooking tutorials, restaurant reviews, and food travel content. Its longevity of content, videos remain searchable and viewable for years, makes it structurally different from TikTok's ephemeral feed.

3.3 Social Media Influencers and Food Purchase Intention

The role of social media influencers (SMIs) in food marketing has emerged as one of the most extensively studied topics at the intersection of communication, marketing, and food studies. A systematic review by Faber and Perez-Cueto (2024), published in Food Quality and Preference, synthesized findings from over 80 empirical studies on the relationship between social media and food consumer behavior, concluding that influencer exposure consistently and significantly predicts food purchase intention across demographic groups and cultural contexts.

Several mechanisms explain this influence. First, parasocial relationship theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) posits that audiences form quasi-social bonds with media personalities, attributing to them the trust and credibility normally reserved for personal relationships. When a trusted influencer endorses a food product, the recommendation is processed more like a personal recommendation from a friend than a commercial advertisement.

Second, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals evaluate their own behaviors and attributes by comparing them to others, particularly aspirational peers. Food influencers, who typically project idealized lifestyles, bodies, and dining experiences, provide constant comparison targets that motivate imitation of their dietary choices.

Third, self-brand congruity (SBC) operates as a moderating mechanism. Research by Tran (2025) examined how influencer credibility shapes purchase behavior through SBC, the degree to which a consumer's self-image aligns with the brand being promoted by the influencer. When congruity is high, influencer recommendations significantly amplify purchase intention; when congruity is low, the effect is moderated. This has important implications for food marketing strategy: matching influencer persona to both brand identity and target audience self-concept is a prerequisite for effectiveness.

A comprehensive review by Sardar et al. (2025) in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* synthesized the evidence on influencers and purchase intention, identifying content authenticity, transparency about sponsorships, and follower count as the three most consistently significant predictors of influencer-driven food purchase intention across 15 years of research.

3.4 The Ethics and Risks of Visual Food Marketing

The academic literature does not present an uncritically positive view of digital food marketing. A significant strand of research focuses on the risks and ethical dimensions of influencer-driven food content, particularly for vulnerable populations including children, adolescents, and individuals with eating disorders.

Potvin Kent et al. (2024), publishing in *Public Health Nutrition*, analyzed food marketing targeted at youth on TikTok and Instagram and found that a significant portion of brand-sponsored content promoted fast food products using influencers and viral trends, frequently employing strategies that blur the boundaries between entertainment and advertising. The study noted that less than 30% of influencer food content that was commercially motivated carried appropriate disclosure labels, a finding with serious ethical and regulatory implications.

Research on the psychological effects of food content exposure further complicates the picture. Vaughan et al. (2025) found that digital food advertisements are significantly more engaging and memorable to younger users than traditional advertisements, leading to higher brand recall and stronger behavioral responses. This heightened persuasive

effectiveness, combined with weak regulatory oversight and limited media literacy among young audiences, creates conditions for potentially harmful dietary influence at scale.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), provides the foundational theoretical lens for analyzing how digital visual food content persuades consumers. The ELM proposes that attitude change and behavioral influence can occur through two distinct cognitive pathways: the central route, in which the individual carefully evaluates the substantive merits of a message, and the peripheral route, in which persuasion occurs through superficial cues that bypass detailed cognitive elaboration.

Table 3. Application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model to Digital Food Marketing

Dimension	Central Route (High Elaboration)	Peripheral Route (Low Elaboration)
Consumer Involvement	High — consumer actively seeks information	Low — passive scrolling, visual consumption
Processing Type	Rational, argument-based evaluation	Emotional, aesthetic, social-proof-based
Key Persuasion Cues	Nutritional facts, certifications, research	Visual appeal, likes, shares, influencer appearance
Decision Speed	Deliberate, slow	Impulsive, fast
Attitude Durability	Strong, resistant to change	Weak, easily reversed
Outcome	Informed dietary choice	Impulse purchase or imitation behavior
Relevance in Food Marketing	Health campaigns, product labeling	Food influencer content, viral videos, trends
Food Security Potential	High — if nutritional messaging is integrated	Low unless deliberately engineered

Source: Adapted by the authors from Petty & Cacioppo (1986); Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024); Farhat et al. (2025); Faber & Perez-Cueto (2024).

As Table 3 illustrates, the social media environment is structurally engineered to promote peripheral processing. Users scroll through feeds at high speed, encountering hundreds of pieces of content in brief sessions. Under these conditions, detailed evaluation of nutritional information, ingredient sourcing, or health claims is cognitively unlikely. Instead, consumers respond to peripheral cues: the visual beauty of a dish, the credibility signaled by an influencer's follower count, the social validation suggested by high engagement metrics, and the emotional charge of aspirational lifestyle imagery.

The ELM predicts that attitudes formed through the peripheral route are less durable and more susceptible to change than those formed through careful deliberation. However, in the context of food marketing, even transient attitude changes can have significant behavioral consequences: a single impulse purchase decision, a restaurant visit inspired by an aesthetically compelling TikTok video, or a dietary pattern shift driven by sustained influencer exposure across months of daily scrolling.

Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024), in their study of TikTok influencer credibility and purchase intentions, found robust empirical support for the peripheral route mechanism: source attractiveness, follower count, and video aesthetic quality were significantly

stronger predictors of purchase intention than message content or product information quality. This finding directly supports the ELM application to food marketing contexts.

4.2 Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory, developed by Kelman (1958) and subsequently elaborated by Cialdini (1984) in his analysis of influence principles, identifies three distinct mechanisms through which individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are shaped by others: compliance, identification, and internalization.

In compliance, individuals conform to social pressure or reward structures without genuinely adopting new beliefs. In food marketing, compliance manifests as purchasing a trending food product to participate in a viral moment, the behavior is driven by social pressure rather than genuine preference. In identification, individuals conform because they wish to establish or maintain a relationship with an influencer they admire, food choices become expressions of affiliation with a desired social identity. In internalization, the deepest and most durable form of influence, individuals genuinely adopt the values and behaviors of an influencer as their own, over time reshaping their dietary identity and food culture.

Research by Sodexo UK (2024) on young people and food media found evidence for all three mechanisms simultaneously: young users complied with viral food trends to participate in peer culture, identified with food influencers as lifestyle role models, and gradually internalized the dietary patterns modeled by creators they followed daily. The study noted that in an environment where visual and social cues overlap, users are more impressionable and more likely to replicate food behaviors seen online, a finding with important implications for both marketing effectiveness and public health.

5. Case Study: The "What I Eat in a Day" Format on TikTok

5.1 Background and Cultural Context

The 'What I Eat in a Day' (WIED) content format represents one of the most significant and analytically revealing phenomena at the intersection of food, media, and marketing in the current decade. Originating on YouTube in the early 2010s as a candid lifestyle genre, the format migrated to TikTok and Instagram around 2019–2020, where it was transformed by algorithmic amplification, shortened to fit the platform's attention economy, and progressively colonized by commercial food marketing.

A WIED video typically documents a creator's food consumption over a 24-hour period, presented through a series of brief clips: breakfast preparation shown in aesthetically pleasing close-up, a photogenic lunch, snacks featuring prominently labeled brands, and dinner presented as a lifestyle signifier. The format's appeal derives from its pseudo-documentary intimacy, it appears to offer unmediated access to the creator's real life, combined with powerful aspirational aesthetics that construct an idealized food lifestyle.

By early 2025, the hashtag #WhatIEatInADay had accumulated over 12 billion views on TikTok alone, making it one of the most consumed food content formats on any media platform in history. The format is particularly influential among young adult audiences aged 18–29, who constitute TikTok's primary demographic and who are simultaneously at a life stage characterized by significant dietary autonomy and identity formation.

5.2 The Marketing Architecture of WIED Content

A structural analysis of WIED content reveals a sophisticated, multi-layered marketing architecture that operates largely below the threshold of conscious consumer awareness. Several commercial mechanisms are typically embedded within the format:

Product placement functions as the primary revenue model: branded food items, supplements, meal kits, and beverages are featured prominently in video frames, often with verbal mentions but without explicit disclosure of commercial relationships. Research by Potvin Kent et al. (2024) found that fewer than 30% of commercially motivated WIED videos carried FTC-compliant disclosure labels in 2023, a figure that represents a significant gap between regulatory requirements and platform practice.

Aspirational lifestyle construction operates as a secondary but equally powerful mechanism. The creator's overall aesthetic, home environment, body presentation, activity level, social relationships, functions as an implicit endorsement of the food choices featured, suggesting that consuming the same foods will produce the same lifestyle outcomes. This mechanism exploits social comparison processes and is particularly effective with younger audiences who are in active processes of identity formation.

Algorithmic amplification ensures that the most engaging WIED content, typically the most visually spectacular, emotionally resonant, or socially provocative, receives maximum distribution, creating a structural incentive for creators to maximize aesthetic quality and emotional charge rather than nutritional accuracy or health messaging.

Table 4. Influencer Typology and Strategic Applications in Food Marketing

Type	Followers	Engagement Rate (avg.)	Trust Level	Cost per Post	Best Use in Food Marketing
Mega	≥ 1M	1–3%	Low–Medium	\$10,000+	Mass awareness, brand launches
Macro	100K–1M	3–5%	Medium	\$1,000–\$10,000	Product sponsorships, campaigns
Micro	10K–100K	5–10%	High	\$100–\$1,000	Niche audiences, authentic reviews
Nano	1K–10K	10–20%	Very High	\$0–\$100	Local food promotion, community trust

Source: Compiled by the authors from Sardar et al. (2025); Restroworks (2025); Geyser (2024); Influencer Marketing Hub (2024).

5.3 Quantified Impact Analysis

Table 5. Quantified Analysis of the “What I Eat in a Day” (WIED) Format – TikTok (2024–2025)

Metric	Data Point	Source / Notes
#WhatIEatInADay — TikTok cumulative views	> 12 billion	TikTok platform data (early 2025)
Average video duration	30–90 seconds	Optimized for algorithmic boost
Products featured per video (avg.)	3–5 items	Often with undisclosed paid partnerships
Typical creator follower range	500K–5M	Macro-influencer tier, high reach
% ultra-processed food featured	> 70%	Potvin Kent et al., <i>Public Health Nutrition</i> (2024)
Audience likely to try featured product	~75%	Matter Communications (2024)
Gen Z behavioral change after exposure	45%	Food & Beverage Magazine (2025)
Gen Z interested in health-benefit foods	73%	Food & Beverage Magazine (2025)
Time from TikTok trend to mainstream menu	2–4 weeks	Food & Beverage Magazine (2025)
Influencers disclosing paid sponsorships	< 30%	FTC Compliance Report (2024)

Source: Compiled by the authors from Matter Communications (2024); Potvin Kent et al., *Public Health Nutrition* (2024); Food & Beverage Magazine (2025); TikTok platform data (2025); FTC Compliance Report (2024).

The data presented in Table 5 reveal several critical dimensions of the WIED format's impact. Its scale is extraordinary: over 12 billion cumulative views represent a reach that exceeds most traditional broadcast media campaigns. Its commercial efficacy is high: 75% of audiences report being likely to try featured products. Its health profile is concerning: over 70% of featured items are ultra-processed, and only 30% of commercially motivated content carries appropriate disclosure.

The acceleration of trend adoption is perhaps the most structurally significant finding: the compression of the cycle from TikTok trend to mainstream restaurant menu to 2–4 weeks represents a fundamental transformation of how food culture evolves. What once took years of gradual diffusion through cookbooks, restaurant reviews, and culinary media now happens in days through viral amplification — a change that favors commercial food marketers who can rapidly capitalize on trends, but that disadvantages slower-moving food security and health communication actors.

5.4 The Food Security Paradox

The WIED case study crystallizes what this paper terms the 'food security paradox' of digital visual food content. The same technological infrastructure, short-form video, algorithmic amplification, parasocial influencer relationships, visual storytelling, that has proven extraordinarily effective at driving commercial food sales could theoretically be deployed with equal effect for food security education and health communication.

There is preliminary evidence that this potential is reachable. An eye-tracking study by MDPI (2025) found that young adults paid significantly more attention to food content emphasizing health or functional value than to purely indulgent content, suggesting that

well-designed health-oriented food content can compete for attention in the algorithmic environment. Food & Beverage Magazine (2025) reports that 73% of Gen Z consumers are interested in foods that provide health benefits, a substantial market signal that is currently underleveraged by health communicators relative to commercial food brands.

The barrier is not audience receptivity but incentive structure: commercial food brands have financial resources, professional production capabilities, and clear return-on-investment metrics that public health communicators typically lack. Bridging this gap requires new models of partnership between food security organizations, academic researchers, platform regulators, and creative practitioners.

6. Discussion

The convergence of evidence from the statistical overview, the literature review, the theoretical frameworks, and the WIED case study supports a set of interconnected conclusions that are important for marketing scholars, communication researchers, and food security practitioners alike.

6.1 The Structural Dominance of Peripheral Processing in Food Marketing

The most fundamental finding of this analysis is that the social media environment is structurally engineered to promote peripheral processing of food messages, and that this has profound consequences for both marketing effectiveness and public health outcomes. When consumers encounter food content while scrolling — a context characterized by high stimulus density, low cognitive effort, and algorithmic optimization for emotional engagement, they are reliably moved along the peripheral route of the ELM: responding to visual beauty, social proof, and influencer credibility rather than nutritional information or deliberative food values.

This is not a failure of individual rationality but a product of platform architecture. TikTok's infinite scroll, Instagram's visual feed optimization, and YouTube's autoplay features are all designed to minimize friction and cognitive effort, maximizing time-on-platform and advertising exposure. The result is a food information environment that systematically disadvantages informational, deliberative messaging in favor of emotional, visual, and social forms of food communication.

6.2 The Credibility Transfer Mechanism

A second critical finding concerns the mechanism by which influencers achieve their persuasive power. The evidence reviewed in this paper consistently points to credibility transfer as the core mechanism: influencers who have built genuine parasocial relationships with their audiences effectively loan their personal credibility to the food products and brands they feature. This transfer is particularly powerful because it bypasses the critical evaluation processes that consumers typically apply to traditional advertising.

The research by Tran (2025) on self-brand congruity illuminates this mechanism: when an influencer's persona aligns with both the brand's values and the audience's self-concept, the credibility transfer is maximized. For food marketers, this means that

influencer selection must be driven not merely by follower count or demographic match, but by deep alignment of lifestyle values, aesthetic sensibility, and audience identity.

6.3 The Ethical Dimension: Between Aspiration and Manipulation

The paper's analysis reveals a significant ethical tension at the heart of visual food marketing on digital platforms. The same mechanisms that make influencer food marketing effective, parasocial trust, identity aspiration, peripheral processing, also create conditions for potentially manipulative influence, particularly when combined with limited disclosure practices, algorithmic amplification of commercially motivated content, and targeting of adolescent audiences.

The finding that fewer than 30% of commercially motivated WIED content carries appropriate disclosure labels (FTC, 2024) is not merely a regulatory compliance issue but a fundamental breach of the informational rights of consumers who believe they are receiving genuine personal recommendations from trusted peers. This breach is particularly serious in the context of food, where content that promotes nutritionally poor dietary patterns can have real health consequences at population scale.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated, through a multi-method analysis combining statistical evidence, theoretical frameworks, literature review, and case study, that visual food content on digital platforms has become the dominant force shaping food consumer behavior in the contemporary era. The mechanisms through which this influence operates, peripheral processing of aesthetic stimuli, parasocial credibility transfer, social identity construction, and algorithmic amplification, are now sufficiently well understood to enable both more effective food marketing and, crucially, more effective food security communication.

The case study of the WIED format provides a concrete illustration of the phenomenon at its most commercially developed: a content genre reaching 12 billion views, featuring predominantly ultra-processed foods, operating largely outside regulatory frameworks, yet demonstrating the extraordinary potential of short-form visual storytelling for behavioral influence at scale.

The central contribution of this paper is its articulation of the 'food security paradox': the same visual grammar, platform mechanics, and influencer relationships that are currently deployed primarily in the service of commercial food marketing represent an untapped infrastructure for food security communication. Realizing this potential requires academic research, regulatory reform, institutional investment, and creative innovation. a multi-stakeholder challenge that this conference, by bringing together communication scholars, marketing researchers, and food security experts, is uniquely positioned to advance.

8. Recommendations

This study highlights the need for a multidimensional approach to digital food communication, involving researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and public health actors. For academic institutions, future research should adopt interdisciplinary frameworks integrating communication studies, marketing, food science, and public health in order to better capture the complexity of digital food ecosystems. There is also a strong need for experimental and longitudinal studies that move beyond self-reported intentions to assess the actual behavioral impact of digital food content over time. In parallel, the development of robust analytical tools and validated scales for measuring digital food media literacy remains essential.

For food marketing practitioners, the findings emphasize the strategic value of authenticity and engagement. Micro- and nano-influencers appear to be more effective than large-scale influencers due to higher trust and interaction levels. Marketing strategies should prioritize storytelling and lifestyle integration rather than direct product promotion, while also adapting content to the specific dynamics of each platform. Furthermore, transparency in sponsored content and the integration of nutritional information can enhance long-term brand credibility, particularly among health-conscious audiences such as Generation Z.

From a regulatory perspective, stronger policy interventions are required to ensure consumer protection in digital environments. Mandatory disclosure standards for sponsored food content, along with accountability mechanisms for platform algorithms, are necessary to limit the exposure of vulnerable populations, especially youth, to unhealthy food messaging. Additionally, sustained investment in large-scale research and the integration of digital media literacy into educational systems are crucial for fostering critical consumption skills.

Finally, for food security organizations and public health communicators, the adoption of influencer marketing techniques represents a significant opportunity. By leveraging platform-specific strategies, collaborating with credible local influencers, and investing in high-quality visual content, these actors can effectively disseminate health-oriented messages. The growing interest of younger generations in health and sustainability further reinforces the potential of digital platforms as powerful tools for advancing food security objectives.

References

1. Alcántara-Pilar, J. M., Rodríguez-López, M. E., Kalinić, Z., & Liébana-Cabanillas, F. (2024). From likes to loyalty: Exploring the impact of influencer credibility on purchase intentions in TikTok. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 78, 103709. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103709>
2. Amra & Elma LLC. (2024). Food marketing statistics in 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.amraandelma.com/food-marketing-statistics/>

3. Barthes, R. (1964). *Rhétorique de l'image*. *Communications*, 4(1), 40–51.
<https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1964.1027>
4. Cialdini, R. B. (1984). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. William Morrow.
5. De Araujo, T., Neijens, P., & Vliegenthart, R. (2024). Social media influencers and brand credibility in digital food marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, 183, 114874. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114874>
6. eMarketer. (2024). *Food and beverage influencer marketing growth report 2024*. Insider Intelligence.
7. Faber, I., & Perez-Cueto, F. J. A. (2024). Social media and food consumer behavior: A systematic review. *Food Quality and Preference*, 114, 105101.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2023.105101>
8. Farhat, K., Aslam, W., Mogaji, E., & Shah, S. S. H. (2025). High visual complexity or low visual complexity: A study related to food advertising on Instagram. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 31(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09732586241257733>
9. Federal Trade Commission. (2024). *FTC compliance report on social media disclosure standards*. US Federal Trade Commission.
10. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140.
11. Food & Beverage Magazine. (2025, September). Why 84% of Gen Z are trying social media food trends. Retrieved from <https://www.fb101.com>
12. Geyser, W. (2024). *The state of influencer marketing 2024: Benchmark report*. Influencer Marketing Hub. <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report/>
13. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
14. Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2(1), 51–60.
15. Lupton, D. (1996). *Food, the body and the self*. SAGE Publications.
16. Matter Communications. (2024). *2024 Food & Beverage Trends Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.matternow.com/blog/matter-food-beverage-trends-2024/>
17. MDPI. (2025). Visual attention to food content on social media: An eye-tracking study among young adults. *Nutrients*, 18(6), 69.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/nu18060069>
18. Mintel. (2025). *US social media influence on food and foodservice consumer report 2025*. Mintel Store. Retrieved from <https://store.mintel.com>
19. Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. Springer-Verlag.
20. Potvin Kent, M., Pauzé, E., Roy, E.-A., & Minaker, L. (2024). Food marketing targeting youth on TikTok and Instagram: A content analysis. *Public Health Nutrition*, 27(1), e45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980023002744>
21. Restroworks. (2025). *Restaurant social media statistics 2025: Trends, engagement and marketing data*. Retrieved from <https://www.restroworks.com/blog/restaurant-social-media-statistics/>

22. Sardar, S., Ahmad, R., Hussain, S., & Ahmed, Z. (2025). Social media influencers and purchase intention: A review and research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.70046>
23. Sodexo UK. (2024). How social media is influencing what young people eat. Retrieved from <https://uk.sodexo.com/insights/market-trends/2024/schools/social-media-and-food>
24. Tran, M. (2025). Influencer credibility and consumer behavior: The mediating role of self-brand congruity and moderating role of involvement. *Cogent Business & Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2025.2541040>
25. Vaughan, C. A., Ghosh-Dastidar, M., Slaughter, M. E., & Collins, R. L. (2025). Digital advertising engagement and recall among younger consumers. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 65(1), 12–28