



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

From Pixels to Plate: The Role of Digital Food Photography in Consumer Decision-Making and Brand Perception

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by

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Resumo

Este estudo investiga como a fotografia de alimentos em conteúdo digital influencia a percepção de marca, a tomada de decisão e a confiança dos consumidores. Por meio de entrevistas qualitativas com 12 participantes de diferentes origens demográficas, o estudo explora as formas pelas quais a apresentação visual de alimentos – incluindo iluminação, composição e cores – afeta as percepções dos consumidores. Os resultados revelaram que fotos atraentes de alimentos podem estimular o apetite e despertar o desejo de consumir, especialmente quando apresentam elementos visuais vibrantes e arranjos cuidadosos. Contudo, a autenticidade das imagens provou ser um fator determinante para a confiança; os participantes demonstraram preferência por conteúdo gerado por usuários, que consideram mais confiável e menos manipulado do que fotos profissionais de marca. Muitos relataram experiências em que o produto real não correspondia ao que era representado nas imagens, levando a uma diminuição na credibilidade da marca.

A pesquisa também destacou que, embora fotos profissionais sejam eficazes para atrair consumidores, a falta de correspondência entre a imagem e o produto real pode resultar em insatisfação e perda de confiança. Além disso, os participantes ressaltaram que fotos de alta qualidade criam uma impressão positiva de marcas, mas que o conteúdo excessivamente editado pode ser visto com ceticismo. Esses achados ampliam a literatura existente sobre comportamento do consumidor, destacando a necessidade de equilíbrio entre qualidade visual e autenticidade para marcas de alimentos. Este estudo sugere que marcas podem se beneficiar ao integrar fotos de usuários em suas estratégias de marketing para construir uma imagem mais autêntica e confiável.

Palavras-chave: Fotografia de Alimentos, Percepção de Marca, Comportamento do Consumidor, Marketing Digital, Autenticidade, Conteúdo Gerado por Usuários

Abstract

This study examines how food photography in digital content influences consumer brand perception, decision-making, and trust. Through qualitative interviews with 12 participants from diverse demographic backgrounds, the research explores how the visual presentation of food—encompassing elements like lighting, composition, and color—affects consumer perceptions. The results indicate that appealing food images can stimulate appetite and evoke a desire to consume, especially when they feature vibrant colors and carefully arranged plates. However, authenticity emerged as a crucial factor for trust; participants expressed a preference for user-generated content, considering it more reliable and less manipulated than professional brand photography. Many participants reported experiences where the actual product did not match its photographic representation, leading to reduced brand credibility.

The findings also highlight that, while professional food photos are effective in attracting consumers, discrepancies between images and the actual product can lead to dissatisfaction and diminished trust. Additionally, participants noted that high-quality images create a positive brand impression, yet overly edited content may be viewed with skepticism. These insights extend the existing literature on consumer behavior by underscoring the need for a balance between visual quality and authenticity in food branding. This study suggests that brands can benefit from incorporating user-generated photos into their marketing strategies to cultivate a more authentic and trustworthy image.

Keywords: Food Photography, Brand Perception, Consumer Behavior, Digital Marketing, Authenticity, User-Generated Content

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	v
<i>Resumo</i>	vii
<i>Abstract</i>	ix
<i>Table of Contents</i>	xi
<i>Index of Tables</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	17
<i>Chapter 1 - Literature Review</i>	19
1.1. The Role of Visuals in Consumer Decision Making	19
1.2. Food Photography in Marketing	20
1.3. User-Generated Content (UGC) and Consumer Engagement	22
1.4. Impact of Digital Food Photography on Eating Behaviours.....	23
<i>Chapter 2 - Method</i>	24
2.1. Research Design and Setting	24
2.2. Data Collection	24
<i>Chapter 3 - Results</i>	26
3.1. Sample Characteristics.....	26
3.2 Research Questions and Findings	27
<i>Chapter 4 - Discussion and Conclusions</i>	31
4.1. Discussion.....	31
4.2. Theoretical Contributions	32
4.3. Managerial Implications	32
<i>4.4. Limitations and Future Research</i>	33
<i>References</i>	35

<i>Appendixes</i>	40
Appendix A. Interview Guide.....	40
Participant 1	43
Participant 2	48
Participant 3	53
Participant 4	58

Index of Tables

Table 1: Participant Profile: Demographics, Social Media Use, and Diet Description...26

List of Abbreviations

UGC – User-Generated Content

E-Content- Electronic Content

RQ- Research Question(s)

SM- Social Media

Introduction

In contemporary society, visual content is increasingly integral to shaping the consumer experience, particularly within the food and beverage industry. The influence of visuals on consumer behavior has grown in importance in the digital era, especially among younger generations who gravitate toward visual-centric social media platforms. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not merely passive spaces for sharing; they actively engage consumers, shaping preferences and expectations regarding dining options and brand perception. High-quality, visually appealing images—especially of food—have the power to impact consumer perceptions significantly, influencing decisions across dining and brand choices through widespread sharing and engagement (Gambetti & Han, 2022; Liu et al., 2022).

This research examines the role of digital food photography in molding consumer behavior and enhancing brand perception. In particular, it focuses on how various styles and presentation methods of food photography impact consumers' purchase intentions and engagement with brands. Visuals in food marketing serve as potent tools that leverage aesthetic appeal to captivate potential customers, offering a sensory glimpse that reinforces the desirability of food items. Studies suggest that the stylistic differences in food photography, such as emphasizing preparation processes versus final presentations, elicit distinct responses from consumers. For instance, vibrant, well-styled images can inspire consumer interest and foster social sharing, transforming viewers into brand advocates (Zellner et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2023).

Moreover, user-generated content (UGC) adds another layer of authenticity, making brand interactions more relatable and engaging. UGC in the form of food photos posted by consumers has the potential to amplify brand reach and credibility by fostering a sense of community and trust around the brand (Chen et al., 2024). This type of organic endorsement through visuals is highly valuable, as it aligns with the preferences of digital-native consumers who prioritize realness and social validation in their brand interactions.

Despite extensive research into the role of visual content in marketing, there remains a gap in understanding how specific styles of food photography impact consumer decision-making and brand perception. This study aims to address this gap by exploring

how digital food photography influences consumer behavior and brand interaction. The following research questions guide this investigation:

- **RQ1:** How does the presentation style of food photography in digital content influence consumer brand perception and decision-making?
- **RQ2:** How do consumers perceive the credibility and trustworthiness of brands represented through digital food photography, and what factors shape these perceptions?

By investigating these questions, this study seeks to provide marketers and brand managers with insights into the strategic use of visual content in food branding. The findings aim to contribute to the fields of digital marketing and consumer psychology by offering a nuanced understanding of how different food photography styles affect consumer responses. Ultimately, these insights could inform the development of more effective visual marketing strategies that enhance brand appeal, foster stronger consumer-brand relationships, and advance the food industry's digital engagement strategies.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

1.1. The Role of Visuals in Consumer Decision Making

Visual content has become an essential component of modern marketing strategies, especially with the rise of image-centric platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. Food imagery, in particular, serves as a powerful stimulus in shaping consumer decision-making. This is particularly relevant as contemporary consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, are increasingly responsive to visual cues, often prioritizing them over traditional text-based information. According to Liu et al. (2024), visuals require less cognitive effort than text to communicate food appeal, highlighting their effectiveness as a quick and powerful means of influencing choices. As Liu et al. (2022) observe, while research on how consumers process online food images is still developing, the influence of visuals in shaping food-related decisions is undeniable.

In the context of food, visuals play an even more significant role, as they replicate sensory attributes such as color, texture, and presentation—key factors that shape perceptions of taste and quality. The concept that "the first taste is with the eyes" (Zellner et al., 2014) encapsulates this phenomenon, suggesting that visual impressions create an immediate sense of taste and satisfaction even before the food is consumed. These visual elements, whether in professional food photography or user-generated content, play a crucial role in influencing consumer preferences. Gambetti and Han (2022) emphasize that visual appeal, including aspects like color and texture, not only stimulates hunger but also shapes flavor perception, enhancing the sensory experience of the consumer.

The importance of food presentation extends beyond the aesthetic appeal to include emotional resonance and brand loyalty. Visual elements such as vibrant colors, dynamic angles, and meticulous plating enhance a brand's desirability, influencing consumers' decisions to purchase. In fact, the structured consumption of visual media on social networks significantly heightens consumers' awareness of dining options, making them more sensitive to the visual cues presented by food brands. Studies have consistently shown that aesthetically pleasing food images not only attract attention but also foster positive emotions that can increase the likelihood of a purchase (Zellner et al., 2014). These images encourage consumers to engage with brands through organic sharing, further amplifying brand visibility and reach.

Plating aesthetics also influence consumers' perceptions of the care and effort involved in meal preparation. While attractive plating may not necessarily increase willingness to pay, it enhances consumers' enjoyment and liking of the meal (Zellner et al., 2014). This suggests that visual appeal enhances consumer perceptions without directly altering economic behavior. Zhang et al. (2022) further support this, noting that visual factors such as plate shape, size, and pattern can influence both food consumption and perception, particularly among younger demographics.

Moreover, emotional states play an important role in shaping consumer behavior. Rizzato et al. (2022), as cited by Zhang et al. (2022), suggest that emotions unrelated to food can influence eating behaviors. This points to the combined effect of visual stimuli and emotions in creating a holistic food experience for the consumer, one that goes beyond the sensory attributes of the food itself.

1.2. Food Photography in Marketing

Food photography has become a cornerstone of modern marketing, particularly with the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, where visually appealing content plays a central role in consumer engagement. The phenomenon of "foodstagramming," where users post images of their meals, provides businesses with valuable insights into consumer preferences for both food and dining environments (Chen et al., 2023). This user-generated content offers a unique perspective on what consumers find visually appealing, influencing the way brands present their products. Visioli (2024) highlights the strategic potential of visual food marketing to promote healthier food choices, using the power of imagery to draw attention and encourage better dietary decisions.

For brands targeting digitally engaged demographics, social media provides high-reach, low-cost advertising opportunities that resonate particularly well with Millennials and Gen Z (Ong et al., 2024). The trend of "Instagrammable" food has become a competitive marketing strategy, pushing brands to enhance the visual appeal of their offerings to align with the aesthetics favored by consumers. Philp et al. (2022) argue that food photos are no longer just about showcasing the product; they have become a vehicle for creating content that users want to share, which amplifies brand visibility and

consumer interaction. Social media marketing has thus evolved into an ecosystem where consumer values—such as quality perceptions and visual appeal—are at the core of a brand's identity (Liu et al., 2022).

Social media photos have been shown to evoke positive emotions, influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Poirier et al., 2024). This emotional engagement is crucial in the digital age, where consumers are not just passive recipients of advertising but active participants in content creation and dissemination. As such, food photography has become an essential tool for brands, enabling them to connect with consumers on an emotional level and ultimately drive purchase behavior.

Food photography is not only about the final plated dish but also about the storytelling elements that can be incorporated into the imagery. By showcasing the preparation process alongside the finished product, brands can present their offerings from multiple perspectives, emphasizing quality, authenticity, and transparency. This dual approach allows consumers to witness the journey of the product, fostering a sense of connection and trust. For example, images that depict the making of a vibrant smoothie bowl or the plating of a creatively styled dish do more than just capture a beautiful scene; they also create an aspirational experience, inviting consumers to replicate or share the experience on social media, particularly on visually oriented platforms like Instagram.

When executed skillfully, food photography can elevate a brand's visual appeal, strengthen positive consumer sentiments, and significantly boost purchase intentions. Many global fast-food chains and restaurant brands have recognized the importance of high-quality, strategically produced food images in driving their promotional campaigns and attracting new customers. Through carefully curated imagery, these brands can communicate their core values, build emotional rapport with consumers, and stand out in an increasingly competitive market.

Integrating storytelling into food photography can deepen consumer engagement by adding a narrative layer to the product. Depicting the transformation from raw ingredients to a polished dish not only enriches the visual experience but also aligns with consumers' growing desire for authenticity and craftsmanship. Brands that visually

narrate the story of each dish can evoke a sense of transparency and reliability, qualities that help foster brand loyalty and distinguish their products in the marketplace.

1.3. User-Generated Content (UGC) and Consumer Engagement

User-generated content (UGC) has become a key driver of consumer engagement, transforming consumers into co-creators who actively participate in brand narratives via social media. Chen et al. (2023) highlight that UGC, especially on platforms like Instagram, offers valuable insights into consumer preferences, allowing brands to adapt their strategies effectively. Food images that showcase the preparation process, as opposed to just the finished product, tend to drive higher engagement, as they invite a deeper, personal connection with the food (Liu et al., 2022).

UGC's importance lies in its perceived authenticity and relatability. Consumers trust peer-generated content more than traditional ads, viewing it as a more reliable reflection of real-life experiences. This authenticity fosters brand loyalty driven by peer validation rather than corporate messaging. Liu et al. (2024) emphasize that photos and videos created by consumers significantly enhance perceptions of quality and trustworthiness, deepening emotional connections with brands.

Moreover, UGC fosters social interaction and community, particularly among younger consumers highly engaged with food marketing on social media (Chen et al., 2024; Ares et al., 2022). This participatory nature of UGC creates a shared sense of ownership over brand identity, strengthening consumer-brand relationships and enhancing long-term loyalty.

In the food sector, UGC allows brands to tap into diverse consumer perspectives, adding cultural and personal nuances to their marketing. Ethnic food images shared on social media, for example, can transcend cultural boundaries, positively influencing consumer emotions and engagement (Chen et al., 2023). However, UGC can also present challenges, particularly for adolescents who may be exposed to images promoting unhealthy eating habits (Amson et al., 2023; Barre et al., 2016). Despite these concerns, UGC has been shown to encourage food literacy and healthier eating behaviors in some cases (Steils & Obaidalahe, 2020; Simeone & Scarpato, 2020).

1.4. Impact of Digital Food Photography on Eating Behaviours

Digital food photography has become a powerful tool in shaping consumer behavior, especially through platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. Often referred to as “food porn,” visually appealing images of food can stimulate cravings and influence dietary choices, even in the absence of physical hunger. Wu et al. (2023) argue that images of visually appealing food increase appetite, often encouraging larger portion consumption, a phenomenon known as “visual hunger” (Califano & Spence, 2024). These images activate pleasure responses in the brain, similar to sensory stimuli like smell or taste, forming emotional connections with viewers and reshaping their eating patterns.

Exposure to enticing food imagery can also lead to overconsumption of indulgent foods. Ares et al. (2022) note that visually engaging food photos, often featuring vivid colors or celebrity endorsements, are particularly influential among adolescents, increasing the appeal and recall of specific foods, sometimes leading to unhealthy consumption. Furthermore, idealized food photography on social media may contribute to body dissatisfaction (Drivas et al., 2024; Gerwin & Ashraf, 2024). While such imagery has clear marketing advantages, it necessitates a balanced approach to avoid fostering unhealthy relationships with food.

The act of creating and sharing food images also affects consumer behavior, promoting greater mindfulness about food choices. Sharing photos on social media can heighten awareness of food quality and presentation, encouraging healthier eating habits. Moreover, this participatory culture fosters social bonds, where feedback and validation influence dietary decisions, further shaping collective and individual eating behaviors.

Chapter 2 - Method

2.1. Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the impact of digital food photography on consumer perceptions of food brands and their purchasing behavior. By concentrating on the digital portrayal of food across platforms like social media, blogs, and marketing channels, this approach provided in-depth insights into how consumers interpret and react to food images.

The qualitative design was especially suited to examining how various styles of food presentation—such as lighting, color, and composition—shape brand credibility and influence consumer choices. In-depth interviews encouraged participants to reflect on their prior experiences with food content encountered online, without presenting them with specific images. Observational data were also gathered from both digital and physical contexts, including social media platforms and restaurants, to present a holistic perspective on consumer engagement with food imagery.

This multifaceted approach aimed to shed light on the complex relationship between food photography, consumer emotions, and decision-making, contributing to a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional factors that shape consumer behavior within the food industry.

2.2. Data Collection

Data collection for this study combined in-depth interviews with observational techniques, employing a mixed-methods approach to obtain a comprehensive view of consumer behavior related to food photography. This qualitative approach facilitated an exploration of the subtleties of consumer responses, providing a richer understanding of the factors that influence perceptions of food imagery and its effects on purchasing decisions.

Participants for the in-depth interviews were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals based on demographic factors such as age, gender, and cultural background to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. This selection criterion was crucial

for examining how demographic and psychographic variables shape consumers' interpretations of food imagery. A target sample size of 12 participants was pursued to achieve data saturation, supporting the reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The interviews were conducted via Google Meet, allowing for flexibility and the inclusion of participants from various geographical locations, thereby enhancing the diversity of perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Each interview was audio-recorded with participant consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. This transcription enabled a thorough examination of participants' narratives, emphasizing their emotional responses to food photography and perceptions of authenticity—key factors in understanding consumer behavior in relation to digital content.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, facilitating the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes within the qualitative responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following transcription, responses were coded to categorize emerging themes related to consumer perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral outcomes. This framework enabled an in-depth exploration of the relationship between food imagery and consumer decision-making processes, offering a comprehensive understanding of how various elements of food photography influence brand perception and purchasing behavior.

Chapter 3 - Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Social Media Usage Frequency</i>	<i>Primary Social Media Platforms</i>	<i>Diet Description</i>
1	22	Female	Angolan	Everyday	Instagram, TikTok	Eats almost everything
2	26	Female	Indian	Everyday	Instagram, LinkedIn	Moderately healthy
3	29	Female	Angolan	Everyday	Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok	Mix of pleasure and mindfulness, exploring diverse flavors
4	28	Female	Nicaraguan	Everyday	Instagram, Facebook, TikTok	Balanced with fresh, homemade meals; mix of traditional and international cuisine
5	27	Male	Cape Verdean	4-5 days per week	Instagram	Balanced feeding
6	29	Female	Mexican	Almost everyday	Instagram, Facebook	Mix of traditional Mexican food and healthy options
7	35	Male	Angolan	Everyday	YouTube	A mixture, not really controlled
8	26	Female	Spanish	Everyday	Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	Balanced
9	21	Male	Angolan	Everyday	WhatsApp, Instagram, X, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit	Carnivore/omnivore
10	30	Male	Angolan	Everyday	X (formerly Twitter)	Balanced
11	29	Female	Brazilian	Everyday	Instagram	Healthy—avoiding processed foods
12	39	Male	Lebanese	Everyday	Instagram	A healthy balanced diet focusing on protein, carbs (sweet potatoes, rice), vegetables, fruits

Table 1: Participant Profile: Demographics, Social Media Use, and Diet Description

A total of 12 participants took part in this study, offering a diverse range of perspectives on food photography and its influence on consumer behavior. The group included both male and female participants, aged between 21 and 39, representing various nationalities, such as Angolan, Indian, Nicaraguan, and Lebanese. Social media

engagement was high, with most participants using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn on a daily basis. Dietary habits among participants varied, with many describing their diets as balanced or moderately healthy.

3.2 Research Questions and Findings

RQ1: How does the presentation style of food photography in digital content influence consumer brand perception and decision-making?

The aesthetic quality of food photography was widely noted across participants as a primary factor influencing brand perception and purchasing decisions. Participants unanimously emphasized that clear, high-quality images with bright lighting, natural colors, and careful attention to composition are crucial in making food look visually appealing, fresh, and desirable. This finding underscores the role of presentation in conveying the quality and appeal of food, as well as establishing a brand's identity and values.

Bright, natural lighting, vibrant colors, and clear focus emerged as critical components in food photography that drive consumer engagement and enhance brand perception. Several participants, including 2, 3, 5, 7, and 12, remarked that these elements immediately draw their attention and make food appear more appetizing and enticing. For instance, Participant 5 mentioned that close-up shots revealing texture, such as crispness or creaminess, significantly impact their interest, making them more likely to try the item. Participant 12 also recalled a specific image of a burger, describing how dramatic lighting and close focus on the textures and layers made it so memorable that it led him to visit the restaurant.

Many participants pointed to the importance of detail and realistic presentation, asserting that such images influence their perception of both the food's quality and the authenticity of the brand. Participants 6, 8, 9, and 11 particularly emphasized how elements such as texture, natural colors, and realistic lighting contribute to an authentic and appealing portrayal of the food. For example, Participant 9 noted that photography that shows "a bit of imperfection" is more credible and aligns better with their expectations of the dish.

Additionally, several participants expressed a preference for food images that convey simplicity rather than excessive styling. Participant 11, for example, indicated that overly edited or staged images feel less authentic and make them skeptical about the actual quality of the food. Similarly, Participant 4 noted that overly stylized images, while visually striking, often fail to evoke trust, instead appearing as an artificial representation that can reduce their interest in the food or brand. This trend reflects a growing consumer desire for digital content that aligns with the true appearance of the food they will encounter, as realistic photography seems to reinforce perceived authenticity and appeal.

Participants widely acknowledged that high-quality food photography plays a central role in determining their dining choices and brand engagement. For Participants 3, 5, 8, 10, and 12, the decision to visit a restaurant or try a new food product often hinges on the presentation of food images they see online. Participant 8, for instance, said that “seeing food that looks fresh and appetizing” can make the difference between choosing a restaurant or dismissing it, demonstrating the direct impact that food photography has on initial consumer interest. Participant 12 echoed this sentiment, stating that compelling images with vibrant colors and well-captured textures evoke an emotional response, often leading them to crave the food and eventually make a purchase.

Furthermore, many participants reported that photos that highlight freshness, simplicity, and close-up textures increase the likelihood of visiting a brand, whereas images that appear staged or artificially enhanced deter them from engaging with it. For example, Participant 6 mentioned that heavily edited or overly stylized images reduce their perception of the food’s freshness and authenticity, causing them to view the brand as less trustworthy and thereby diminishing their likelihood of making a purchase.

RQ2: How do consumers perceive the credibility and trustworthiness of brands portrayed through digital food content, and what factors influence these perceptions?

Credibility and trustworthiness in food photography emerged as central themes, with participants noting that digital content is most impactful when it provides an accurate representation of the food being marketed. Many participants expressed a preference for user-generated content or “real” images that feel less staged, perceiving these images as

more authentic and therefore more trustworthy than highly polished, brand-created photography.

Consistency between the food shown in digital images and the actual product served is critical to building trust in a brand. Participants 3, 5, 8, 9, and 11 each recounted instances where they felt misled by food photography that over-promised on quality and appearance, which negatively affected their perception of the brand. For instance, Participant 11 cited an experience with a brand where the food in images looked significantly better than in real life, likening the experience to “a McDonald's commercial,” where the appealing image was a stark contrast to the reality of the food. This inconsistency led participants to feel disappointed and less likely to trust the brand in the future, underscoring the potential for photography to either build or erode brand loyalty based on how closely images align with real experiences.

Several participants, such as 3, 4, and 6, also mentioned that they perceive user-generated images as more credible, especially when accompanied by personal anecdotes or honest reviews. This suggests that consumers value a blend of visual representation and narrative context, viewing user-generated content as a reliable, genuine reflection of the dining experience. Participants 7 and 12, for example, asserted that user-generated photos and reviews contribute to a more holistic understanding of the brand, as they typically present the food without the polish of brand marketing.

While user-generated content was generally viewed as more trustworthy, participants still acknowledged the value of professional brand photography when executed authentically. Participants 2, 4, and 9 noted that well-composed, high-quality images can reflect positively on a brand, conveying professionalism and attention to quality. However, several participants, including 6, 8, and 12, expressed concern that professional images, particularly those that appear heavily edited or overly styled, can feel deceptive if they do not align with the actual product. This highlights a potential paradox: while consumers expect brands to invest in high-quality visuals, overly stylized images risk eroding trust if they do not realistically represent the food.

Participant 8 emphasized that the “fine line” between appealing imagery and excessive editing is critical, noting that professional images should accurately capture the

food's qualities without relying on artificial enhancements. This preference for authentic brand photography suggests that while professional images are valued, they are trusted only when they feel realistic and genuine, rather than an idealized version of the food that may not align with the consumer's actual experience.

For several participants, reviews and contextual information provided alongside food images contribute significantly to the perceived credibility of the brand. Participants 3, 6, and 10 mentioned that while food photography is a primary factor in grabbing attention and establishing initial interest, additional factors such as user reviews, ratings, and detailed descriptions provide valuable context and reinforce the authenticity of the image. Participant 6, for instance, noted that photos alone are often insufficient to make a final decision, as they rely on additional consumer reviews to verify the food's quality and the brand's credibility.

Participants 2 and 4 also highlighted the role of reviews in validating the visual content, explaining that images combined with detailed, user-generated reviews provide a more holistic view of the brand, creating a sense of trust that goes beyond what visuals alone can achieve. This suggests that while food photography is a powerful tool in attracting consumer interest, its effectiveness in building credibility is enhanced when it is supported by reliable, authentic contextual information from other consumers.

In summary, the findings indicate that food photography significantly influences consumer perceptions of brands and decision-making, with realistic presentation styles that emphasize detail, natural lighting, and texture positively impacting brand perception and desire to engage. While professional brand photography can enhance perceptions of quality and appeal, consumers overwhelmingly trust user-generated content more, finding it to offer a more genuine representation of the food and dining experience. The credibility of digital food content is largely dependent on its alignment with the real-life product, and participants expressed skepticism toward images that appear overly staged or edited. Overall, consumers view authenticity, consistency, and contextual information as essential in determining the trustworthiness of a brand through digital food content. These insights reveal a preference for visual accuracy in food photography and underscore the value of user-generated content as an influential component in digital food marketing.

Chapter 4 - Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce existing literature on the role of digital food photography in shaping consumer behavior, decision-making, and brand perception. The visual appeal of food photography, especially when presented on platforms like Instagram, resonates with consumers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, who prioritize visuals over traditional textual information in the decision-making process (Liu et al., 2024). As noted in the literature, visual cues such as color, plating, and texture play an essential role in influencing consumer perceptions of taste and quality (Zellner et al., 2014). This study echoes these insights, revealing that participants are highly responsive to well-composed food images, associating them with enhanced taste and quality expectations.

The study also highlights a growing consumer preference for authenticity, with participants indicating greater trust in user-generated content (UGC) compared to professionally curated brand images. This preference aligns with the observations of Chen et al. (2023) and Liu et al. (2022), who suggest that UGC fosters a sense of reliability and peer validation, which traditional advertising often lacks. Participants reported that UGC feels more genuine and relatable, enhancing brand credibility. Conversely, professionally edited food images, while visually appealing, may trigger skepticism, as consumers perceive them as overly idealized and potentially deceptive. This finding aligns with Poirier et al. (2024), who argue that excessive editing may reduce consumer trust, as the final product may not align with the perceived reality.

Additionally, our research indicates that food photography not only influences immediate purchasing decisions but also fosters long-term brand loyalty when it aligns with authentic representation and emotional appeal. The emotional connection elicited by food visuals, as reported by Poirier et al. (2024), is further substantiated by this study, where participants expressed feelings of satisfaction and a desire to engage with brands whose images resonate on a personal level. However, discrepancies between photographed and real-life products can lead to disappointment and diminished trust,

suggesting that brands must balance visual appeal with authenticity to maintain consumer confidence.

4.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to consumer behavior literature by expanding on how digital food photography impacts consumer decision-making, particularly in the context of perceived authenticity and trust. While prior research has documented the influence of visual cues on consumer perception (Gambetti & Han, 2022), this study provides a nuanced understanding of how consumers differentiate between professional and user-generated food images and how this differentiation affects brand trust and credibility. The findings suggest that while visually appealing images can stimulate appetite and positive brand associations, authenticity remains a critical factor for trust—a factor that has not been fully addressed in existing studies.

Moreover, this study supports the theoretical notion that “the first taste is with the eyes” (Zellner et al., 2014) by demonstrating that consumers form immediate impressions based on visual stimuli, even in digital contexts. It also reinforces the concept of "visual hunger" as outlined by Califano & Spence (2024), showing how digital images can stimulate desire and influence dietary decisions, even in the absence of physical hunger. By integrating these concepts with consumer preferences for authenticity in UGC, this research advances theoretical frameworks around visual persuasion and trust in digital marketing.

4.3. Managerial Implications

The insights from this study offer practical implications for food brands and marketers aiming to leverage digital photography effectively. Firstly, brands should prioritize authenticity alongside visual quality. While professional photography attracts attention, incorporating UGC into marketing strategies can enhance perceived authenticity and trustworthiness. Given the preference for peer-generated content, brands could encourage customers to share their experiences or integrate user-generated images into their official platforms, fostering a sense of community and credibility (Chen et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024).

Additionally, brands should be mindful of the potential for disappointment when actual products do not meet the visual expectations set by edited images. To mitigate this risk, marketers might adopt a more transparent approach, showcasing images that accurately represent the product while still maintaining visual appeal. By doing so, brands can maintain consumer trust and avoid the negative impact of over-promising and under-delivering. Finally, engaging consumers through visual storytelling, by depicting the process from raw ingredients to the plated dish, can create an aspirational yet authentic experience that resonates with consumers (Visioli, 2024). Such narratives can deepen consumer connection with the brand, enhancing loyalty and encouraging repeat purchases.

4.4. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, there are limitations to consider. The sample size was relatively small and focused on a specific demographic group, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand on this study by including a broader, more diverse sample to determine if these findings hold across different consumer segments. Additionally, the study primarily relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Observational studies or experiments could offer a more objective measure of how visual content influences decision-making.

Future research could also explore the impact of specific visual elements, such as color contrast, lighting, and plating, on consumer perception to provide more granular insights into what drives consumer preferences in food photography. Investigating how cultural backgrounds affect perceptions of authenticity in food photography would also enrich the understanding of global consumer behaviors. Furthermore, given the potential for visual content to influence dietary habits, researchers might examine the ethical considerations of using highly idealized food images, especially among younger, impressionable audiences, as highlighted by Ares et al. (2022) and Drivas et al. (2024).

In sum, while this study underscores the power of digital food photography in shaping consumer perceptions, future research can further elucidate the nuances of

authenticity, trust, and cultural influences in the evolving landscape of digital food marketing.

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Appendixes

Appendix A. Interview Guide

Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this interview. My goal is to better understand your perceptions of food photography and how it may influence your choices and preferences

Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you consent to recording this interview in audio to ensure the accuracy of the data. The recording will be used only for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

Demographics and background:

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your nationality?
- How often do you use social media platforms?
- Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?
- How would you characterize your usual diet?
- What are your favourite dishes?
- How frequently do you engage with food-related content on social media or other digital platforms and who are the creators of that content?
- Do you follow any social media accounts that specialize in food? Can you specify?
What type of food related content do you usually consume?
- What's your main purpose for consuming food content?
- How important is food photography to you when viewing food-related content?
- Are there any types of food images that particularly appeal to you? why?

General perceptions about food photography:

- ⇒ What are your initial impressions when you see food images online?

- ⇒ In what ways do you think food photography influences your dining choices or food purchases?

Presentation style and visual elements:

- ⇒ In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good photo of food? Ex- Think about a photo that made you want to try a dish immediately. Was it the type of food according to your food habits, the lighting, the colours or how the food was arranged in the plate?
- ⇒ What specific elements of food photography (e.g., lighting, composition, color) catch your attention the most? For example- Some people are drawn to bright, colorful images, while others prefer a more natural minimalist style. what works best for you?
- ⇒ How does the visual style in food photography impact your perception of the dish or brand?
- ⇒ Can you describe a food image that recently impressed you? What made it stand out? For example- Was it a dish you saw on social media or in an ad that looked especially appetizing? what elements made it memorable?

Brand perception:

- How does the quality of food photography influence your perception of a restaurant or food brand?
- Can you give an example of a brand whose food photography positively influenced your opinion of them?
- Have you ever been disappointed by a food item that didn't match its photographic representation? How did this affect your view of the brand?

Decision-making process:

- How often do you purchase food based on images you've seen online?
- Can you walk me through your thought process when deciding to try a new restaurant or food product based on its photography?
- How do food images compare to other factors (like reviews or prices) in influencing your decisions?

User-generated content vs. professional photography:

- How do you perceive food images posted by other consumers compared to professional brand photography?

- Which do you find more trustworthy or influential in your decision-making: user-generated content or professional brand images?

Authenticity and trust:

- What makes a food photograph feel authentic or trustworthy to you? Have you ever felt misled by food photography? Can you describe that experience?
- How important is the consistency between photographed food and the actual product in building your trust in a brand?

Emotional and psychological impact:

Can you recall a time when a food photograph triggered a craving or desire to eat?

How do you think food photography on social media affects your overall relationship with food?

Behavioural changes:

Have you ever changed your eating habits or tried new foods because of images you've seen online?

Brand engagement:

How likely are you to engage with (like, comment, share) food-related content on social media?

What type of food content are you most likely to engage with and why?

Do you take and share your own food photographs? If so, what motivates you to do this?

Future trends:

How do you think food photography in digital marketing will evolve in the future?

What changes would you like to see in how brands present their food through photography?

Participant 1

Monica: Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this interview. My goal is to better understand your perceptions of food photography and how it may influence your choices and preferences. Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you consent to recording this interview in audio to ensure the accuracy of the data. The recording will be used only for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

Participant 1: Yes, I consent.

Monica: Great! Let's start with some background questions. What is your age?

Participant 1: 22.

Monica: And your gender?

Participant 1: Female.

Monica: What is your nationality?

Participant 1: Angolan.

Monica: How often do you use social media platforms?

Participant 1: Every day.

Monica: Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

Participant 1: Instagram and TikTok.

Monica: How would you characterize your usual diet?

Participant 1: I eat almost everything.

Monica: What are your favorite dishes?

Participant 1: Portuguese and Angolan food.

Monica: How frequently do you engage with food-related content on social media or other digital platforms, and who are the creators of that content?

Participant 1: I engage a lot with these kinds of contents on TikTok, especially those that suggest new restaurants to try.

Monica: Do you follow any social media accounts that specialize in food? Can you specify?

Participant 1: Yes, I follow @Andrechica on TikTok. He's a Portuguese TikToker who travels and showcases restaurants and food brands around the world, mainly in Portugal, and a few chefs like @fogaça, @heltaraujo, and @alexala.

Monica: What type of food-related content do you usually consume?

Participant 1: Mainly recipes.

Monica: What's your main purpose for consuming food content?

Participant 1: To try and recreate recipes.

Monica: How important is food photography to you when viewing food-related content?

Participant 1: Super important.

Monica: Are there any types of food images that particularly appeal to you? Why?

Participant 1: Yes, Brazilian cuisine.

Monica: What are your initial impressions when you see food images online?

Participant 1: I crave a lot when they look yummy and simple.

Monica: In what ways do you think food photography influences your dining choices or food purchases?

Participant 1: It does influence me because every time I book a restaurant, I need to check their social media.

Monica: How does the visual style in food photography impact your perception of the dish or brand?

Participant 1: I really like aesthetic pictures; they attract me. If it's aesthetic, then I'm in.

Monica: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good photo of food? Was it the type of food according to your food habits, the lighting, the colors, or how the food was arranged on the plate?

Participant 1: Definitely the lighting and the colors.

Monica: What specific elements of food photography catch your attention the most? For example, do you prefer bright, colorful images or a more natural minimalist style?

Participant 1: The composition of the ingredients and how minimalist they look. I don't like messy plates.

Monica: Can you describe a food image that recently impressed you? What made it stand out?

Participant 1: I saw an image of scrambled eggs. It looked so delicious and simple. It was super orange, and I remember the bread was super toasted with butter and a bit of pink salt.

Monica: How does the quality of food photography influence your perception of a restaurant or food brand?

Participant 1: It influences a lot because it makes me curious.

Monica: Can you give an example of a brand whose food photography positively influenced your opinion of them?

Participant 1: Yes, @flordoduke, a restaurant in Luanda.

Monica: Have you ever been disappointed by a food item that didn't match its photographic representation? How did this affect your view of the brand?

Participant 1: It's super normal for this to happen in Angola. Normally, I don't buy from them anymore.

Monica: How often do you purchase food based on images you've seen online?

Participant 1: Not a lot.

Monica: Have you been in the process of deciding to try a new restaurant or food product based on its photography?

Participant 1: Yes.

Monica: How do food images compare to other factors, like reviews or prices, in influencing your decisions?

Participant 1: Price and mainly word of mouth.

Monica: How do you perceive food images posted by other consumers compared to professional brand photography?

****Participant 1:**** Let's say that it's more authentic.

****Monica:**** Which do you find more trustworthy or influential in your decision-making: user-generated content or professional brand images?

****Participant 1:**** I'd say user-generated content.

****Monica:**** What makes a food photograph feel authentic or trustworthy to you?

****Participant 1:**** A picture taken by a normal consumer.

****Monica:**** Have you ever felt misled by food photography? Can you describe that experience?

****Participant 1:**** Yes, a couple of times.

****Monica:**** How important is the consistency between photographed food and the actual product in building your trust in a brand?

****Participant 1:**** It depends. If I already know the brand, it doesn't matter a lot.

****Monica:**** Can you recall a time when a food photograph triggered a craving or desire to eat?

****Participant 1:**** Yes, a burger place made me want to try it.

****Monica:**** How do you think food photography on social media affects your overall relationship with food?

****Participant 1:**** In a good and bad way—good when it is a healthy meal, and bad when it's just carbs.

****Monica:**** Have you ever changed your eating habits or tried new foods because of images you've seen online?

****Participant 1:**** Not really.

****Monica:**** How likely are you to engage with food-related content on social media?

****Participant 1:**** I like and comment, mostly every week.

****Monica:**** What type of food content are you most likely to engage with and why?

****Participant 1:**** Different cuisines because it gives me a view of what other people eat around the world.

****Monica:**** Do you take and share your own food photographs? If so, what motivates you to do this?

****Participant 1:**** Yes, I share pictures on Instagram when the plate looks appealing.

****Monica:**** How do you think food photography in digital marketing will evolve in the future?

****Participant 1:**** Maybe restaurants will invest more in AI to create their food photography, which kind of scares me. But those who keep real pictures of their brand or restaurant will remain on top.

****Monica:**** What changes would you like to see in how brands present their food through photography?

****Participant 1:**** I like authentic images that match the real-life food. Restaurants should leave the good-looking plates online away and focus on making them look good and, most importantly, delicious in real life.

Participant 2

Monica: Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this interview. My goal is to better understand your perceptions of food photography and how it may influence your choices and preferences. Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you consent to recording this interview in audio to ensure the accuracy of the data. The recording will be used only for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

Participant 2: Yes, I consent.

Monica: Great! Let's start with some background questions. What is your age?

Participant 2: I'm 26.

Monica: And your gender?

Participant 2: Female.

Monica: What is your nationality?

Participant 2: Indian.

Monica: How often do you use social media platforms?

Participant 2: Every day.

Monica: Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

Participant 2: Instagram and LinkedIn.

Monica: How would you characterize your usual diet?

Participant 2: Moderate healthy.

Monica: What are your favorite dishes?

Participant 2: Rice and Chicken Curry.

Monica: How frequently do you engage with food-related content on social media or other digital platforms and who are the creators of that content?

Participant 2: Every day.

Monica: Do you follow any social media accounts that specialize in food? Can you specify?

Participant 2: Yes. The Pasta Queen, Bigger Bolder Baking, BuzzFeed Tasty, and other food influencers.

Monica: What type of food-related content do you usually consume?

Participant 2: Easy-to-make recipes, desserts, and baking.

Monica: What's your main purpose for consuming food content?

Participant 2: To find easy-to-make dishes.

Monica: How important is food photography to you when viewing food-related content?

Participant 2: Moderately important.

Monica: Are there any types of food images that particularly appeal to you? Why?

Participant 2: Desserts and Middle Eastern dishes because they are my top favorite foods to eat.

Monica: What are your initial impressions when you see food images online?

Participant 2: They make my mouth water.

Monica: In what ways do you think food photography influences your dining choices or food purchases?

Participant 2: If it looks interesting, I will prepare it.

Monica: How does the visual style in food photography impact your perception of the dish or brand?

Participant 2: I prefer natural-looking plating and presentation.

Monica: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good photo of food? For example, was it the type of food, the lighting, the colors, or how the food was arranged on the plate?

Participant 2: The crockery or plate the food is plated on, and how close the picture is taken. I like clear pictures in good lighting.

Monica: What specific elements of food photography (e.g., lighting, composition, color) catch your attention the most?

Participant 2: Desserts in dim light and main course dishes with good lighting and a nice background.

Monica: Can you describe a food image that recently impressed you? What made it stand out?

Participant 2: An apple cake by The Pasta Queen. It was rustic and looked very homemade.

Monica: How does the quality of food photography influence your perception of a restaurant or food brand?

Participant 2: Very likely. If the food looks appealing and appetizing, I'll likely try the restaurant.

Monica: Can you give an example of a brand whose food photography positively influenced your opinion of them?

Participant 2: A local burger joint I saw advertised on Instagram. I ended up ordering from them.

Monica: Have you ever been disappointed by a food item that didn't match its photographic representation? How did this affect your view of the brand?

Participant 2: Yes, many times. It makes me very unlikely to try them again.

Monica: How often do you purchase food based on images you've seen online?

Participant 2: Moderately often.

Monica: Have you been in the process of deciding to try a new restaurant or food product based on its photography?

Participant 2: Yes.

Monica: How do food images compare to other factors like reviews or prices in influencing your decisions?

Participant 2: Reviews matter more to me. *

Monica: How do you perceive food images posted by other consumers compared to professional brand photography?

Participant 2: It depends. On social media, I want it to look good, but for reviews, I trust consumer pictures more.

Monica: Which do you find more trustworthy or influential in your decision-making: user-generated content or professional brand images?

Participant 2: User-generated pictures when making the ultimate decision.

Monica: What makes a food photograph feel authentic or trustworthy to you?

Participant 2: A decent angle and way of taking the picture.

Monica: Have you ever felt misled by food photography? Can you describe that experience?

Participant 2: Yes, especially regarding the quantity shown in photos.

Monica: How important is the consistency between photographed food and the actual product in building your trust in a brand?

Participant 2: Very important to me.

Monica: Can you recall a time when a food photograph triggered a craving or desire to eat?

Participant 2: Almost every day.

Monica: How do you think food photography on social media affects your overall relationship with food?

Participant 2: It's generally good.

Monica: Have you ever changed your eating habits or tried new foods because of images you've seen online?

Participant 2: Yes.

Monica: How likely are you to engage with food-related content on social media?

Participant 2: I like and share content, but I don't comment.

Monica: What type of food content are you most likely to engage with and why?

Participant 2: Easy-to-make food items because I enjoy preparing them.

Monica: Do you take and share your own food photographs? If so, what motivates you to do this?

****Participant 2****: Yes, I share photos whenever I bake. The time and effort that goes into preparing motivate me to share.

****Monica****: How do you think food photography in digital marketing will evolve in the future?

****Participant 2****: I think AI-generated images will make food look more appealing, especially foods that happen to be favorites.

****Monica****: What changes would you like to see in how brands present their food through photography?

****Participant 2****: Don't make it too fancy. Use a decent quantity while plating.

Participant 3

Monica: Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this interview. My goal is to better understand your perceptions of food photography and how it may influence your choices and preferences. Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you consent to recording this interview in audio to ensure the accuracy of the data. The recording will be used only for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

Participant 3: Yes, I consent.

Monica: Great! Let's start with some background questions. What is your age?

Participant 3: I'm 29 years old.

Monica: What is your gender?

Participant 3: Feminine.

Monica: What is your nationality?

Participant 3: Angolan.

Monica: How often do you use social media platforms?

Participant 3: Every day.

Monica: Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

Participant 3: LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok. *

Monica: How would you characterize your usual diet?

Participant 3: I would describe my usual diet as a mix of pleasure and mindfulness. I enjoy exploring diverse flavors.

Monica: What are your favorite dishes?

Participant 3: I don't have a favorite dish; I appreciate a culinary diversity that allows me to taste different flavors.

Monica: How frequently do you engage with food-related content on social media or other digital platforms, and who are the creators of that content?

Participant 3: Fitness people.

****Monica****: Do you follow any social media accounts that specialize in food? Can you specify?

****Participant 3****: No, I don't have any.

****Monica****: What type of food-related content do you usually consume?

****Participant 3****: Traditional food from every part of the world.

****Monica****: What's your main purpose for consuming food content?

****Participant 3****: I like to see what people are innovating.

****Monica****: How important is food photography to you when viewing food-related content?

****Participant 3****: I love art, so I love seeing how cooks create art with food.

****Monica****: Are there any types of food images that particularly appeal to you? Why?

****Participant 3****: No specific types.

****Monica****: What are your initial impressions when you see food images online?

****Participant 3****: I wonder if it's real or edited, like with Photoshop or AI, because the images are so perfect.

****Monica****: In what ways do you think food photography influences your dining choices or food purchases?

****Participant 3****: It doesn't influence my choices much.

****Monica****: How does the visual style in food photography impact your perception of the dish or brand?

****Participant 3****: A lot. I like when things have a good image and aesthetic. The eyes eat first, so when food has good photography, it makes an impression.

****Monica****: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good photo of food? For example, was it the type of food, the lighting, the colors, or how the food was arranged on the plate?

****Participant 3****: The light and colors. I love when the food has an aesthetic appeal with low lighting—it feels like a sexy ambiance.

****Monica****: What specific elements of food photography (e.g., lighting, composition, color) catch your attention the most?

****Participant 3****: I love minimalistic photos with low lighting that feel romantic.

****Monica****: Can you describe a food image that recently impressed you? What made it stand out?

****Participant 3****: An image taken on my birthday. It looked romantic, with candles, red roses, and glasses on the table. The food looked like art.

****Monica****: How does the quality of food photography influence your perception of a restaurant or food brand?

****Participant 3****: It influences me a lot because we eat with our eyes first. But some restaurants don't match the photo quality, which disappoints me.

****Monica****: Can you give an example of a brand whose food photography positively influenced your opinion of them?

****Participant 3****: No, I don't have one.

****Monica****: Have you ever been disappointed by a food item that didn't match its photographic representation? How did this affect your view of the brand?

****Participant 3****: Yes, many times, especially here in Angola. Most restaurants use internet photos, and I hate that.

****Monica****: How often do you purchase food based on images you've seen online?

****Participant 3****: A lot, almost always. I'm an architect, so I love aesthetically pleasing things.

****Monica****: Have you been in the process of deciding to try a new restaurant or food product based on its photography?

****Participant 3****: Yes. I check the restaurant images first, then look at the food and reviews. A beautiful place with bad food is a zero for me.

****Monica****: How do food images compare to other factors like reviews or prices in influencing your decisions?

****Participant 3****: Reviews are very important to me.

****Monica****: How do you perceive food images posted by other consumers compared to professional brand photography?

Participant 3: No comparison is needed; professionals are trained for this, so the quality is different.

Monica: Which do you find more trustworthy or influential in your decision-making: user-generated content or professional brand images?

Participant 3: User-generated content.

Monica: What makes a food photograph feel authentic or trustworthy to you?

Participant 3: When it looks natural. If it looks fake, like Photoshop or AI, it loses trust.

Monica: Have you ever felt misled by food photography? Can you describe that experience?

Participant 3: Yes, when I ordered a hamburger that looked natural in the photo but was disappointing when it arrived.

Monica: How important is the consistency between photographed food and the actual product in building your trust in a brand?

Participant 3: Very important. It shows how serious the brand is.

Monica: Can you recall a time when a food photograph triggered a craving or desire to eat?

Participant 3: It depends; I see a lot of images online.

Monica: How do you think food photography on social media affects your overall relationship with food?

Participant 3: It affects me by making me more demanding with plating at home, adding a touch of creativity.

Monica: Have you ever changed your eating habits or tried new foods because of images you've seen online?

Participant 3: Yes, a lot—my eyes eat first.

Monica: How likely are you to engage with food-related content on social media?

Participant 3: I usually like posts.

****Monica****: What type of food content are you most likely to engage with and why?

****Participant 3****: Healthy food and traditional foods from different countries.

****Monica****: Do you take and share your own food photographs? If so, what motivates you to do this?

****Participant 3****: Yes, I love aesthetics.

****Monica****: How do you think food photography in digital marketing will evolve in the future?

****Participant 3****: It will evolve a lot because everything is digital now, and people are becoming more demanding.

****Monica****: What changes would you like to see in how brands present their food through photography?

****Participant 3****: I think they should add more naturalness so the photos look real.

Participant 4

Monica: Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this interview. My goal is to better understand your perceptions of food photography and how it may influence your choices and preferences. Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you consent to recording this interview in audio to ensure the accuracy of the data. The recording will be used only for research purposes and will be treated confidentially.

Participant 4: Yes, I consent.

Monica: Great! Let's start with some background questions. What is your age?

Participant 4: I'm 28 years old.

Monica: What is your gender?

Participant 4: Feminine.

Monica: What is your nationality?

Participant 4: Nicaraguan. *

Monica: How often do you use social media platforms?

Participant 4: I use them daily.

Monica: Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

Participant 4: Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

Monica: How would you characterize your usual diet?

Participant 4: I'd say my diet is balanced with a strong emphasis on fresh and homemade meals. I enjoy a mix of traditional and international cuisine.

Monica: What are your favorite dishes?

Participant 4: I love *gallo pinto* with fried plantains, but I also enjoy trying new international dishes like sushi or Mediterranean salads.

Monica: How frequently do you engage with food-related content on social media or other digital platforms, and who are the creators of that content?

Participant 4: Pretty frequently. I follow both home chefs and food influencers who specialize in healthy, affordable meals.

Monica: Do you follow any social media accounts that specialize in food? Can you specify?

Participant 4: Yes, I follow a few food bloggers and nutritionists who share recipes and cooking tips.

Monica: What type of food-related content do you usually consume?

Participant 4: Mainly recipes and videos of traditional dishes being prepared in creative ways.

Monica: What's your main purpose for consuming food content?

Participant 4: To get inspiration for new meals and learn cooking techniques.

Monica: How important is food photography to you when viewing food-related content?

Participant 4: It's quite important. Good food photography draws me in and makes me want to try a dish.

Monica: Are there any types of food images that particularly appeal to you? Why?

Participant 4: Yes, I'm drawn to bright, colorful photos with natural lighting. They make the food look vibrant and fresh.

Monica: What are your initial impressions when you see food images online?

Participant 4: If the image is well-composed, I often think, "I need to try making that!" or I get inspired to visit a place that serves it.

Monica: In what ways do you think food photography influences your dining choices or food purchases?

Participant 4: It plays a big role. A visually appealing photo can convince me to try a new dish or visit a restaurant.

Monica: How does the visual style in food photography impact your perception of the dish or brand?

Participant 4: It has a significant impact. A beautiful, high-quality photo makes the dish look more appetizing and the brand seem more trustworthy.

****Monica****: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good photo of food? Was it the type of food according to your food habits, the lighting, the colors, or how the food was arranged on the plate?

****Participant 4****: The arrangement of the food and good lighting are essential. I prefer a picture that's clear, taken in natural light, and shows the texture of the dish.

****Monica****: What specific elements of food photography (e.g., lighting, composition, color) catch your attention the most?

****Participant 4****: Bright, colorful images with natural lighting catch my attention the most. Composition also matters – the photo needs to have balance and a sense of appeal.

****Monica****: Can you describe a food image that recently impressed you? What made it stand out?

****Participant 4****: I saw a picture of an elaborate tropical fruit platter on Instagram. The vibrant colors and the way it was arranged like an art piece made it memorable.

****Monica****: How does the quality of food photography influence your perception of a restaurant or food brand?

****Participant 4****: A lot. If a restaurant's food photography looks appealing, I'm more inclined to think it's a quality establishment.

****Monica****: Can you give an example of a brand whose food photography positively influenced your opinion of them?

****Participant 4****: Yes, there's a local restaurant in Managua that posts mouth-watering pictures of their dishes online. It definitely influenced my decision to try them.

****Monica****: Have you ever been disappointed by a food item that didn't match its photographic representation? How did this affect your view of the brand?

****Participant 4****: Yes, it happened with a dessert shop. The photos looked amazing, but the real thing was smaller and didn't taste as good. It made me think twice about going there again.

****Monica****: How often do you purchase food based on images you've seen online?

****Participant 4****: Fairly often. If a dish looks appealing, I'm likely to try it out.

****Monica****: How do food images compare to other factors (like reviews or prices) in influencing your decisions?

Participant 4: Reviews are still the most important, but good food photography is what draws me in initially.

Monica: How do you perceive food images posted by other consumers compared to professional brand photography?

Participant 4: I find both useful. Professional photos look great, but user-generated images often feel more authentic and show what the food actually looks like.

Monica: Which do you find more trustworthy or influential in your decision-making: user-generated content or professional brand images?

Participant 4: User-generated content is more trustworthy, but professional images do influence my first impression.

Monica: What makes a food photograph feel authentic or trustworthy to you?

Participant 4: When it's not overly edited and looks like something I could see in real life.

Monica: Have you ever felt misled by food photography? Can you describe that experience?

Participant 4: Yes, I ordered a smoothie bowl that looked vibrant online but arrived looking dull and watery. It was disappointing.

Monica: How important is the consistency between photographed food and the actual product in building your trust in a brand?

Participant 4: Very important. It shows the brand's honesty and commitment to quality.

Monica: Can you recall a time when a food photograph triggered a craving or desire to eat?

Participant 4: Yes, just last week! I saw a picture of a perfectly grilled steak on TikTok and instantly craved it.

Monica: How do you think food photography on social media affects your overall relationship with food?

Participant 4: It makes me more aware of presentation and sometimes inspires me to be more creative with my own cooking.

****Monica****: Have you ever changed your eating habits or tried new foods because of images you've seen online?

****Participant 4****: Yes, I've tried several recipes and even new ingredients after seeing them on food blogs or Instagram.

****Monica****: How likely are you to engage with (like, comment, share) food-related content on social media?

****Participant 4****: I'll like and sometimes share if it's a dish I find interesting or want to try.

****Monica****: What type of food content are you most likely to engage with and why?

****Participant 4****: Easy recipes and unique dishes that I can recreate at home.

****Monica****: Do you take and share your own food photographs? If so, what motivates you to do this?

****Participant 4****: Yes, I love sharing when I've made something special or tried out a new recipe. It's fun to showcase my cooking and get feedback.

****Monica****: How do you think food photography in digital marketing will evolve in the future?

****Participant 4****: I think it will become more interactive and immersive, with more use of 3D imagery and maybe even virtual tasting experiences.

****Monica****: What changes would you like to see in how brands present their food through photography?

****Participant 4****: More realistic images that don't oversell the product. I'd love to see more behind-the-scenes photos of how dishes are made too.

