

DIGITAL FOOD CULTURE AND IDENTITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NIGERIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH FOOD INFLUENCERS

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions and discursive practices of Nigerian postgraduate students regarding the rising popularity of food influencers on social media. Anchored on the Two-Step Flow Theory and Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, the study explores how postgraduate students interpret, negotiate, and respond to food influencer content in relation to authenticity, cultural identity, and digital consumer behaviour. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and five In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) involving postgraduate students and expert informants, including a food content creator, cultural critic, nutritionist and communications specialist. Thematic analysis of the data revealed five core themes: food influencers as digital storytellers and culinary motivators; skepticism about over-commercialized and manipulative content; concerns over the cultural distortion of Nigerian cuisine; food influencing as a performance of class and aspiration; and audience expectations for authenticity, cultural representation, and health literacy. The findings highlight the nuanced and reflexive media engagement of postgraduate students, who act as active agents in decoding and reshaping media narratives. The study concludes that food influencing in Nigeria is not a trivial digital trend but a contested cultural practice shaped by power, identity and socioeconomic dynamics. Recommendations include: Promoting cultural authenticity, improving transparency in influencer marketing, encouraging healthier food practices and strengthening media literacy among digital audiences.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Digital Culture, Food Influencers, Media Representation, Postgraduate Students

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the expansion of digital media has profoundly transformed how individuals experience and engage with food culture. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook have given rise to a new category of cultural intermediaries, food influencers, whose digital personas blend entertainment, expertise and lifestyle branding. These influencers, often without formal culinary training, wield substantial power to shape public perceptions of food, cooking and consumption through visually engaging and emotionally resonant content (Olorunnisola & Agbo, 2022; Nwafor & Okeke, 2024). Their influence extends beyond mere gastronomy, intersecting with broader discourses of identity, aspiration and social belonging in the digital age (Adeyemi & Salawu, 2023).

The appeal of food influencers lies in their strategic fusion of authenticity, relatability and performative expertise, qualities that attract and sustain vast online followings. Through algorithmic amplification and peer-to-peer sharing, their content circulates widely, reshaping contemporary food narratives that were once curated by chefs, nutritionists or traditional media institutions. This shift illustrates a democratization of culinary authority, yet it also introduces new complexities concerning credibility, commodification and representation. Nigerian scholars have argued that digital influencers increasingly function as informal opinion leaders whose recommendations shape everyday lifestyle decisions among young adults and urban populations (Asemah, Edegoh, & Ojih, 2021; Ojebode & Oyero, 2022).

Among the audiences engaging deeply with food influencer culture are postgraduate students, a distinct social group characterized by higher educational attainment, critical media literacy, and socio-cultural awareness. For many within this cohort, food-related content on social media serves not only as entertainment but also as a source of knowledge, lifestyle guidance, and cultural expression (Ekwenchi & Nwabueze, 2023). Postgraduates' engagement with such content is therefore layered, infused with intellectual curiosity, personal reflection, and social critique. Their interpretations may reveal broader societal negotiations about authenticity, digital authority, and the commercialization of everyday life.

Despite the growing prevalence of food influencers, research attention in Nigeria has largely centered on digital marketing, online consumer behaviour, and social media advertising effectiveness (Okorie & Ezeibe, 2022; Udeze & Chukwu, 2024), leaving a gap in understanding how audiences, particularly educated ones,

construct meaning around these figures. Very few studies have examined how food influencer culture is discussed, interpreted, or critiqued by critical social groups such as postgraduate students, whose perspectives could offer valuable insights into how digital trends shape social values and communicative practices. This gap is especially salient within the Nigerian context and other regions of the Global South, where social media engagement intertwines with unique socio-economic realities, cultural expectations, and evolving digital ecosystems. In such contexts, influencer culture often reflects hybridized forms of aspiration, class mobility, and cultural expression, warranting nuanced analysis beyond Western-centric models of influencer studies (Oso, Ajiboye, & Adesina, 2023). Scholars have noted that the Nigerian digital environment is characterized by rapid mobile adoption, youth-driven content production, and increasing commercialization of online identity, all of which shape how influencers construct and monetize their personal brands (Nwabueze & Okonkwo, 2025).

Furthermore, the rise of influencer capitalism blurs the boundaries between personal storytelling and commercial persuasion, raising critical questions about authenticity and mediated credibility (Asemah & Edegoh, 2024). As food becomes increasingly visualized, branded, and monetized, it risks being stripped of its socio-political and communal meanings, turning sustenance into spectacle. Postgraduate discourse around these dynamics offers a window into how informed and reflective audiences navigate, resist, or reinterpret the values embedded in influencer-driven food communication.

Accordingly, this study investigates how postgraduate students engage in discourse around the growing popularity of food influencers. It explores the meanings, contradictions, and social negotiations present in their conversations, seeking to understand how they construct and critique the cultural influence of food influencers in everyday life. Thus, it sought to explore how postgraduate students perceive and interpret the growing influence of food influencers on social media and examine the dominant themes with conversational patterns that characterize postgraduate discourse around food influencers. The study also, analyzed how postgraduate students evaluate issues of authenticity, credibility, and commercialization in food influencer content. It investigated the cultural and social meanings which the postgraduate students attach to food influencer trends within their academic and digital environments.

Conceptual Discussions

Food Influencers: Conceptualizing Digital Tastemakers

Food influencers are digital content creators who utilize social media platforms to showcase, review, or promote food-related content to targeted audiences. Their emergence reflects the growing convergence of personal branding, entertainment, and commercial communication within Nigeria's digital media ecosystem. Recent Nigerian studies emphasize that social media platforms have transformed ordinary users into influential communicators who shape consumer behaviour and public engagement through consistent online presence and multimedia storytelling (Fakeye & Ayoola, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, influencers are individuals who strategically use communication techniques such as visual presentation, persuasion, branding, and audience interaction to attract followers and sustain engagement. These communication strategies are embedded in the cultural and social realities of Nigerian society, where influencers align their content with societal trends and audience expectations to maintain relevance and credibility (Nnaemeka & Udoh, 2024).

Food influencers perform both informational and aspirational roles within digital communication spaces. They provide practical information about food, lifestyle, and consumption while simultaneously presenting curated experiences that inspire followers' choices and behaviours. Contemporary Nigerian research indicates that influencers significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions, demonstrating their growing importance in marketing communication and lifestyle promotion within the country (Ehichoya & Oyinade, 2024).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of influencers in Nigeria is strongly linked to trust, relatability, and continuous interaction with audiences. Social media platforms provide new spaces for human interactions (Edogor, Ezeonyejaku, Onyjelem, Uchendu, and Obi, 2026) and where individuals can showcase talents, build visibility, and gain recognition through sustained online engagement. This visibility enhances their persuasive capacity and positions them as credible sources of information and lifestyle guidance within digital communities (Lucas & Siman, 2024).

Consequently, the authority of influencers in contemporary Nigeria increasingly derives from perceived lived experience and consistent digital participation rather than formal institutional credentials. The growing reliance on influencers for information and lifestyle guidance reflects the broader transformation of communication practices in the digital age, where social media platforms serve as central arenas for interaction, identity construction, and opinion formation among audiences (Okon, Ojedor, & Owolabi, 2025).

Social Media Celebrity Culture: From Fame to Microcelebrity

The concept of celebrity has evolved significantly in the digital era. Historically, recognition and status were conferred by mainstream media institutions (Okunna and Omenugha, 2012) through controlled narratives and limited access. In contrast, social media celebrity culture is defined by accessibility, interactivity, and self-presentation, little wonder Edogor et al (2026, p.84) observe that "social media have metamorphosed individuals into 'media institutions.' Individuals can now construct and project public visibility through strategic personal branding, audience engagement, and content creation (Ayodele & Isameel, 2025).

In Nigeria, the idea of "microcelebrity" reflects how ordinary users perform celebrity-like behaviours online. Such performances include managing a public persona, engaging with followers through comments and direct messages, and promoting products or services without reliance on traditional media institutions (Nnaemeka & Udoh, 2024). Self-presentation strategies such as authentic language, visual aesthetics, and regular audience interaction help content creators build credibility and a sense of relatability among followers (Nnaemeka & Udoh, 2024).

Food influencers exemplify this trend by shaping online identities rooted in food but extending into lifestyle domains such as health, travel, fashion, and wellness. Their visibility is shaped not by traditional media but by social media algorithms, aesthetic presentation, and audience interaction on platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Nnanna-Ohuonu, 2025). These influencers combine everyday, authentic content such as daily meals and kitchen routines with paid collaborations and sponsored promotions, illustrating how commercial and personal content intersect in digital visibility work (Nnanna-Ohuonu, 2025).

Self-branding is central to the digital influencer economy. Nigerian research shows that influencers must constantly negotiate between personal expression and market demands, as brands prefer influencers whose communicated values align with their audience's expectations (Ayodele & Isameel, 2025; Nnanna-Ohuonu, 2025). This negotiation creates a hybrid persona that blends perceived authenticity with commercial appeal, reinforcing the blurred boundary between personal life and market engagement (Ayodele & Isameel, 2025).

Among postgraduate students, who are largely digital natives and critically engaged media users, social media celebrity is not accepted at face value. Their

discourse reflects an awareness of the constructed nature of influencer narratives and the commercial motivations behind digital visibility. While some postgraduates admire the creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit of influencers, others critique the commodification of identity and consumer-driven lifestyles presented as authentic online experiences (Nnaemeka & Udoh, 2024; Ayodele & Isameel, 2025).

Digital Food Discourse and Visual Aesthetics

Food, long considered a site of cultural identity and social meaning, has undergone a transformation in the digital age. The rise of visual social media platforms has turned food into a highly aestheticized and performative object. Food influencers play a central role in this transformation, presenting food not just as nourishment, but as a cultural artifact and an Instagrammable experience. Lupton (2017) describes digital food cultures as comprising practices of sharing, narrating and performing food consumption. These practices are often less about the actual act of eating and more about how food is represented and shared with an emphasis on pleasure, style and identity. A single photo or 30-second video can convey messages about class, taste, ethnicity and modernity (Johnston & Goodman, 2024).

Food influencers employ techniques like food styling, color filtering, themed plating, and music overlays to transform meals into visually seductive content. De Solier (2023), argues that food becomes a cultural capital; a way of signaling sophistication, authenticity or wellness. Vegan dishes, exotic meals, fusion cuisine or home-baked desserts all become symbolic markers of identity. This has implications for how postgraduate students interpret food influencer content. While some appreciate the creativity, effort and aesthetics involved, others raise concerns about unrealistic food ideals, hidden marketing agendas and the psychological impact of constant food comparison.

There is a tension between admiring the art of food presentation and recognizing its potential to reinforce elitist, gendered or class-based narratives (Cairns, Johnston, & Baumann, 2021). Additionally, postgraduate discourse often reflects concerns about the over-commercialization of food narratives, where genuine cultural expression is repackaged into marketing content. This critical stance is influenced by academic exposure to media critique, cultural theory and discourse analysis, which encourages deeper interrogation of food influencers' semiotic and symbolic power.

Audience Reception and Media Literacy

The fourth and final concept relevant to this study is audience reception, particularly as it intersects with critical media literacy. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides a useful lens for understanding how different audiences interpret media texts. Hall posits that media messages are encoded with preferred meanings by producers but are decoded in diverse ways depending on the audience's social location, knowledge and experience. In the context of this study, food influencers encode messages around lifestyle, wellness or taste. However, postgraduate students, as relatively informed and critically trained individuals, may not receive these messages passively. Instead, they engage in negotiated readings (accepting some aspects while questioning others) or oppositional readings (rejecting the dominant message altogether). This critical engagement is underpinned by media literacy, which Potter (2013) defines as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in various forms. For postgraduate students, media literacy is not only a cognitive skill but also a social practice, shaped by academic exposure to theories of representation, ideology and power.

Research has shown that highly literate audiences are more likely to question the credibility of influencer content, recognize hidden sponsorships and interrogate the broader media system (Livingstone & Bulger, 2022). They may critique how algorithms prioritize certain types of food content, how influencers reproduce dominant ideals of body image or how cultural appropriation occurs in the presentation of ethnic cuisines. Furthermore, postgraduate discourse is often reflexive, they do not only critique influencers but also reflect on their own consumption patterns, feelings of aspiration or inadequacy and the role of digital media in shaping their food choices and lifestyles. This meta-awareness makes them ideal subjects for exploring nuanced perspectives on the popularity of food influencers.

Together, the concepts of food influencers, social media celebrity culture, digital food discourse, and audience reception provide an integrated framework for analyzing how postgraduate students discuss and interpret food influencers. These concepts reveal that influencer culture is not merely about popularity but reflects deeper issues around identity, power, digital labor, cultural values and mediated reality. Understanding how postgraduate students negotiate the influence of influencers, whether through admiration, critique, emulation, or resistance, offers insight into the dynamics of digital cultural participation and how education, age and media exposure shape audience attitudes in an era of pervasive influence.

Empirical Review

Recent Nigerian scholarship has increasingly examined the role of social media influencers in shaping audience perceptions, engagement, and consumption behaviours within digital environments. For instance, Olanmi, Ayoola, and Inneh (2023) investigated the relationship between social media influencer credibility and online purchase intention among young consumers in Nigeria. Using a quantitative survey design grounded in Source Credibility Theory, the researchers collected data from active social media users to assess how trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness influence consumer decision-making. The findings revealed that influencer credibility significantly predicts purchase intention, indicating that audiences are more likely to engage with and act upon recommendations from influencers they perceive as reliable and knowledgeable. The study concluded that social media influencers function as persuasive communication agents whose messages shape consumer attitudes and behavioural responses in the Nigerian digital marketplace. This study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates how audiences evaluate influencer credibility, a key factor influencing discourse and engagement with food-related content among postgraduate students.

Similarly, Obahiagbon, Nwankwo, and Olaniyi (2023) conducted a qualitative study examining the impact of social media influencers on brand equity among small businesses in Nigeria. The researchers employed in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to explore how influencer marketing strategies contribute to brand visibility, customer loyalty, and consumer engagement. The study found that influencers play a significant role in promoting products and shaping brand perception through relatable storytelling, visual presentation, and interactive communication with followers. The authors further observed that audiences do not passively consume influencer content but actively engage through comments, shares, and discussions, thereby contributing to the co-creation of brand meaning in digital spaces. This finding supports the argument that social media platforms function as participatory communication environments where users negotiate meanings and interpretations of influencer messages. For the current research, the study provides evidence that influencer popularity is sustained through continuous interaction and audience engagement, which aligns with the investigation of postgraduate students' discourse surrounding food influencer culture.

In a related Nigerian study, Bankole, Adeoye, and Adeyemi (2024) explored adolescents' exposure to fast food marketing on Instagram and its influence on user engagement patterns in Nigeria. Using a content analysis design, the researchers analyzed posts from the Instagram accounts of major fast-food brands to identify marketing strategies used to attract audience attention. The

findings indicated that visually appealing food imagery, promotional messages, and interactive features such as hashtags and contests significantly increased user engagement, measured through likes and interactions on posts. The study concluded that social media platforms serve as powerful communication channels for promoting food-related products and shaping audience interest in food consumption. This study is particularly relevant to the present research because it demonstrates how food-related digital content stimulates engagement and interaction among social media users in Nigeria. It further reinforces the need to examine how educated audiences, such as postgraduate students, interpret and discuss the growing visibility of food influencers within contemporary digital media culture.

Collectively, these studies provide a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for understanding how postgraduate students engage with food influencer content. They reveal that influencer popularity is not merely a product of visibility but a discursive process shaped by authenticity, credibility and cultural resonance. For this research, the reviewed works underscore the importance of examining how educated audiences interpret, negotiate and construct meanings around influencer culture within contemporary digital media spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Two-Step Flow Theory and Encoding/Decoding Theory, both of which provide critical insights into how media messages, particularly from food influencers are interpreted, negotiated, and discussed within specific social and intellectual contexts such as postgraduate communities.

1. Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)

The Two-Step Flow Theory, developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), proposes that media influence do not operate in a direct, linear fashion but instead flows through opinion leaders who first consume media content, interpret it, and subsequently transmit their interpretations to others within their social circles. In the context of this study, food influencers can be seen as modern digital opinion leaders whose curated content, ranging from recipes and health advice to lifestyle representation, influences audience behaviour and perceptions. However, postgraduate students are not passive recipients. They often engage critically with such content and contribute to a second layer of discourse that can reinforce, question, or reshape the original message (Katz, 1957). This theory thus frames food influencer communication as a socially mediated process involving interpretation and re-interpretation among informed audiences.

2. Encoding/Decoding Theory (Hall, 1980)

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (1980) provides a cultural framework for understanding media reception. According to Hall, media producers "encode" messages with preferred meanings, but audiences "decode" these messages based on their own social and cultural contexts, resulting in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. Food influencers encode their content with specific lifestyle ideals, aesthetic values, and marketing intentions. However, postgraduate students by virtue of their educational exposure and critical thinking skills, may decode such content differently. Some may align with the intended messages (dominant reading), others may partially accept and critique them (negotiated reading), while some may outright reject the influencer's framing (oppositional reading). This theory is valuable for examining how meaning is constructed in everyday conversations and digital discourses (Hall, 1980; Philo, 2008).

Together, these two theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how food influencer content travels through digital networks and how postgraduate students, as reflective media users, engage in meaning-making processes. The Two-Step Flow Theory explains the influencer's role in shaping trends and opinions, while the Encoding/Decoding Theory highlights the interpretive agency of the audience.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that adopted Focus Group Discussion as the research design and specifically employed a discourse analysis approach. This method is appropriate for examining how language constructs meanings, values, and social realities (Gee, 2014). Since the research explores how postgraduate students talk about, interpret, and negotiate the growing influence of food influencers, discourse analysis provides an in-depth understanding of the narratives, ideologies, and social representations embedded in their discussions. The population of the study comprises purposively selected postgraduate students enrolled in masters and doctoral programmes across various departments selected from the Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) and the University of Uyo (UNIUYO).

These students are assumed to be active consumers of digital media content and capable of engaging critically with issues surrounding influencer culture. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who are both familiar with social media food influencers and willing to discuss their

perceptions. The study involved two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), each comprising ten participants, and five In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) to elicit both collective and individual perspectives.

Data were collected using two instruments: an FGD guide, which probed participants' general views, experiences, and thematic concerns about food influencer culture, and an interview guide, designed to explore deeper reflections on authenticity, commercialization, identity formation, and sociocultural impact. Both instruments were reviewed by communication scholars to ensure content validity. The FGDs were conducted in a neutral and comfortable setting within the university and moderated by the researcher, assisted by a note-taker. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, while the IDIs were conducted either in person or virtually, depending on participant preference, lasting about 30 to 45 minutes each. All discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns, key metaphors, and underlying ideologies within participants' language (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emerging themes were organized around central areas such as perceptions of food influencers, expressed values, critiques of digital culture, and the broader cultural symbolism reflected in the discourse.

Results

The data generated from the two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with postgraduate students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) and University of Uyo (UNIUYO). Each FGD comprised ten participants, purposefully selected to ensure a blend of gender, academic disciplines, and active social media engagement. The discussions explored how postgraduates perceive and interact with food influencers and how such content influences cultural identity, consumption behaviour, and critical media consciousness. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarkes (2006) Thematic Analysis Framework. The themes that emerged were interpreted in line with the FGD guide, which focused on communication strategies, awareness, impact, authenticity, and audience expectations.

Emergent Themes

1. Food Influencers as Agents of Culinary Inspiration and Digital Storytelling

Participants from both universities acknowledged the role of food influencers as motivational figures and digital storytellers. Their storytelling techniques,

charismatic presentation, and visually captivating content were identified as key factors sustaining user engagement.

"What keeps me watching isn't even the food, it is how they tell a story. It feels like you're part of their kitchen and process. Group A, participant 3, Female, 26, UNIZIK (MSc, Mass Communication)

"The way they place food, the music, the colors make it cinematic. It's beyond cooking; it's performance. Definitely, when you see contents like this, you feel it's a necessity to have a taste of a similar meal." Group B, participant 7, Male, 30, UNIUYO (MSc, English). This aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, as participants indicated that they use food influencer content for entertainment, aesthetic gratification, and personal development (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). The influencer is not just a food presenter but a lifestyle communicator who satisfies multiple needs.

2. Social Media as a Double-Edged Knife: Between Influence and Manipulation

Despite their admiration, participants expressed skepticism about the commercial undertones of influencer content. Concerns were raised about excessive brand promotions and paid partnerships, which they believed compromised authenticity and trust. "Once they start tagging every video with five brands, I start doubting if it's about food or money. For sure, you are made to see the celebrities as active users of the brands. You feel like the celebrities are looking like what they eat but in reality it's not so. They may be using a completely different food brand" - Group A, participant 9, Male, 32, UNIZIK (MBA).

"Some promote things they have never used. You can tell it's scripted. It feels dishonest." - Group B, participant 1, Female, 29, UNIUYO (MSc, Public Health).

"Endorsement is a form of advertising that is highly manipulative. Fans who are excessively obsessed with these celebrities will want to patronize the brand not to satisfy their taste board but to sustain the psychological affection." - Group B, participant 6, male, 31, Uniuyo (PGD, New Media). This reflects an oppositional reading (Hall, 1980), where audiences reject the encoded commercial intent in favor of their own interpretations. Postgraduates showed strong media literacy, often challenging and negotiating messages in line with their values.

3. Cultural Erosion and the "Instagrammization" of Indigenous Food

A powerful discourse emerged around the Westernization and aesthetic distortion of Nigerian cuisine. Participants noted that many food influencers prioritize global appeal over cultural authenticity, often altering traditional dishes to fit foreign tastes or social media aesthetics.

"I watched a video where someone cooked egusi without ogiri or palm oil, and called it 'modern twist.' That's not innovation, it's erasure." - Group A, participant 5, Female, 27, UNIZIK (MSc, Sociology). "They now serve nkwobi in wine glasses and jollof in sushi rolls. That's no longer our culture, it's performance for the West." - Group B, participant 10, Male, 30, UNIUYO (MSc, Political Science)

This theme connects to development communication concerns, particularly the loss of cultural integrity in media narratives. The aestheticization of food was seen not just as a creative expression but as a form of cultural dilution, where the need for virality overrides the essence of tradition.

4. Identity, Self-Representation, and the Performance of Class

The discourse also revealed that food influencer content often reflects middle- and upper-class sensibilities, thereby creating a symbolic exclusion of lower-income viewers. The use of imported spices, high-end cookware, and English-dominant narration created class boundaries.

"You see all these influencers in N200k kitchens using basil and paprika, and you're wondering: who cooks like this in Mushin?" - Group A, participant 1, Male, 28, UNIZIK (MSc, Development Studies)

"They present food like it's a luxury experience, not a daily need. It makes cooking feel like a performance for the rich." - Group B, participant 4, Female, 30, UNIUYO (MSc, Education)

This highlights Bourdieu's (1984) notion of taste and class, where the production and consumption of cultural products (like food videos) serve to reinforce social hierarchies. Postgraduates were aware of these dynamics and often decoded influencer content through a lens of socioeconomic realism.

5. Audience Expectations: Authenticity, Relatability, and Cultural Representation

Despite their critiques, participants expressed specific expectations from food influencers: authentic representation, cultural education, and transparency in branding.

"Just be real. If you are promoting something, say it's an ad. And cook local dishes with pride." Group A, participant 2, Female, 31, UNIZIK (MSc, English)

"Let's see more content from villages, not just Lekki apartments. There is beauty in our roots." Group B, participant 8, Female, 26, UNIUYO (MSc, Linguistics)

This ties into the concept of participatory communication, where audiences are not passive recipients but active participants shaping and responding to media narratives. The call for cultural representation also aligns with postcolonial media theory, which advocates for indigenous identity in media production.

Cross-Institutional Observations

UNIZIK participants were more theoretically reflective and framed their responses with references to media theories and social critique.

UNIUYO participants showed practical engagement, often discussing food influencers in terms of daily utility, household relevance, and cultural pride.

Both groups, however, displayed critical consciousness, resisting simplistic or manipulative influencer messaging.

In-depth Interview (IDI)

This section draws from five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with carefully selected individuals who are well-positioned to offer expert perspectives. These participants include a food content creator, a digital media scholar, a nutritionist, a communications lecturer, and a cultural critic. Thematic analysis was used to distill key patterns from their narratives.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gain expert insights into the cultural, communicative, and sociotechnical dynamics shaping the popularity of food influencers in Nigeria. Participants were selected purposively to offer grounded, professional, and theoretical commentary on issues raised by postgraduate students during the FGDs. Their responses provide contextual depth, challenge popular assumptions, and allow for triangulation of data.

The five interviewees were:

1. Participant A - Popular Nigerian food content creator on Instagram and YouTube.
2. Participant B - Dietitian.
3. Participant C - Registered Nutritionist and public health advocate.
4. Participant D - Cultural critic and columnist.
5. Participant E - CEO Orlist Foods.

Emergent Themes and Interpretive Analysis

1. Professionalization of Food Influencing and Strategic Communication

All respondents emphasized that food influencing has evolved from a hobby to a full-fledged career requiring branding, storytelling, consistency, and audience analytics.

"The audience now demands a full experience: editing, plating, backstory. You're no longer just cooking; you're telling a visual narrative," Participant A observed.

"Food influencers apply strategic communication principles. They know what posts perform best, when to post, and how to pitch products, this is not accidental, it is deliberate and critical." Participant B noted.

This reinforces the FGD findings about storytelling and aesthetics. It also validates the application of strategic communication theories, where every piece of content functions as a message encoded with deliberate meaning (Hall, 1980).

2. Trust and the Crisis of Authenticity in the Influencer Economy

Most key informants acknowledged that sponsorship deals create a double-bind: influencers must earn income, yet over-commercialization breeds distrust.

"There is pressure to monetize quickly, so many promote products they have never used. But the audience is catching on. In fact, it is not very clear whether food influencers actually cherish the food they endorse. They are smart," Participant A said.

"Authenticity is now currency. Once followers perceive you as a 'brand puppet, engagement drops drastically," Participant E said.

These responses affirm audience agency and critical reception, consistent with Hall's oppositional reading. Followers reject messages they perceive as manipulative. The comments also echo FGD critiques about influencers "selling out" to commercial interests.

3. Health, Nutrition, and Food Literacy Concerns

Participant C, raised the issue of misinformation and nutritional distortion in influencer content, especially where aesthetics override health standards.

"A major concern is people copying recipes without knowing the health implications. Influencers often use high-sodium spices and processed ingredients for visual appeal."

"The culture of 'cooking for clicks' can indirectly normalize unhealthy food habits." This introduces a critical dimension: the public health implications of food content. Influencer content may drive behaviour, but not always in health-positive ways. Nutrition is often sacrificed for trends, an area underexplored in FGDs but vital for policymaking.

4. Cultural Integrity vs. Global Appeal

Participant D emphasized that many food influencers unconsciously contribute to cultural erasure through what she termed 'aesthetic dilution' of Nigerian cuisines.

"There's a form of culinary colonization happening. Dishes are renamed, repackaged, and stripped of ethnic identity to appeal to global audiences."

"What's wrong with just calling it 'ofe akwu' instead of African tomato soup?" This critique aligns strongly with FGD responses around Westernization. It draws on postcolonial communication theory, warning against hegemonic pressures that rebrand indigenous content for Western palatability (Thussu, 2006).

5. Class, Access, and Performativity

Participant C provided a sociological reading of food influencer content as a form of digital performance rooted in class aspiration and consumer culture.

“Food videos are not just about food, they are about lifestyle signalling. They tell you who belongs and who aspires. And the message is often: success looks expensive.”

“This is why you see golden spoons, marble kitchens, imported spices. It’s not your average Nigerian reality, it’s aspirational theatre.”

This resonates deeply with the FGDs, especially among students who felt excluded by elite imagery. The analysis echoes Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (1984); digital food culture, he argues, reproduces class distinctions even on democratized platforms like TikTok or Instagram.

Cross-Cutting Analytical Reflections

Experts and students agree on the increasing commercialization of food influencing, though experts focus more on strategy while students emphasize authenticity.

Cultural dilution emerged as a shared concern, though experts analyzed it through the lens of globalization and identity loss.

The FGDs raised emotional and subjective critiques, while IDIs added theoretical depth and systemic critique, such as health literacy, performative capitalism, and algorithmic aesthetics.

All experts urged the need for media literacy, influencer accountability, and policy frameworks that promote ethically grounded content creation.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: How do postgraduates perceive the rising popularity of food influencers in Nigeria?

The FGDs revealed a generally positive perception of food influencers among postgraduate students, with many acknowledging the role these individuals play in modernizing culinary practices, educating viewers, and inspiring creativity. For instance, participants from both Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the University of Uyo noted that food influencers introduce new ways of cooking familiar dishes and make traditional meals look fashionable and exciting.

However, beyond admiration, there was also critical reflection. Several students viewed influencers as performers who may not necessarily reflect real-life cooking experiences. Some participants from UNIZIK noted that the perfect kitchen settings and luxury ingredients often portrayed make the content appear aspirational rather than relatable, a sentiment echoed by UIU participants who spoke of feeling excluded due to elite presentations.

This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, as discussed in the IDIs, where Participant E emphasized that food influencer content functions as aesthetic class signalling. Influencers, in trying to impress or attract a global audience, sometimes alienate local viewers by curating lifestyles that appear out of reach.

Overall, postgraduate perceptions are thus dual-layered: influencers are admired for innovation and visibility, but also critiqued for perceived inauthenticity and class bias.

Research Question 2: What factors influence postgraduates' trust or skepticism toward food influencer content?

Trustworthiness emerged as a major theme in both the FGDs and the interviews. In the FGDs, many postgraduates said they trust influencers who show personal use of products, explain their cooking processes in simple terms, and engage actively with their audience. Conversely, skepticism increases when content becomes over-commercialized or when influencers jump from brand to brand without consistency.

Some influencers post every brand that pays them, even ones that contradict each other. You can't trust that, said a UNIZIK participant.

In the IDIs, Participant A admitted that financial pressures drive many influencers to accept deals indiscriminately, while participant B emphasized that authenticity is the new currency in influencer marketing. These expert insights reinforce the FGDs' claim that today's digital audience, especially educated ones like postgraduates, are highly media-literate and discerning.

This skepticism aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) concept of oppositional readings, where audiences reject or reinterpret messages based on their own knowledge, beliefs, and social context. Trust, therefore, is earned not just through aesthetics but through consistency, transparency, and relatability.

Research Question 3: How do food influencers impact postgraduate students' dietary habits, food choices, or culinary practices?

A key insight from both data sources is that influencers do influence food behaviour, albeit selectively. Participants mentioned trying out recipes or cooking styles seen online, especially during festive periods or special occasions. However, many clarified that the influence is often aesthetic or occasional rather than habitual.

"I copied a jollof rice recipe from one influencer on Instagram. It came out nice, but I don't always follow their methods. Sometimes, it's too expensive," said a UNIUYO respondent.

The IDIs added a critical health dimension. Participant C, the nutritionist, warned that many recipes promoted online are visually appealing but nutritionally flawed, with high use of processed ingredients, sugar, or sodium-rich seasonings. This concern was largely absent in the FGDs, indicating that health is not top-of-mind for most postgraduate viewers when engaging influencer content. These findings suggest that food influencers shape short-term experimentation more than long-term dietary shifts. Also, their influence is filtered through the lenses of economic reality, cultural familiarity, and nutritional awareness, with varying levels of concern among audiences.

Research Question 4: What are the cultural implications of the content promoted by food influencers, especially in relation to traditional Nigerian cuisine?

This was one of the most emotionally charged themes in the FGDs. Participants across both cohorts expressed concern that food influencers often rebrand or westernize traditional meals. For instance, ofe akwu being called African tomato sauce or egusi soup being presented as a nut-based stew for international appeal was seen as undermining cultural identity.

Why not just say egusi soup? Must we always sound foreign to be seen? a UNIZIK participant asked rhetorically.

This critique was strongly supported in the IDIs. Participant D, the cultural critic, described this trend as a form of culinary colonization, where indigenous cuisines are stripped of their names, history, and context in the name of globalization. Such practices, she argued, feed into postcolonial anxieties of identity loss and cultural commodification (Thussu, 2006).

Participant E, added that this aesthetic dilution is not neutralit reflects power dynamics in global media visibility. In trying to attract international audiences, influencers may unintentionally alienate their local cultural roots.

This tension between cultural pride and global relevance is at the heart of how food influencer content is produced and received. For postgraduates, especially those sensitized by academic training, this tension often leads to critical negotiation of what to accept, reject, or modify in influencer content.

Conclusion

This study examined postgraduate students' perceptions of the rising influence of food influencers in Nigeria, focusing on trust, impact, and cultural implications. Findings reveal an ambivalent stance: while students appreciate influencers' creativity, visibility, and educational value, they remain critical of the elitism and performative aesthetics in much of their content. Trust in influencers is contingent upon authenticity, transparency, and consistency, reflecting a media-literate audience capable of nuanced interpretations. Although influencer content

encourages short-term food experimentation, its effect on enduring dietary behaviour is minimal, constrained by economic, cultural, and health factors. Culturally, the rebranding of traditional dishes for global appeal provokes concerns of identity dilution among postgraduate audiences. Overall, food influencers are viewed as both cultural innovators and agents of commodification, underscoring the need for more context-sensitive and ethically responsible food media practices in Nigeria's digital landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following were recommended:

1. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration (NAFDAC) should encourage Nigerian Food influencers to preserve the authenticity of Nigerian cuisine by using indigenous names and cultural contexts.
2. The food influencers should showcase realistic cooking settings and affordable ingredients to engage ordinary viewers.
3. Transparency in sponsorship and consistency in endorsements are essential for building audience trust.
4. Collaborations with nutritionists can help promote healthier food choices and balanced diets.
5. Influencers should create channels for audience feedback to enhance participation and cultural sensitivity.
6. Media literacy programs should be strengthened to help audiences critically evaluate influencer content.

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There was no conflict of interest with any sources or persons from the beginning of this paper to the end of it.

Ethical clearance

The authors kindly sought and duly got ethical clearance from the respondents and or every other relevant authority who provided the data or information used for this paper.

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