

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS IN FOOD COMMUNICATION: CONSUMPTION PATTERNS, FOOD AND HEALTH NARRATIVES ACROSS EUROPEAN SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Background. Food content on social media platforms has emerged as a powerful influence on consumer perceptions, preferences, and purchasing decisions, with growing implications for public health. Given that food preferences and eating habits are rooted in cultural background, understanding how these cultural dimensions shape digital food communication patterns represents a critical research gap.

Objective. This study aims to explore whether cultural value orientations are mirrored in the food content consumption patterns observed across European social media communities, and how these patterns reflect broader public health-related perceptions of food, health, and authenticity.

Material and Methods. A comparative quantitative and netnographic analysis was conducted on the social media profiles of food influencers from 14 European countries. The structure and thematic focus of food-related content were examined across cultural clusters. The segmentation of these cultural groups was based on the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map, an internationally recognized framework for analyzing cross-cultural value differentiation.

Results. The findings indicate culturally distinct patterns in how health is communicated through food-related content. Among food influencers from Mediterranean and Central European countries, health is predominantly communicated implicitly through homemade meals, traditional dishes, and mindful ingredient selection, rather than explicit nutritional or dietary claims. In contrast, influencers from Northern and Western European countries more frequently embed health communication within personal narratives and lifestyle-oriented content, where everyday experiences and emotional self-disclosure play a central role.

Discussion and Conclusions. The study demonstrates that health narratives in food communication are culturally constructed. Understanding such culturally embedded consumption behaviors contributes to more effective food communication and may support preventive health communication in online environments.

Keywords: food, communication, health communication, social media, cultural characteristics

INTRODUCTION

Food choices are fundamentally shaped by cultural values, traditions, social norms, and habitual practices. Eating habits and their social acceptance are closely linked to the cultural and economic context of a given country [1]. Virtually every region of Europe can be understood as a cultural landscape shaped by human activity [2]. Scholars suggest that European research should focus more intensively on unhealthy dietary patterns, such as obesity, rather than solely emphasizing the concept of “healthy food.” According to this perspective, the emphasis should shift from studying “healthy foods” to exploring “healthy eating,” integrating food and health research more

comprehensively. This approach is expected to bring significant long-term economic and social benefits [3].

However, it is worth noting that “health” as a marketing keyword has long played a central role in consumers’ lives, as nearly any product can be successfully promoted under the guise of health [4, 5]. The impact of dietary recommendations is often limited, and changing established eating habits remains challenging [6]. These findings suggest that marketing and communication play a crucial role in effectively reaching consumers and encouraging mindful food choices.

Consumer decisions are influenced not only by dietary guidelines but also by emotional factors and awareness levels [7]. For effective food communication, it is essential that nutrition experts,

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chefs, and influencers collaborate by aligning their respective strengths. The goal should not be for all actors to assume identical roles, but rather to combine their expertise in order to shape reliable and objective messages about food and health [8].

With the rise of social media, content about food has entered a new dimension, as consumers increasingly encounter and follow current dietary trends through online platforms. Social norms and values shape social media behavior within cultural contexts [9]. Organizations' ability to perceive and learn drives digital transformation [10], yet social media often functions more as a visibility channel than a platform for dialogue among stakeholders like scientists, farmers, and civil society [11].

In social media, content about food is intertwined with cultural identity, as food influencers often design their content in accordance with their own religious and cultural backgrounds [12], aligning it with the values of their target audiences. On social media platforms, messages about "good food" circulate differently across communities. The most common interpretation of "good food" is associated with a healthy lifestyle, which also facilitates the transformation of brands into lifestyle-oriented identities [13]. Research indicates that emotions mediate the link between a topic's social relevance and user engagement [14].

Previous findings suggest that culture itself shapes how social norms develop within nations and how these are reflected in media representations [1]. A cross-country comparison found that although food innovation systems vary between nations, they operate based on shared fundamental values [15]. Similarly, analyses across five countries revealed cultural differences in preferences for liked social media content, while negative evaluations showed greater consensus [16].

As influencer marketing continues to play an increasingly prominent role in the field of food communication, there is a growing need for deeper theoretical investigation to better understand its strategic applications and impacts. Images depicting healthy foods generate higher user interest and a greater willingness to try the associated products [17]. Researchers analyzing the posts of various influencers found that in 62% of 360 analyzed content pieces, a brand name was mentioned, yet only 6% were officially disclosed as advertisements [18]. These results indicate that, much like the ongoing debates surrounding influencer marketing, further research is needed to better understand the broader media policy frameworks.

It is essential that the diversity among stakeholders involved in food communication should foster cooperative and complementary partnerships rather than division [8]. When applied appropriately,

influencer marketing may serve as a long-term preventive tool for public health. However, if misinterpreted, it can also contribute to the spread of unhealthy dietary practices.

Aim of the study

This study explores how health is represented and communicated in the content of food influencers, and how these messages are received and engaged with by audiences in Northern-Western and Mediterranean-Central Europe. The study focuses on the interplay between cultural background, influencer communication strategies, and audience engagement.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Hofstede's cultural dimensions model [19] and Schwartz's value system model [20] laid the foundations for examining intercultural differences. Hofstede's framework explores social and economic disparities between cultures and their influence on individual behavior, while Schwartz's model emphasizes fundamental human values and needs. In addition to these theoretical contributions, the analytical approach of Inglehart and Welzel [21] also serves as a cornerstone of this research.

Based on the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map, which links socioeconomic development with value systems, this study classifies food contents from 14 European countries to explore how cultural background influences consumer behavior and content consumption patterns. Europe provides a unique context with diverse food traditions and health perceptions across countries that share similar socio-economic and regulatory frameworks. This balance allows for a clear examination of how cultural differences influence digital food and health communication.

This trend-exploratory study analyzes food influencers from fourteen European countries, classified into "Catholic" and "Protestant" cultural clusters according to the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map [22]. Food influencers were selected as the focus of analysis because they function as key trendsetters in digital communication, making it analytically sufficient to examine a limited number of highly influential actors to identify emerging patterns. The Northern and Western European (NWE) countries, representing the "Protestant" [22] cluster, include Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark. The Mediterranean and Central European (MCE) countries, representing the "Catholic" [22] cluster, are Croatia, France, Slovakia, Spain, Italy, Hungary, and Slovenia (Figure 1).

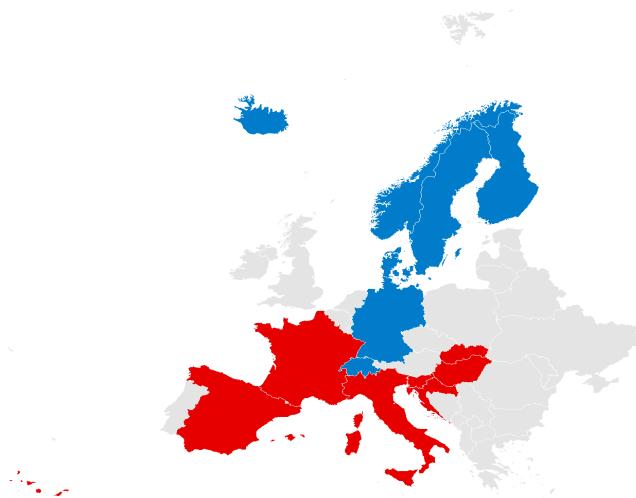


Figure 1. Northern and Western (NWE) and Mediterranean and Central European (MCE) countries included in the study

Source: edited by the Authors

Influencers were identified following Von-Polheim et al. [12] using the StarNgage.com platform. Inclusion criteria required that their main content focus be self-made dessert recipes, ensuring comparability. Only Instagram macro-influencers (100,000-1,000,000 followers) were considered, with one influencer selected per country, prioritizing those with the highest engagement rates [23] when multiple candidates met the criteria. In cases where suitable profiles were missing from StarNgage or macro-level thresholds could not be met, accounts sharing original food recipes with slightly higher or lower follower counts were included. Influencers primarily focused on lifestyle, travel, or fashion content were excluded. The size of the national influencer market was also considered in the selection process. Data collection

was conducted between November 2024 and January 2025.

The dataset includes over 600 individual pieces of Instagram content produced by 14 influencers. Since Instagram posts often consist of multiple images or videos grouped together in a single carousel, the total number of content items substantially exceeds the 595 posts (286 from MCE and 309 from NWE countries) published during the data collection period. This multi-content format was carefully considered and analyzed using qualitative and netnographic methods to fully capture the influencers' communication strategies. The Sotrender analytics platform [24] was employed to conduct netnographic analysis, offering tools for detailed evaluation of content performance and audience engagement.

RESULTS

Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings present measurable patterns of audience dynamics, providing empirical support for the qualitative observations regarding food content consumption. Posting activity varied notably across countries: the German influencer published the most posts (96), while the Finnish influencer shared the fewest (12). Monthly distribution showed the highest activity in December (234 posts) and the lowest in January (155 posts), consistent across both cultural clusters (MCE: 119/71; NWE: 115/84).

The second Figure (Figure 2) compares food influencers based on their respective countries. The black bars represent follower counts (in millions), while the red line indicate growth in thousands of followers. This figure should not be interpreted as a direct comparison between countries, but rather

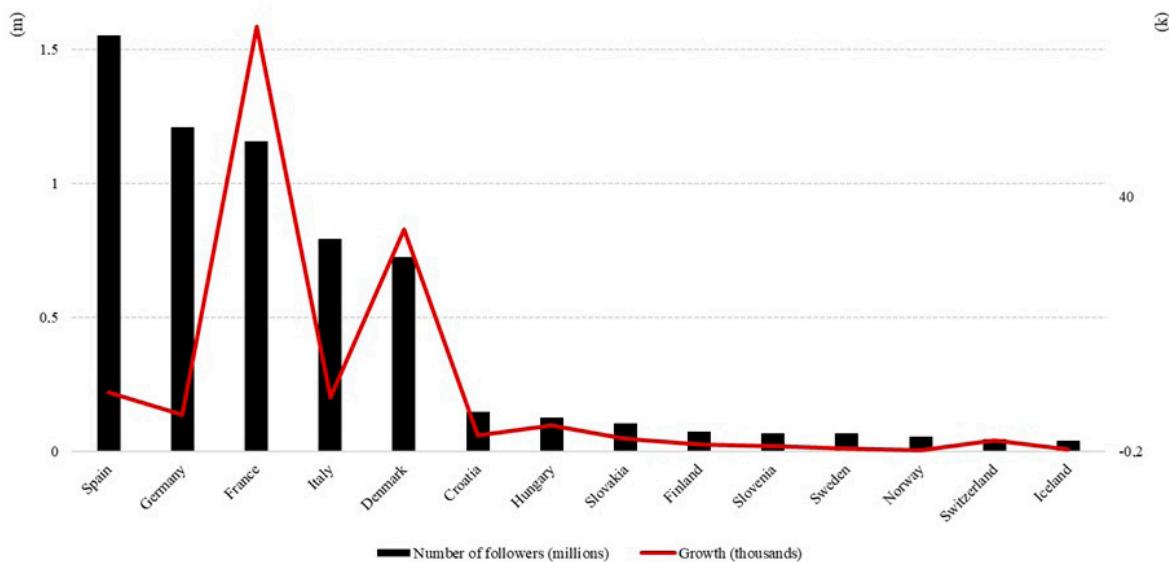


Figure 2. Comparison of influencers' follower numbers and follower change across the analyzed countries
Source: edited by the Authors

the focus should be on their growth rates, which serve primarily as indicators to provide contextual understanding of market dynamics.

Within the sample, Spain had the largest follower base (exceeding 1.5 million) along with substantial growth of over 9,000 new followers. France demonstrated the most significant follower increase, gaining approximately 67,000 new followers, the highest growth among all examined countries. Italy also maintained a large follower base of nearly 794,000, with an increase of 8,313 followers by the end of the study period. Although Croatia and Hungary had comparatively smaller follower bases, both showed steady growth, particularly Hungary, which gained 3,903 new followers. Germany, with more than 1.2 million followers, exhibited modest growth of only 5,532. Denmark stands out with 723,769 followers and an impressive 34,776 follower increase, representing the second most dynamic growth in the dataset. Norway was the only country to experience a slight decline in followers (-105), deviating from the overall positive trend. Smaller countries such as Switzerland and Iceland had relatively low follower counts (44,101 and 38,832, respectively), though Switzerland still recorded a positive increase of 1,465 followers. Slovakia, Finland, Slovenia, and Sweden all achieved modest growth, gaining only a few hundred new followers each.

Influencer marketing effectiveness

In influencer marketing, one of the most relevant performance indicators is the engagement rate [23].

Given the varying market sizes, direct performance comparisons are challenging and beyond the scope of this study. Instead, our focus lies on measuring effectiveness, for which engagement rate provides a more meaningful and comparable metric. This metric is of key importance because, in this market, success depends not only on the number of followers but also on the level of audience interaction. That is, the proportion of followers who actively engage with content through actions such as likes, comments, shares, or purchases.

In the case of food influencers, even the role of emotional attachment can be quantified through the degree of engagement and follower loyalty [25]. To assess audience involvement beyond follower counts, the engagement rate was calculated as a relative indicator of how actively users interact with content in relation to the size of the follower base.

Engagement rate = $[(\text{total number of user interactions on the page}/\text{number of posts})/\text{number of followers}] \times 100$ [26]

The average engagement rate among content creators from Mediterranean and Central European (MCE) countries was 2.09%, while for Northern and Western European (NWE) countries it was 1.92%. In both groups, the average rate hovered around 2%, indicating that audience activity and follower responsiveness remain generally stable and comparable across both Catholic and Protestant cultural markets.

Nevertheless, significant cross-country differences can be observed within both regions (Figure 3). In the MCE group, Italy (3.71%) and France (2.82%)

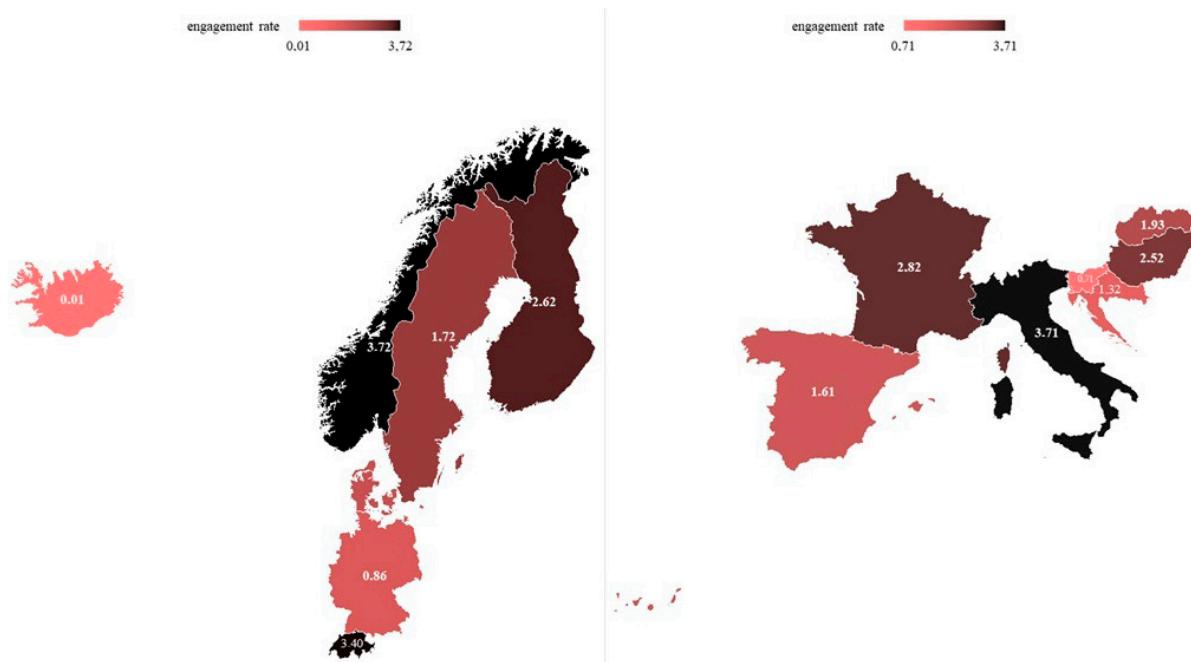


Figure 3. Comparison of engagement rates of the examined influencers by NWE and MCE country groups. Darker colors represent higher engagement rates

Source: edited by the Authors

exhibited the highest engagement levels, whereas Slovenia (0.71%) substantially lowered the regional average. Within the NWE countries, engagement rates showed even greater variation: Norway (3.72%) and Switzerland (3.40%) recorded exceptionally high values, while Iceland (0.01%) demonstrated almost no audience interaction, effectively representing a “dormant market”.

It is evident that engagement levels do not correlate with the size of the country, yet they are not entirely independent of the specific market context. Countries with outstanding engagement levels in both regions offer strong potential for effective influencer campaigns. However, across both cultural groups, strategic market assessment and careful influencer selection remain crucial to ensure the efficiency and credibility of marketing efforts.

Netnographic findings

In the Mediterranean and Central European (MCE) countries, changes in influencers’ follower counts were primarily determined by the nature of their food-related content.

In Hungary, a post featuring a traditional pastry generated a notable daily increase of 230 new followers. In contrast, a post promoting a vegan dessert as part of the “Veganuary” campaign marked a negative peak in audience response (Figure 4). This suggests that the audience tends to resonate more strongly with traditional culinary content than with alternative gastronomic themes.

Similarly, significant fluctuations were observed in Spain. While a post showcasing Dubai chocolates resulted in a loss of 584 followers, another post presenting mango panna cotta attracted 1,137 new followers. These findings indicate that authentic, culturally familiar content performs better among local audiences compared to globally themed or exotic material.

In Italy, a post about Tuscan soup produced one of the largest single-day follower increases in the entire dataset, gaining 5,558 new followers. However, when the influencer shared a Sri Lankan cooking vlog, the account experienced a series of unfollows (Figure 5). This pattern demonstrates that content rooted in different cultural contexts tends to be less well-received by Italian audiences, emphasizing the relevance of cultural proximity in influencer-driven food communication.

In the Northern and Western European (NWE) countries, changes in follower counts were primarily influenced by lifestyle-, event-, and public figure-related content.

In Germany, a post shared from a prestigious event celebrating the influencer’s professional achievements resulted in a loss of 1,107 followers,



Figure 4. Posts of the Hungarian food influencer generating the highest (left) and lowest (right) follower change
Source: Instagram posts provided for analysis by the Sotrender analytics platform



Figure 5. Posts of the Italian food influencer generating the highest (left) and lowest (right) follower change
Source: Instagram posts provided for analysis by the Sotrender analytics platform

while a collaborative post featuring a public figure generated 1,204 new followers. A year-end, four-part recap series likewise led to a decline of 2,540 followers, whereas two Valentine’s Day-themed posts published consecutively triggered a positive trend, attracting 1,701 new followers (see Figure 6).

In Sweden, a series of posts documenting the influencer’s Caribbean vacation (Figure 7) led to continuous unfollows. These results suggest that lifestyle-oriented content tends to resonate less, or at least proves to be highly polarizing, within the food influencer segment among both German and Swedish audiences.

In Denmark, the dataset showed the most consistent growth throughout the observation period. Although



Figure 6. Posts of the German food influencer generating the highest (right) and lowest (left) follower change
Source: Instagram posts provided for analysis by the Sotrender analytics platform



Figure 7. Posts of the Danish influencer generating the highest follower change (left, 3 posts) and the Swedish influencer's post generating the lowest change (right)
Source: Instagram posts provided for analysis by the Sotrender analytics platform



Figure 8. Posts of the Icelandic influencer generating the lowest follower change
Source: Instagram posts provided for analysis by the Sotrender analytics platform

the influencer's content did not rely on personal branding, the account still achieved the second-highest growth rate among the Protestant countries. In Iceland (Figure 8), a New Year's Eve post featuring a non-self-made dessert, followed by the publication of more personal content, resulted in a series of unfollows. Similarly, in Finland, the audience size decreased after a Christmas family-themed post.

DISCUSSION

The role of food influencers in digital health narratives

A central contribution of this research lies in identifying culturally distinct content strategies among influencers from MCE and NWE countries. The findings confirm that consumer decisions related to food are influenced not only by dietary guidelines but also by emotional factors, awareness levels [3], and broader cultural components such as values, beliefs, traditions, and religion. In this context, effective food communication requires cooperation among nutrition experts, chefs, and influencers, not through role homogenization but by combining complementary forms of expertise. Such collaboration can contribute to the dissemination of reliable and meaningful messages about food and health [4].

Influencers operating in NWE contexts tend to integrate personal narratives, emotions, and everyday experiences more openly into their content, even when such openness leads to polarized reactions or follower loss. This pattern aligns with theoretical approaches that conceptualize influencer activity as the management of follower equity within the creator economy, where value is generated through sustained relational engagement rather than solely based on audience size [25]. In contrast, influencers from MCE countries adopt a more restrained, theme-centered communication style. Rather than emphasizing individual self-expression, MCE influencers appear to prioritize audience retention, social harmony, and the reinforcement of collective cultural identities through food-related themes. These differences among European cultures are reflected in food consumption patterns, such as dietary preferences, willingness to adopt sustainable eating behaviors, and the popularity of emerging food trends [1].

The results also contribute to the expanding literature on digital food cultures, which emphasizes the growing role of non-traditional actors in shaping norms of "good food" [13]. Food influencers increasingly act as cultural intermediaries who construct dietary meanings through everyday storytelling rather than expert authority. At the same time, the blurred boundaries between personal expression, cultural representation, and commercial communication.

Earlier studies have documented the prevalence of undisclosed brand mentions and emphasized the need for clearer regulatory frameworks [18], alongside ongoing debates on digital media governance across countries [28]. Although explicit advertising was not the focus of this study, the subtle intertwining of health, authenticity, and lifestyle underscores the complexity of regulating influencer practices.

The representation of health in food communication

The present study demonstrates that food influencers conceptualize health in ways that differ from dominant biomedical or market-driven narratives. While previous studies have shown that images of healthy food tend to increase user interest and willingness to engage [17], the present findings highlight that the meaning of "healthy" itself is culturally constructed and interpreted differently across contexts. This implicit understanding of health aligns with broader research suggesting that eating habits and their social acceptance are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and social contexts [1]. In this sense, health emerges not as a technical or nutritional category, but as a culturally meaningful practice rooted in everyday routines.

Our findings suggests a strong association between homemade food and health resonates with scholarly calls to move beyond the narrow analysis of "healthy foods" toward a broader understanding of "healthy eating" as a socially and culturally embedded phenomenon that integrates food, health, and lifestyle [3]. Notably, influencers appear to enact this perspective organically, without relying on explicit health claims or normative dietary advice. This indirect communication of health is particularly relevant given that "health" has long functioned as a powerful and frequently overused marketing concept [4, 5]. The findings of the present study suggest that food influencers may address this limitation by embedding health-related meanings in emotionally resonant and culturally familiar practices.

Overall, the findings reaffirm that food consumption and its interpretation are strongly influenced by local cultural, social, and economic conditions [1]. They also highlight the importance of acknowledging cultural diversity among actors involved in food communication and encouraging complementary rather than divisive approaches [8, 27]. On social media platforms, interpretations of "good food" circulate unevenly across communities, but they are most commonly associated with a healthy lifestyle, which also facilitates the transformation of food brands into lifestyle-oriented identities [13]. Within the discourse of digital gastronomy, homemade food emerges as a powerful yet culturally differentiated symbol of health, authenticity, and care.

Limitations of the study

When interpreting the results, it is important to acknowledge that the sample of food influencers analyzed was relatively limited in size; thus, the observed patterns cannot be generalized to the entire national markets. Moreover, given the dynamic nature of social media, engagement rates and follower fluctuations are influenced by numerous external factors such as algorithmic changes, seasonal effects, and global events. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than exhaustive representations of long-term behavior.

Strengths of the study

Despite these limitations, the study has several notable strengths. One key strength lies in its qualitative, netnographic approach. Rather than relying solely on quantitative metrics, the study captures the symbolic, emotional, and cultural dimensions of food–health communication on social media. The findings demonstrate how influencers function as cultural intermediaries who translate abstract health ideals into culturally resonant and emotionally meaningful everyday practices. Nonetheless, by segmenting influencers according to the Inglehart-Welzel (2023) cultural map, the research provides a fresh analytical framework for understanding how culinary cultures manifest in digital environments. The findings contribute to the growing scholarly discourse on the role of cultural factors in social media communication and consumer behavior.

Future direction

Future research should prioritize in-depth, short-term trend-exploratory studies that capture emerging patterns in food and health communication. Although longitudinal designs remain important for understanding long-term structural changes. The rapidly evolving nature of social media marketing, driven by frequent shifts in platforms, algorithms, and influencer practices, makes timely trend analyses particularly valuable. Conducting multiple focused studies over shorter periods may therefore provide more relevant and actionable insights than relying exclusively on extended longitudinal approaches. Expanding research to non-European regions would provide clearer insights into how different cultural values shape health-related food narratives and help identify common patterns across diverse digital food cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers a novel perspective on the examination of health narratives by comparing the social media content of food influencers from

different European countries through the lens of cultural background. The primary aim was to explore how cultural differences that shape eating habits are reflected in patterns of food content consumption on social media.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed clear differences between the two cultural clusters. Across both clusters (NEW, MCE), health-related meanings are primarily articulated through the narrative of homemade food. Influencers frame health not through calorie restriction or dieting trends, but through mindful ingredient selection and home cooking practices. Through this discourse, food influencers contribute to reshaping how health is understood, shifting the focus from restriction and control toward care, creativity, and cultural continuity.

From a broader consumer perspective, the association between homemade food and health functions as a symbolic bridge between modern health-conscious attitudes and traditional culinary values. This connection strengthens cultural identity and fosters trust in food-related practices. While these insights offer practical implications for brands and organizations seeking culturally resonant food communication strategies, the deeper significance of the findings lies in their contribution to understanding how digital food cultures reflect wider social meanings of identity, health, and well-being across Europe's diverse cultural landscapes.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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