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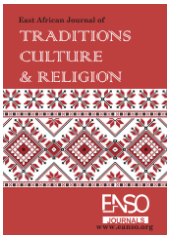

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Original Article

Culinary Globalisation: The Global Spread of Recipes through Instagram and the Impact on Traditional Kenyan Foods

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ABSTRACT

The importance of authentic traditional cuisines goes beyond nutritional benefits and sustenance. They represent cultural heritage and demand to be preserved. In an age where social media platforms inform and have the power to influence consumption choices, Kenyan traditional cuisine faces threats of abandonment for more "insta-worthy" dishes. This study examines the impact of Instagram on the globalisation of food culture and its implications on traditional Kenyan cuisines. Rooted in homogenization theory, the research explores whether Instagram promotes the erosion of local culinary practices by promoting other globally recognisable cuisines. A qualitative approach was applied, combining content analysis of 28 food bloggers' Instagram accounts with semi-structured interviews involving chefs, bloggers, and Instagram users. Findings reveal that globally popular foods- particularly fast foods such as chicken wings- dominate in visibility, while Kenyan local dishes are underrepresented, to the extent of being described as "boring". Kenyan food bloggers often fuse traditional foods with global elements to enhance engagement, but risk diluting the authenticity of the dishes. In a rather unexpected turn, the study also highlights some creators who have embraced traditional foods and cooking methods as their niche, attracting significantly higher engagement metrics compared to the modern creators. Several participants also expressed renewed interest in traditional foods for health reasons. The findings reflect a duality in Instagram's role, complicating the total homogenization assumption aided by digital spaces. The paper concludes by recommending stronger heritage preservation strategies, including UNESCO's food heritage initiative, national cultural festivals, and leveraging social media to persuade younger generations to promote traditional culinary practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Food is more than a source of nourishment and sustenance. Food is just not a basic biological requirement. It is a central cultural symbol that reflects tradition, heritage, and a sense of belonging, shaping both individual and collective identities across societies (Trisutaguna et al., 2025). Authentic Kenyan culinary heritage is reflected in staple dishes like u*gali, chapati, mukimo, nyama choma, sukuma, and githeri.*

National cuisines and traditional dishes are important vessels for carrying cultural knowledge and preserving heritage identity (Okech & Timothy, 2023). In this digital era, food has also become a medium of art, expression, visual storytelling, and cultural exchange. In Kenya, traditional foods represent more than regional diversity. They also carry symbolism and a lot of historical significance.

In today's hyper-connected world, distinct cultural practices are at risk of increasing homogenization. Native languages are going extinct, rituals are being forgotten, and food cultures are being highly influenced by global trends. One of the most powerful drivers of these trends is social media, particularly Instagram. With over two billion monthly active users, Instagram has the power to shape consumer choices in daily life, from fashion styles to which soap is the best- through influencer culture and algorithms. Culinary content has risen to the top of this list. Food content is widely shared, consumed, and promoted on Instagram. Images and videos of step-by-step recipes, expertly plated food, exotic meals, and restaurants that are a 'must-try' dominate timelines. The need for picture-perfect food and digital validation has elevated food into an art that engages global audiences.

Culinary traditions have been religiously passed down across generations through family recipes and cookbooks. Instagram has made this easier and a trend. The platform has become a virtual stage for home cooks, chefs, food influencers, and everyday online users to showcase their culinary experiences globally. Food texts have shifted from authority figures in the field to anyone who dines out and goes online (Zeamer, 2018). Whether sharing restaurant reviews, international food, a recipe that has been in the family for generations, or simply a dish you hurriedly made for dinner after a long day, has immensely contributed to the cross-cultural food narrative. As a result, global cuisines have become more accessible and desirable, including in local settings such as Kenya, where the popularity of international restaurants and food experimentation continues to grow.

While this has diversified the food we eat, inspired so much culinary creativity, and fostered appreciation for other cultures, it also raises concerns about the dilution and marginalisation of traditional local food. The pressure to conform to "insta-worthy" food can lead to the alteration and even neglect of traditional dishes.

In Kenya, international restaurants are more common, especially in urban centres. As the middle class grows and global travel becomes more accessible, there is a heightened interest in diverse culinary experiences (Adzakor, 2024). A quick survey across the major malls around Nairobi city, it is interesting to note that there is not a single

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restaurant whose niche is Kenyan traditional meals. As access to international recipes becomes easier and evidently preferred in urban areas, there is a growing risk that local foods may lose their visibility and intergenerational relevance.

Culinary globalisation is the process through which local and global food cultures intersect, blend, and evolve. Instagram promotes this cultural fusion by enabling users to interact with global recipes, adapt, and reimagine them. Where certain ingredients are unavailable, substitution and improvisation lead to hybrid dishes.

Problem Statement

In today's global village, cultures and traditions are facing erosion, making preservation of culinary heritage a pressing concern. Instagram has changed how food is shared, consumed, and perceived through visual content and algorithm-driven trends across borders. While the platform promotes creativity, cross-cultural appreciation, and innovation, it also raises critical questions about the fate of local cuisines.

In Kenya, traditional foods carry deep cultural and historical significance, yet their relevance appears to be diminishing among younger generations in the face of globalised food trends. The influence of Instagram on culinary practices warrants a closer examination. This study investigates the role of Instagram in influencing the abandonment of traditional foods and whether Kenyan culinary recipes are being adapted in ways that risk diluting their cultural authenticity in pursuit of 'Insta-worthy' appeal.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the correlation between Instagram usage and the dietary preferences of young Kenyans (aged 18-35) towards traditional versus globalised foods.
2. To measure the perceived decline in preparation and consumption of traditional Kenyan foods relative to the promotion of international cuisines on Instagram.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culinary Traditions in the Age of Media-sharing Apps

While there has been much research on the spread of culinary practices through digital media, there is a significant gap in understanding the impact of this globalisation on the preservation of traditional foods, particularly in Kenya. This review combines literature on Instagram's visual culture, culinary systems, gastrodiplomacy and nutrigenomics to critically analyse the tensions between homogenising forces of globalisation and the potential of platforms like Instagram to celebrate culinary diversity and establish the niche for the present study.

Scholars universally acknowledge that the culinary system is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that serves as a core component and reflection of cultural identity, encompassing practices, rituals, and historical narratives that reflect a society's fabric (Adzakor, 2024; Okech, 2023). However, a clear debate emerges regarding globalisation's impact. On one hand, authors like Ogar (2019) and Osorio (2022) highlight how globalisation leads to culinary fusion and the transformation of local cuisines, often detaching food from its traditional meanings. This aligns with homogenization theory, suggesting an erosion of distinct culinary identities. Conversely, institutions like UNESCO and scholars like Strugar (n.d.) propose gastronomy as a cultural bridge, where the recognition of food as intangible heritage can empower communities to express their identity globally.

Within this broader debate, Instagram has become a central site for digital food culture (Feldman, 2021). The platform's visual nature prioritises aesthetics, fostering a culture where food becomes picturesque content. Instagram currently has over 530 million posts bearing the #food and other related tags. In Kenya, food and drink are a favourite topic with a

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large percentage of users considering themselves "foodies" or "food aficionados". These figures are not shocking, taking into account that Instagram users often target specific audiences to gain likes and followers, which can function as a form of social capital and status symbols (Herman, 2017). This very characteristic introduces a critical contradiction. While Instagram offers unprecedented visibility for diverse cuisines, it also commodifies them, potentially reducing complex cultural traditions to visually appealing trends designed for engagement. This paradox is evidenced by research, such as Bragg et al. (2021), which raises concerns about the powerful, targeted influence of food marketing on vulnerable demographics like teenagers- who spend around seven hours online daily- suggesting platforms may prioritise commercial appeal over cultural authenticity.

Food is not only a tool to satisfy hunger, but also a symbol of global identity (Trisutaguna *et al*.,2025). In the early 2000s, the concept of gastrodiplomacy was introduced after a Thai program launched to promote its cuisine abroad. Gastrodiplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy that uses food as a means of persuading audiences about the power of cuisine to promote specific foreign policy goals (Mendelson Foreman, 2024). Similar to public diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy attempts to influence how a nation is perceived abroad, using its cuisine as a soft power tool to enhance its global image. The most common use of gastrodiplomacy is when traditional food is served at diplomatic events, and food is gifted among diplomats and politicians to enrich ties and strengthen bonds (UNESCO, 2025). Beyond enriching diplomatic ties, food tourism has become one of the most common forms of niche tourism, attracting millions of people who travel to sample local cuisines, experience regional food traditions, learn traditional cooking, and enjoy the local eating ambience (Okech & Timothy, 2023). However, its application through social media is faced with challenges related to representation and equitable cultural access and whether the pursuit of an 'Insta-worthy' aesthetic leads to adaptation or dilution (Herman, 2017).

While Feldman (2021) rightly acknowledges the visibility Instagram provides for underrepresented cultures and democratized participation, the existing literature stops short of critically examining the consequences of this visibility at the local level. Therefore, a clear research gap exists: there is a lack of empirical focus on how the algorithmic and aesthetic demands of Instagram specifically influence the perception, adaptation, and potential abandonment of traditional Kenyan foods among local populations. This study directly addresses this gap by moving beyond a description of global trends to investigate whether the platform's architecture ultimately serves to preserve cultural heritage or accelerate its erosion through homogenization.

Food Beyond Culture: Geographical Nutritional Needs

Additionally,
the health and nutritional aspects of culinary traditi ons based on geographical and biological composition need to be considered. Research often focuses on food as a cultural symbol without paying attention to the health impacts of traditional culinary practices. There is a need to explore how traditional diets factored into the functionality of different races. Consider three biological men- an African, an Asian, and an American. Their traditional meals, as well as their nutritional needs, are different. Their individual needs have not changed with globalisation.

Khan (2024) describes nutrigenomics or nutritional genomics as a scientific field involving biochemistry, physiology, nutrition, and genomics to study how genes and nutrition interact, with gene variants predicting how an individual's body will respond to specific nutrients. She continues to explain that human genetic diversity affects food tolerances and dietary needs, shaping different populations' relationships with food. However, it would be ignorant to overlook the limitations of

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nutritional association influenced by environment, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and income (Young, 2023).

Throughout the research, there is consistent evidence of the significance of food on a cultural and identity level. There is also evidence of digital tools influencing culinary consumption decisions. This then begs the question: if culinary homogenization continues, what will happen to individual identities?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Homogeneity Theory

Cultural homogenization is the process by which local cultures become more similar to one another because of the impact of dominating global civilisations. This phenomenon is mostly caused by globalisation and the reach of social media (Balogun & Aruoture, 2024).

Instagram has popularised Western culture, intentionally or subconsciously resulting in substantial cultural transformations and consumption patterns among young Kenyan users. Culinary homogenization is reflected in the world's culinary landscape, which is becoming increasingly uniform, with traditional foods moving aside for fast food and processed meals (Lee, 2025). Homogenised food eating practices have major implications for nutritional outcomes, cultural heritage preservation, and the sustainability of local food systems. According to Lee (2025), the homogenization of diets is largely driven by globalised food markets and trade, which has led to the increased access of international food products; the influence of multinational food corporations with their aggressive marketing and chain expansions; and cultural exchange that has been significantly easier on social media. Instagram chefs may either reinforce standardised global food aesthetics or transform them by mixing global techniques with Kenyan ingredients.

Walsh (2014) points out that people are taking advantage of economic growth and urbanisation to move away from basic staples like rice and beans, in place opting for more diverse diets. He adds that a homogenised diet is not only boring and unhealthy, but the world is also vulnerable to any disaster, as it is heavily relying on a few staple crops. This increases their production and ultimately affects climate change. Lee (2025) argues that local foods are not given enough credit for resisting the homogenization effects and maintaining their unique identities. Credit due to local cuisines is due; however, younger generations might not see their value and simply do not care enough to fight for their preservation.

Palmer (2024), on the other hand, believes those who claim to protect authentic cultures from contact with or contamination by others are almost always acting on a set of ideas that emerged in Europe, even when they claim to be representing allegedly authentic African, native American, Islamic, or other non-European cultures. While these claims may be laced with some truth, they risk oversimplifying the complex nature of cultural exchange while undermining patriotic and heritage preservation efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, combining content analysis of Instagram posts with semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected as it aims to explore the subjective lived experiences and attitudes of Kenyans on globalised food and the subsequent erosion of traditional recipes as facilitated by digital platforms. Given the limited existing research on this specific topic, an exploratory research design is best suited to gain a deeper understanding of the subject, clarify concepts, and generate hypotheses for future research. The study primarily used semi-structured interviews to investigate the research question in more detail.

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The philosophical foundation of this study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm. According to Cresswell and Cresswell (2018), social constructivists seek understanding in the world by developing subjective meanings of their experiences. This study aims to rely on the participants' views on the role of Instagram in their consumption choices to gauge the complexity of views, rather than narrowing it down to a few categories. This strategy enables a deeper exploration of both the visual representation of food and the subjective meanings attached to it by content creators and consumers.

The content analysis purposively sampled 28 Instagram posts featuring recipes, cooking videos, or plated meals, uploaded between January 2025 and July 2025. The posts were identified using hashtags such as #foodie, #recipeideas, #foodiesofinstagram, #instafood, and #Kenyanfood. The Instagram accounts sampled in this study included Kenyan chefs, food influencers, and global food bloggers showcasing Kenyan meals. Each Instagram post was treated as a unit of analysis, examining images, videos, captions, hashtags, and engagement metrics, i.e., likes and comments. The sample size of 28 posts was determined to be sufficient to achieve data saturation for the content analysis, providing a diverse yet manageable collection to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the presentation of Kenyan cuisine.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants, including food content creators, food enthusiasts, and social media users. The small sample size is justified by the in-depth qualitative nature of the study, which prioritises rich, detailed insights over generalizable statistical data. The number of interviews was determined to be sufficient to reach a point of thematic saturation, where new interviews failed to yield new information relevant to the research objectives. The interviews provided deeper insight into how Instagram influences culinary preferences and the impact food trends have on Kenyan food culture.

The data from both the interviews and the Instagram content was analysed manually using thematic analysis. The process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the analysis. A manual approach was chosen for its suitability to the study's scale and its alignment with the constructivist paradigm.

Limitations

This research design is not without its limitations. The process of selecting Instagram accounts, despite carefully guided criteria, was not completely objective, and algorithmic bias may have influenced which posts appeared on the search results. As a result, the samples did not fully represent all Kenyan cuisines, as only a few traditional dishes were featured. The interpretation of the visuals and captions was inherently subjective, and different researchers may draw alternative meanings from the same content.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study prioritised the privacy and protection of the users. Since Instagram is a public platform, most posts were analysed without consent to be studied. Usernames and identification information have been withheld since consent was not granted. Given the minimal risk and the public nature of Instagram content, formal institutional clearance was not required. For interviews, participants voluntarily accepted to be part of the study, gave verbal informed consent, and their names were withheld to preserve confidentiality.

FINDINGS

Instagram Content Analysis

Analysis of 28 Instagram accounts-11 Kenyan, 17 international- revealed a distinct visibility gap for Kenyan cuisine. While local creators primarily

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posted local recipes, international creators largely ignored Kenyan food, with only five such posts found among hundreds scanned. When international bloggers featured African cuisine, they focused on a few popular dishes like Nigerian *jollof* rice, Ethiopian *injera*, and Kenyan *ugali*. Among Kenyan creators, content was dominated by a small cluster of dishes like *ugali, mukimo*, and *kienyeji* chicken, neglecting the full diversity of traditional recipes.

A key finding was the prevalence of food fusion. Kenyan bloggers frequently blended local dishes with global ingredients and methods, often labelling these as "modern methods" or "recipes made easier." These fusion posts were often meticulously plated and garnered high engagement. Globally, fast food trends- especially variations of chicken wings and fried potatoes- dominated feeds, reflecting a shift towards universally appealing, "Instagram-friendly" foods.

However, a notable exception emerged: creators showcasing traditional cooking methods like using firewood and makeshift ovens also attracted significant engagement, suggesting a niche audience for authentic representation.

Findings from Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews with seven participants confirmed Instagram's powerful influence on dietary choices. Users reported being drawn to foreign recipes promoted as "easy," "simple," and visually appealing. Some younger participants described local foods as "boring" and "basic," viewing them as repetitive and lacking variety compared to global cuisines. One participant claimed that Kenyan local food "is the same few dishes in rotation*", needing to explore other cuisines that have variety*. Another said *cooking is an art that should be experimented with, constantly innovated for improvement, and enjoyed according to individual preferences- hence the fusion with other recipes.* This perception was compounded by the platform's role as a space for social display, where traditional foods were seen as less prestigious.

Content creators acknowledged this pressure, with two chefs noting that many traditional dishes are "not photogenic," discouraging their promotion online. On the other hand, older participants expressed strong pride in Kenyan food, emphasising its health benefits and cultural value, often contrasting it with fast food they considered unsatisfying. The phrase "*nikikula hiyo ni kulala njaa"* - translating to *"eating that meal alone equates to sleeping hungry"*- was often repeated when asked about fast foods in their diet. Some bloggers reported alternating between traditional and global recipes to balance authenticity with popularity.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that Instagram acts as a strong agent of culinary homogenization, while simultaneously revealing pockets of resistance that complicate a narrative of total cultural erosion. The findings align with homogenization theory, where platform algorithms prioritise a narrow range of visually appealing, globally recognisable foods (Feldman, 2021), such as variations of parts of chicken, pasta, pizza, and burgers, overshadowing local dishes. This also suggests that some cuisines are more susceptible to globalisation by being easy to package on social media.

This marginalisation has profound implications. As Herman (2017) notes, social media detaches food from its community context, reducing it to an abstract digital representation. The findings suggest that for younger Kenyans, this digital representation is becoming more influential than lived culinary traditions, risking a generational break in the transfer of knowledge. The youths' susceptibility to online food trends and desire to impress an online community came out strongly in the interviews. Describing traditional Kenyan food as "boring" and "basic" and opting to experiment with online recipes instead demonstrates a lack of pride in their

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cultural roots. The concern that local foods are being phased out is not far-fetched, as the platform's economy of likes and shares inherently rewards uniformity over diversity.

The marginalisation of Kenyan food is twofold. Externally, it suffers from low global visibility, with international creators rarely featuring it. Internally, local creators face pressure to adapt, leading to food fusion that increases engagement but risks diluting authenticity. This creates a significant visibility gap, detaching food from its community context (Herman, 2017) and threatening the intergenerational transfer of culinary knowledge, as younger Kenyans gravitate towards what is digitally validated.

However, homogenization is not absolute. The high engagement for content featuring traditional cooking methods indicates a latent demand for authenticity. Furthermore, the valorisation of traditional foods for their health benefits represents a significant counter-trend. This complicates the total homogenization narrative and presents a strategic opportunity. The challenge is that this "African health" narrative is underrepresented online compared to Western wellness trends like avocado toast and green smoothies. Bridging this gap requires both creative representation on Instagram and broader recognition that African heritage diets are not just cultural artefacts but also living systems of nutritional wisdom that resonate with contemporary health movements.

This duality underscores a critical tension. The platform's architecture incentivises uniformity, yet the data shows that authentic cultural expression can also resonate profoundly. The economic imperative of gastrodiplomacy and food tourism (Okech & Timothy, 2023) adds urgency to this issue beyond cultural concern. Tourists seek authentic experiences that include sampling *ugali-mayai* or *nyama choma* and *kachumbari* to ultimately share on social media, rather than chicken wings, which they can find anywhere else in the world. For Kenya to leverage its culinary heritage for national branding and tourism, intentional strategies are needed to bridge the gap between the platform's preference for homogenised trends and the value of its traditional food systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To safeguard Kenya's culinary identity in the age of social media, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Policy-Level Actions

UNESCO Food Heritage Initiative

Traditional culinary practices constitute an important part of intangible heritage throughout the world. These practices also promote a varied diet that respects ecosystems and maintains genetic biodiversity (UNESCO, 2025). Kenya should actively engage with UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage initiatives to formally recognise and protect traditional foods. Official recognition from a reputable organisation such as UNESCO would elevate the pride and visibility of these foods both locally and globally, framing them as crucial sources of identity.

Government-Led Cultural Festivals

National and county governments of Kenya should prioritise holding cultural festivals that showcase traditional foods, drinks and cooking demonstrations. These events should include storytelling about culinary history and cooking demonstrations to pass on knowledge and create a renewed appreciation for traditions that are being phased out. Starting in the former eight main regions, these events would provide a platform for celebrating culinary diversity and fostering national unity.

2. Individual-level Actions

Leveraging Social Media for Promotion and Preservation

Food bloggers, influencers and individuals should be encouraged to creatively showcase more traditional dishes on platforms like Instagram. By

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emphasising health benefits, origin stories and unique preparation methods, they can enhance familiarity and pride in Kenyan culinary heritage. This could further be promoted through incentives and partnerships with regional festivals.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore the role of Instagram in the abandonment of traditional foods in Kenya. Based on qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews on selected Instagram food bloggers, it can be concluded that Instagram plays a significant role in influencing food consumption choices among users, especially younger generations. The results indicate that Instagram clearly accelerates cultural hybridisation, with Kenyan food bloggers adapting traditional dishes to align with global aesthetics. This aligns with homogenization theory, which suggests globalisation creates cultural uniformity by encouraging certain cuisines that are more appealing and marketable. Concurrently, the findings also complicate the total homogenization assumption by revealing areas of resistance. Some creators are successfully using Instagram to revive traditional dishes beyond the more popular dishes. Moreover, the branding of traditional dishes as healthier reassures that local cuisines are not completely disappearing just yet.

Instagram, as well as other digital platforms, with intentional and patriotic food content creators, have the opportunity to redefine, preserve, and promote local foods rather than aid in the erasure of Kenyan culinary heritage if we allow.

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