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Self-branding and content creation strategies on Instagram: A case study of foodie influencers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to better understand the processes and procedures adopted by micro-influencers to create 'instagrammable' content. It is based on 17 in-depth interviews with foodie micro-influencers based in London and Barcelona. Interview data was complemented with participant observation in restaurants or cafes. This paper makes three original contributions. Firstly, the study expands the understanding of the concept of 'instagrammability' by approaching it from the perspective of influencers creating content to satisfy and/or grow an audience. Secondly, it illustrates how two dominant factors drive influencers' content creation process: the self/audience focus content branding orientation. The 'audience-focus' content development process varied drastically, with some influencers being very conscious of responding to their audiences' needs whereas others maintained first and foremost a very strong 'self-focus'. However, even for the influencers who were the most responsive to their audiences' perceived wishes, a sense of 'self-focus' was maintained as an anchor point in all developed content, often linked to a passion for a certain type of food. Thirdly, this paper maps and describes the *behind-the-scenes* content creation process adopted by micro-influencers, including four stages (1) *Content Planning,* (2) *Media Gathering*, (3) *Editing,* and (4) *Publishing*, which was followed by an engagement phase. This study offers a timely contribution to better comprehend the content creation cycle adopted by micro-influencers by using foodie influencers as a case study.

1. Introduction

Content creation is the cornerstone of social media marketing. Several scholars (e.g., Arriagada, 2021; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019) have analysed content creation on social media. Following Bourdieu (1993), Arriagada (2021) argues that content creation and advertising are cultural and economic activities that increasingly

interact with each other and operate 'according to rules, strategies, players, and capitals' (p. 2). Increasingly, social media influencers take care of (sponsored) content creation on social media (e.g., Enke & Borchers, 2021). Enke and Borchers (2021) define influencers as 'third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web' (p. 7). Studies that focus on analysing influencers' content can be divided into two main research perspectives: self-focused and audience-focused content.

In the 'self-focus' perspective, contents are studied as constructs of influencer's identity (e.g., Erz & Christensen, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Studies of self-identity driven content tend to investigate an influencers' motivation to post and share content online as a form of self-expression, life documentation, or sharing a deep interest in a field (e.g., Chen, 2012; Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). A key aspect of social media content developed by influencers is self-branding. The concept of self-branding is a combination of self-presentation and personal branding (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Like product branding, personal branding entails capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2005). According to Labrecque et al. (2011), personal branding refers to personality and authenticity. As such, self-branding is a process used by influencers to craft and promote their authentic selves in relation to a topic of their interest, reflected in the content they produce (Erz & Christensen, 2018). Self-presentation strategies reveal that depicting or explicitly referencing a physical body is one of the techniques to construct a digital identity and project a digital likeness (Schau & Gilly, 2003). In the 'audience-focus' perspective, content is examined as a persuasive communication tool to attract audiences, including tactics to promote the visibility of the posts (Cotter, 2018; Scolere et al., 2018) as well as retain, entertain, and win the trust of followers (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). The way in which the content is presented, such as media *vividness* (visual richness) or *interactivity*, are also crucial elements of content creation strategy (e.g., Lou & Xie, 2021).

When discussing the characteristics of successful content on the Instagram platform, the term 'instagrammability' is used within both the academic literature and general media (e.g., content that is suited to the platform and is likely to do well is 'instagrammable', or has 'high levels of instagrammability'). Research has found that the photogenic aspect/use of environment cues such as props, brightness and colour contribute to instagrammability (Campbell et al., 2022; Hosie, 2017). In addition to this, according to Unger and Grassl (2020), the term instagrammability can differ in terms of perceived meaning and level of influence depending on the audience, with some evidence demonstrating generational differences between the pull of instagrammability.

Most existing research on influencers focuses on beauty and lifestyle influencers (e.g., Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Torjesen, 2021). However, less academic attention has been paid to food influencers (e.g., Goodman & Jaworska, 2020; Weber et al., 2021) despite the amount of content shared about food on social media (Parry, 2019). While some studies focus on human interaction with food (Abril et al., 2022; McDonnell, 2016; Weber et al., 2020), such as the use of smartphones when dining out (Weber et al., 2020) or sharing food porn images on social media (Abril et al., 2022; McDonnell, 2016), others pay attention to food influencer activities (e.g., Goodman & Jaworska, 2020; Mainolfi et al., 2021;

Miguel et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2021). The term 'food influencer' has been used to refer to celebrity chefs (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020; Rowe & Grady, 2020), home cooks (Ashman et al., 2021; Barnes, 2022), or food bloggers (Koch, 2017; Naulin, 2019). This study focuses on 'foodie influencers', a type of food influencer positioned as a food lover who mainly posts restaurants reviews and occasionally some recipes (Miguel et al., 2022) since there is less research specifically in this type of food influencer.

Issues related to food content creation and authenticity have been discussed by some scholars (Miguel et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2021). In the study conducted by Weber et al. (2021), participants preferred the label 'food content creator' over influencer since the term often implies a lack of authenticity. Despite significant efforts in preparing, decorating, and staging food photos, these Instagram foodies consider themselves as 'content creators' instead of 'influencers' because they prepare the food and the props like an 'art' while 'influencers' are individuals who could just post food photos from a restaurant to promote a business (Weber et al., 2021). In their visual analysis of food images on different media such as cookbooks, magazines, and digital media, Taylor and Keating (2018) identified four food images stylistic frameworks, namely, innovation, entertainment, mastery, and authenticity. Unlike other types of contents such as fitness, fashion, and beauty (where influencer's physical appearance is often formed an important part of the content), food influencers rely more heavily on pure food images or recipes (Lewis, 2020; Yang, 2019).

Although some studies on food influencers have examined the effect their content has on their audience (e.g., Mainolfi et al., 2021), there is a lack of understanding about the processes that 'foodie influencers' follow to create content which achieves the desired influence and level of engagement. As Enke and Borchers (2021) observe, influencers have acquired certain skills that are necessary to produce and distribute successful content on social media. Over time, influencers develop an understanding of the dynamics that operate in different social media and the workings of their algorithms, and they strategically use hashtags, mentions, captions and schedule the timing of posting to maximise the exposure of their content. Building on the study conducted by Weber et al. (2021), which identified food influencers' motivations and practices around food content creation, this paper analyses the *behind the scenes* processes and procedures adopted by 'foodie influencers' to create 'instagrammable' content. This paper aims to answer two research questions to shed light on influencers' professional practice: (1) What are the different steps on foodie influencers' content creation process on Instagram? and (2) What are the content strategies used by foodie influencers on Instagram?

2. Methods

The paper focuses on the foodie influencers active on Instagram since it is the most popular platform among foodies (Koch, 2017; Lewis, 2020). Instagram yields hundreds of millions of posts with the hashtags #food and #foodporn (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022; Taylor & Keating, 2018). The sample included 17 foodie micro-influencers (<100k followers) (Gan et al., 2019) who had high levels of engagement within the hashtags '#londonfoodies' and '#bcnfoodies'. Different studies (e.g., Erkli, 2022; Park et al., 2021; Satı & Kazancoglu, 2020) show that micro-influencers are more persuasive than macro-influencers to engage audiences. Following Satı and Kazancoglu (2020), Erkli

(2022) argues that food influencers who have niche followers and share posts, especially in the regions where consumers live (local restaurants) could be more effective than macro influencers. Sample selection involved identifying the top foodie influencers using the Instagram 'explore tool'. This enabled those posts with the highest engagement and activity levels to be identified (Thomas, 2021). The selection of Barcelona and London was led by the active number of posts with foodie hashtags, which was the highest among European cities. For example, #bcnfoodies (253,000 posts) and #londonfoodies (627,000 posts) have much more posts than other European cities like Paris (#parisfoodies with 45,500) or Berlin (#berlinfoodies, 44,800 posts). The sample (see Table 1) includes influencers specialised in certain types of food (e.g., croquettes, ramen, Omani, gluten-free) as well as more general foodie influencers who write reviews about all types of restaurants, ensuring a cross-sector of the foodie domain is covered here.

The fieldwork took place in the Summer of 2019. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as they enable participants to explain the complex meanings they have constructed in their own words (Walliman, 2016). Thirteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, three via Skype, and one via telephone. Interviews in Barcelona were conducted in Spanish and translated into English to facilitate the data analysis. The interview process followed a semi-structured approach, taking elements of both a structured and unstructured approach as per Fontana and Frey (2000). Whilst topics of discussion were pre-set, questions were asked in an open-ended manner, and follow-up questions were asked as each interview progressed (Bryman, 2016; Powell & Brubacher, 2020). Participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to the interviews taking place (Nijhawan et al., 2013) and they were given the option to remain anonymous. However, all the participants chose to disclose their Instagram moniker and supported publication and dissemination of the findings. The identification of their handles was viewed as a reward for them, since participants reported that their main motivation to participate in the study was gaining visibility of their foodie accounts via potential publications.

Table 1. Foodie influencer participant Instagram activity (data gathered 3 October 2022).

London Foodies	Posts Followers	Barcelona Foodies	Posts Followers
Eastlondongirlblog	2457 55,800	Alotroladodelamesa	611 5690
Elliecroissant	1031 14,800	Thefoodiemark	2006 12,300
Foodieatwithu	277 2955	Donacroquetabcn	718 14,000
Dinewithdina	458 23,800	Guirifoodie	74 6947
Jojoandandy_ (Jojoeatslondon)	801 18,200	Foodtrendsbcn	458 13,400
Londonmunch	2035 6036	H2bcn	1583 5130
Squibbvicious	2851 8068	Ikigairamen	177 13,500
Angelinafoodandtravel	1081 23,600	Quesecueceenbcn	2936 71,500
Thatguyeats	291 2773	Donafoodie (*)[a]	758 7182

[a](*) donafoodie is a brand extension of donacroqueta. Therefore, it is the same micro-influencer under both accounts.

In order to be embedded in the foodie influencers' context, most interviews (13) took place in eateries and cafes in London and Barcelona. This setting also allowed the researcher to observe the foodie influencers in action *in vivo*, since most participants took advantage of the free meal offered as a reward to participate in the study to create content for their foodie account. Previous studies on foodies (e.g., Getz & Robinson, 2014; Vila et al., 2020) also used participant observation to capture the *behind-the scenes* content creation process of the food images they will later share on social media. In this study, participant observation helped to understand and contextualised the influencers' content creation practices such as setting the scene, shooting, and writing notes about the food. The rest of the interviews (4) took place via (video)calls and participants received an Amazon voucher as a reward. Data were later analysed utilising NVivo software to identify key themes following the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Oliveira et al., 2016).

3. Creating the foodie brand image

The first stage of being a successful content creator is to establish a public persona on social media (Enke & Borchers, 2021; Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020). There were a range of factors that contributed to a foodie influencers personal brand image. When discussing the creation of their own personal brands, many participants reported the need for having a unique selling point (USP) as observed in previous studies (e.g., Chen, 2012; Labrecque et al., 2011; Taylor & Keating, 2018). For example, the guirifoodie (F and M, Barcelona) based their posts' creative process on original and funny pictures. They used a Playmobil man (which looks like a hipster, and it is supposed to be a foreigner visiting

Figure 1. The guirifoodie in Eroica Caffe.

Figure 2. The guirifoodie in Al Norte.

Barcelona) in all their pictures to create that unique brand personality (see Figures 1 and 2) as per the innovation dimension of Taylor and Keating (2018) stylistic framework.

Other participants focus their foodie accounts on niche content (often influenced by their backstory), such as gluten-free (alotroladodelamesa); croquettes (doñacroqueta); ramen (ikigairamen), or Omani food (dinewithdina). As illustrated in the following excerpt, this positioning on a niche content increased their engagement rates:

> The minute I actually started posting about Omani and Zanzibar food, I noticed more people became really interested because there was no one else in the UK that does Omani food or Zanzibar food (dinewithdina, F, London).

Although having a very niche positioning (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013) can be a good self-branding technique, it can also be detrimental to reach larger audiences. In response to this, one participant reported setting an additional foodie account up to complement his previous one (which was focused on croquettes). While keeping the same brand identity than doñacroqueta by using the same colours and imaginary (see Figures 3 and 4), he managed to utilise the well-known benefits of brand extension by leveraging the positive associations of the existing brand (Park et al., 1991) in the new brand doñafoodie.

Some participants maintained a very substantial 'self-focus', using their Instagram accounts as a means of self-expression, with any content produced or collaborations needing to fit with a fixed element of the identity they portray online. An example of this is when they discussed turning down collaborations which they feel did not fit with their foodie brand:

Figure 3. Doñacroqueta's logo.

Figure 4. Doñafoodie's logo.

> I choose them [restaurants] on the basis of whether they look good to 'me' - and it's something I would like to try … generally it has to appeal to me. It has to look like it can 'fit' my brand (londonmunch, M, London).

In addition, a range of branding techniques were used including the use of unique identifiers such as logos (see Figures 5 and 6), watermarks, or the use of personally branded hashtags (e.g., #thatguyeats, #guirifoodie) to link content to their accounts.

Still within the confines of the 'self-focus', some participants wanted to portray an element of their own identity, which was somewhat more fluid and diverse, and thus, allowed for a broader type of content. Findings show the need for some foodie influencers to come across as someone who tries new things or trend-setters, in line with the study conducted by Naulin (2019). For example, foodtrendsbcn (F, Barcelona) and quesecueceenbcn (F, Barcelona) explained that they wanted to position their brands in the 'what's going on' topic. In fact, 'Que se cuece' means 'what's going on' in Spanish, and the useful expression includes the word 'cuece' which means to boil, providing a word play to refer to what's going on in terms of the culinary scene in Barcelona. Regarding 'self-focus' and identity construction content, influencers walk a fine line between maintaining a constant personal branding image and adaptation to changes. Content creators attempt to maintain a consistent image of their personal brands through choices of images and information shared with others (Labrecque et al., 2011) as well as the way their narrative is organised and structured (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This is because the authenticity of a personal brand is positively enhanced by perceived stability (i.e., the consistency in behaviours and trueness in personality and characteristics) (Moulard et al., 2015).

On the other hand, there were mixed opinions in terms of influencers appearing in their own posts as part of their own self-branding. Some influencers were against

Figure 5. Thatguyeats' logo.

Figure 6. Quesecueceenbcn's logo.

appearing as they felt it detracted from the focus of the food. However, in line with existing literature (e.g., Weiss, 2014) which shows how increasingly food influencers are also becoming social media performers, some participants felt that appearing in their post assisted engagement and personalisation of the account. As some empirical studies have shown, influencers' branding strategies evolve overtime through different stages to suit new audiences (e.g., Erz & Christensen, 2018; Khamis et al., 2016; Labrecque et al., 2011). Other scholars observed that influencers renew self-presentation tactics such as changing from simple self-expressive and storytelling posts to more managed and deliberate content curation (Erz & Christensen, 2018) or developing professionalism and standardisation (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021) once they have reached a large number of followers. Therefore, they move from a 'self-focus' content approach to an 'audience-focus' approach.

4. Audience-driven content creation process

As per the existing literature, the audience focussed foodies were more concerned with the elements of their post that appealed to the taste of their followers as opposed to their own self brand, with 'instagrammability' often being rooted in the immediate visual characteristics of the content posted. One interesting context specific quality of instagrammability that was discussed was the concept of 'food porn' (Taylor & Keating, 2018), images including cheesy hamburgers, dripping chocolate desserts, or liquid egg yolk (e.g., cutting an omelette). 'Food porn' was reported to increase posts' engagement, which is consistent with existing research on the impact of media vividness (Li & Xie, 2020) and close-up images (Yang, 2019) on engagement levels, for example:

Typically, I think across Instagram food blogging - a picture of a burger is most *instagrammable* and attracts most likes. Yeah, I just find that a burger is the most photogenic piece of food (londonmunch, M, London).

Every now and then we post some videos if like, for example, we've got one where the yolk on the top of the eggs benedict is like hot, and like all the yoke is running out. And that looked really good (jojoeatslondon, F & M, London).

The findings of this study also supported existing research which suggested the ever-changing environment of a social media platform (including features, algorithms, etc.) impacted the way in which content was created, forcing the foodie influencers to tailor their content to the platform (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Scolere et al., 2018). Participants used a range of social media tools to increase the exposure of their content (e.g., mentions, hashtags). In particular, participants extensively discussed their use of hashtags. Although a few of them did not use hashtags (see Figure 7), most influencers who took part in this study often use the maximum amount they were entitled to use on Instagram, this is 30 hashtags. Figure 8 shows a post whose content was gathered during the course of their interview, including the maximum number of hashtags allowed by Instagram.

However, tactics would differ from influencer to influencer, with some using hashtags as a tool to create their personal brand (as explained earlier), others to increase reach, or both:

I do try and mix and matching. But yes, you know, there might be 10 for one set, and 10 from a restaurant, or food set, and so on and so forth (H2bcn, M, Barcelona).

Like there are some core elements like #londonfoodies, like #londonmunch which I keep in all of my posts (londonmunch, M, London).

This was partially in line with previous studies on 'platform dependence' which discusses the notion that influencers are being mindful that the circulation and visibility of their

Figure 7. Post with caption including emojis but no hashtags.
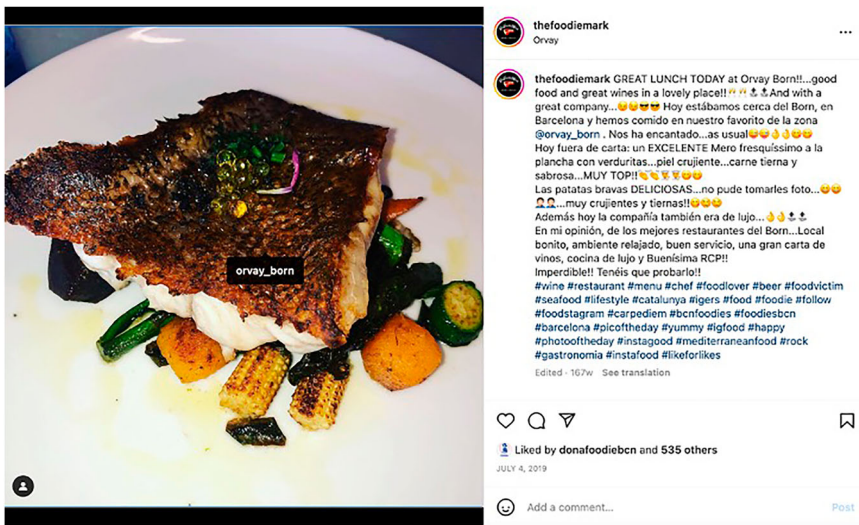
Figure 8. Post using a single picture, 30 hashtags, and a tag to the restaurant.

content is dependent on platform specific algorithms (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020), or in the context of this study, how the use of hashtags on Instagram played a key role to make the content 'findable'. Beside using incentive and visual appeals and hashtags, other content promotion techniques adopted by participants included scheduling timing for posting, frequency of posting, and direct engagement (sharing thoughts and opinions with the audience, commenting or responding to the audience's reactions), as observed in former studies (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Okuah et al., 2019). Consideration was given to engagement levels to choose the time of posting (of which judgements were reached as a result of trial and error) and the influencers work patterns, as demonstrated in the following quote:

> I've done research around this, and I've got on Instagram about the insights and my audience is more active towards the evening. And so, I tend to, if I post once a day, it'll either be at 7:30 am, lunchtime, preferably 5 pm to 6 pm when people are leaving work, but I don't have a scheduler, you know, so it's just me, when I'm free (eastlondongirlblog, F, London).

The findings of this study add a further dimension to the concept of 'platform optimisation' which was not discussed in previous studies (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Scolere et al., 2018) in terms of the best time to post content to maximise engagement. In relation to frequency of posting, most participants posted on average three times per week. In contrast to existing literature which suggests that influencers are under pressure to constantly produce new content for their audience (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; McLachlan & Cohen, 2021), participants in this study appeared to be less pressured to post content every day than fashion and beauty influencers. They had other jobs that were their main source of income, and their foodie influencer activity was just an extra income, usually in the form of free meals. For most participants, being a foodie micro-influencer was seen as a hobby and they were aware this was an activity that it was hard to monetise to the extent to earn for a living.

5. Foodie influencers content planning process

The first stage of the content creation process was the *content planning* and was often influenced by the engagement they received in previous posts. Most influencers carefully planned and designed their content before posting on a pre-planned date and would have a 'bank' of content available at any one time. Therefore, the amount of content already 'banked' and curated by the influencers awaiting publication would influence the urgency of starting this process again. There was, however, room for some spontaneity to fit unplanned events in their agendas. This is echoed in the following quotation:

> We've got a whole plan of like upcoming posts and the captions that we've got for them. We've already written the hashtags that we're going to use next to the captions. So, we've also got upcoming places that we're going to be visiting, like dates and times (…). But obviously if we go to an [unexpected] event … . then we will slot that in. So, you know, we can move things around (jojoeatslondon, F & M, London).

During the content planning phase, the foodies (both self focussed and audience focussed) demonstrated that they were consistently mindful about what content worked and what did not in terms of engagement levels of posts on Instagram as per discussions on instagrammability in previous sections, often referred to past experiences of creating content and characteristics of the said content which they felt worked on Instagram. For example:

> At first it used to just be focused on like one dish and I try and get the right photo quite close up with minimal backgrounds and things I wish I'm trying to make it like look pretty include like little decorations, little flowers or whatever. And that tends feel that works (dinewithdina, F, London).

After planning, the second part of the content creation process was the *media gathering* phase. This took place at restaurants (participants combined visits to restaurants of their choice with collaborations) or foodie influencers events, along with planned shooting of food content at home for some of the participants. The said setting would often impact the time an influencer could devote to creating content in terms of preparing the scene. For example:

> The photos [taken with home cooked food] are good and they were planned. But in the restaurants, you have to set up at that moment (ikiramen, M, Barcelona).

The media gathered would normally consists of photos and/or videos, which would be utilised in a range of formats on Instagram (e.g., posts, stories). Participants demonstrated a strong preference for still images, partially due to a lack of familiarity with capturing video content, represented in claims such as 'I'm not as comfortable as maybe the younger generation just snapping a video' (H2bcn, M, Barcelona) or 'I still don't know much about video. I asked a friend to help me with it, to help me record' (foodtrendsbcn, F, Barcelona), and the lack of ability/time to adequately set the scene. All foodie influencers interviewed in this study were devoted to taking the time required to gather media to a standard that would allow them to publish professional-looking content. Indeed, many participants commented that most times they ate their food cold because of the long time they needed to set the food and take the pictures. Previous studies demonstrated the benefits of creating professional-looking content on Instagram posts (Li & Xie, 2020;

Pletikosa Cvijikj et al., 2013; Yang, 2019) which the participants demonstrated awareness of as per the previous section. However, this study acknowledged pressures which limited the time foodie influencers could employ on staging the food and taking pictures and videos in restaurants, such as not wanting to disrupt other diners, people they were dining with, or maintaining a balance between being able to take a good photo but also personally enjoying the occasion:

> If I am in a restaurant I try and do it as fast as possible unless they ask me to take pictures as I don't want to disrupt other customers and I don't want the food to go cold (elliecroissant, F, London).

Many participants reported to go to restaurants where other foodie influencers had been or even going with other foodie influencers to a restaurant to create content together. However, despite promoting the same restaurants (and often the same menus), a wide range of individual preferences when it comes to media gathering and content creation make the content looking distinctive:

> Different influencers definitely do have different styles. I've been at events where you could have 10 different influencers take a picture of the exact same dish of food, and you will have 10 completely different pictures (thisguyeats, M, London).

The third stage of the foodie influencers content creation process is the *edition* phase. There was a strong desire to produce quality content for their collaborations, which involved a lengthy time in the edition stage. For the most part, this process occurred after the visit to the restaurant or event, partially because of the time taken to perfect content, but also for safety reasons according to some female influencers. For example:

> For safety reasons, I will always wait till I have left. I've never encountered in person any dangerous people, but I think posting your exact location on the internet is not a safe thing to do (elliecroissant, F, London).

Participants discussed lengthy editing periods, sometimes approaching three hours, although not as lengthy as the editing times quoted in other studies (Weber et al., 2021). The editing stage included editing photos using an app of choice, deciding on format (e.g., post, story), writing the caption, choosing accompanying hashtags, etc. Some of the foodie influencers utilised Adobe apps (Photoshop, Lightroom) to edit their pictures, whilst others used Snapseed by Google or Vsco. A key influencing factor over the choice of the editing app was the level of expertise by the influencer (e.g., some held full time positions in Communication roles which required knowledge of professional apps such as Photoshop) or time available (some influencers commented positively on the versatility of Snapseed). As opposed to the study conducted by Weber et al. (2021), where food influencers who created content about home food mainly used PCs to edit their pictures, participants mainly used their smartphones to edit the pictures, for example:

> I do everything through my mobile phone, that is, no photo passes through my computer. I use one (app) called Vsco. I have a lot, that is, I have all the applications to edit videos and to edit photos (alotroladodelamesa, F, Barcelona).

While some participants used carrousel, videos, and stories, most foodie influencers who took part in this study preferred to create posts with just one single picture and a rather long caption to explain the food experience.

The fourth phase of the content creation process identified in this research is entitled the *publishing stage.* This part of the process related to the procedures took by foodie influencers when posting their content on Instagram. As indicated in the first stage of this process (*planning*), it was commonplace for influencers to have a bank of content which they would strategically publish at planned intervals. It was also common practice among participants to publish created content much later than the date the media was gathered, although some content was sometimes published on the day of a visit (usually a story) at the request of the restaurant. Participants would often publish content on set days, usually three days a week (although a few participants posted every day). After the content creation process was finished, the *Monitoring and Interacting* stage would be initiated, where influencers would reply and like comments, as well as answering to private messages that they often received asking them for food recommendations.

6. Discussion

Our research adds context to many of the back-end procedures that took place in influencers' content creation process (e.g., Sutherland, 2021; Weber et al., 2021). This paper makes three new contributions. Firstly, this paper extends our understanding of 'instagrammability' as an academic concept and in the context of foodie influencers. It does this by illuminating the community specific qualities which have not been discussed in previous studies (e.g., Campbell et al., 2022; Unger & Grassl, 2020) and by examining it from the perspective of content creators rather than personal users.

The framework in Figure 9 builds on existing research on the concept of instagrammability (Campbell et al., 2022; Unger & Grassl, 2020) by highlighting the generic characteristics of instagrammable content. Based on the findings of this study and previous literature, we would offer the following generic definition of instagrammability:

> Instagrammability is an umbrella term which implies the likelihood of successful engagement levels of any content posted specifically on Instagram, encompassing the characteristics of successful content on the platform, most notably the tailoring of content to suit features and algorithms specific to the Instagram platform, to appeal to a given audience that is active on Instagram, the overall quality of media presented and the acknowledgement of qualities specific to a particular online community.

The last element of the definition above is important as this implies there will be elements of instagrammability that stay confined to particular communities of practice. In the context of foodie influencers, the qualities of instagrammable content differed depending on the orientation of the influencer. Self-focussed influencers would argue that one the most important characteristic of instagrammability relates to content that appeals to their self-brand (e.g., fixed element of their identity). Conversely, audience-focussed influencers placed greater emphasis on immediate content characteristics when discussing instagrammability, utilising community specific terminology to describe visually appealing content (e.g., 'food porn').

Secondly, the findings of this paper reinforce existing research insofar that they demonstrated the importance of acknowledging both a 'self-focus' (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011) and 'audience-focus' (Audrezet et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wang et al., 2019) influencers content creation motivations. We also provide a
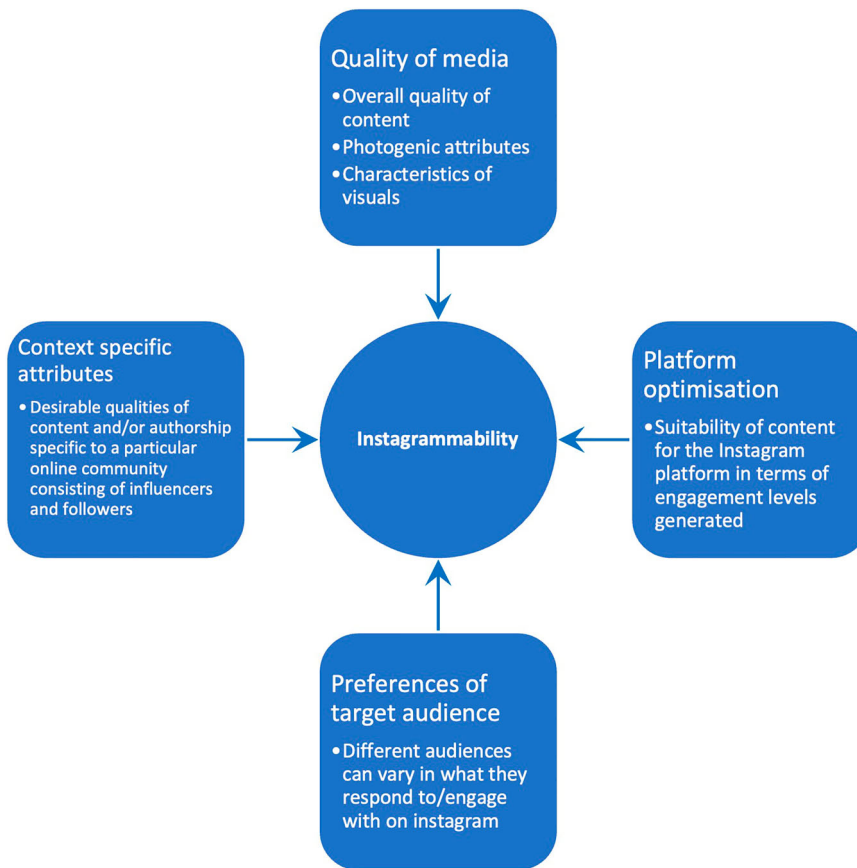
Figure 9. Defining instagrammability.

new perspective of how these two elements work alongside one another in terms of influencing content created by influencers. This study found that whilst the level of 'audience- focus' varied substantially among participants, a sense of 'self-focus' was evident with all of those interviewed and almost acted as an anchor point.

However, even the most self-focussed foodie influencers were influenced by the 'instagrammability' (Campbell et al., 2022) of their posts, demonstrating at least some mindfulness of variables which would lead to higher levels of engagement on Instagram. Therefore, it could never be said that an influencer fell fully into the 'self-focus' or 'audience-focus' category. The 'audience-focus' content development process varied drastically, with some influencers being very conscious of responding to their audiences' needs whereas others maintained first and foremost a very strong 'self-focus'.

Finally, this study mapped a clear process adopted by foodie influencers when creating content for Instagram. This is outlined in the above diagram (Figure 10), which conceptualises the different stages of the content creation process in a decontextualised manner. Whilst there were some differences in the time frame attributed to this process, Figure 10 represents an accurate account of the stages that participants progressed through when creating content for their foodie Instagram accounts. Although the process is limited to
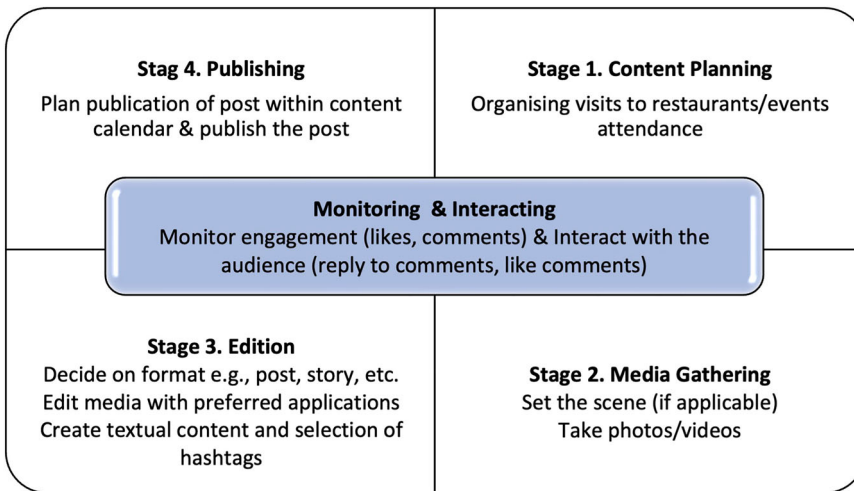
Figure 10. The content creation process among foodie influencers.

an individual piece of content, in practice the influencers would often be working and managing multiple pieces of content at the same time, hence constantly engaged in different procedures. This is reflected in the cyclical nature of the framework, which reflects that the process is often ongoing with new content being sought when others finish.

This study echoed some similarities to the work of Weber et al. (2021) in terms of the passion demonstrated by participants for creating great content, in addition to other studies which described content preferences (Lewis, 2020; Taylor & Keating, 2018; Yang, 2019). However, one important difference to note between this study and Weber et al.'s (2021) was that the majority of participants in their study were full time influencers, wheras in this study participants created foodie content as a hobby and balanced their 'foodie' activities with a full time occupation. As a result, there were some clear differences in the content creation processes of both studies. For example, the content editing times quoted in our study were far shorter (up to three hours per post as opposed to eight) and Adobe Photoshop was not used as universally, with most of the influencers in our study preferring to use smartphone apps such as Snapseed for reasons associated with time, convenience, and lack of expertise with professional software. In the context of content creation, this is an important contextual difference which we would argue needs greater appreciation in any future study on influencer activities.

7. Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the influence of 'instagrammability' on the content creation process, as well as an influencer's level of self and/or audience focus. Findings show that even for the foodie influencers who were the most responsive to their audiences' perceived wishes, a sense of 'self-focus' was maintained as an anchor point in all developed content, often linked to a passion for a certain type of food. This study offers a new framework which maps a content creation process adopted by foodie influencers,

including four stages (1) *Content Planning,* (2) *Media Gathering*, (3) *Editing,* and (4) *Publishing*, which was followed by an engagement phase. This framework can be used to provide structure to future research in the area. There are practical implications implied by the findings of this study. By enhancing existing knowledge of the content creation process adopted by micro-influencers, this would allow marketers to give more careful consideration to the ways in which they work with them at each stage of this process to maximise the benefits of any collaboration.

There are four main limitations to this study: (1) the issues concerning self-selection bias in social research (e.g., Bjering et al., 2015); (2) the focus of the study on micro-influencers, and (3) the focus was on European foodie influencers and (4) the meal offered as a reward might have fostered forced content creation. First, a limitation relates to self-selection bias. However, the cumulative experience base of the purposive sample (e.g., Creswell & Miller, 2000; Johnson & Weller, 2002) helped to minimise this limitation. Second, none of the participants monetised their accounts to the extent where they were able to make a full time living from their food-related content. They maintained their Instagram accounts as a hobby or extra income. At the time of this study participants could be categorised as 'micro-influencers'. Third, the focus of the current study was on European foodie influencers; there could be further research on cultural differences by comparing foodies from different continents. Finally, offering a meal as a reward might have prevented participants from behaving completely naturally from the constraint of presenting a quid pro quo in the interview and might have forced content creation.

Further research would need to be conducted to explore self-branding techniques as well as the content creation process within influencers with much larger followings since their practices may defer from amateur foodie influencers. Also, there is scope for much wider studies in this area, utilising content analysis to identify posting patterns over a much wider range of accounts. In the context of content creation, future research could investigate the content creation process within other influencers communities of practice beyond foodies (e.g., fashion, lifestyle) incorporate a comparative study approach to examine until what extent other influencers communities of practice engage on different content creation processes as opposed to foodie influencers. In the context of instagrammability, there is scope for more context-specific research outside of the foodie community to expand the understanding of this concept further, and to compare in more detail perceptions of instagramability between self-focussed and audience-focussed influencers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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