



VISUAL STORYTELLING AND GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE: Digital Narratives of Traditional Caribbean Restaurants on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how traditional restaurants on the Colombian Atlantic coast employ visual communication strategies on social media platforms to represent gastronomic heritage within contemporary visual culture. Grounded in a visual arts perspective, the research focuses on visual storytelling, aesthetic composition, and digital narratives as mechanisms through which cultural identity and authenticity are constructed and communicated. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyses the presence, interaction patterns, and visual formats adopted by restaurants across different platforms, highlighting both communicative practices and technological limitations. The findings reveal a predominance of static visual content and limited innovation, underscoring the need to strengthen visually driven narratives that contribute to both cultural representation and competitive positioning.

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1. Introduction

In the digital era, rapid technological advancements have driven a global transformation of unprecedented magnitude (Asparrent-Revollar et al., 2023). This shift has presented both opportunities and challenges, prompting gastronomic establishments to adopt innovative strategies for promotion and commercialization (Hikmawati et al., 2022; Molina et al., 2023). Among these, social media communication, enhanced user experiences, and active engagement between users and restaurants stand out as particularly impactful (Cabrera-Cordova et al., 2023; He & Zhang, 2022; Lepkowska-White, 2017). Restaurants specializing in traditional cuisine, which form part of the cultural identity and tourism appeal of their regions, are navigating a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Digital platforms have proven to significantly shape consumer preferences and purchasing behaviors (Grillo Torres & Moreno López, 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Rafael-Baltazar et al., 2023). In the Colombian context, gastronomic establishments have strategically integrated social media into their digital marketing efforts, not only as tools for visibility but also as cultural spaces where traditions are represented through images, videos, and storytelling. This success is largely attributed to the implementation of innovative communication approaches and the effective management of information and communication technologies (Asparrent-Revollar et al., 2023; Gong et al., 2021; Grillo Torres et al., 2023; Molina et al., 2023). The growing influence of digital platforms has transformed how restaurants interact with their audiences, fostering new forms of cultural consumption where food is simultaneously a product and a symbol of identity. As Kent and Taylor (2021) note, social media fosters dialogic engagement and enables users to participate in shaping meanings around cultural experiences.

However, traditional food establishments in Colombia's Caribbean region often lack the strategic and technological resources needed to fully leverage digital platforms. While their presence on Facebook and Instagram is strong, visual innovation remains limited, and platforms such as TikTok and YouTube are underutilized, reducing their ability to reach younger audiences and global markets. This situation highlights a pressing need to better understand how these restaurants currently use social media and where opportunities for improvement exist. Given the cultural and economic significance of traditional cuisine in the region, it is essential to examine digital communication practices as visual channels that mediate cultural identity and heritage. As Lin et al. (2022) argue, gastronomy is not only a driver of tourism but also a medium of cultural representation that contributes to well-being and identity construction. Similarly, Wingate et al. (2021) emphasize that communication practices in restaurants shape customer experience and influence perceptions of cultural authenticity.

In this context, the present research contributes specifically to visual culture studies by examining how digital images and visual narratives on social media construct meanings of gastronomic heritage and cultural identity, positioning gastronomy as a visual and symbolic expression within contemporary digital culture.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

In the case of traditional restaurants, the ongoing digital shift presents both opportunities for greater visibility and significant challenges in maintaining cultural authenticity (Cardona-Sánchez et al., 2020; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2025; Moreno & Tejada, 2019). The integration of digital platforms is not merely a technical adjustment to new tools but rather a cultural reconfiguration in how culinary experiences are mediated, represented, and marketed to global audiences. The process of digital transformation has evolved from being considered an optional strategy to becoming an operational necessity, especially in service-oriented sectors such as gastronomy, where communication practices are intimately tied to notions of heritage, identity, and authenticity. Studies show that digital tools enhance branding, streamline operational processes, and expand consumer reach, creating opportunities for restaurants to compete not only locally but also on global stages (Chakraborty et al., 2023; Fabrizio et al., 2022; Melović et al., 2020). As emphasized by Gruss et al. (2020), social media platforms like Facebook foster a sense of belongingness that can be strategically harnessed by restaurants to strengthen consumer attachment to cultural food brands, thereby transforming online communication into an affective and identity-driven process.

Despite these opportunities, traditional restaurants face structural and symbolic barriers to full adoption of digital strategies, including financial constraints, limited human resources, digital illiteracy, and persistent fears of diluting cultural identity through commercialization (Molina et al., 2023; Moreno and Tejada, 2019). Family-owned restaurants, which form the backbone of gastronomic heritage, often perceive digital marketing as a double-edged sword, where visibility comes at the expense of potential misrepresentation of culinary traditions. Owners frequently express concern that online promotional practices could trivialize or commodify their practices, reducing deeply embedded cultural values to superficial marketing images (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2022; Grillo Torres, 2022). This has led scholars to stress that innovation in the gastronomic field must be carefully balanced with the preservation of authenticity and the reinforcement of local identity. According to Lin et al. (2022), gastronomy operates as a cultural medium that simultaneously enhances well-being, promotes identity construction, and sustains heritage, meaning that its representation in digital spaces must be handled with a high degree of cultural sensitivity to avoid cultural erosion.

The concept of consumer engagement has become central to digital strategies in gastronomy. Interactive platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok enable emotional bonding and facilitate the co-creation of narratives between brands and consumers (Haushalter et al., 2023; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Zahoor, 2022). These interactions are not merely transactional but symbolic, as they create opportunities for consumers to feel part of a collective identity built around culinary traditions. Yet research indicates that many traditional restaurants continue to struggle with generating active participation from users, often due to a lack of professional management of their digital presence or insufficient investment in content creation (Lee & Lee, 2020; Wibowo et al., 2021). Visual storytelling has therefore emerged as a vital strategy for these establishments. Grounded in cultural values, visual storytelling allows restaurants to create affective connections, presenting images and audiovisual narratives that reinforce heritage and cultural identity (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Park et al. (2021) highlight that visual content, particularly high-quality photographs and video storytelling, enhances perceptions of authenticity and increases consumer trust, demonstrating that food is not only marketed as a product but also as a cultural symbol.

Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook dominate this landscape, serving as the primary vehicles for visual storytelling and reach (Appel et al., 2020; Celimli and Adanacioglu, 2021). These platforms privilege visual aesthetics, making them particularly useful for restaurants aiming to showcase traditional dishes, restaurant atmospheres, and narratives around cultural experiences. On the other hand, platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have gained significant traction among younger audiences, who increasingly consume short-form videos that blend entertainment with cultural learning (Dolan et al., 2019; Yuan & Lee, 2023). However, small businesses often underexploit these opportunities due to limited resources, lack of expertise, or unclear strategic direction (Grillo-Torres et al., 2023; Sashi et al., 2019; Seifert & Kwon, 2020). In this sense, the adoption of innovative content such as behind-the-scenes videos, cooking demonstrations, or interactive live sessions has proven particularly effective in boosting perceptions of authenticity and trust (Bu et al., 2021). Nevertheless, oversaturation of digital content creates the challenge of differentiation, requiring restaurants to develop culturally grounded and creative strategies to stand out in crowded digital markets (Audrezet et al., 2020; Song et al., 2022). Geurts (2019) further argues that communication operates as a form of commitment sharing, where the symbolic exchange between speaker and audience creates common ground, suggesting that cultural narratives in digital gastronomy function not only as marketing devices but as acts of cultural negotiation.

Emotional branding and experiential content have also become decisive factors in the success of digital communication for gastronomic heritage. Narratives such as the historical origins of dishes, symbolic connections to local communities, or stories about culinary practices enhance consumer loyalty and increase cultural visibility (Nasir et al., 2021; Rautela, 2021; Sung et al., 2023). These strategies allow restaurants to transform their digital profiles into cultural archives that extend beyond product promotion to heritage preservation. At the same time, technological tools such as augmented reality, geolocation services, QR codes, and mobile personalization offer new avenues for enriching consumer experiences (Huang et al., 2021; Nagele et al., 2021). Although these tools remain underutilized in traditional contexts, they hold considerable potential for creating immersive experiences that bridge the gap between digital presence and cultural authenticity. With careful cultural sensitivity, these innovations can strengthen

heritage value by enabling consumers to engage with gastronomy in ways that extend beyond the restaurant itself (Azeem et al., 2021). Kent and Taylor (2021) contend that dialogic engagement through social media fosters collaborative meaning-making and strengthens social change, an idea particularly relevant for gastronomy as a cultural resource that requires active dialogue between stakeholders.

At a broader societal level, digital transformation intersects with cultural tourism, local entrepreneurship, and post-pandemic recovery processes. Scholars have emphasized that digital platforms are no longer confined to marketing functions but extend into operational domains such as reservation systems, customer feedback loops, food safety protocols, and online reputation management (Li et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Peco-Torres et al., 2021). This convergence blurs the line between service provision and cultural communication, reinforcing the notion that digital tools serve both operational and symbolic functions in the gastronomic sector. Wingate et al. (2021) emphasize that communication challenges in restaurants are not only operational but also directly shape perceptions of cultural authenticity and trust, highlighting the role of digital engagement in constructing consumer experiences. Moreover, the rise of visual culture studies underscores how digital images and storytelling practices not only market products but also actively shape cultural meanings, reinforcing the symbolic dimension of gastronomy (Mouritzen et al., 2024).

A review of the literature reveals both advances and persistent gaps. While scholars increasingly recognize that digital transformation reshapes gastronomic practices through visual and interactive communication strategies, most studies remain concentrated on fast-food chains, large franchises, or urban contexts in developed economies. As a result, there is limited understanding of how heritage-based restaurants in Latin America negotiate the tension between authenticity and commercialization in digital visual spaces. Traditional restaurants in these contexts often operate under severe resource constraints, limiting their ability to implement sophisticated digital strategies. Furthermore, there is insufficient exploration of how cultural heritage can be authentically represented in digital spaces without falling into over-commercialization. The literature also reveals a lack of research on the bidirectional dynamics of communication in heritage-based restaurants, where consumer feedback and co-creation of cultural meaning through social media can either reinforce or dilute authenticity. Addressing these gaps requires studies that situate gastronomic communication within the framework of visual culture, heritage preservation, and cultural identity, offering new theoretical and practical contributions.

In response to the gaps identified in the literature, particularly regarding the visual representation of gastronomic heritage in digital environments, this research is situated within the field of visual arts and contemporary visual culture. The study aims to analyse how traditional restaurants on the Colombian Atlantic coast construct and disseminate visual narratives on social media platforms, focusing on visual storytelling, aesthetic strategies, and modes of interaction. By examining images, audiovisual content, and digital communication practices, the research seeks to understand how gastronomy operates as a visual and symbolic expression of cultural identity within digitally mediated spaces. From an analytical perspective, this study is guided by a set of exploratory propositions rather than statistically testable hypotheses. It is assumed that traditional restaurants predominantly rely on static visual formats, such as photographs, rather than immersive audiovisual narratives to represent gastronomic heritage on social media. It is also expected that visually elaborated storytelling strategies foster higher levels of user interaction and symbolic engagement. Finally, the limited incorporation of innovative digital tools is presumed to constrain the development of more immersive and culturally expressive visual narratives. These propositions serve as analytical lenses to guide the interpretation of the empirical findings.

3. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the digital communication strategies and online presence of traditional food restaurants located along Colombia's Caribbean coastal region, an area with a rich gastronomic tradition that is integral to its cultural tourism offering. By combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative coding techniques, the study enabled a comprehensive understanding of how these establishments interact with digital audiences, how visual elements are used in communication, and how effectively they contribute to preserving cultural identity in a competitive gastronomic landscape.

The qualitative component involved an in-depth analysis of the content and structure of restaurant websites and their social media profiles. The analysis focused on variables such as publication frequency, type of content shared, discursive tone, user engagement levels, and the degree of technological adoption. Social media platforms evaluated included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. This allowed the identification of cultural elements, visual narratives, and communicative strategies used to strengthen cultural positioning and audience connection. For the quantitative component, a dichotomous coding scheme was used to transform qualitative observations into measurable indicators, thus ensuring greater precision and replicability. This coding system allowed for the evaluation of reach, engagement, innovation level, and consistency of digital communication practices, enabling comparative analysis across the sampled restaurants.

The study sample consisted of 15 traditional restaurants, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling, following the methodological recommendations of Otzen and Manterola (2017). Selection criteria included: (1) documented revenue growth in 2022 (as reported in the 2023 Sector Regulatory Report: Fast Food Chains and Restaurants, *lanota.com*), (2) active presence on at least two major social media platforms, (3) culinary variety reflecting regional or heritage gastronomy, and (4) relevance and recognition in the local market. The sample captured a diverse cross-section of the sector, including both heritage-oriented and modern fusion-style restaurants.

Quantitatively, the restaurants varied in size and digital influence. Average menu prices ranged from COP \$20,000 to \$80,000, and Instagram follower counts ranged from fewer than 1,000 to over 107,000 followers. For example, Varadero Pescados & Mariscos and Pescayé had notably high digital visibility, while others such as Caimán del Río and Taganga represented more modest business models with smaller yet active online communities. Qualitatively, the sample included establishments promoting Afro-Colombian cuisine (e.g., Palenque Kusina Mestiza), traditional seafood (e.g., Fogón Marino), and modern culinary formats with live entertainment (e.g., Sabina).

To systematize data collection, two Excel-based instruments were developed based on the methodologies of Badell (2015) and Neuendorf (2017). The first instrument recorded website features and general social media activity; the second focused on interactivity metrics, content diversity, and technological innovation. Data collection was conducted during the first half of 2023, with subsequent data analysis taking place in the second half of the year.

Ethical principles of social research were strictly adhered to. All restaurant-related data were anonymized, encrypted, and securely stored. No personally identifiable information was collected, and informed consent was obtained from relevant representatives. These measures ensured the transparency, validity, and integrity of the research in accordance with international ethical standards.

4. Results

The analysis of social media data from traditional cuisine restaurants along Colombia's Caribbean coast reveals distinct patterns in their digital communication strategies. All restaurants maintain active Facebook profiles, highlighting the platform's extensive reach and its effectiveness in engaging a broad audience. Additionally, 93% of the establishments are present on Instagram, emphasizing its value for visual storytelling, promotional content, and fostering user interaction through creative formats.

In contrast, platforms such as Twitter exhibit limited adoption, primarily serving for brief updates and not perceived as essential by most establishments. Approximately 26% of the restaurants maintain active profiles on TikTok, indicating its increasing relevance in attracting younger audiences through dynamic and viral video content. YouTube, despite its capacity to host extended audiovisual materials suitable for brand storytelling and culinary demonstrations, is utilized by only 20% of the sample (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participation of traditional food restaurants from the Colombian Atlantic coast on social media platforms

Medios Sociales	Frecuencia	%
Facebook	15	100%
Instagram	14	93%
X (Twitter)	5	33%
TikTok	4	26%
YouTube	3	20%
Pinterest	0	0%
Snapchat	0	0%
Vimeo	0	0%
LinkedIn	0	0%
Foursquare	0	0%
Delicious	0	0%
BeqBe	0	0%
Spotify	0	0%

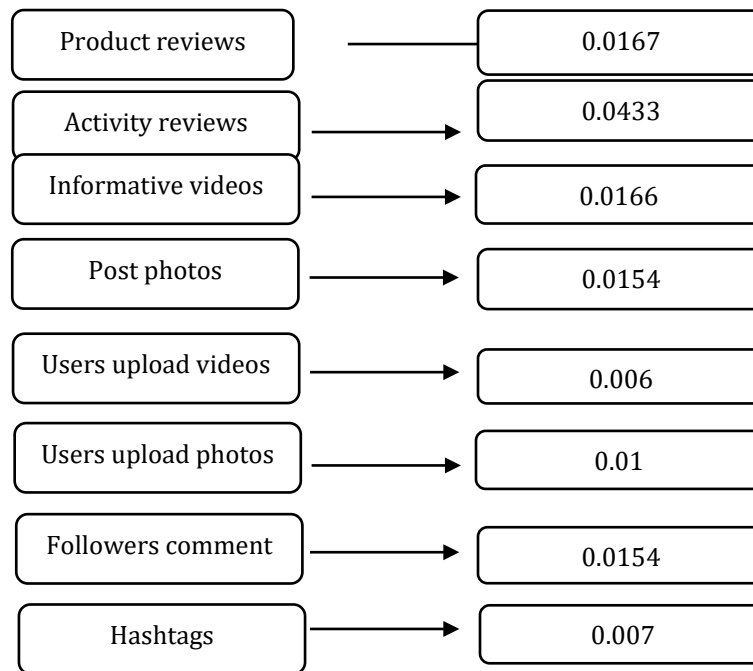
Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025.

The analysis reveals a clear preference for visual social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. These platforms not only enable restaurants to engage with their audiences but also provide spaces where culinary traditions are represented through images of emblematic dishes, coastal landscapes, and festive atmospheres, reinforcing the symbolic dimension of gastronomy as cultural heritage. The low engagement on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter suggests significant untapped potential for diversifying and expanding their digital visual strategies.

In terms of technological innovation in communications, there was a lack of interactive activities to engage customers and enhance their experience. No apps with innovative features that could differentiate these restaurants in the market were identified.

Virtual events, a key aspect in the digital age for gastronomic establishments, have not been fully utilized to increase audience engagement and reach. Interactive maps, which could enhance the customer experience, have not been effectively implemented. Moreover, technologies like QR codes and NFC, which facilitate transactions and quick access to information, have not been integrated into marketing and operational strategies, limiting accessibility, information flow, experience, reservations, visibility, and overall marketing.

The absence of geolocation and augmented reality limits the ability of restaurants to offer personalized and immersive experiences to customers. The absence of digital communication innovation affects the restaurants' ability to attract customers, compromising their position in a market that values creativity and technological adaptation.

Figure 2. Social Media Communication of Restaurants on the Colombian Atlantic Coast

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025.

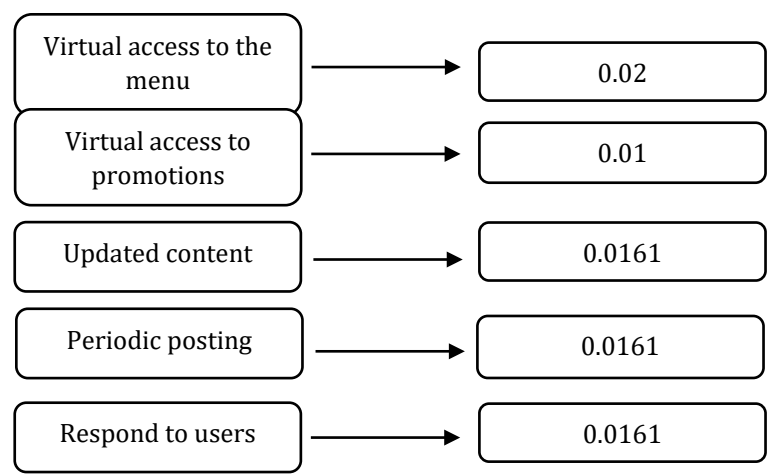
Emphasising interactions that encourage active engagement between users and consumers, a discernible pattern emerges in the frequency of comments related to products and activities, indicating a strong level of user involvement. The majority of the social media profiles examined demonstrate consistent engagement through the sharing of informational videos and photographs, showcasing the strategic use of visual content. Nevertheless, contributions from users remain scarce, and there is no substantial presence on niche platforms (See Figure 2).

It's important to highlight that comments on products and activities showed a high rate of interaction on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Similarly, informational videos and photographs were consistently posted across these platforms, reinforcing their role in the digital communication strategy of these restaurants.

In comparison, Twitter follows a similar pattern, though with fewer multimedia posts, but a higher use of tags. TikTok stands out for its high engagement with video content and comments, although photos are less frequent due to the nature of the platform. YouTube focuses primarily on video content, with moderate user contributions, while LinkedIn sees lower content frequency and limited use of tags and hashtags.

From this analysis, it can be inferred that restaurants on Colombia's Atlantic coast primarily focus on sharing content related to their products and activities, while user-generated contributions are minimal. Furthermore, digital tools such as mobile applications and RSS feeds are not utilized. Conversely, tags and hashtags are more prevalent on visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Figure 3. Sharing of Digital Content from Restaurants on the Colombian Atlantic Coast through Social Media



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025.

The evaluation of digital strategies implemented by traditional coastal cuisine restaurants along Colombia’s Caribbean coast reveals several key findings. Although digital menus are available through Facebook and Instagram, user engagement with this feature remains minimal—only 2% of users interact with it—indicating underutilization of this resource. Similarly, while promotional content represents a core element of these restaurants’ social media strategies, it generates engagement from merely 1% of users, raising concerns about its actual effectiveness or alignment with audience interests (see Figure 3).

Regarding other aspects of the digital strategy, the download of textual content is minimal in a third of the social profiles analyzed, as indicated by the low percentage of 0.3% in the graph, showing that it is not a frequent practice. Likewise, despite dynamic audiovisual content activity on Instagram and TikTok, the download option is minimal, reflected by 0.5% in the graph. Concerning frequent content updates, it is essential to maintain audience interest, particularly on Instagram and TikTok, where users value such updates, as evidenced by 2% in the graph.

Additionally, periodic posting is frequently seen on Facebook and Instagram. The 2% reflected in the graph underscores the importance of maintaining a dynamic and frequent presence to ensure adequate audience engagement. Interaction with users is highly active on these social networks and is essential for fostering appropriate customer retention. The 2% reflected in the graph highlights the importance of responding to comments and inquiries to optimize the customer experience. Lastly, online press activity is very limited across a third of the social networks analyzed. LinkedIn stands out, where a slight advantage of 0.2% is observed in the graph, indicating that restaurants are not yet fully leveraging this digital medium for promotion.

Regarding digital communication innovation, the analysis reveals a pronounced absence of advanced tools across the social media profiles of traditional coastal restaurants. The lack of interactive features likely contributes to reduced customer engagement and limits experiential depth. Likewise, the absence of mobile applications restricts the personalization and efficiency of user interactions. The underuse of virtual events represents a missed opportunity for broader outreach and community engagement. Furthermore, the omission of interactive maps hinders user navigation and accessibility, reducing the potential to attract both local and tourist clientele.

The analysis also reveals that QR codes are not being utilized, significantly affecting missed opportunities to implement digital menus and promotions. Similarly, the absence of NFC codes limits the offering of innovative and convenient experiences for customers. Finally, the lack of geolocation implies a lack of personalization and contextual adaptation in customer interactions, limiting the restaurants’ potential to offer an integrated and modern experience to their audience.

Finally, a detailed analysis was conducted of various factors related to social media presence, such as the number of followers, “likes,” post frequency, and tone of communication. The social media activity

analysis shows that Instagram and Facebook have the highest number of followers for the restaurants analyzed. Instagram stands out with significant numbers, such as 107,000 followers for Varadero Pescados & Mariscos and 71,000 for Pescayé. In contrast, Facebook, though with fewer followers than Instagram, also presents notable figures, such as 23,314 followers for Varadero Pescados & Mariscos and 10,000 for Caimán del Río.

Compared to Instagram and Facebook, the presence on Twitter and TikTok is significantly lower. For instance, Varadero Pescados & Mariscos has 1,043 followers on Twitter, while Pescayé has 3,067 on TikTok. Social media platforms like YouTube and LinkedIn showed minimal follower counts, generally fewer than 10, indicating a lower investment or focus on these networks.

In terms of “likes,” most were obtained on Facebook. For example, Varadero Pescados & Mariscos leads the list with 22,845 “likes,” followed by Restaurante Mistura Barranquilla with 8,300 “likes” and Tabaca with 1,600 “likes.” This suggests that Facebook remains crucial for attracting and retaining customer attention. Similarly, Pescayé has managed to obtain 9,435 “likes” on TikTok, demonstrating that this platform can be highly effective for restaurants that create engaging, viral content. In contrast, Restaurante Mistura obtained 2,630 “likes” on Instagram, highlighting the importance of this platform for visual food promotion. Other platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn showed minimal interaction in terms of “likes,” suggesting lower effectiveness in restaurant promotion or a lack of support on these networks.

The analysis of post frequency indicated that, on average, approximately 18.9 posts per week were made by the restaurants across a third of the social networks analyzed, reflecting moderate interactive communication. In terms of audience participation, each consumer posted approximately one comment per week, providing a detailed and accurate view of user engagement levels. The tone of communication is predominantly positive, which should be leveraged to highlight favorable reviews. While not exempt from criticism, particularly regarding delivery times, it is important to diversify social media content and communicate transparency and improvements in service.

To further consolidate the empirical findings, the following visual examples are introduced as analytical evidence of the communication patterns identified across social media platforms. These figures are presented to visually demonstrate how traditional restaurants translate gastronomic heritage into digital visual narratives, in line with a visual culture approach.

As evidenced in the analysis, Instagram functions as a key platform for visual storytelling, where gastronomy is framed as a cultural and symbolic experience. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 4, which presents an Instagram post from one of the analyzed traditional restaurants. The image reflects the use of aesthetic composition, visual atmosphere, and cultural references to construct a narrative of authenticity and heritage, positioning food as a visual expression of identity rather than merely a commercial product.

Figure 4. Example of Instagram visual storytelling by a traditional Caribbean restaurant



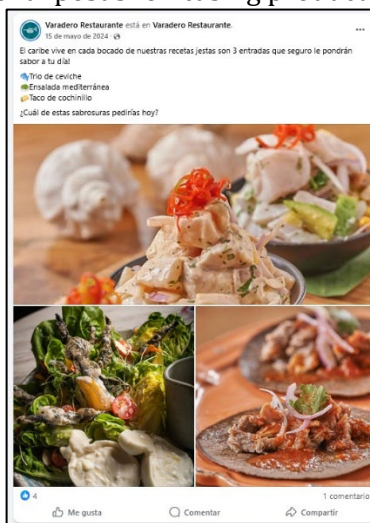
Note. Instagram post from the Varadero restaurant illustrating visual storytelling practices associated with Caribbean gastronomic heritage through aesthetic composition and cultural references.

Source: Instagram (Varadero Restaurante, 2024).

In contrast, other communication practices identified in the results prioritize product visibility over narrative or cultural representation. This approach is exemplified in Figure 5, which displays a Facebook post centered on promotional content. The visual composition emphasizes the product itself, with limited

contextual or symbolic elements, illustrating a more instrumental use of imagery that reduces the potential for cultural storytelling.

Figure 5. Facebook promotional post showcasing product centered communication



Note. Facebook post by the Varadero restaurant emphasizing product visibility through a promotional visual composition with limited cultural or symbolic references.

Source: Facebook (Varadero Restaurante, 2024).

Together, these visual examples substantiate the analytical findings by highlighting the coexistence of distinct visual communication strategies among traditional restaurants. The contrast between narrative-driven and product-centered imagery underscores the uneven development of visual storytelling practices and reinforces the need for more culturally grounded visual approaches within digital communication environments.

5. Discussion

This study on the social media strategies of traditional food restaurants along Colombia's Atlantic coast reveals consistent patterns in platform usage and content deployment that illustrate both opportunities and persistent challenges. The findings highlight a marked preference for Facebook and Instagram, which aligns with prior research emphasizing the centrality of these platforms in digital food service communication (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Their visual affordances such as images, videos, and stories not only facilitate promotional activities but also function as symbolic vehicles for cultural representation. In this sense, restaurants have effectively utilized the most accessible tools available to them, although their strategies remain limited to the most mainstream platforms.

The restricted adoption of emerging platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter contrasts with global trends where short-form video content, viral marketing, and real-time interaction have become essential for capturing younger audiences (Himmelboim & Golan, 2019; Vasquez-Reyes et al., 2023). This underutilization represents a significant gap, as these platforms have proven especially effective in promoting cultural products and shaping new consumer habits. Restaurants that fail to embrace these spaces risk narrowing their audience base and losing relevance in increasingly dynamic digital environments. The evidence presented here suggests that digital adoption is uneven, reflecting structural barriers but also attitudinal resistance to innovation, which may hinder long-term competitiveness.

Regarding content strategies, the preference for visual posts and stories demonstrates awareness of the importance of aesthetics and authenticity in consumer engagement. This finding is consistent with literature emphasizing the role of creative and culturally grounded content in stimulating interaction (Audrezet et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2020). Yet the content analyzed often lacks depth, privileging static promotional messages over visual storytelling that highlights heritage, traditions, or community values. This limited approach reduces opportunities for audiences to engage with gastronomy as a living cultural

expression and instead frames it as a mere promotional product. This suggests that while restaurants recognize the importance of visibility, they have not fully explored the potential of narratives that connect consumers to identity and heritage. The risk, as other scholars note, is that digital presence becomes reduced to surface-level promotion rather than a genuine cultural representation.

Another gap identified is the limited incorporation of innovative technologies such as augmented reality, QR codes, geolocation, and interactive maps. The absence of these strategies contrasts with growing evidence that such tools enrich consumer experiences, foster interactivity, and enhance brand differentiation (Huarng et al., 2021; Nagele et al., 2021). The lack of technological adoption not only reduces competitiveness but also limits the ability of restaurants to design immersive experiences where consumers engage with cultural heritage in dynamic ways. In this regard, the findings emphasize the urgency of aligning digital innovation with heritage promotion, rather than treating these dimensions as separate or incompatible.

The analysis of user engagement reveals promising but incomplete results. The active interaction on Facebook and Instagram shows a degree of responsiveness to consumer interest, consistent with the observations of Song et al. (2022) and Celimli and Adanacioglu (2021). However, engagement remains limited to one-directional interactions, with scarce evidence of user-generated content, dialogic communication, or participatory co-creation. This finding reflects an underdeveloped approach to community building, where consumers are treated as passive audiences rather than active contributors to cultural storytelling. The literature highlights the importance of dialogic models in social media communication, which foster stronger emotional bonds and enhance perceptions of authenticity. Without this, digital communication risks remaining transactional and superficial.

Taken together, the findings reveal a paradox. Traditional restaurants in the Colombian Atlantic coast acknowledge the value of visual communication and maintain a strong presence on digital platforms. Yet their strategies reveal hesitation toward deeper innovation, both in platform diversification and in the use of visual storytelling as a medium for cultural expression. This tension illustrates the challenge of balancing economic visibility with cultural authenticity, showing that gastronomy in digital spaces is both a heritage practice and a commodified image.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample of 15 restaurants, although representative of the study area, limits the generalizability of the results to other regions or countries. Second, the analysis focused exclusively on digital behaviors observable on platforms, without incorporating consumer perspectives that could shed light on how strategies are perceived in terms of authenticity and effectiveness. Third, the study considered only the main social media platforms, leaving aside alternative or emerging digital channels that may also play a role in cultural promotion.

Future research should broaden the scope to include a larger and more diverse sample of traditional restaurants in different Latin American regions, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. It would also be valuable to integrate consumer perspectives through surveys or interviews to understand how audiences interpret and respond to digital strategies. Longitudinal studies could examine how the digital presence of restaurants evolves over time and how changes in strategy impact consumer loyalty and cultural visibility. Finally, future research should explore how emerging technologies can be incorporated in ways that enhance authenticity, ensuring that digital innovation is not pursued at the expense of cultural heritage but as a tool for its preservation and promotion.

From a visual arts perspective, the findings demonstrate that social media platforms function as contemporary exhibition spaces where gastronomy is curated through images, videos, and digital aesthetics. These platforms operate similarly to visual galleries, where cultural meanings are negotiated and visually performed. The predominance of static imagery and the limited use of immersive audiovisual formats suggest that many traditional restaurants remain at an early stage of visual narrative development. This reinforces the relevance of visual culture methodologies for understanding how everyday cultural practices, such as gastronomy, are transformed into visual expressions within digital environments.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this research was to analyse how traditional restaurants on the Colombian Atlantic coast employ visual communication strategies on social media to construct and disseminate narratives of gastronomic heritage within contemporary visual culture. From a visual arts perspective, the study examined how images, audiovisual content, and digital aesthetics contribute to the representation of cultural identity and authenticity. The findings allow for a critical assessment of current visual practices and highlight the potential of visual storytelling as a strategic and cultural resource.

The findings confirm the predominance of Facebook and Instagram as the most widely used platforms, with their visual affordances serving as powerful tools for promoting gastronomy as a cultural and tourism asset. However, the limited use of platforms such as TikTok and YouTube highlights a strategic gap that restricts the ability to connect with younger audiences and diversify outreach. The study also underscores the need for more authentic storytelling, as current strategies focus heavily on promotion and underexploit the potential of cultural narratives.

A further conclusion is that technological innovation remains limited. The absence of tools such as augmented reality, QR codes, and geolocation suggests that restaurants are not fully capitalizing on available resources to create immersive and interactive experiences. Engagement, while present on Facebook and Instagram, remains largely one-directional, limiting opportunities for co-creation and participatory communication with consumers. The study demonstrates that cultural heritage can be strengthened when digital communication evolves toward dialogic and visual narratives that allow users not only to consume but also to participate in the construction of meaning.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to visual culture studies by explaining how digital images and narratives shape perceptions of authenticity and cultural identity within gastronomic contexts. From a practical perspective, it provides actionable recommendations for traditional restaurants, including the diversification of platforms, investment in innovative technologies, and the development of visual storytelling strategies grounded in heritage. These insights are particularly relevant for emerging economies, where gastronomy operates as both a driver of tourism and a symbolic representation of identity and collective memory.

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