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SOCIAL MEDIA, CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: PROMOTING LOCAL CULINARY HERITAGE THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the ways in which local culinary heritage is represented, promoted, and experienced within tourism markets. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok enable cultural entrepreneurs, local food producers, chefs, community enterprises, and tourism organizations to communicate culinary traditions beyond their immediate geographical boundaries. This paper examines the relationship between social media, cultural entrepreneurship, culinary heritage, and sustainable tourism through a thematic analysis of existing literature. Six interconnected themes emerge from the analysis: digital storytelling and culinary heritage visibility; cultural entrepreneurship and local economic empowerment; authenticity and cultural identity; user-generated content and tourist engagement; digital platforms and sustainable destination development; and tensions involving commodification and platform dependence. The analysis suggests that digital platforms can provide small cultural enterprises with greater visibility, strengthen place-based storytelling, encourage tourist engagement, and generate entrepreneurial opportunities. At the same time, digital visibility may contribute to cultural simplification, commercialization, unequal platform access, and the modification of culinary practices primarily for tourist

consumption. The study proposes a Digital Culinary Heritage Entrepreneurship Framework explaining how heritage resources can be transformed through digital storytelling, tourist engagement, and cultural entrepreneurship into sustainable tourism outcomes. The study concludes that responsible digital promotion requires community participation, authenticity, equitable benefit distribution, local ownership, and cultural continuity.

KEYWORDS: Social media, cultural entrepreneurship, culinary heritage, sustainable tourism, gastronomy tourism, digital storytelling, tourist engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is more than a basic component of the tourism experience. Local cuisine represents collective memory, regional identity, agricultural practices, community traditions, rituals, and knowledge transmitted from one generation to another. Traditional food therefore constitutes an important component of cultural heritage as well as an economic resource for tourism destinations.

The growing interest in food-related travel has contributed to the development of culinary tourism, gastronomy tourism, and food tourism. Ellis et al. (2018) explain that food tourism extends beyond the simple consumption of food during travel and involves a broader interaction among culture, place, authenticity, identity, and tourist experience.

At the same time, tourism communication has undergone significant digital transformation. Travellers increasingly discover destinations through photographs, reels, videos, reviews, hashtags, influencer content, and other forms of user-generated media. Because food is highly visual and experiential, culinary tourism has become particularly compatible with social-media communication.

Social media also offers considerable opportunities for cultural entrepreneurs. Cultural entrepreneurship involves the transformation of cultural traditions, heritage, creativity, and symbolic resources into social and economic value. Within the culinary sector, cultural entrepreneurs may include traditional cooks, chefs, small restaurants, food producers, farmers, community organizations, market vendors, culinary guides, content creators, and family businesses.

Digital platforms allow such entrepreneurs to communicate directly with prospective visitors without depending entirely on traditional tourism intermediaries. Entrepreneurs can explain the history of traditional dishes, demonstrate preparation methods, showcase regional ingredients, introduce local producers, and connect food with local culture and identity.

However, digitalization does not automatically produce sustainable outcomes. Increased visibility can encourage commercialization, cultural simplification, standardization, and the modification of traditional foods according to tourist expectations. Sustainable culinary tourism therefore requires consideration of how heritage is represented, who controls its representation, and who receives the economic benefits.

Accordingly, this paper addresses the central research question:

How do social media and digital platforms enable cultural entrepreneurship to promote local culinary heritage while contributing to sustainable tourism development?

The study specifically examines digital representation of culinary heritage, entrepreneurial opportunities generated through social media, tourist engagement, and the sustainability challenges associated with digital heritage promotion.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Culinary Heritage and Tourism

Culinary heritage consists of traditional recipes, ingredients, food-production techniques, rituals, preparation practices, agricultural knowledge, and community traditions transmitted between generations. Food therefore functions simultaneously as nourishment, identity, memory, and cultural expression.

Bessière and Tibère (2013) demonstrate that traditional food in rural tourism can become an important mechanism through which tourists encounter local culture and heritage. The tourism value of cuisine is consequently not limited to taste. Travellers may also be interested in stories surrounding ingredients, traditional preparation methods, local landscapes, family practices, festivals, and community identity.

Culinary heritage also provides destinations with opportunities for differentiation. While tourism infrastructure may be similar across locations, food traditions generally emerge from particular environmental, historical, and cultural circumstances. Local cuisine can therefore create distinctive destination identities.

2.2 Cultural Entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship provides an important link between heritage preservation and economic development. Cultural entrepreneurs generate economic and social value by utilizing traditions, narratives, creativity, heritage resources, and cultural meanings.

Within culinary tourism, traditional knowledge can be transformed into experiences such as cooking workshops, regional food trails, food festivals, farm visits, storytelling dinners, local food products, culinary walking tours, and community-based dining experiences.

An important element of cultural entrepreneurship is storytelling. Entrepreneurs are not merely selling food; they communicate why particular foods are important to a community. Cultural narratives connect food to local histories, identities, landscapes, traditions, and people. Su et al. (2026) emphasize the relationship between place, cultural entrepreneurship, and tourism and highlight the importance of balancing innovation with cultural legitimacy and community relationships.

2.3 Social Media and Culinary Tourism

Social media has changed destination marketing from an organization-controlled activity into an interactive environment where tourism businesses, local communities, visitors, influencers, and destination organizations jointly construct destination images.

Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook are especially effective for culinary tourism because photographs, short videos, cooking demonstrations, recipes, market scenes, and visual storytelling can stimulate curiosity about local food.

Abdul Latip et al. (2024) indicate that social-media content influences culinary-heritage tourism by shaping destination perceptions and traveller behaviour. Authenticity, nostalgia, curiosity, attractive visual content, and interpersonal influence are particularly relevant to travellers' engagement with culinary heritage.

User-generated content further strengthens this process because visitors become participants in destination marketing. Photographs, videos, ratings, reviews, location tags, and recommendations posted after a culinary experience can subsequently influence other tourists.

2.4 Sustainable Tourism and Local Food

Sustainable tourism incorporates economic, sociocultural, and environmental considerations. Culinary tourism may contribute to local sustainability by supporting family businesses, restaurants, local producers, farmers, markets, guides, and community enterprises.

Economically, visitor spending can increase the retention of tourism revenue within local communities. Culturally, tourism may create incentives for maintaining culinary traditions and transferring knowledge to younger generations. Local food systems can also strengthen relationships between tourism enterprises and regional producers.

Nevertheless, tourism can create negative consequences such as excessive commercialization, external ownership, unequal distribution of benefits, cultural commodification, and environmental pressures. Sustainable culinary tourism therefore requires community participation, responsible management, and culturally appropriate representation.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a **qualitative thematic-analysis approach** to identify recurring concepts and relationships within interdisciplinary literature concerning social media, culinary heritage, cultural entrepreneurship, and sustainable tourism.

The thematic procedure follows the principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarization with relevant literature, initial coding, identification of potential themes, review and refinement of themes, theme definition, and interpretation.

The literature considered studies relating to social media and tourism, culinary tourism, food heritage, cultural entrepreneurship, digital storytelling, user-generated content, destination branding, community-based tourism, and sustainable tourism.

Initial codes included digital visibility, storytelling, authenticity, visual representation, tourist engagement, entrepreneurial opportunity, local economic development, destination identity, community participation, commodification, heritage preservation, and platform dependence. These codes were subsequently grouped into six major themes.

4. Findings: Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Digital Storytelling and Visibility of Culinary Heritage

Digital storytelling emerged as an important mechanism through which culinary traditions can reach audiences beyond their original geographical communities.

Traditional culinary knowledge has historically been transmitted through families, neighbourhoods, markets, festivals, and everyday community practices. Social media provides an additional mechanism through which such knowledge can be documented and communicated.

Videos of traditional cooking techniques, interviews with elderly cooks, photographs of regional ingredients, festival stories, recipe demonstrations, and narratives about local food practices can simultaneously perform the functions of heritage documentation and tourism promotion.

Masmoudi and Jmour (2025) demonstrate that digital culinary storytelling may communicate nostalgia, national identity, sensory appeal, expertise, and the desire for distinctive

gastronomic experiences. Visual communication is particularly important because attractive images and videos can stimulate curiosity even though digital platforms cannot reproduce taste or smell.

The process can be summarized as:

Culinary Heritage → Digital Storytelling → Online Visibility → Tourist Curiosity → Potential Visitation.

Theme 2: Cultural Entrepreneurship and Local Economic Empowerment

Social media can reduce some of the market-access barriers experienced by small culinary enterprises. Traditional food businesses often have limited advertising budgets and access to tourism distribution networks. Digital platforms provide comparatively affordable opportunities to reach potential visitors.

Cultural entrepreneurs can promote cooking classes, regional food products, culinary trails, food festivals, farm visits, homestay meals, traditional restaurants, and community-based dining experiences.

Digital storytelling also enables entrepreneurs to move beyond simply selling a food product. By communicating the origin, cultural symbolism, ingredients, preparation methods, producer identity, and relationship of food to local landscapes, entrepreneurs can transform ordinary food consumption into a cultural experience.

The relationship can be expressed as:

Local Knowledge + Entrepreneurial Capability + Digital Access → Cultural Enterprise → Visitor Expenditure → Local Economic Opportunity.

When income remains within the community, such entrepreneurship has the potential to contribute to local economic development and cultural continuity.

Theme 3: Authenticity and Cultural Identity

Authenticity represents a central element of culinary tourism because many visitors search for food experiences perceived as connected to local history, traditions, and everyday life.

Social-media content can strengthen perceptions of authenticity by showing traditional foods prepared in homes, local markets, farms, festivals, and long-established restaurants. Content featuring local cooks, farmers, family histories, regional ingredients, and local languages can strengthen the connection between cuisine and cultural identity.

However, digital popularity can also create challenges. Entrepreneurs may modify traditional dishes in terms of presentation, ingredients, portion size, or appearance to make them more attractive to online audiences.

This produces a continuing tension between:

Cultural Continuity ↔ Tourist-Oriented Adaptation

Innovation is not necessarily inconsistent with heritage because culinary traditions naturally evolve. The critical sustainability issue is whether communities continue to exercise meaningful control over how their traditions are represented and adapted.

Theme 4: User-Generated Content and Tourist Co-Creation

Social media has transformed tourists from passive consumers into active producers of destination content. Travellers photograph meals, record videos, share reviews, use hashtags, tag locations, and recommend culinary experiences to others.

This creates a circular relationship:

Digital Content → Travel Interest → Culinary Experience → User-Generated Content → Further Digital Exposure.

For small cultural enterprises, such content can provide substantial promotional value because visitors become informal brand advocates without requiring expensive advertising.

However, tourists may represent local cuisine according to their own perceptions rather than community meanings. Visually attractive dishes may receive greater exposure, while culturally important but less visually appealing culinary practices may remain overlooked. Therefore, increased user participation simultaneously expands visibility and reduces complete community control over heritage representation.

Theme 5: Digital Platforms and Sustainable Destination Development

Digital culinary promotion can contribute to sustainable destination development by encouraging tourists to explore less-known regions, communities, traditional markets, local restaurants, farms, and food-producing areas.

Digital gastronomy routes can connect farmers, chefs, producers, restaurants, guides, artisans, and other tourism stakeholders. Such networks may distribute visitor expenditure beyond major tourist attractions.

Culinary tourism may also promote stronger local supply chains when tourism enterprises purchase ingredients and products from nearby farmers and producers.

The sustainable-development pathway emerging from the analysis is:
Digital Visibility → Culinary Tourism Demand → Local Entrepreneurship → Local Economic Circulation → Heritage Continuity → Sustainable Destination Development.

However, sustainability is conditional upon local ownership, community participation, responsible sourcing, visitor management, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

Theme 6: Commodification, Platform Dependence and Cultural Sustainability
The final theme highlights the contradictions associated with digital heritage promotion.
Social-media algorithms frequently reward visually attractive, entertaining, unusual, or rapidly engaging content. Culinary traditions may therefore be simplified to fit digital trends. Complex cultural histories can be reduced to short narratives, while traditional foods may increasingly be promoted as "Instagrammable" tourism commodities.

This results in a visibility paradox:
Greater digital visibility may economically strengthen culinary heritage while simultaneously increasing pressure to commercialize it.

Another concern relates to platform dependence. Small entrepreneurs operate within digital systems whose algorithms, advertising structures, trends, and visibility mechanisms remain largely outside their control.
Differences in digital literacy, technology, language capabilities, content-creation skills, and financial resources may further create inequalities among entrepreneurs.
Digital-capacity development and community involvement are therefore essential if social media is to contribute meaningfully to culturally sustainable entrepreneurship.

5. Discussion and Proposed Conceptual Framework

The thematic analysis indicates that social media acts as a mediating mechanism between culinary heritage and tourism markets.

The overall relationship identified by the study can be summarized as:
Culinary Heritage → Digital Mediation → Cultural Entrepreneurship → Sustainable Tourism Outcomes.

Culinary heritage provides cultural resources such as traditional recipes, ingredients, production knowledge, agricultural landscapes, rituals, memories, and regional identities.

Digital platforms transform these cultural resources into photographs, videos, reels, hashtags, stories, reviews, and online communities.

Audience engagement subsequently generates curiosity, electronic word-of-mouth, emotional connection, information search, perceived authenticity, and travel interest.

Cultural entrepreneurs can then transform digital attention into tourism products and experiences, including culinary tours, workshops, food products, restaurants, festivals, and community experiences.

The process may ultimately contribute to employment creation, local income generation, heritage preservation, cultural transmission, destination diversification, stronger local supply chains, and community pride.

Digital Culinary Heritage Entrepreneurship Framework

The study therefore proposes the following framework:

Heritage Resources

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Digital Storytelling

↓

Audience Engagement

↓

Cultural Entrepreneurship

↓

Sustainable Tourism Outcomes

The relationship is influenced by several moderating factors:

1. Community participation
2. Cultural authenticity
3. Digital literacy
4. Local ownership
5. Platform governance
6. Equitable benefit distribution
7. Environmental responsibility

The framework emphasizes that social media should not be treated simply as a promotional tool. Rather, it operates as an intermediary infrastructure that can transform cultural meaning into tourism visibility, visitor engagement, entrepreneurship, and local development.

6. Implications

The findings provide implications for cultural entrepreneurs, destination-management organizations, tourism policymakers, and community organizations.

First, local culinary producers and heritage custodians should be actively involved in destination digital-marketing strategies. Digital promotion should feature community voices rather than relying only on professionally developed destination advertisements.

Second, small cultural entrepreneurs require training in photography, digital storytelling, short-form video creation, social-media engagement, and platform management.

Third, digital content should communicate not merely the appearance of local dishes but also their history, ingredients, preparation techniques, cultural meanings, and connection with local communities.

Fourth, tourism organizations can encourage digital networks connecting farmers, restaurants, chefs, markets, guides, accommodation providers, and local artisans.

Finally, the effectiveness of digital culinary tourism should not be measured only through likes, followers, comments, and online views. Sustainability measures should also consider local income generation, community participation, heritage transmission, use of local products, involvement of small enterprises, and visitor distribution.

7. CONCLUSION

Social media has significantly transformed the relationship among culinary heritage, cultural entrepreneurship, and tourism. Traditional foods that were once predominantly embedded within geographically limited communities can now reach global audiences through digital platforms.

The thematic analysis identified six major dimensions: digital storytelling and culinary-heritage visibility; cultural entrepreneurship and economic empowerment; authenticity and cultural identity; tourist co-creation through user-generated content; sustainable destination development; and the challenges of commodification and platform dependence.

Digital platforms provide cultural entrepreneurs with opportunities to communicate directly with tourists, convert local knowledge into tourism experiences, and generate economic value

from culinary heritage. However, increased visibility may also create pressure to simplify, commercialize, or modify cultural traditions according to online trends and tourist expectations.

Therefore, the contribution of social media to sustainable tourism depends not only on increasing the visibility of traditional cuisine but also on how that visibility is managed and how its benefits are distributed.

Sustainable digital culinary tourism requires communities to maintain agency over heritage representation, entrepreneurs to remain connected with local economies, tourism revenue to support heritage custodians, and digital storytelling to communicate meaningful cultural narratives.

Social media should therefore be understood as more than a destination-marketing channel. When managed responsibly, it can function as a cultural and entrepreneurial infrastructure connecting heritage preservation, community participation, visitor engagement, cultural entrepreneurship, and sustainable local development.

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