Implementing Food Photography with Digital Marketing at the new restaurant

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Implementing Food Photography with Digital Marketing

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Abstract

Particularly in the era of social media, food photography has evolved into a main instrument in restaurant promotion. This project investigates in the restaurant sector how visual appearance of food affects consumer involvement, brand image, and loyalty. Combining a review of existing literature with primary research (one in-depth interview with the restaurant owner and a consumer survey), the study explores five key themes. While restaurants gain from real, well-curated images to enhance their brand online, the results reveal great alignment between academic theory and reality, people "eat with their eyes" and are greatly impacted by food pictures in their dining decisions. The results of the survey and the interview point together to the fact that good, honest food images can draw in fresh business, boost confidence, and inspire return visitation. Small and medium businesses find it difficult to keep a consistent flow of professional material, nevertheless, due to resource limitations; this emphasizes the need of do-it-yourself projects and user-generated content when done right. Emphasizing authenticity, consistency, and strategic use of social media platforms, the study ends with pragmatic ramifications for restaurant owners; and acknowledges constraints while offering recommendations for future research on this appetizing junction of food, photography, and digital marketing.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In an era where diners often decide where to eat based on what they see online, striking food imagery has become a vital part of restaurant marketing. High-quality photos not only highlight the freshness and appeal of dishes but also build a restaurant's brand identity across digital channels. This study examines how professional food photography, when combine with digital marketing, influences both the acquisition of new customers and the retention of existing ones.

1.1 Objective of the Study

This research critically examines how professional food photography, and DIY (do-it-your-self) photography, when integrated with digital marketing strategies, can influence both the acquisition and retention of customers in a restaurant setting. In particular, it seeks to answer:

What is the relationship between food photography and digital marketing in driving customer engagement and loyalty for restaurants?

1.2 Aims and Objectives

1. **Explore the strategic role of food photography**
   – Analyze how high-quality photos contribute to the overall success of restaurant marketing campaigns in Dublin and beyond.
2. **Identify key visual drivers of engagement**
   – Determine which photographic elements (e.g., composition, lighting, styling) most effectively capture attention and inspire consumer action.
3. **Deliver actionable insights**
   – Develop a clear set of best-practice recommendations that enable restaurants, regardless of size to harness food photography for stronger digital presence.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

By combining expertise in food photography with the latest digital marketing techniques, this study aims to create a replicable service model. Small and new restaurants will be equipped with a step-by-step roadmap to craft, curate, and deploy images that not only reflect their brand identity but also drive measurable growth in online visibility and customer interaction.

1.4 Significance of the Study

- **For Restaurant Owners:**
  Gain evidence-based photographic guidelines to refine marketing strategies, maximize return on investment, and differentiate their brand in a crowded marketplace.
- **For Photographers and Marketers:**
  Understand industry-specific needs and consumer preferences to tailor service offerings that bridge creativity with commercial impact.
- **For Consumers:**
  Enjoy more compelling, authentic visual content that enhances the decision-making process and overall dining experience.

1.5 Limitations

- **Access to Participants:**
  Securing in-depth interviews with restaurant owner may be constrained by his availability and willingness to participate.
- **Time Constraints:**
  Balancing academic responsibilities with fieldwork, including the survey administration, may affect the scope of data collection.
- **Qualitative Analysis Reliability:**
  Ensuring consistency and objectivity in coding interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses will require careful peer review and validation techniques.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature and is organized into five thematic sections corresponding to the research focus areas. Together, these sections build a conceptual foundation for analyzing how food photography intersects with consumer psychology and restaurant marketing strategy. Also it answers the sub-research questions, asked in applied project 1.

2.1 Visual Elements in Food Photography That Influence Consumer Choices

Photography of foods is a pivotal area within identification of consumer choice and consumer choice-making in hospitality consumer choice-making. Images are not only for visual purposes; they build value, atmosphere, and brand representation. Literature explains how composition, lighting, and color schemes stimulate emotions, forming images as evocative and memorable (Detta et al., 2024; Do, 2018). Good images may thus comprise a highly persuasive method of communication, and most of the time, they exercise their attraction on consumers long before reading of text and reviews becomes effective. Empirical studies establish the direct influence of visual properties on consumers' appetitiveness and choice-making. Manipulated visual properties of photographs of foods research done by Rodriguez et al. (2022) indicated that rich color photographs (i.e., highly chromatic photographs with appetizing hues) significantly enhanced spectators' pleasure and purchase intention of the image object. Similarly, Sari et al.'s research on small business context indicated that effective photography of foods on the socials may generate higher sales by creating higher exposure and preference of the products, showing marketing effectiveness of appetizing visual presentation of the products. Additionally, Santhakumar (2018) illustrated that use of sophisticated product images, especially when complemented with informing copy like prominent brand names or slogans, is highly effective at capturing consumers' attention and impacting purchase outcomes positively. This is complemented by Ravindran and Santhakumar’s research on image research on foods and clothing where they established that elaborate, rich-information images served to solidify consumers' self-assurance and usage of the material. By way of conclusion, integration of rich images, clear brand communication, and reflective representation has a direct influence on consumers' perceptions and choice-making. To restaurants, strategic use of such visual tools is instrumental for winning and converting people within a digitized and image-saturated world.

2.2 Restaurant Strategies in Using Digital Media for Visual Branding

Online marketing has revolutionized the way restaurants engage with markets, and visual branding on online channels is a priority. Mobile apps and social networks have become major exposure and brand-building channels. Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are where consumers go to be reached, with restaurants able to showcase their menu and ambience ahead of time (Dhar & John, 2019). Restaurants are thus compelled to constantly provide appealing, high-standard visual content in a bid to remain up to date, especially as consumers habitually use mobiles to browse for menus, read reviews, and even book reservations (GC & Kirves, 2019). A strong visual web presence is a twenty-first-century "shop window," inviting consumers with mouthwatering shots and clean branding. The success of operating within the online space is not so much a matter of presence as engagement and being responsive. Sain (2024) makes the argument that there is worth integrating social-media activity with customer engagement activity, stating that restaurants which engage positively with online reviews and carefully manage their online reputation have a tendency to establish strong long-term brand loyalty. Pawa (2017) and Kanaan et al. (2023) add the research that restaurant websites and social-media accounts must be responsive and simple to use, pointing to the importance of being constantly responsive to new trends like mobile-optimized content, short-form video, and compelling story-telling. Combined, the research reveals that keeping up with new technology and creating content is a routine activity that is required for long-term attention from consumers. A battle for balance for control of content quality and authenticity of presentation is another challenge for digital branding. Restaurants are caught out with the option of highly styled professional shots or rather loose and spontaneous shots. This is all about credibility: over-edited or "too-perfect" shots might get visitors but dissuade consumers when the on-location experience fails to match those photographs. No matter the strategy, visual content needs to elicit emotions, convey brand drivers, and build meaningful customer experiences (Tarabieh, 2022). That is, each picture shared needs to be appealing to the eye but also help convey the restaurant story and the essence of its qualities, entering into a genuine relationship with fans.

2.3 Best Practices in Food Photography for Restaurant Marketing

As restaurants go for maximum visual content, there has emerged some best practices within the literature that concern themselves with quality, consistency, and authenticity. The growth of

“gastroporn”—the term for over-stylized, indulgent excess of images of food—has affected consumer expectations on networks (Yıldırım & Öztaş, 2024). The trend is a visual culture where appearance is at times a higher concern than authenticity, where resources like Instagram and Pinterest become authoritative hubs for eye-catching images of food and consumer want. Highly stylized fare may get people excited and draw attention, but they also impose a lofty standard on how the food is supposed to look, creating distance from reality for the image. And yet, the search for picture-perfect images creates ethical and credibility issues. Klug (2022) highlights the need to be honest and transparent with the styling of food, noting that heavy manipulation or artificial augmentation of foods distorts the consumer view and creates unrealistic expectations. An example is utilizing unedible proxies or heavy visual manipulation to produce a dazzling image, which risks destroying trust by showcasing a meal quite different from that shown by the image shown. Authenticity is a prominent best practice: whereas professional images produce a polished, technically faultless image, homemade or DIY content is seen as authentic and relatable to look at. There is a tension that exists between creating an idealized image and staying within a honest presentation of the meal. To strike a balance, there exist guidelines that couple aesthetics with authenticity that experts suggest. Llanera (2023) provides an operable recipe for presenting food on online platforms, with guidelines for standardized styling practices (such as consistent lighting, direction of shots, and color profiles) to enable visual continuity across a restaurant’s feed or website. Enacting such best practices makes sure there is a consistent look to the brand without compromising on presenting the food in a realistic manner. Primarily, best practices have to strike a balance of professional-grade attractiveness with honest portrayal. To that end, scholarship has illustrated that flattering imaging of foods is not just about a good look but encompasses story and cultural resonance. By way of illustration, Peng (2019) explains how the sociocultural phenomenon of online sharing of food photographs has evolved into a lifestyle branding phenomenon that signifies that knowledge of the cultural background and intention of the audience forms part of creating resonant visual communication. At the end of it all, story and culture sensitivity become a method of creating meaningful imaging of foods based on building on consumer trust and engagement. Restaurants that craft the art and ethics of imaging foods become able to design images that not only invite a look but also meet expectations and values and thus establish a favorable brand reputation.

2.4 Cost-Effectiveness & Impact of Professional vs. DIY Photography

Digital photography has made it difficult to distinguish professional from amateur effort and raised questions of cost-effectiveness and effects for restaurants. Professional food

photographers bring expertise at the craft, higher-grade equipment, and a lot of experience at styling and lighting—skills that are sure to result in higher-quality photographs and a established visual look (Jacobson et al., 2000). These advantages can help a restaurant maintain its reputation and convey professionalism and sophistication. High-end photographs are able to make foods look especially appealing, deserving of premium prices and enhancing the reputation of the establishment. But using professionals is also quite expensive, scheduling inconvenient, and at times with fewer inputs for creativity for the restaurateur, which is weighed against the benefits. Meanwhile, do-it-yourself photography made possible by the omnipresent mobile phone and user-friendly software is democratizing visual content creation to even the smallest restaurants. Practically anyone is able to take and share photographs, allowing companies with limited budgets to participate in visual marketing. Němcová (2018) proposes that DIY methods foster creativity, timeliness, and cost-effectiveness, especially for small companies who are not able to hire professionals. Restaurant owners are able to experiment with different shots or styles on the fly, reformulating their content on a flexible basis to respond to feedback from customers or trends. Wakelin (2021) adds the way that current-day digital technology and social applications have changed the way people produce content, allowing restaurateurs to produce their own content and speak straight to an audience without an intermediary. By taking it on themselves, owners and in-house personnel are able to add more of the personality of the restaurant to the photographs, the branding quite possibly being made more authentic and accessible. For all the better-known benefits of DIY methods, there is a downside when it comes to polish and cohesion. Maintaining consistency of quality is hard without expertise—post-processing, lighting, and composition all come into play when creating the final image, and the DIY practitioner may not be able to edit a consistent look or keep up with consumers' lofty expectations on their feeds nowadays. Brand cohesion and visual narrative may also be compromised with scattershot or inconsistent image quality. These are the times when pro help is called for: the trained photographer or consultancy ensures each image is part of a cohesive story and marketing plan for the brand. Pros or the DIY method is generally a question of a restaurant’s budget, skill levels, and aspirations. Most restaurants discover that a hybrid solution is the solution—professional shooters for star items or promotions (for creating a gold standard of quality), supplemented with DIY images for posts that cover everyday activity and happenings. Together, the hybrid solution can deliver maximum quantity and quality of visual content at budget without going broke or burning resources.

2.5 Role of Visual Content in Building Brand Loyalty and Engagement

Visual marketing is a foundation of new era brand building, particularly for the restaurant and hospitality industry wherein sweet images may be equivalent to customer loyalty and

engagement. Emotional evoking visual images have been proven to create consumers' trust, loyalty, and repeat purchases (Tarabieh, 2022; Jayasingh, 2019). Fantastic images, so to speak, do not just get a one-time consumer -- they form a relationship with the image viewer on a sentimental scale. Engaging images speak of authenticity as well as excitement, pre-influencing a consumer's experience and impression with the brand even when they have not even opened the door yet. By showing consistent, appetizing images of the meal, lovely moments of customers, or kitchen creativity behind the scenes, a restaurant is able to convey its culture and story, quite probably forming an emotional relationship with the customer toward the brand. Social media has the function of converting visual content to two-way communication. Zakiah et al. (2023) and Khoirunnisa and Marllenisa (2022) prove that regular, appealing visual contents on accounts like Instagram attract higher levels of audience engagement and engender long-term loyalty for the brand. Restaurants that keep visual feed current and active prompt customers to like, comment, and share the content, thus involving themselves in the marketing activity as well. These sites welcome consumers to not only look at content but also write their own tales (e.g., a tale of a favorite meal they had), building a network of brand loyalists along with it. Such a type of consumer-generated content further encourages involvement because potential consumers prefer to trust similar images from their peeps. This cycle of engagement – from restaurant post inviting a customer to go, to the customer own post on the experience itself – builds long-term relationships and loyalty on a basis of visual memory. Restaurants' implication is that photographs of their fare need to be leveraged not only as a call to attraction purpose, but as a building and retention strategy for communities also. By constantly offering up content that is pertinent and meaningful on an emotional scale, and which builds out the brand, restaurants keep their customers engaged and loyal. Good photographs have the power to make old customers remember the good times there, to bring them back, while simultaneously assuring new followers exactly what the establishment is about. Good visual content has a way of making satisfied diners loyal ambassadors, avowedly. The evidence is that restaurants who leverage their visual media well – finding a balance of aesthetic appeal, veracity, and consistent messaging, are better able to foster long-term loyalty for customers within an online context. These findings point up that restaurants throughout Ireland (as elsewhere) need to take healthy photography habits for their fare into their online marketing strategy, for by so doing they are able to improve customer engagement, repeat business, and overall brand value substantially.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research adopted a mixed-methods qualitative strategy for the purposes of collecting rich feedback and general views of consumers on restaurant marketing using food photography. The two primary parts of collecting primary data were a semi-structured interview with the restaurant owner, and a structured questionnaire for consumers. The chapter discusses research design, recruitment of participants, the data collection process, and research ethics.

3.2 Investigative Strategy and Study Design

With the topic for investigation being exploratory - how visual food content constructs branding and consumer behaviour, a qualitative method was paramount to obtain thoughtful comment and experience. A semi-structured interview by case-study with the restaurant owner yielded rich context from a practitioner perspective. To add to and crosscheck those findings, a survey with a sample of consumers was employed, which gave quantifiably calculable evidence on behaviour and opinion that could be cross-checked with interview and with literature. Design is thus triangulatory using: a) literature review (secondary evidence) for theory-informed themes, b) an interview (primary qualitative evidence) for experientially based commentary, and c) a survey (primary quantitative evidence) for variability of attitudes/behaviour. Triangulation adds robustness to findings, overlap areas can be accepted as well-supported conclusions, with differences possibly being interesting gaps or paradoxes for purposes of argumentation. The interview was semi-structured, so a pre-specified list of open questions gave context to the interview with room for the interviewee to expand on a point or go off on a related point. Questions had the five research themes to ensure the key issues were addressed (the full interview transcript is presented in Appendix E). The method provided evidence qualitatively on a restaurant's current application of food photography, issues seen, and subjective opinions on what is/ isn't working - effectively a practitioner view. Due to constraints on time and resources, only a single interview was completed. This is a restriction on representativeness, but the interview length was planned to make up for by securing lengthy comment. It was provided using Google Forms and collected mostly quantitative responses. The survey provided a broader context to establish whether patterns by literature and by the interview participant generalize to overall consumer attitudes. The survey questionnaire (Appendix F) contained 10 questions with multiple choice, Likert scales (ratings for importance and likelihood), and a single multiple-selection grid (platform and image aspect preference). By frequency distribution and

pattern of response, the survey provides a reality check on whether assumptions by marketer (and our interview participant) mirror consumer reality. Overall, the method is predominantly qualitative (the interview and open-ended thematical identification) with quantitative inputs (numbers from the survey) - a pragmatic method to achieve a balanced analysis for an applied marketing issue.

3.3 Participant Selection

Interview Participant: The interview was conducted with the owner-manager of the new restaurant in Dublin, Ireland ("Interviewee or owner" for purposes of anonymization). The reason for interviewing him was based on the assumption that he could provide well-informed opinions on the ways that food photography is used in their marketing strategy, issues that they face (time, budget, etc.), and what they have learned on consumer responses. While only one interview is insufficient to account for restaurant practices heterogeneity, it was conceived as enough for purposes of exploratory research when supplemented with consumer evidence and the academic literature. The interviewee was guaranteed confidentiality and volunteered for interview. No individual identifying details or the restaurant name are reproduced within the report for purposes of ensuring confidentiality, on terms of agreement for ethics.

Survey Respondents: The survey aimed at adult persons who are restaurant or take-away consumers and use the internet. A non-probability convenience sampling was used: the survey link was shared across WhatsApp groups, with a purpose of gathering a small group quickly. A total of 21 respondents participated in the survey. Small as they were, respondents covered a spectrum of age bands (with representation for the 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44 groups) and varied on the frequency with which they photographed their foods separately (from never taking them at all to taking them on a monthly basis). Respondents' gender is not stated, although from observation amongst acquaintances, male and female respondents both were within the group. Respondents were physically located in Ireland. Due to population size being small, results from the survey are not statistically generalizable, although they are suggestive measures by which to contrast with the literature. We used a survey even with a small population so that we could get the consumers' perspective on a structured basis, so that we could go further than on a single owner-manager's opinion or published research alone. Even a small survey is able to tell whether there is stark match or mismatch on the big issues.

3.4 Data collection methods

Interview Method: The interview was conducted in written form by email due to time

constraints on the participant's side. Information form and permission form had been sent, explaining the purpose of the research and guaranteeing confidentiality (see Appendix A for the written permission that was secured). The interview questions (10 key questions grouped thematically) were emailed to the participant, and he replied in writing over a matter of a few days. The technique effectively equated to a transcript written by the interviewee themselves, with minimal transcription on the part of the research worker involved. The advantage of using the technique was that the interviewee was able to respond with time to ponder, with possibly reflective detail. The disadvantage is that there is no spontaneity and the option of being able to ask spontaneous follow-ups as one would with a live interview. The substance of the interview was collected as a written document, which the research worker read over and coded by theme. Key findings and quotations were pulled out for use for analysis chapter, so participant voice is made clear within findings.

Survey Procedure: The survey was constructed using Google Forms and had a majority of multiple-choice questions for ease of response. Distribution was via message on WhatsApp groups, inviting those with a keen interest in food or a love of social media to take part. It was made clear that the survey is for a research study by a postgraduate student and that responses are anonymous. As it was a convenience sampling, no incentives were provided; responses on a voluntary basis welcome. The survey was left open for a three-week window for April 2025. The questions collected: demographic proxy (age group), behaviour (frequency of taking a picture of a meal, use of a platform), attitude (visuals being important on a 1–5 scale), and specific experiences (e.g., ever had avoided a location because of poor photos?). By the survey date close, 21 responses had been made. Data collected was collated automatically by Google Forms, which the researcher moved into Excel for purposes of analysis. Simple descriptive statistics (counts, proportions) were derived, due to small N. Charts (pie and bar charts) were used for purposes of visualization of key outcomes (these appear within Chapter 4 for illustrative purposes).

3.5 Data Analysis Interview

Responses, being qualitative, were processed using thematic analysis. Interview transcript was read several times by the researcher and recurring themes or emphases which aligned with (or did not align with) themes from the literature were recorded. As interview questions were thematically framed, it was only sensible to map responses to each research theme. An example is interviewee sentence “You eat with your eyes… It 100% brings customers to our premise,” which was coded with the visual influence on consumer choice theme. Analysis looked for loci of confirmation or contradiction. Of specific interest was interviewee opinion against using professional photographs (“I don’t use them. Not worth it.”) to establish whether literature or survey responses would repeat or contradict that opinion. Key quotations from

interview were selected to be quoted back within the findings to add evidence and color for the story.

Survey responses were analyzed quantitatively. On each question, the number of each response was counted. Due to the small size of the participants, percentages were also provided to facilitate interpretation (e.g., “61.9% of respondents replied Yes to avoding a restaurant because of bad images”). Some questions had charts done to see the distribution presented graphically. The researcher also looked for any obvious correlations (but with only 21 data points formal correlation analysis is not possible). Combined analysis was a matter of comparing the qualitative findings (from interview and open-ended nature of some survey answers e.g. "Not sure" explanations) with the quantitative patterns (survey statistics, and any statistics from material). Triangulation allowed confirmation of conclusions.
For example, if the literature mentions that photographs need to be authentic, and the interviewee answered "must look real" and the survey showed that all of them rated authenticity as at least moderate or high, then we have a good finding.
Conversely, where there was disagreement (i.e., when the interviewee said Facebook is irrelevant but survey also showed some use of Facebook), that was a valuable discrepancy to follow.

3.6 Ethical Issues

The research followed scholarly research ethics:

Informed Consent: The interviewee received a written explanation of the study's purpose and data use. The participant agreed to participate on the interview introduction form (Appendix A) and was informed of their freedom to withdraw or refuse questions. The Google Form preamble said that the poll is anonymous, voluntary, and for research only.

Surveys did not collect personal information like names or phone numbers.

The participant is just called “the interviewee” or “restaurant owner-manager” while reporting. Since the survey collected no names, anonymity was guaranteed. Individual respondents are not named, and results are given collectively, with instances such as “one respondent (25-34 years old) reported…” remaining anonymous.

Data Protection: The researcher controlled interview email, transcript file, and survey results file on his password-protected computer and cloud storage, they will be destroyed after a reasonable retention period (typically after the college evaluates the project). The research violated no ethical standards because it used humans (although slightly sensitive material).

Taking an online interview instead of a face interview was done to continue seeking written clearance, and due time limitations.

Research design was ethical and methodologically sound. Though primary research was restricted, a candid expert interview and a quick consumer survey are excellent sources to examine against earlier data. The chapter on discussions addresses method weaknesses including small sample size and solitary interview. But the data satisfy the project's needs and provide important insights about food photography's role in restaurant marketing.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

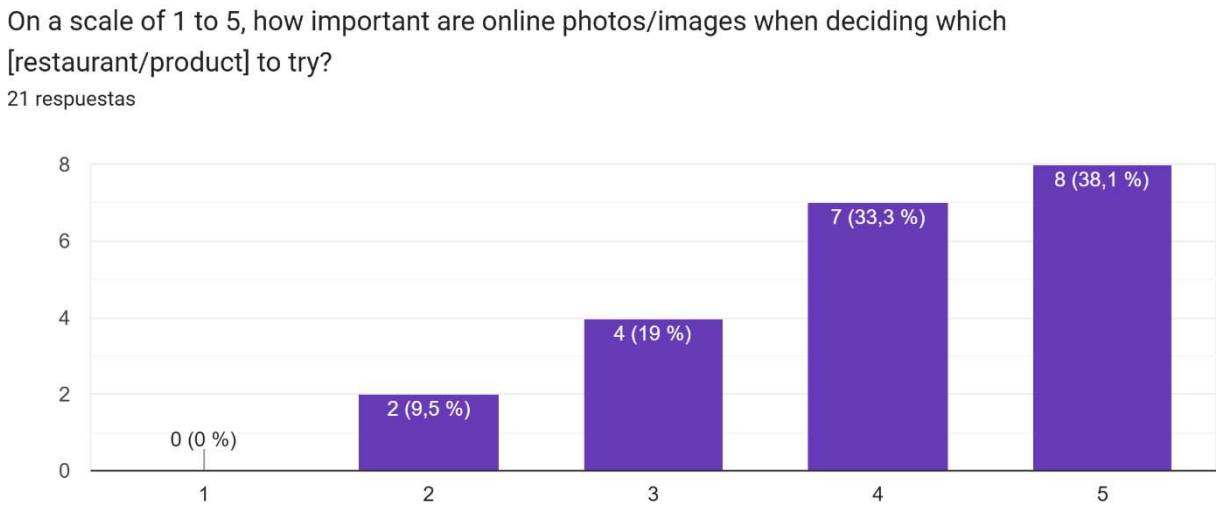
This chapter presents the primary research findings from both the in-depth interview and the consumer survey, organized according to five key themes identified in the literature review. Under each theme, relevant results from the interview and survey were collated, compared with the literature, and interpreted to derive meaning. Based on these findings, brief recommendations were also formulated for restaurant marketing practice, the combined insights across all themes were then used to address the central research question in the concluding chapter.

4.1 Visual Elements in Food Photography That Influence Consumer Choices

Visual food imagery influences consumers' restaurant visits, according to this study. Primary data showed that food photos strongly influenced customer choice. The interviewee stressed the importance of appealing food photos, stating that “You eat with your eyes… [seeing] great looking food… 100% brings customers to our premise” (Interviewee). He added that lighting, presentation, and realism were “all vital” in making a food appealing, indicating that a well-lit, well-presented, authentic-looking photograph can attract diners. The poll found that most customers highly weigh food images in their decisions, supporting this qualitative conclusion. In particular, 38.1% of poll respondents ranked internet photos as highly significant (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) when choosing a restaurant, and 61.9% said they had avoided a restaurant with

unattractive or unprofessional photos. Two-thirds of surveyed diners were repelled by bad food photography, demonstrating how much visuals impact customer choice. Triangulating these findings with the literature confirmed that diners “eat with their eyes,” a well-established concept. The literature showed that high-quality food pictures can trigger appetite and desire before reading, altering consumer choices (Detta et al., 2024; Do, 2018). Rodriguez et al. (2022) discovered that bright, colorful food photos increased users' satisfaction and buy intentions. The interviewee confirmed these academic findings by saying appealing graphics draw people to the eatery. Similar to research showing that poor visuals might dissuade clients, the survey found that many customers avoid businesses with poor visuals (Sari et al., 2021). Both primary data and literature agreed that visual attractiveness influences customer decisions. This synergy supported the premise that restaurants should invest in appealing food photography deliberately.

Figure 4.1.1



Interpretation: Theme 1 data showed that attractive food imagery drove first customer engagement. This means eateries benefit from displaying their menu items in attractive, high-quality photographs. This study found that consumers were lured to well-presented food images and avoided places with ugly pictures. The research confirmed and illustrated the “you eat with your eyes” theory with real-world data, showing that food photography influenced consumer choices. To leverage on customers' visually-driven decision-making, restaurants should constantly employ high-quality, authentic food photographs in their web marketing. Thus, restaurants can provide a good first impression and entice people to visit.

4.2 Restaurant Strategies in Using Digital Media for Visual Branding

This theme addressed how restaurants visually express themselves on social media, websites, etc. and their challenges. Despite content generation constraints, the case study restaurant employed Instagram for visual branding. In the interview, the restaurant owner said his food image digital marketing campaign is “only about average” and needs “more variety” of material. They posted “about 95% [from] Instagram and about 5% [from] Facebook,” with Instagram being their most popular platform. This shows that the corporation focused its visual branding on Instagram, where most customers engaged, with Facebook having little impact. Online restaurant promotion was difficult due to time and budget, according to the respondent. Because returns were “too hard to measure,” the restaurant relied on organic content, which he believed had the best results compared to cost, rather than social media content development or advertising. The owner also indicated Instagram ads were “a little effective,” indicating low ROI. According to the interview, small businesses with limited time and money concentrated on free, organic Instagram postings, the most profitable channel, for visual branding. The survey results supported and contextualized these findings, particularly on customer attentiveness. Instagram was the most popular online restaurant visit platform at 71.4%. Only 28.6% of respondents preferred Facebook, while review sites (33.3%), food delivery apps (19%), official websites (19%), and TikTok (23.8%), had varying but lower effect. Consumer response verified the interviewee's experience that Instagram had the highest engagement, validating the restaurant's Instagram strategy. The findings imply that restaurants should prioritize Instagram for this group because food imagery has the biggest reach and impact, but not ignore other channels. The survey didn't ask about restaurants' internal concerns, although the interviewee's time and financial issues are common. Consumer platform decisions indirectly help eateries utilize scarce resources. Comparing these data to literature shows gaps and alignment. As the new “shop window” for restaurants, social media must be visually appealing (Dhar & John, 2019). Instagram and other visual media are crucial for attracting customers with appealing food photos and creating brand recognition before they come (GC & Kirves, 2019). This study's extensive usage of Instagram confirms those trends and Sain's (2024) recommendation that restaurants embrace social media to create client loyalty. An active, responsive presence across platforms using short-form videos and interactive content is recommended to keep up with digital marketing trends (Pawa, 2017; Kanaan et al., 2023). Interviewee focused on Instagram, less Facebook, and less paid promotion due to resource constraints. In truth, small restaurant proprietors may struggle to implement theory's multi-platform, flexible methods. The interview found that time and money can prevent a business from maximizing its online visual branding (e.g., posting frequently or diversely or engaging on every platform). The interviewee's acknowledgement that they need to do more and the survey's reinforcement of Instagram's usefulness confirmed literature's primary concept that rich and consistent visual content on social media drives branding. Literature

recommends graphic social marketing, especially on Instagram, but the restaurant's plan indicates that it requires time and effort.

Figure 4.1.2



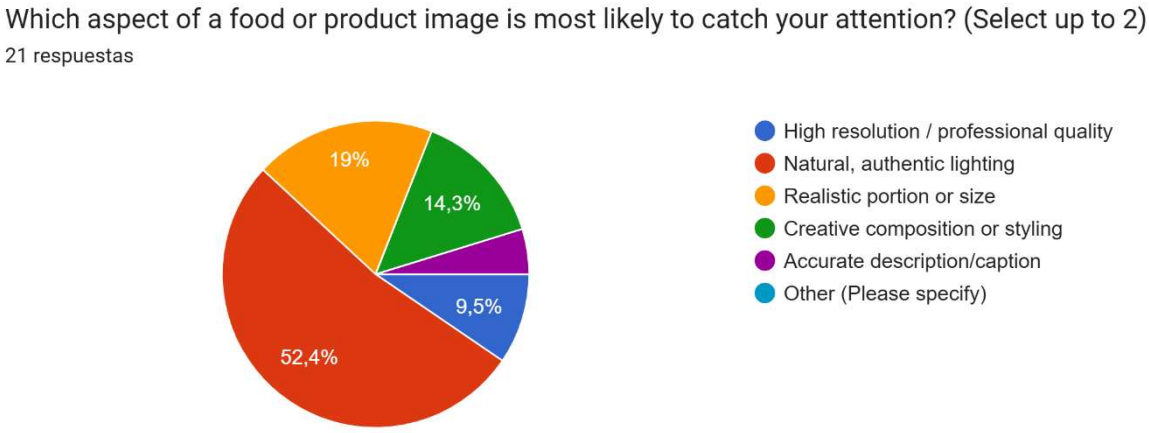
Interpretation: Theme 2: Restaurants require and struggle with digital visual branding. The restaurant's visual marketing centered on Instagram the most successful route to reach consumers, which was an excellent move given consumer preferences, but limited resources prevented a larger plan. This means that while restaurants realize the importance of online food photography, maintaining a strong presence requires effort and sometimes financial investment (in content generation or advertising). Small restaurants must wisely allocate digital marketing funds for maximum ROI. Prioritizing Instagram was sensible and consumer-driven. The restaurant and comparable SMEs should create a more structured content strategy for their visual branding, including a timetable for regular posts and diversified content, and assign modest dedicated resources (time or funding) to social media. While checking Facebook and review sites, focus on Instagram, the most engaging platform. The company might also observe online interactions or utilize free analytics tools to measure the impact of its visual content and justify continued or increased digital branding spending.

4.3 Best Practices in Food Photography for Restaurant Marketing

This restaurant marketing subject encompasses food photography styling, authenticity, and consistency. The main study indicated restaurant owners value realism and authenticity. The owner said, “Dishes should only be set up the way [they] present[ed] to the customer.” To

prevent misleading consumers, he avoided overstaging. The restaurant photographed the dish as it would be presented for visual accuracy. Of food photography "dos and don'ts", the interviewee noted it must look natural and not overdone. Visually appealing material has more impact than fake or inferior material. The owner disliked excessive style and augmentation since it made images look “too fake” and undermined trust and appeal. Basic quality matters. Avoid fakery and sloppy, unsightly photographs, which can mar good food. Best practices interviews included realistic food portrayal, quality, and appearance. The proprietor appreciated honest food photography in appropriate lighting and presentation over trickery or ideal images. Consumer studies confirmed visual authenticity and quality preferences. Most respondents (52.4%) preferred “natural, authentic lighting” for food photos. Most prefer natural photos versus carefully altered ones. While few chose “high resolution/professional quality” or “creative composition”, one (9.5%), put professional polish top. This means buyers prefer realism versus stylization. Answers on a 1–5 scale showed that professional-looking photographs enhanced restaurant trust (38.1%), whereas casual or user-generated photos increased brand authenticity (45%, moderate at 3). Polished photographs show professionalism and quality, but candid photos make a company more real, combine aesthetics and authenticity for optimal results. Basic, well-lit images on a table or in a server's hands were preferred over “manufactured” ones. He added that “the images must all look a similar style” after employing really professional content, meaning that introducing a significantly different style (like stock or studio photos) may force the restaurant to maintain that high gloss level for all content to avoid jarring discontinuities. Food photography literature emphasizes authenticity, consistency, and ethics, supporting these principles. Yıldırım and Öztaş (2024) caution against "gastroporn," a false gastronomic portrayal that builds expectations. Klug (2022) warns against excessive culinary style, such as utilizing inedible stand-ins or significant editing, which could deceive buyers and erode confidence if the product fails; The interviewee demanded that the photo dish mirror the table dish. This study and literature emphasized authenticity, to maintain brand consistency in photographs, Llanera (2023) recommended uniform lighting, angles, and color profiles. This supports the interview conclusion that the restaurant needs a consistent look, such professional studio shots. Scholarly investigation also reveals that restaurants must balance food presentation and honesty. Storytelling and cultural context can increase food imagery' significance (Peng, 2019), indicating that authenticity is about brand story and values as well as food appearance. Our findings suggest that the restaurant's goal was to communicate “this is who we are and what we serve,” not a fantasy. Primary research and literature favor real, high-quality photographs, over fraudulent ones.

Figure 4.1.3



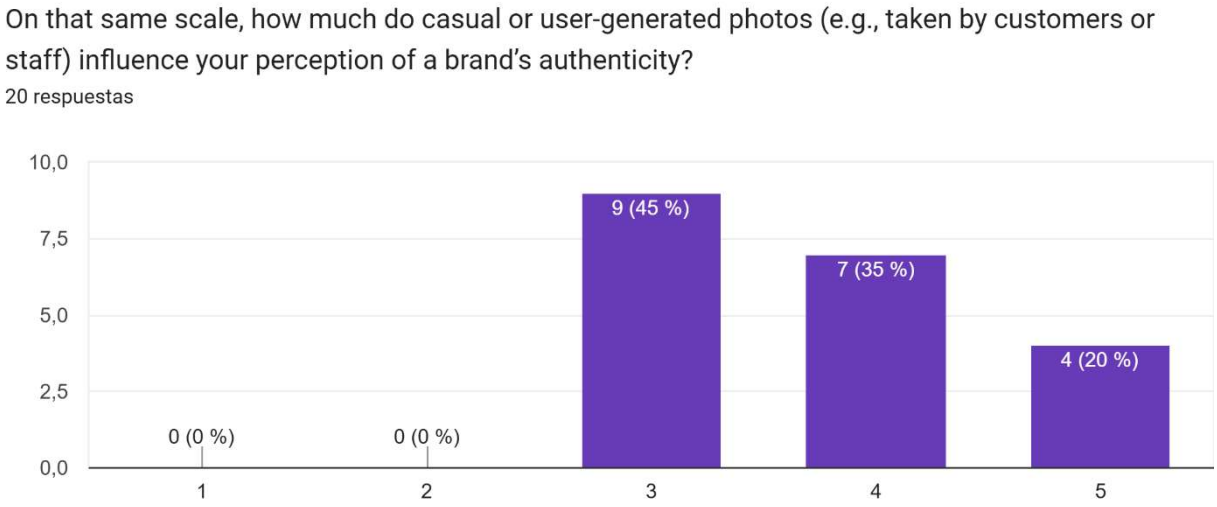
Interpretation: The findings supported Theme 3 that restaurant food photography should be authentic, quality, and consistent. According to the interview and poll, overproduced photographs lose clients, but honest, appealing photos attract them. Customers want tasty photos and honest reviews. This implies restaurant images should be honest and well-lit and staged to showcase food. All images may need internal standards to unify a brand's visual content. Restaurants should present food with natural lighting and minimum post-processing to maintain trust. All platforms should use the same frame, lighting, and editing to make brand images instantly identifiable and trustworthy. These best practices can help a restaurant create a unique, original visual identity that thrills consumers without setting expectations.

4.4 Cost-Effectiveness & Impact of Professional vs. DIY Photography

The study compared the cost and branding benefits of professional and DIY food photography for restaurant marketing. Interviewee preferred DIY for affordability and authenticity/consistency. The restaurant owner said professional photographers may not be better than smartphone images since they look overly staged. He likes candid, well-lit photos on the table or in a waiter's hands. He preferred the restaurant's authenticity to staged photography. “I don't use them,” the candidate, stated of professional costs and marketing benefits. Not worthwhile. ” He said “ you cannot use your own less quality content” since “the images must all look a similar style.” Professional images can boost a restaurant's visual standard, forcing all future content to meet it, which could be unsustainable for a tiny business. The owner avoided professional photography to control his feed's style and prevent combining high-end and low-end photos. Also removed exorbitant professional service fees. Overall, the interviewee found DIY photography was cheaper and better for him than professional, limiting

future content options. The survey results subtly corroborated the interviewee's viewpoint. As said, 78% of customers trusted brands more with well-lit, professional photos. This shows restaurant patrons prefer professional photography's polish and credibility. Over half of respondents said casual or user-generated photographs made a brand more honest and personable. While professional photos may impress and reassure customers about the restaurant's quality, user-generated or DIY images can humanize the business and build trust via authenticity. Instagram's combination of professional and amateur food images was the most influential platform, and 8 out of 9 respondents shared a restaurant's photo because it looked delicious. Their eagerness to share photos, whether professional or amateur, proves that appealing content is enough to captivate customers. An overwhelming 47.6% of respondents stated they would return to a brand that "consistently posts appealing, high-quality visuals." Possible high-quality DIY. Customers valued consistency and appeal above photographer pedigree. The interviewee worried mixing professional and amateur photos would ruin homogeneity. As long as the graphics are nice and consistent, buyers don't care how the restaurant produces it (by a skilled photographer or a clever employee with a smartphone). Our findings illustrate the merits and cons of professional and DIY photography compared to previous studies. Professional photographers' lighting, composition, and equipment can boost a restaurant's image (Jacobson et al., 2000). Luxury photos may make dishes look tasty and promote brand image. According to the literature, hiring professionals is expensive and scheduling shoots can be inflexible, and over-reliance on outsiders can reduce content's immediacy and personal touch. Němcová (2018) discovered that smartphone-based DIY solutions boost innovation, speed, and cost savings for small businesses. This study participant created knowledge swiftly and cheaply by themselves. Wakelin (2021) discussed how modern tools allow restaurateurs to produce their own content and directly engage with their customers, giving pictures brand distinctiveness. The interview highlighted that the owner valued DIY content (such showing food in a waiter's hand, which adds personality) over professional filming for its flexibility and authenticity. Without professional help, DIY content may vary in quality and style, but the literature warns about consistency. Our interviewee realized this, as indicated by his sensible choice to adhere to one style and avoid mixing professional photographs that would seem horrible. Wakelin (2021) and Němcová (2018) found that restaurants employ professional photography for branding and DIY photographs for daily social media updates. This hybrid approach balances quality and quantity. The owner of our case study only used DIY content. The extreme hybrid method is a DIY authenticity and consistency method. Academics may propose paying specialists for some content, but a small eatery may DIY if the cost/benefit ratio is negative, the survey found that customers care more about appealing and current visuals than whether they are professional or DIY as long as the restaurant maintains quality.

Figure 4.1.4



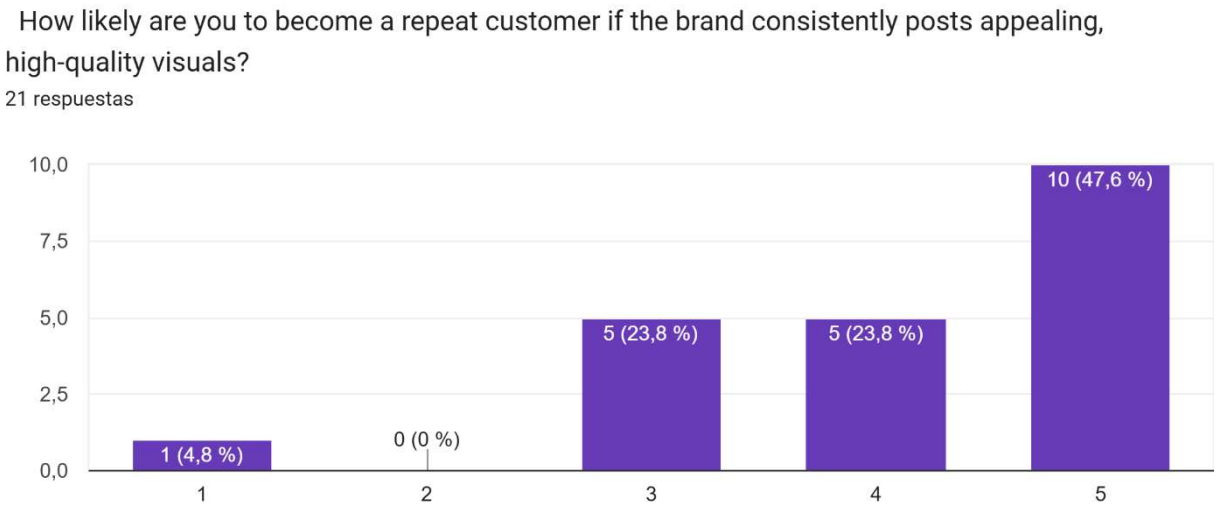
Interpretation: Theme 4 found that DIY photography was more practical and authentic for a small restaurant than expensive, unsustainable professional photography. The study showed that the owner's desire for authenticity, consistency, and budgetary prudence, essential for a small business, justified his hesitation to recruit professionals. Professional photos were polished, but consumers sought authenticity and did not need studio shots for every post. DIY visuals can captivate restaurant patrons if done well. DIY content can show context and visual standards, but professional photos build trust. Learning and practicing in-house photography is vital since terrible or inconsistent DIY photos can hurt a restaurant's brand. This theme suggests restaurants balance professional and DIY photography for cost-effective content. To set a high standard, a restaurant should hire expert photographers for a few important graphics (such as a flagship dish or seasonal menu debut) and mimic that technique for daily updates. If hiring a professional is too expensive, invest in staff training or better equipment for DIY photography to maintain quality. Visual consistency was pushed to keep the restaurant's digital presence unified and appealing, regardless of image quality. This affordable hybrid technique creates trustworthy, attention-grabbing graphics while saving money.

4.5 Role of Visual Content in Building Brand Loyalty and Engagement

Final theme, how visual content, especially food photographs on digital platforms, fosters customer engagement and brand loyalty. The main research found that regular, interesting visual content

engaged customers. The participant emphasized visual reminders of the establishment. With so many restaurants, “you need to constantly remind people of your product and food.” Posting culinary images on social media gently reminds past or potential consumers of the establishment. He also said that images are “vital when launching a new dish,” suggesting that beautiful photos of new menu items can entice followers to try them. Instead of internet metrics, the reply suggested using bookings during a busy weekend to measure engagement success. Thus, he feels a message resonated and motivated customers to visit the business if it increased reservations or turnout. This engagement model considers client visits (conversion) the ultimate visual marketing success metric. Surveys showed that regular, beautiful visual material increases customer engagement and loyalty. How likely would respondents return if a brand “consistently posts appealing, high-quality visuals.” 47.6% agreed. Most participants believed maintaining good visual material by a restaurant will boost their loyalty or frequency of visits. Social media and online photos make consumers more likely to return to a restaurant. The survey found that most respondents had shared or reposted a restaurant's photo on social media (38.1% 1–2 times and 19% 3–5 times). Customers who like the content stay loyal and become ambassadors by telling friends and followers. Sharing expands the restaurant's reach and peer referrals attract new customers. According to these survey results, restaurants post engaging photos, customers enjoy, share, and frequent, and the brand fosters community and loyalty. Likes and shares indicate interest, but returning customers are the ultimate loyalty indication. The survey did not ask consumers what engagement signs are significant. The interviewee's observation that bookings increased after certain posts shows this pattern: a captivating post can turn interaction into purchases, and repeated experiences will establish customer loyalty to the restaurant. These data match the literature well. Visual marketing content evokes emotion, increasing client loyalty and engagement, says research. Tarabieh (2022) and Jayasingh (2019) say evocative, high-quality photographs build trust and repeat purchases, producing loyal customers. Great imagery appeals to customers' senses and recollections (e.g., a wonderful meal or a promise) to develop a lasting relationship. Our analysis found the interviewee's behavior of posting to “remind” customers to be emotional presence. Restaurants can post images on social media and let consumers comment and create content, building loyalty (Zakiah et al., 2023; Khoirunnisa & Marllenisa, 2022). The study found this pattern in restaurant photo sharing. Reposting or sharing dining photographs makes guests feel like part of a restaurant's story and community, which boosts loyalty. Our findings further support the premise that consistent visual branding improves brand identity in consumers' minds (the interviewee underlined constant reminders and the survey respondents claimed quality graphics engage them). The triangulation shows that regular, beautiful, and authentic visual content strategy engages customers online and builds brand loyalty offline. Successful restaurants turn delighted customers into repeat visitors and brand promoters, according to research.

Figure 4.1.5



Interpretation: Theme 5 results indicate how images retain the restaurant in clients' minds and start a conversation. Both research revealed that featuring appealing food photos regularly builds connection. The interview and survey show that the restaurant uses social media photos to revive interest, remind customers of good times, and tempt them with new ones. Regular interaction can establish a loyal following that returns, interacts (likes, comments, shares), and promotes the brand. The restaurant should view its visual posts as long-term relationship-building rather than one-time marketing. A popular post increased bookings for the interviewee, showing how content can mobilize customers. Restaurants should post engaging visual content and use social media for relationship marketing. To develop a community, restaurants should share new images of their food, atmosphere, and customers several times a week and respond to comments and promote user-generated content. They should also track followers, comments, and reservations to discover what material resonates. Fresh, emotionally engaging images may generate brand loyalty for restaurants.

Chapter 4 concludes: Food photography and online marketing effect customer behavior and restaurant success across these five themes, according to interviews, surveys, and literature. The major study for each theme area confirmed or increased the literature and answered questions about visual influence, branding methods, best practices, cost, and loyalty. This indicated that effective food photography, professional or amateur, helps restaurants attract customers, communicate their brand identity, and establish loyalty. This prepares for the last chapter, which summarizes the key research issue, gives suggestions, recognizes study flaws, and advises more research.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Answering the Research Question

The central research question of this study asked: “How does the quality of food photography (professional vs. DIY) influence customer engagement and retention in new small- and medium-sized restaurants?” Based on the findings, a clear response is available. Food imagery boosts customer engagement and loyalty in restaurant digital marketing, according to studies. Online, engaging food photos connect establishments and consumers, influencing them at multiple stages. First, high-quality and delicious food photos influence potential customers' initial selections – many diners in this survey chose where to eat based on visual appeal, proving that people “eat with their eyes” before making a reservation. Consistent and original visual content engages guests and reinforces the restaurant's identity. Restaurants can engage customers with a consistent stream of photographs that illustrate their story and promote new products on social media, especially Instagram. Customer appreciation and favourable memories of continued engagement strengthened loyalty, making them more inclined to return. The study found that when a restaurant constantly provides engaging graphics, customers remain aware and interested and a large proportion plan to return. Engaged consumers often share the restaurant's content or create their own postings (e.g. food images as guests), which increases the restaurant's reach and generates a network of brand fans, a sign of loyalty. This research also illuminates the balance of quality and authenticity needed to increase engagement and loyalty in food photography and digital marketing. Both the presence and kind of food images were important, according to the research. Most effective were genuine, aesthetically pleasing product photos. While polished professional photographs conveyed brand quality and reliability, candid DIY images conveyed authenticity and relatability. When executed correctly, both styles might attract buyers. This restaurant used DIY images that felt genuine to use digital marketing efficiently, reducing money and increasing consumer interest. The poll found that visual quality (trust) and visual authenticity (brand connection) were positively received. Thus, restaurants must decide how to create images (professionally or in-house) that matches their brand voice and resources. Food photography can drive interaction, set and manage customer expectations, and keep the conversation going, fostering loyalty, when done right. The study found that intelligently integrating food images into digital marketing attracts and retains customers. Its persuasive language in restaurant marketing attracts new consumers and reminds old ones to return, strengthening the brand and improving business performance in the competitive restaurant industry.

5.2 Consolidated Recommendations

Several useful suggestions were developed considering the research findings to assist restaurants in making better use of digital marketing and food photography. For emphasis and clarity, these suggestions, which surfaced at the conclusion of each theme analysis in Chapter 4, are gathered in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1

Theme	Recommendation for Restaurants
1. Role of Food Photography in Consumer Choices	To draw clients who "eat with their eyes," make sure that all web platforms feature food photos that are of the highest caliber, enticing, and realistic. This means making an attempt to portray each meal in marketing materials in a way that is visually appealing in order to attract clients based on first impressions.
2. Strategies in Digital Media Visual Branding	Create a content strategy that is both consistent and diverse for the main social media platforms, particularly Instagram. To keep customers interested, restaurants should publish frequently and vary their material (various foods, viewpoints, and behind-the-scenes photos). It is advised to set up specific time or a small sum of money for social media administration. Additionally, basic analytics should be used to gauge interaction and modify approach as necessary.
3. Best Practices in Food Photography	Follow consistency and authenticity when taking pictures of food. It is advised that restaurants use natural lighting, present their food cleanly, apply a consistent style or filter, and take pictures of their menu items as they are served—avoid misleading styling. By doing this, viewers' trust is increased and the images maintain their credibility while reinforcing a unified brand image.
4. Professional vs. DIY Photography	Use a hybrid approach to visual material that is economical. Budget-conscious eateries should mostly employ do-it-yourself photographs, but aim for superior quality with proper training and equipment. For a few signature photos or for the initial branding, think about hiring a professional photographer. Then, try to replicate that look in-house. This strikes a balance between price and quality and guarantees that all of the photographs utilized are of the same caliber to prevent startling discrepancies.

Theme	Recommendation for Restaurants
5. Visual Content for Loyalty & Engagement	Continue to be visually engaged and have an active social media presence. It is recommended that restaurants often share new food photos and other visual content to "remind" patrons of what they have to offer. In order to create an online community, they should also promote user involvement through comments, shares, and user-generated images. This consistent interaction with eye-catching images will eventually turn happy consumers into devoted repeat customers.

Table 5.1: Suggested activities for putting into practice theme-based digital marketing and food photography tactics. Every suggestion is based on the study's findings and is intended for restaurant owners or marketers who want to use visual material to increase client acquisition and retention.

5.3 Limitations

This research provided valuable insights, but its limits must be acknowledged. First, main data sample size and breadth were small. The customer study had 21 responses, a convenience sample that is not statistically representative of diners. The qualitative data came from a single in-depth interview with one restaurant owner; therefore, the opinions and practices may not apply to all restaurants (various types of restaurants or cultural contexts may have different experiences). Due to the small sample size, findings are indicative of trends and provide depth in this context, but they cannot be overgeneralized without further investigation. Second, time and access limited research design. While precise and insightful, email responses may lack the spontaneity and probing follow-ups of an in-person or real-time interview. This may have reduced qualitative data and avoided explanations that a live interview would have provided. Time constraints limited the survey to three weeks, and recruitment relied on the researcher's network, which may have introduced self-selection bias. Third, response bias may exist, as a business owner describing his marketing, the interviewee may praise his techniques or justify his choices (such as downplaying professional photography because he didn't employ it), given the recruitment approach, poll respondents may be younger, more social-media-active, and their Instagram and online visual views may not reflect older demographics. The external elements were not thoroughly examined. This study did not quantify sales or loyalty beyond self-reported likelihood or distinguish between cuisine or restaurant kinds and visual marketing outcomes. Other factors like as meal quality or service, may also affect engagement and loyalty

beyond photography, these constraints make the study's conclusions probable and supported by the data, but they should be treated as exploratory findings that need further validation.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the insights and restrictions above, further research on this topic could take several viable pathways to improve and widen understanding:

Increase Sample Size and Diversity: Future research should include a wider range of clients to generalize how food photography affects decision-making. Whether these conclusions are universal or demographically particular could be determined by a diverse sample of age, geography, and culture. Interviewing several restaurant owners or marketing managers from different types of restaurants (cafés, fine dining, fast service) would compare food photography approaches and challenges.

Quantify Business Performance Impact: Online food images could affect a restaurant's traffic, sales income, and customer return rate. An experiment or longitudinal research might compare customer engagement and income for two restaurants: one with professional photography and the other with DIY social media posts. This would provide more objective ROI data for pro vs. DIY photography.

Platform-Specific Dynamics: Future studies may analyze which food images work best on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, restaurant websites, and other visual digital marketing platforms. A study might compare Instagram and TikTok food content engagement (static photos vs. short videos) to determine how format and platform culture affect consumer response. Understanding how Instagram Stories and viral food videos interact with food photography can help marketers tailor their content approach to each channel.

Visuals that attract or retain customers may be explained by focus groups or diner interviews. Studying psychological mechanisms (e.g., does a realistic photo generate expectations that are satisfied, resulting in trust? Or could aspirational, attractive visuals induce an emotional desire to experience the product?) may help explain how visual material affects consumer behaviour. This could involve tests where volunteers report their feelings or restaurant patronage to different food graphics.

UGC and Community Building: User-generated food photography (customers' meal images) may be studied in restaurant marketing. It would be good to study how restaurants encourage and use customer images and how they effect other customers. Do many organic posts increase a brand's reputation and appeal more than professional posts?. This research illuminates digital food marketing's community aspect and how businesses may utilize images to mobilize loyal customers.

These and other studies can help us understand how to use food photography in digital marketing across settings and with measurable results.

5.5 Final Conclusion and Benefits of the Research

Finally, this applied project study proved how food photography and online marketing may enhance restaurant profitability and offered practical advice. Answering the research question, appealing and authentic food photos online boost customer engagement and loyalty. The study proved “people eat with their eyes” and developed a marketing strategy using literature, primary data, and conversation, this research benefits multiple food and hospitality stakeholders: Restaurant owners and managers can directly benefit from the recommendations on how to improve their visual marketing by understanding how consistent, high-quality imagery can attract and retain customers. For small firms with limited funding, this helps them allocate resources and improve marketing. Second, marketing professionals and food photographers may exploit consumer preferences for authenticity versus polish to design content strategies that resonate and advise restaurant clients on the correct mix between professional photos and in-house content. The research demonstrates when expert assistance (e.g., visual style or signature images) is most helpful and where an organic approach may guide service offerings. Thirdly, when establishments adopt this findings, internet diners may see more honest, enticing meal choices images. Before entering the restaurant, decisions are easier and more informed, and expectations match reality, enhancing customer satisfaction. Finally, the findings enhance academic and practical knowledge of culinary digital marketing, enabling future academics and educators to examine visual content and customer behavior. This project identifies major patterns and supports theoretical notions with real-world data to prepare for future research on food, photography, and marketing. In this project, food photography and digital marketing improved restaurant brand and performance and gave guests a more engaging dining experience. These findings should improve digital food images and profitability.

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