

Digital Influence and Sustainable Food Practices in Tourism: A Social Science Perspective on Responsible Consumption and Climate Action (SDG 12 and SDG 13)

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Abstract: Tourist food consumption is increasingly mediated by digital technologies, particularly social media, which shape behaviors, norms, and values with profound implications for sustainability and climate action. This review examines the intersection of digital influence and sustainable food practices in tourism through a social science lens, emphasizing the relevance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 12 and 13. Drawing on theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Norms Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and sustainable consumption frameworks, the study analyzes how digital narratives created by influencers, tourists, and tourism businesses affect individual choices and collective behaviors. The review highlights both opportunities and risks: social media can encourage environmentally responsible, locally sourced, and low-carbon food practices, yet it can also amplify unsustainable consumption patterns, greenwashing, and social inequities in host communities. Critical stakeholders including tourism enterprises, destination organizations, content creators, tourists, and policymakers are identified as essential actors in aligning digital influence with sustainability objectives. The paper concludes by proposing a research agenda addressing longitudinal behavioral studies, algorithmic effects, and governance strategies to harness digital platforms for responsible consumption. By situating tourist food practices within broader social, cultural, and environmental contexts, this review underscores the potential of social science approaches to inform policy and practice for equitable, climate-conscious tourism.

Keywords: Digital Influence, Sustainable Food Practices, Tourism Social Media, Responsible Consumption, Food Security, Climate Action, SDG 12, SDG 13

Introduction

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the way tourism experiences are imagined, consumed, and evaluated. Among these technologies, social media platforms now play a central role in shaping tourists' expectations and behaviors, particularly in relation to food experiences (Tandafatu et al., 2024). Images of local cuisines, influencer recommendations, online reviews, and short-form video content increasingly guide where tourists eat, what they consume, and how they perceive the authenticity and value of food while traveling. While this digital influence has contributed to the diversification and visibility of culinary tourism, it has also raised critical questions about sustainability, responsibility, and equity in tourist food consumption (Ingrassia et al., 2022). Food practices in tourism are not environmentally or socially neutral. Tourism-driven food consumption contributes to greenhouse gas

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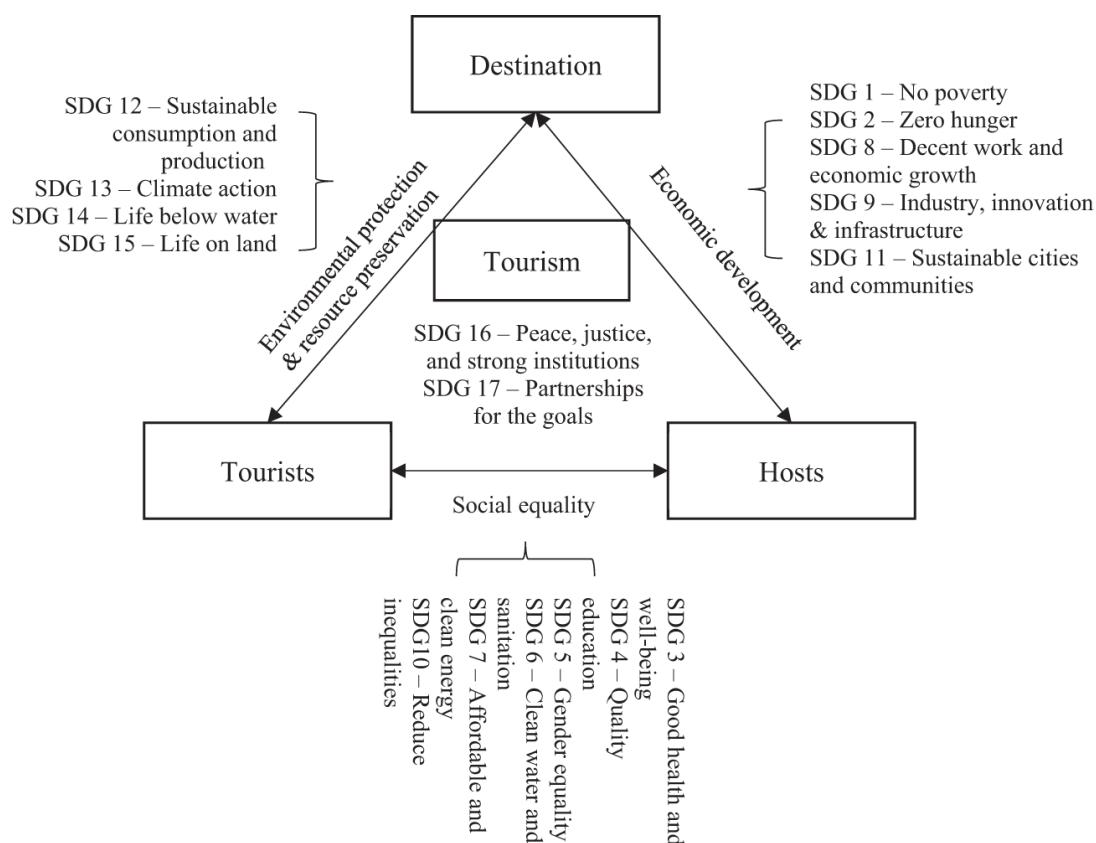
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emissions, food waste, pressure on local food systems, and shifts in traditional dietary patterns (Candia, 2024). The growing emphasis on indulgent, visually appealing, and abundance-oriented food content on social media can intensify these challenges by encouraging excessive consumption and privileging resource-intensive food choices (Naderi et al., 2024). At the same time, digital platforms also hold the potential to promote responsible consumption, raise awareness of sustainable food practices, and support local and seasonal food systems. This dual role positions digital influence as a critical, yet underexamined, factor in advancing or hindering sustainable development within tourism. The relevance of these dynamics is particularly evident when viewed through the lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 12 emphasizes responsible consumption and production, advocating for reductions in food waste, sustainable resource use, and increased consumer awareness (Monaco, 2024). SDG 13 underscores the urgency of climate action, including the need to mitigate emissions associated with food production and consumption. Tourism intersects with these goals in complex ways, generating economic opportunities while simultaneously exerting environmental pressures (Küfeoğlu, 2022). As illustrated in Figure 1 (adapted from (Buhalis et al., 2023), tourism interacts with multiple SDGs, linking environmental protection, economic development, and social equity. Food, as a core component of the tourist experience, lies at the center of this intersection, highlighting the critical role of sustainable consumption and climate-conscious practices within the tourism sector.

Figure 1

Tourism 2030: SDG interconnections with tourism (adapted from (Buhalis et al., 2023)).



From a social science perspective, tourist food consumption is shaped not only by individual preferences but also by social norms, cultural meanings, and digital interactions. Social media platforms function as spaces where consumption practices are normalized, celebrated, and replicated. Influencers and peer-generated content can reinforce dominant consumption patterns, yet they can also challenge them by promoting plant-based diets, zero-waste initiatives, and ethical food sourcing (Coman et al., 2025). Understanding how these digital narratives influence tourist behavior is essential for assessing their implications for sustainability and climate action.

Despite a growing body of research on social media and tourism marketing, existing literature remains fragmented when it comes to linking digital influence explicitly to sustainable food practices and the SDGs. Many studies focus on destination branding, consumer engagement, or satisfaction, often overlooking broader questions related to food security, environmental responsibility, and long-term sustainability. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the social justice dimensions of tourist food consumption, particularly in destinations where tourism demand can exacerbate inequalities in food access for local communities (Rodrigues et al., 2023). In response to these gaps, this review adopts a social science perspective to synthesize existing research on digital influence and sustainable food practices in tourism, with a specific focus on SDG 12 and SDG 13. By integrating insights from tourism studies, sustainability research, and digital sociology, the paper aims to critically examine how social media shapes tourist food consumption patterns and their environmental and social consequences. Through this synthesis, the review seeks to highlight key theoretical approaches, identify methodological trends and limitations, and propose directions for future research and policy. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on how digital platforms can be leveraged to support more responsible and climate-conscious food practices within the tourism sector.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the relationship between digital influence and sustainable food practices in tourism requires an integrative theoretical approach that accounts for individual behavior, social interaction, and structural forces embedded within digital platforms. From a social science perspective, tourist food consumption is not merely a matter of personal choice but is shaped by norms, meanings, and power relations that are increasingly mediated through social media. This section outlines the key theoretical foundations informing the conceptual framework of this review and proposes an integrative model linking digital influence to responsible consumption and climate-related outcomes in tourism (Zhang et al., 2025). One of the most widely applied frameworks for explaining consumption behavior in tourism research is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). According to this theory, behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of digital influence, social media content contributes directly to all three components. Exposure to visually appealing food imagery can shape tourists' attitudes toward specific food choices, while influencer endorsements and peer engagement establish social norms around what is considered desirable or acceptable to consume while traveling. Additionally, digital information about availability, pricing, and accessibility of food options can influence tourists' perceptions of control over making sustainable choices. TPB thus provides a useful lens for understanding how online content translates into offline food consumption behaviors (Balıkçıoğlu Dedeoğlu et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2025). Complementing TPB, Social Norms Theory offers deeper insight into the collective dimensions of digital influence. Social media

platforms function as spaces where norms are produced and reinforced through likes, shares, comments, and algorithmic visibility. In tourism contexts, repeated exposure to similar food narratives can normalize high-consumption practices or, alternatively, promote restraint and responsibility. For example, when sustainable food practices such as plant-based meals or zero-waste dining are portrayed as socially valued and widely adopted, they are more likely to be perceived as normative. This perspective highlights the role of digital communities in shaping shared expectations around responsible consumption (Polyportis et al., 2025).

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) further enriches the analysis by emphasizing the symbolic and identity-related aspects of food consumption in tourism. Food experiences are often used by tourists to express cultural capital, authenticity, and lifestyle aspirations. Social media intensifies this process by transforming food into a visual and performative object. From this standpoint, sustainable food practices may be adopted not only for ethical reasons but also as a means of signaling environmental awareness and social responsibility. However, CCT also draws attention to contradictions, as sustainability narratives can be commodified and detached from their original ethical intent (Lin et al., 2023). The framework is also informed by theories of sustainable consumption, which emphasize the need to reduce environmental impacts while maintaining social well-being. These theories shift attention from individual choice to systemic factors, including production practices, supply chains, and institutional contexts. In tourism, sustainable consumption is influenced by the availability of local and seasonal foods, pricing structures, and destination-level policies. Digital platforms can either reinforce unsustainable systems by amplifying demand for resource-intensive foods or support transitions toward sustainability by increasing transparency and awareness (Lin, 2024). Integrating these perspectives, the conceptual framework positions digital influence as a mediating force between social and structural factors and tourist food consumption outcomes. Social media exposure shapes attitudes, norms, and identities, which in turn influence food choices during travel. These choices have implications for responsible consumption (SDG 12), including food waste reduction and support for local food systems, as well as for climate action (SDG 13) through their associated carbon footprints. Importantly, the framework also acknowledges feedback loops, whereby tourist engagement with sustainable food content can reinforce digital narratives and influence broader consumption trends (Simeone & Scarpato, 2020).

By bringing together behavioral, cultural, and sustainability-oriented theories, this framework provides a holistic foundation for examining digital influence in tourism food practices. It moves beyond simplistic cause-and-effect assumptions and instead highlights the complex, socially embedded processes through which digital platforms shape consumption. This integrative approach supports a more nuanced understanding of how social media can be leveraged to advance responsible consumption and climate goals within the tourism sector.

Social Media as a Driver of Tourist Food Consumption

Social media has become a powerful driver of tourist food consumption by shaping expectations, preferences, and perceptions of value before and during travel. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and online review sites increasingly function as informal guides, influencing where tourists eat and what they choose to consume. Unlike traditional marketing channels, social media content is embedded within everyday social interaction, making its influence both subtle and pervasive. Food-

related content, in particular, occupies a central place in digital tourism narratives, as meals are highly visual, culturally symbolic, and easily shareable (Soltani et al., 2021). One of the most visible mechanisms through which social media shapes tourist food consumption is visual storytelling. High-quality images and short videos often emphasize abundance, aesthetic appeal, and novelty, presenting food as an experience to be consumed not only physically but also digitally. This visual emphasis can encourage tourists to prioritize “Instagrammable” dishes and venues, sometimes irrespective of their environmental footprint or cultural relevance. As a result, food choices may be driven more by online visibility and social validation than by considerations of sustainability or responsibility (White, 2021). Influencers play a particularly influential role in this process. Through curated narratives of travel and dining, influencers act as cultural intermediaries who translate destinations into consumable experiences. Their recommendations can legitimize specific food practices, normalize excess, and reinforce aspirational consumption patterns. At the same time, influencer credibility often rests on perceived authenticity, which creates space for promoting local, traditional, or sustainable food options. This tension highlights the ambivalent nature of digital influence: the same mechanisms that drive overconsumption can also be mobilized to encourage more responsible food choices (Ingrassia et al., 2022). User-generated content and online reviews further amplify social media’s impact on tourist food behavior. Ratings, comments, and peer recommendations contribute to the formation of social norms by signaling what is popular, acceptable, or worth experiencing. From a social norms perspective, repeated exposure to similar consumption patterns can lead tourists to internalize these practices as expected components of the travel experience. This dynamic is particularly relevant in destinations where tourism demand concentrates around a limited number of food outlets, intensifying pressure on local food systems and increasing food waste (Zhang et al., 2025). Algorithmic curation adds another layer to the influence of social media on tourist food consumption. Platform algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, often favoring visually striking, indulgent, or extreme food experiences. This can result in the disproportionate visibility of resource-intensive dishes, luxury dining, or oversized portions, while more modest or sustainable options receive less attention. Although algorithms are not inherently opposed to sustainability, their logic of engagement-driven amplification may inadvertently reinforce unsustainable consumption patterns unless explicitly guided otherwise (Aggarwal et al., 2025).

Despite these challenges, social media also offers opportunities to reshape tourist food consumption in more sustainable directions. Growing online interest in plant-based diets, local sourcing, and zero-waste dining demonstrates the potential for alternative narratives to gain traction. When sustainable food practices are framed as desirable, meaningful, and socially valued, they can influence attitudes and behaviors in ways consistent with responsible consumption. Importantly, such shifts often emerge from grassroots digital communities rather than top-down marketing campaigns, underscoring the participatory nature of social media influence (Beninger, 2022). From a social science standpoint, the influence of social media on tourist food consumption should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by cultural meanings, power relations, and technological structures. Tourists are not passive recipients of digital content but active participants who interpret, reproduce, and circulate consumption narratives. Their engagement with food-related content both reflects and reinforces broader trends in tourism and society. Recognizing this reciprocal relationship is essential for assessing the implications of digital influence for sustainable food practices (Christou et al., 2025). Overall, social media functions as a key

mediator between tourism demand and food consumption patterns. Its role extends beyond information provision to the construction of norms, identities, and aspirations related to eating while traveling. Understanding these processes provides a critical foundation for examining how digital influence can either undermine or support efforts to advance responsible consumption (SDG 12) and climate action (SDG 13) within the tourism sector.

Responsible Consumption and Sustainable Food Practices in Tourism (SDG 12)

Responsible consumption, as outlined in SDG 12, is a key challenge for tourism, particularly regarding food. Tourism often encourages indulgence and detachment from everyday sustainability norms, making food consumption a critical site where environmental, cultural, and economic concerns intersect. Digital platforms increasingly shape how responsibility is understood and enacted by tourists (Chan et al., 2018; Delgado et al., 2023). Sustainable food practices encompass reducing waste, supporting local and seasonal systems, ethical sourcing, and moderating resource-intensive consumption. Social media influences these practices by shaping awareness and norms. Content emphasizing abundance and novelty without environmental context can reinforce unsustainable behavior. Conversely, highlighting responsible practices as integral to authentic travel experiences can foster behavioral change aligned with SDG 12 (Singh et al., 2024). Food waste is a major concern. Buffets, oversized portions, and variety-seeking often lead to significant waste. Social media that celebrates excess such as "must-try" lists or viral eating challenges normalizes these practices. Yet, platforms also provide opportunities to address waste through awareness campaigns, storytelling, and transparency about reduction initiatives. Sharing sustainability efforts can align consumer expectations with responsible consumption without compromising experience quality (Astashkina et al., 2025). Local and seasonal foods are another key aspect. Promoting locally sourced ingredients supports regional economies and reduces environmental impacts from transportation. Social media narratives emphasizing authenticity, cultural heritage, and community connection can increase demand for such practices, especially when grounded in local voices rather than external messaging (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025).

From a social science perspective, responsible consumption is shaped by norms and moral signaling. Tourists adopt sustainable practices not only out of environmental concern but also for social recognition. Posting plant-based meals or farm-to-table experiences can function as identity expression. While visibility accelerates adoption, it also risks performative sustainability if symbolic actions outweigh impact (Sorcaru et al., 2024). Digital platforms shape perceptions of responsibility through framing, endorsements, and visually appealing narratives. Simplified labels and influencer promotion can make sustainable choices desirable, but lack of standardized information and greenwashing can create confusion. Clear, accountable communication is essential (Mukendi et al., 2026). Tourism businesses and destinations play a pivotal role. Hotels, restaurants, and marketing organizations increasingly use social media to showcase sustainability commitments. When backed by measurable actions and collaborative initiatives with local producers and content creators, these efforts can meaningfully advance SDG 12 (d'Angella et al., 2025). Social media's influence depends on narratives, values normalized, and structural conditions, highlighting the need to leverage it for environmentally responsible, socially equitable, and culturally respectful food practices.

Food Security and Social Justice Implications of Tourist Food Consumption

Food security is often overlooked in tourism, yet it is central to ethical discussions about tourist consumption. Tourism can pressure local food systems, especially in resource-limited destinations. Social media amplifies demand for specific foods and venues, turning local dishes into high-demand commodities, sometimes increasing prices or diverting supplies, which can exacerbate food insecurity for local communities (Orea-Giner et al., 2026; Saleem et al., 2025). Digital representations of food valorize abundance, exclusivity, and novelty, often marginalizing everyday food practices that sustain residents. This reflects broader power imbalances, where tourist preferences are prioritized. Conversely, tourism can strengthen local food systems through stable demand for small-scale producers, supported by community-based initiatives and digital visibility for locally owned businesses (Mapes, 2021). A key issue is the disconnect between online food representation and material realities. Labor conditions, resource constraints, and social trade-offs are rarely visible, enabling unsustainable consumption. Gender and labor considerations are critical, as women often dominate food production and informal economies. Tourism-driven changes in demand can increase workloads or precarity, and social media indirectly influences which food types gain commercial and social value (Wu & Yu, 2025). Policy integration of food security into tourism planning is challenging. Digital influence accelerates demand faster than regulations can adapt. Campaigns that foreground local voices, food sovereignty, and ethical consumption can encourage responsible tourist behavior. Aligning digital influence with equitable food systems is essential to ensure tourism supports social well-being and long-term sustainability.

Climate Action (SDG 13): Environmental Impacts of Tourist Food Choices

Tourist food consumption significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Diets high in animal products, imported foods, and resource-intensive meals, often promoted on social media, amplify climate impacts. Visually compelling content of meat-heavy dishes or oversized portions can normalize high-carbon practices, while hidden costs from transportation, storage, and waste remain largely invisible (Zhao et al., 2024). Social media also provides opportunities to promote climate-conscious choices. Plant-based diets, low-carbon menus, and locally sourced foods can be framed as desirable and culturally meaningful, influencing behavior through visible, socially rewarded norms. Influencers play a pivotal role in translating abstract climate concerns into concrete actions, though credibility and depth of messaging are critical to avoid skepticism or performative sustainability (Krasny, 2023; Rahman, Shah, et al., 2025). Destination strategies such as highlighting partnerships with local farmers, seasonal menus, and waste reduction initiatives can leverage social media to advance climate goals. Policy coordination across agriculture, tourism, and digital governance is necessary to ensure sustainable choices are feasible and scalable. Aligning digital narratives with (Rahman et al., 2024) responsibility is essential to reduce tourism's environmental footprint and advance SDG 13 (Rahman, Faraz, et al., 2025; Zeqiri et al., 2025).

Stakeholder Roles and Governance in Promoting Sustainable Food Practices through Digital Influence

Advancing sustainable food practices in tourism requires coordination among multiple stakeholders across digital, economic, and institutional domains. Social media's influence is shaped by governance structures, market incentives, and social norms. Understanding stakeholder roles is essential for translating digital influence into progress toward SDG 12 and SDG 13 (Gruchmann et al., 2022). Tourism

businesses including hotels, restaurants, and tour operators shape tourist food choices by communicating menus, values, and sustainability commitments via social media. When messaging is backed by tangible practices such as local sourcing, waste reduction, or low-carbon options, platforms reinforce responsible consumption. Conversely, presenting sustainability primarily as branding risks greenwashing, undermining trust and transformative potential (Dixit, 2025a). Destination management organizations and tourism boards act as intermediaries between policy and market practices. By promoting local food culture, seasonal eating, and community-based tourism on social media, they align destination branding with sustainability objectives. These organizations can set guidelines that ensure digital narratives reflect on-the-ground practices (Pechlaner et al., 2012). Digital content creators and influencers are highly influential in shaping norms and aspirations. Responsible partnerships grounded in transparency can amplify credible sustainability narratives. Without accountability, however, influencers may inadvertently promote unsustainable practices (Panwar et al.). Tourists are active stakeholders. Their engagement sharing content, leaving reviews, or participating in sustainability narratives shapes demand and normalized behaviors. Providing accessible, trustworthy information empowers tourists to make informed choices (Dixit, 2025b). Governance institutions, including policymakers and platform regulators, shape the broader context. Policies promoting transparency, discouraging misleading sustainability claims, and supporting local food systems help align digital tourism practices with SDGs. Regulation provides the framework within which responsible digital influence can thrive (Sneideriene & Legenzova, 2025).

Future Research Agenda

Despite growing interest in digital influence and sustainable tourism, significant gaps remain. Future research should:

1. **Examine longitudinal effects:** Investigate whether exposure to sustainability-focused food content leads to lasting behavioral change or remains symbolic.
2. **Diversify methods:** Move beyond surveys and content analysis to mixed-methods, ethnography, and participatory studies, especially in the Global South, where tourism impacts on food security and climate are pronounced.
3. **Investigate algorithms and AI:** Study how content curation affects the visibility of sustainable versus unsustainable food practices and the spread of misinformation or greenwashing.
4. **Focus on governance:** Explore how policies, platform regulations, and multi-stakeholder collaboration can support sustainable food practices, including comparative studies across destinations.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This review highlights the complex role of social media in shaping sustainable food practices in tourism. Digital platforms influence what tourists eat, how food is valued, and how norms are formed, making food consumption a key intersection of responsible consumption, food security, and climate action.

While social media can reinforce unsustainable patterns, it also offers opportunities to promote local food systems, reduce environmental impacts, and raise social justice awareness. Policy alignment is essential:

- Policymakers should ensure transparency in sustainability communication and discourage misleading digital narratives.

- Tourism businesses and destination organizations must back digital storytelling with genuine practices.
- Influencers and platforms should recognize their responsibility beyond engagement metrics.

Sustainable food practices in tourism depend on reimagining digital influence as a tool for collective responsibility. By situating consumption within social, environmental, and ethical contexts, digital platforms can support equitable, climate-conscious tourism aligned with SDG 12 and SDG 13.

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