

Food Porn; Netnographic Study of Audience Motivation to Follow the Instagram Food Blogger's Pages

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Abstract

In the contemporary digital era, Instagram serves as a dynamic platform for diverse content, fostering interpersonal connections through image and video sharing. This research explores the motivations behind audiences' engagement with routine, universally relatable content, particularly the escalating interest in mundane daily activities like eating. Employing the netnography method, we focus on 20 food bloggers with audiences exceeding 20,000 individuals to uncover user motivations. Contrary to assumptions of passive social media users, findings highlight the active role of audiences in seeking and engaging with everyday activity content. This research sheds light on the motivating factors compelling audiences to consume seemingly commonplace content, contributing valuable insights to understanding evolving social media user behavior. The study reveals that audiences, influenced by technology and Instagram's accessibility, engage with novel content like "Foodporn." Despite potential indifference or antipathy toward foodporn, audiences persist in observing it due to habitual consumption patterns. The instinctual need to eat emerges as a significant factor drawing attention to foodporn, triggering hunger pangs from images of delectable dishes. This nuanced understanding offers valuable insights for scholars studying audience behavior in the ever-evolving landscape of social media, emphasizing the active role audiences play in shaping and consuming content.

Keywords: food porn, food blogger, Instagram, audience affiliation, netnography

1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem

In the modern era, virtual platforms are pivotal for communication, significantly shaping individuals and society as various media outlets inundate our 21st-century world, guiding our actions and influencing our perspectives.

In recent centuries, it has become evident that social networks have emerged as innovative media, capable of replacing traditional forms such as print media. This substitution has not only influenced the minds of the audience but has also idealized their perceptions. Consequently, individuals have started to locate and follow their ideal models within the realm of virtual space. This concept of idealization sometimes pertains to an individual's social status and lifestyle choices, while in other instances, it centers around their physical appearance.

Social networks and media platforms have shown substantial growth recently, with internet access in U.S. households steadily increasing since 1998, according to the United States Census Bureau (Crotty & Hoines, 2011). Instagram is a dominant global social network with over one billion users, emphasizing photo, video, and message sharing (The Parent's Guide to Instagram, 2016). Instagram's unrestricted sharing of visual content globally has attracted a significant user base, reaching over 400 million active users by September 2015 (Samani & Farahani, 2015).

In this article, the researcher has collected and then analyzed the data according to the netnography method. He has also used the most important literary theories related to the subject, such as the dependency theory, which shows that the audience can acquire and transmit information and even social interactions in all aspects. The dimensions depend on the media. For this reason, the audience's reading of Foodporn on the Instagram social network and their motivation to follow this content is very important.

Among the various social networks that have gained significant traction in recent years, Instagram stands out as a prominent example. Instagram's unique feature of allowing users to share videos, photos, and textual content at any time of the day without constraints has successfully captured the attention of a diverse and extensive audience within a short timeframe. This platform enables people to engage with each other, sharing moments and interactions in the form of images, videos, and text. The sharing of content, particularly visual content, on platforms like Instagram garners more enthusiasm compared to platforms that predominantly rely on textual content. "Foodporn" on Instagram, curated by food bloggers, has gained substantial followers by offering a sensory experience that satisfies viewers' desires, and this study explores the audience's motivations for engaging with this content (Manovich, 2015). This study investigates the factors driving audience engagement with digital "foodporn" content produced by bloggers, defined as visually appealing and unattainable culinary creations. The popular Instagram hashtag "Foodporn" is used prominently by bloggers creating "Eating Show" content, emphasizing close-up visuals and food-related sounds, and highlighting audience fascination (Mejova et al., 2016). This study delves into unconventional

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and spicy culinary combinations embraced by food bloggers, gaining popularity, particularly among Iranian bloggers with over 20,000 Instagram followers. "Food porn" offers exaggerated portrayals of momentarily unattainable culinary delights, triggering multisensory experiences that evoke smell and taste, captivating audiences. The research aims to understand why people engage with this content, examining personal versus media-influenced motivations. It suggests that foodporn satisfies food cravings, influenced by media's power, and exposure to such content may increase hunger, driven by the mere viewing of food images. This highlights the impact of visual aesthetics on our sensory experiences and emotional connection to food (Romm, 2015). In the modern context, audiences prioritize authentic images, and platforms like Instagram and food bloggers' pages contribute to the standardization of "exemplary cuisine," positioning these individuals as culinary authorities (Feldman, 2021), with the study focusing on audience responses to these images.

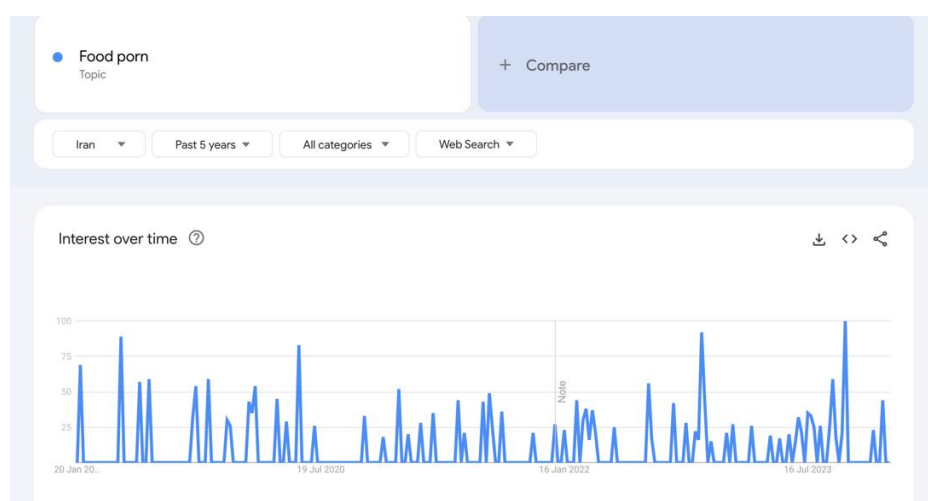


Fig1: The graph of Iranian's use of Foodporn content in the last 5 years on Google Chart

Given the framework provided by the literature review and the insights drawn from it, it becomes evident that exploring the phenomenon of food porn on Instagram within the Iranian context is of considerable significance. Despite its popularity among Iranian Instagram users over the past five years, there remains a notable gap in understanding its impact and the patterns of user engagement from a social sciences and cultural studies perspective. Firstly, the widespread acceptance and engagement with food porn content on Instagram among Iranian users highlight its cultural relevance and resonance within the society. Understanding the underlying motivations and behaviors of users who consume this content is essential for comprehending the evolving digital culture in Iran. Secondly, delving into the dynamics of food porn consumption on Instagram can shed light on broader societal trends and dynamics, such as changes in dietary habits, cultural perceptions of food, and the role of social media in shaping lifestyle choices. By examining

how users interact with food porn content, researchers can gain insights into the intersections of technology, culture, and identity in contemporary Iran.

Furthermore, investigating the impact of food porn on Instagram from a social sciences perspective can contribute to discussions around digital literacy, media influence, and the construction of online identities. Understanding how users navigate and interpret food porn content can inform strategies for promoting media literacy and responsible digital citizenship in Iranian society.

Overall, the exploration of food porn on Instagram within the Iranian context presents a compelling opportunity for interdisciplinary research that bridges the gap between social sciences, cultural studies, and digital media studies. By examining this phenomenon through a critical lens, researchers can uncover valuable insights into the complex dynamics of digital culture in Iran and beyond.

2. Literature

2.1. Dependency Theory

Dependency Theory, initially proposed by Rokeach and Defleur in 1967, asserts that mass media fulfills social needs, serving as an essential source of information and a means of escape from reality in contemporary urban settings, contributing to addictive behaviors (Qasemi, 2006). People's interest in following food bloggers is driven by the desire to momentarily disconnect from personal issues, with the extent of this dependency influenced by social structure and societal changes (Qasemi, 2006).

Rokeach and Defleur highlight the increasing reliance on media for clarity in our complex society, with the media system's importance growing and reshaping cognitive processes, behaviors, and emotions as audience needs evolve. Sociologists argue that an individual's dependence on a specific media source is linked to the effectiveness of media messages (Qasemi, 2006). Information overload is a global concern, with the constant influx of data leading to stress, driving people to rely on online platforms to stay informed and entertained in an anxiety-filled world of relentless work demands.

2.1.1 Dependency Theory's Features and Principles

1. Access to information is a fundamental requirement in all societies, addressing needs like nutrition, housing, and employment.
2. Urban communities are diverse, comprising individuals from various racial, occupational, and professional backgrounds. In such diverse settings, media becomes crucial for gaining insights into others' backgrounds and unique traits.
3. Relying solely on word-of-mouth and established social networks limits information access significantly.
4. Consequently, people progressively develop a greater reliance on the media, and within urban environments, this dependence on the media's impact on the audience intensifies (Qasemi, 2006).

2.1.2 Dimensions of Dependency

The reliance on media has dual dimensions encompassing both society and individuals. In society, media play vital roles in social, economic, political, and educational spheres. On an individual level, people find mass communication tools highly valuable in their daily lives. This reliance on media is particularly pronounced in industrialized areas due to the shallower interpersonal connections in these societies compared to pre-industrial ones (Qassemi, 2005). Consequently, individuals increasingly turn to alternative media sources to fulfill their information needs. In contemporary industrialized societies, the Internet has become a ubiquitous medium for both information and entertainment, replacing traditional personal contacts as a primary source of information.

2.1.3 Criticisms of the Dependency Theory

Scholars debate media dependency, with factors like income affecting reliance and critiques about neglecting other institutions' roles. Media dependence is mutual, with audience engagement crucial. People increasingly depend on virtual spaces and social media for constant information. Autonomy in content choice is key. Cultural backgrounds influence content creation. Modern audiences, especially on social networks, tend to be passive and susceptible to media influence. Even in Iran, food bloggers have a global following, deepening reliance on virtual platforms (Qassemi, 2006).

2.2 The Theory of the Spectacle Society

The Theory of the Spectacle Society explores the growth of consumer culture in urbanized societies and its influence on self-presentation and performance through subcultures. It emphasizes the pervasive role of capital in various aspects of society, from public spaces to personal relationships, making society reflect capital. Debor's concept delves into the interplay of aesthetics, imagery, and consumer capitalism in daily life. Public spaces feature idealized consumer products, masking social disparities. The spectacle society promotes the ideal of the engaged consumer while categorizing anything "outside" consumption as problematic for urban life.

The perception of the "image" varies significantly between its creators and those who observe and participate in it. Creators aim to craft a conventional representation to enhance their capital, while the audience is expected to embrace this image as a reflection of the majority of society, labeling dissenters as anti-society. According to Debor, the spectacle is, to some extent, capital accumulation transformed into an image (Debor, 2002). This procession of images encourages the audience to adopt a uniform taste and passively follow it, becoming captivated by the image itself, regardless of its content, thus becoming mere spectators who perceive the image like everyone else and obediently follow suit. At the same time, the audience opts for using and enjoying the product rather than closely scrutinizing it. Creators commodify their eating images, offering them for sale and display. In this context, truth becomes less about its actual

audience and more about the image that embodies it. Over time, for the audience, images and truth merge, no longer existing as distinct entities. In this scenario, the audience struggles to differentiate between the image and reality, finding satisfaction solely in viewing these images. The concept of lifestyle is of great significance in social, cultural, and political contexts, drawing attention from scholars across disciplines. In the modern world, lifestyle has become a central factor in shaping individual identities, with social class's influence decreasing. Advancements in technology and communication, the spread of cultural capital within families, and widespread access to these factors have significantly impacted the development of diverse lifestyles and the formation of identities aligned with them. The discussion of lifestyles is particularly relevant in societies characterized by mass consumption and consumerism, as argued by Jean Baudrillard. Evaluating lifestyle should focus on behaviors with minimal societal impact, as it serves as the central thread unifying an individual's existence. A closer examination of lifestyle reveals hidden attitudes and values in individuals' thoughts and actions, offering insights into prevailing trends and cultural realities. Lifestyle research can provide a constructive path to understanding and analyzing the nation's cultural environment (Bayengani et al., 2013). In cultural studies and sociology, lifestyle is a long-standing subject of investigation. Today, technological advancements and mass media play a significant role in shaping people's lifestyles. People are no longer solely defined by traditional factors like social class or national identity. Instead, they are influenced by content unrelated to their backgrounds. In a world emphasizing consumption, individuals consume products and content not out of necessity but to identify with others who share their interests. This sets them apart from those who are unfamiliar with these products and content. Individuals adopt these products and engage with this content to participate in a specific consumer culture, even when not genuinely needed. Essentially, people have created a new lifestyle by emulating media and immersing themselves in a culture of consumerism.

2.3 Conspicuous Consumption: Veblen

Paul Dimaggio (2001), the works of Veblen and Bourdieu introduce the beginning of the discussion of consumption patterns and lifestyle. According to Veblen, the basis of honor, dignity, and social status is wealth; Of course, this wealth is not the result of a person's direct work. For wealth to bring the most dignity to its owner, it must be displayed in a self-presenting and ostentatious way. In Veblen's interpretation, although having wealth has been a source of dignity for the wealthy and independent class in small societies, it shows this wealth that was recognized as honorable. In his opinion, "self-expressive leisure" which is displayed through the person's employment in non-productive work, shows the wealth of the person because the non-productive work shows that the person works for leisure and fun and is rich and employment to productive work. **It belongs to the lower classes because they need it to live.** (Lagevardi, 2018)

In Veblen's view, to show their value higher, they are constantly pretending through the obvious destruction of precious goods and pretending leisure through the display of their power

and wealth. The consumption of the upper class is based on a wasteful pattern; This means that their consumption actions will not only not increase production, but will probably cause waste of work, goods, and time. By buying luxury goods, a person wants to own things that others cannot possess, so he proves his superiority to others by showing off and pretending to own goods. This issue leads to the formation of a gap in social and economic as well as the loss of social cohesion. (Raziepour, 2018)

Considering the importance of the subject and the increase in the use of Instagram by cyberspace users, as a researcher, I decided to address this subject in the field of social sciences. In Iran, food porn has not been discussed as an article, and practically users are unaware of this content and what they read about it, and for this reason, writing this article can be very effective and informative. The importance of addressing this issue is important for two reasons. First, because it is new for Iranians, and second, because of the effect it can have on the eating behavior of the audience. For this reason, this article tries to eliminate this knowledge gap as much as possible.

2.4 Use and gratification

The theory of uses and gratifications (UGT) within communication posits that individuals actively pursue and utilize media to fulfill specific needs or objectives. UGT suggests that people aren't merely passive consumers of media content but rather active participants who selectively opt for media content that satisfies their particular requirements and aspirations (Joo & Sang, 2013). This theory delineates four fundamental categories of needs that individuals seek to gratify through media engagement: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Cognitive needs pertain to the craving for information and knowledge, while affective needs involve the desire for emotional arousal or stimulation. Personal integrative needs revolve around reinforcing or enhancing personal identity and self-esteem, whereas social integrative needs concern the urge for social interaction and companionship (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

UGT finds application in elucidating media consumption across diverse contexts such as television watching, newspaper reading, and social media usage. In the realm of social media, UGT has been employed to explore how individuals utilize these platforms to meet their communication and social needs (Lin & Lu, 2011). For instance, researchers have examined how people utilize social media to fulfill their social interaction needs by connecting with friends and family, seeking social support, and cultivating new relationships (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

2. Research Methodology

This study employed the netnography method, a contemporary research approach consisting of five key stages: (1) defining the research problem and specifying the social network under

investigation, (2) identifying units of analysis, (3) establishing data collection criteria, (4) comparing units of analysis against a benchmark, and (5) interpreting findings. Netnography, an adaptation of ethnography (Shahghasemi, 2020), provided a robust framework for understanding user behavior in the context of food bloggers' content. I did all these steps in my article.

The netnography method involved a meticulous three-month analysis of the web pages of 20 selected food bloggers on Instagram. The primary focus was on capturing audience reactions, including comments, mentions, and stories. Due to time constraints, the study concentrated on analyzing the ten most recent posts. The overarching goal was to comprehensively understand the factors contributing to the enthusiastic audience following these bloggers. Pertinent details, such as page names, follower counts, and visual content, were included to enrich the analysis. The selection of the netnography method stemmed from its ethnographic nature, aligning with the study's objective to holistically assess user behavior concerning food bloggers' content. To address concerns regarding the methodology's thoroughness, this research aims to provide a more detailed and comprehensive report on data collection and analysis, ensuring a robust presentation of the results.

3. Research Findings

The term "foodporn" originally referred to the act of appreciating others' culinary creations in media rather than cooking. This discourse aims to reassess the concept of food porn, which has garnered attention in both popular and academic literature. The text offers a historical overview of the term's emergence and usage, highlighting that it is often used more by observers than active participants in the culinary realm. Prominent figures, such as chefs, culinary TV producers, and academics, discuss the existence and diverse forms of food porn and its underlying purposes (McBride, 2010).

The media significantly influences conventional ideals of feminine beauty, emphasizing attributes like a slender physique, fair skin, and bright eyes. People aim to meet these standards, and food bloggers often face questions about how they maintain their slim figures while indulging in rich meals. This query arises from the prevailing beauty ideal, directed at an audience dedicated to achieving it through strict diets. Studies indicate that media promotion of overeating in the 1980s, despite rising obesity and eating disorders, paradoxically contributed to a culture of overindulgence. In today's context, where many struggles with obesity due to sedentary lifestyles and limited resources, content featuring high-calorie foods draws significant attention. Consequently, the audience's response to such content oscillates between longing and amazement as they recognize their inability to partake in such indulgences, fostering a sense of exclusivity among viewers (Mejova et al., 2016).

چقدر میخوری
آخرم چاق نمیشی

چرا واقن این کارا رو میکنی ؟
همینو میتونی بدی کلی بچه یتیم چراااا ایه

3w 4 likes Reply

این همه چیز میز میخوری چرا چاق؟
نمیشی والا من که ناهار مامانم نصف کفگیر برام
میریزه باز نصفشو نمیخورم الان ۴۰کیلو ام تو چرا
هیچیت نمیشه 😂

17w 1 like

Food bloggers play a significant role in enticing global social media users with culinary delights, particularly fast food and Iranian dishes like kebabs. This contemporary shift in culinary preferences is a departure from the past when fast food was not the exclusive favorite. The abundance of food showcased by bloggers has raised questions about what happens to the excess. Many bloggers reassure viewers that excess food is not wasted; it is either given to animals or saved for later consumption. (Mejova et al., 2016).



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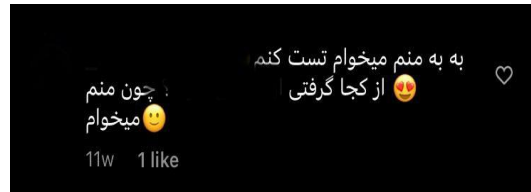


Fig. 6: Translation of comment: I would also like to try this dish. Where did you get it? I want it, too.

Audiences frequently express discontent regarding the excessive advertising on food bloggers' profiles. These ads displayed prominently, constitute a significant portion of bloggers' income, often overshadowing the main content. Many audience members have voiced concerns about the high volume of advertisements.



Fig. 7: Translation of comment: How many ads do you post? Is it possible to make a post without ads?

A common issue that elicits strong reactions from the audience pertains to the challenges undertaken by food bloggers. These challenges include consuming unusual food combinations, large quantities of food in a short time, or participating in unique challenges. The audience is drawn to such content, and bloggers often impose penalties on themselves for failure. Unconventional endeavors tend to attract dedicated followers.



Fig. 8: Translation of comment: Eat raw meat.



Fig. 9: Translation of comment: Banana and chocolate were good, But the ketchup was the worst of all.



Fig. 10: Translation of comment: How did you eat the orange with its skin and eat the noodles uncooked?



Fig. 11: Translation of comment: Finally, I'm glad someone got this emoji challenge right. Please pay attention, people; eating them all in a row is the main challenge.

In the Instagram food blogging landscape, both adults and children actively participate, and their food consumption often deviates from conventional norms, becoming a performative act with sensory elements reminiscent of sexual behavior, leading to the use of the "porn" suffix in categorizing this content. Psychiatrist Deirdre Barrett suggests that hyperbolic simulation can hold greater appeal than real experiences, drawing parallels between the allure of sugar and sexual intimacy. Pornography and food blogging offer hyper-concentrated sensory experiences, with the former relying on sight and sound rather than tactile engagement. (Romm, 2015)



Fig. 12: Translation of comment: He/She plays porn actors.



Fig. 13: Translation of comment: I don't want to have distorted thoughts about them. But they don't leave a choice for me.

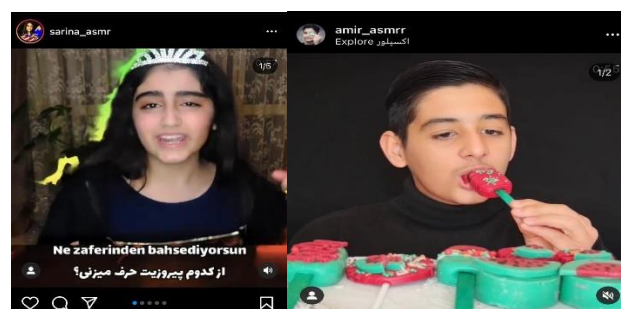


Fig. 14 : Translation of Text: Which victory are you talking about?

Another crucial aspect is the audience's susceptibility to addiction when engaging with these pages. The allure stems from their ability to vividly imagine enjoying delicious culinary experiences, which triggers a cognitive process where visual perception primes the brain for sensory experiences. Gabriella Petrick, a nutrition and food studies professor, notes that the brain reacts as if you are engaging in the depicted activities, whether it is throwing a baseball or eating. Eating engages various brain regions, involving taste, visual, and auditory stimuli, creating a multisensory cognitive process. (Romm, 2015)



Fig. 15: Translation of comment: I love your energy. I had coronavirus, and I had no appetite. But I used to see this page, and my appetite would increase, and I would eat. Very good.

4. Category of Comments

Food bloggers often encourage their audience to provide feedback on their content. Users' exposure to food-related content on these bloggers' pages can be categorized into three distinct groups:

1. Derogatory Comments: This category includes critical remarks about the bloggers' eating habits or unconventional challenges and may also target their appearances. These comments sometimes use harsh language and can lead to deletions or content restrictions. Some express dissatisfaction with food recommendations or endorsed restaurants.
2. Expressions of Gratitude: Many comments express appreciation and gratitude to food bloggers for their recommendations and daring culinary challenges. Examples include comments like, "Thank you for introducing this restaurant; it was truly wonderful." Numerous comments also focus on praising the bloggers' appearances.
3. Morally-Inclined Comments: Some comments introduce a moral perspective, suggesting that the food could have been used to feed those in need, highlighting ethical considerations.

The majority of relevant comments fall into these three main categories, excluding advertising-related comments.

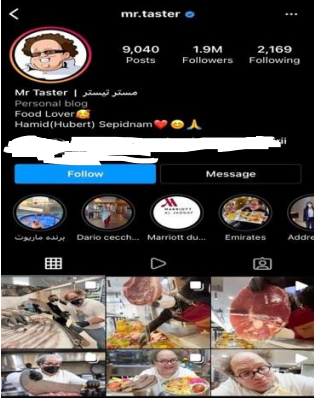
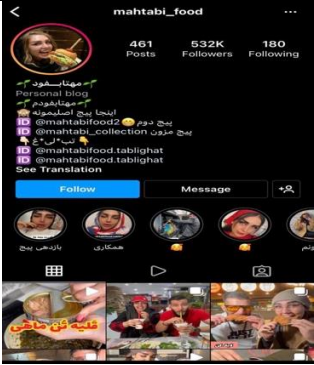
5. Conclusion

This research provides an overview of the prevalence of food porn and content shared by food bloggers. The study focuses on how audiences respond to this content from an audience-centric perspective. Technology and Instagram's widespread accessibility have led to the creation of

novel and unconventional content, including "Foodporn," which involves the presentation of food consumption with stimulating auditory and kinetic elements. Using the netnography method, this research examines user behavior on these platforms. Over time, audiences have become increasingly reliant on media, allowing various content to shape their perceptions of human behavior, including notions of "beauty" or "culinary excellence" propagated by food bloggers. In the context of foodporn, the audience's engagement revolves around visual exposure, not actual food consumption. The findings reveal that while a significant portion of the audience may exhibit indifference or even antipathy toward foodporn content, they persist in observing it due to a habitual pattern of "consuming" and "viewing" these contents. Interestingly, one of the factors drawing the audience's attention to foodporn is their instinctual need to eat, as they report experiencing hunger pangs merely from looking at images of delectable dishes. This research offers valuable insights for scholars interested in understanding audience behavior and responses to foodporn content.

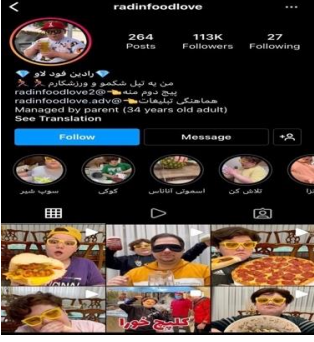
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6. Attachments

Page's picture	Followers	Page's address	Page's name
	1.9M	@Mr. taster	hamidsepidnam
	532K	@Mahtabi_food	Mahtab food
	392K	@north_foody	North_foody
	71.6K	@amir_asmrr	Amir_asmrr

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	113K	@radinfoodlove	radinfoodlove
	462K	@majidtaster	majidtaster
	249K	@mahdi.food	Mahdi.food
	1.8M	@amir_food_review	Amir Jaberi

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	246K	@sepehr.dailylife	Sepehr soleimani
	618K	@Sahand_asmr	Mukbang fun f ood
	285K	@Alisinaakbari	Foodbari
	1.3M	@amoo_roohi_foodlover	amooroohi

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 Instagram profile of chef_babak1. The profile shows 996 posts, 918K followers, and 284 following. The bio mentions 'babak_amiri' and 'Chef'. The posts are primarily food-related images.	918K	@chef_babk1	Babk_amiri
 Instagram profile of fafa_foodd. The profile shows 1,601 posts, 425K followers, and 15 following. The bio mentions 'sepideh_rezai' and 'Blogger'. The posts are primarily food-related images.	425K	@fafa_foodd	Sepideh_rezai
 Instagram profile of mehdi_foody. The profile shows 135 posts, 33.7K followers, and 70 following. The bio mentions 'mehdi' and 'Blogger'. The posts are primarily food-related images.	33.7K	@mehdi_foody	Mehdi_foodi
 Instagram profile of pedarshikamoo. The profile shows 643 posts, 373K followers, and 366 following. The bio mentions 'Pedare Shikamoo' and 'Blogger'. The posts are primarily food-related images.	373K	@pedarshikamoo	Pedare shikamoo

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	846K	@mahdis_food	mahdisfood
	117K	@sarina_asmr	Sarina asmr
	519K	@_mazeh_	Ali davarzani
	685K	@kamyar_cooking	Kamyar ebrahimi

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