

Influence of Food Bloggers in Promoting Sustainable Gastronomic Tourism Empowering Rural Economies

Ma. Flora Collado

West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines

mcollado@wvsu.edu.ph

Abstract: This study investigates the influence of food bloggers in promoting gastronomic tourism as a tool for empowering rural economies, specifically focusing on the rural towns of Iloilo Province, Philippines. Social Influence Theory was the foundation, the study employs a qualitative approach to explore how food bloggers shape tourist behavior, foster economic growth, and enhance the visibility of local businesses. Data were gathered through focus group interviews with 25 purposively selected samples from stakeholders, including rural business owners, tourism officials, food bloggers and residents. The findings reveal that food bloggers significantly enhance rural tourism by portraying authentic culinary experiences and validating the appeal of lesser-known destinations. Through visually appealing content, personal narratives, and direct endorsements, bloggers create a sense of credibility and trustworthiness, heightening tourist curiosity and engagement with rural destinations. This increased interest translates into tangible economic benefits for the communities, as evidenced by higher customer inflow, increased revenue for local businesses, and the creation of new job opportunities. The economic boost supports the sustainability of rural areas, providing a vital source of income for businesses that rely on tourism and fostering entrepreneurial activities among community members. However, it also identifies critical challenges associated with food blogger-driven tourism. These include a growing dependency on influencers for visitor traffic, risks of over-tourism that strain local resources, and pressures to adapt or commercialize cultural practices to meet tourist expectations, potentially compromising cultural authenticity. In response, the study offers practical recommendations for rural tourism boards, local businesses, and food bloggers to develop collaborative, sustainable strategies that promote long-term tourism growth while respecting local culture and resources. Finally, the study calls for further research to examine the long-term economic impacts of digital influence on rural tourism and encourages comparative studies across different cultural regions to understand varying dynamics and strategies for leveraging digital influence in rural economic development.

Keywords: Food bloggers, Gastronomic tourism, Rural economies, Social influence theory, Iloilo Philippines

1. Introduction

Gastronomic tourism has been attracting travellers seeking authentic cultural experiences through food (Everett, 2019). This tourism niche provides rural communities with valuable opportunities to attract visitors. It also stimulates economic growth by showcasing local cuisine (Long, 2020). The rise of social media makes food bloggers influential figures. They are sharing vibrant visuals, personal stories, and real-time culinary experiences across platforms. Some of the most popular ones include Instagram, Facebook, and blogs. These platforms often spotlight lesser-known rural destinations (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2021; Munar & Jacobsen, 2021). Recently, some rural towns of Iloilo Province like Miagao, Guimbal, Lambunao, and San Joaquin are popular among food bloggers. Their digital endorsements enhance visibility and attract both domestic and international tourists. These created a phenomenon that is vital in contributing to economic sustainability and resilience and is increasing support for local businesses (Hays et al., 2021). As research on gastronomic tourism exists, however, studies specifically addressing the role of food bloggers in rural economic development are limited (Miguéns et al., 2018). Much of the literature focuses on influencers in urban areas. Food bloggers are neglected, especially their potential to empower rural economies. Their unique and culturally resonant content is often undervalued (Elena, 2020; Fernandes & Castro, 2023). This study addresses the gap by a) examining the economic impact of food bloggers on rural communities and b) exploring how digital influence can promote sustainable rural development areas.

2. Research Questions

This qualitative study explores the influence of food bloggers in promoting gastronomic tourism and empowering rural economies in the rural towns of Iloilo Province, Philippines. This study addresses two research questions:

- How do food bloggers influence tourist interest in rural gastronomic destinations?
- How do local businesses and stakeholders perceive the impact of food bloggers on rural economies?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Social Influence Theory. Kelman (1958) initially developed it, which provides a foundation for understanding how individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by influential figures. These figures include digital spaces wherein social media influencers play a critical role (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2021; Fernandes & Castro, 2023). In the realm of gastronomic tourism, food bloggers act as powerful agents of influence. Their perceived expertise, social proof, and authenticity collectively shape consumer interest in rural culinary destinations. Food bloggers leverage their expertise and credibility in food and travel. They inspire followers to explore lesser-known gastronomic destinations like rural areas that are often overlooked in mainstream tourism (Lim et al., 2017). These influencers use social media to provide visual and narrative portrayals of authentic culinary experiences. Their contents are appealing to followers' desire for unique cultural encounters and creating a bandwagon effect. Audiences become motivated, and they tend to emulate the influencer's travel choices (Aral & Walker, 2012). Bloggers are authentically engaging with local cuisine and culture. They foster a sense of social proof, which makes followers internalize the depicted experiences as desirable and meaningful (Munar & Jacobsen, 2021). This approach enhances the appeal of rural gastronomic destinations. However, this approach positions food bloggers as essential promoters of tourism-driven economic development for rural communities (Fernandes & Castro, 2023).

4. Literature Review

Gastronomic tourism is defined as travel motivated by a desire to explore and experience unique culinary offerings. It has emerged as a significant niche within the tourism industry, which is driven by traveller's growing interest in authentic local food experiences (Everett, 2019; Long, 2020). This form of tourism allows visitors to engage with local culture through cuisine. The food is positioned as a central element of cultural immersion and discovery. Gastronomic tourism is particularly valuable for rural development. It provides smaller communities with opportunities to attract visitors, generate income, and enhance local businesses. Gastronomic tourism draws tourists to less-populated areas. This contributes to local economic growth through increased spending on food, accommodation, and cultural activities. It plays a role in cultural preservation. It encourages communities to maintain and celebrate their traditional culinary practices. Most importantly, it enhances community pride and social cohesion (Hjalager & Richards, 2021). In this way, gastronomic tourism supports sustainable development in rural areas, which makes it a promising avenue for empowering communities economically and culturally.

5. The Role of Social Media and Digital Influencers in Tourism

The advent of social media has significantly impacted tourism promotion, with digital influencers, particularly food bloggers, emerging as key figures in shaping travel trends and consumer behaviour (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2021). Food bloggers have carved out a unique space within this digital landscape, leveraging their online presence, personal stories, and visually appealing content to attract audiences to specific destinations. Their posts often focus on authenticity, cultural immersion, and the discovery of hidden culinary gems, which resonate with audiences looking for meaningful and unique travel experiences (Fernandes & Castro, 2023). Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and personal blogs amplify the reach of these influencers by allowing them to target and engage broad, yet specific, audiences. Each platform has distinct features that enhance engagement: Instagram's visual storytelling capabilities allow bloggers to showcase destinations through captivating images and videos, Facebook supports community-building by facilitating discussions and group interactions, and blogging platforms enable influencers to share detailed, personal narratives that provide in-depth insights into their culinary journeys (Munar & Jacobsen, 2021). Through these digital channels, food bloggers play a pivotal role in driving interest in various travel destinations, making them influential players in modern tourism marketing.

Social Influence Theory, initially developed by Kelman (1958), offers a framework for understanding how influencers, such as food bloggers, shape consumer behaviour through mechanisms like compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance refers to individuals acting in alignment with influencers due to a perceived reward or social approval; identification occurs when individuals adopt behaviours because they admire and want to emulate the influencer; and internalization involves adopting beliefs or behaviours because they align with personal values. Food bloggers leverage these mechanisms by building expertise, credibility, and authenticity, which encourages followers to trust their recommendations and perceive them as "social proof" of desirable experiences (Aral & Walker, 2012; Lim et al., 2017). This social proof is particularly effective in driving tourism to rural culinary destinations, as followers are motivated to explore these places

based on the bloggers' endorsements. However, theoretical gaps remain in the application of Social Influence Theory to the specific context of food bloggers promoting rural gastronomic tourism, especially in understanding how these mechanisms translate to sustained economic impact. This study aims to fill these gaps by applying Social Influence Theory to the relatively unexplored field of rural tourism promotion through food blogging, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of digital influence in rural economic development.

6. Economic Impact of Food Bloggers on Rural Destinations

Food bloggers play a substantial role in promoting tourism in rural areas by driving interest in unique culinary offerings and less-visited destinations, which can translate into tangible economic benefits for local communities. Studies show that food bloggers can help generate income for local businesses, create job opportunities, and foster a sense of community pride by showcasing the authenticity and cultural richness of rural cuisine (Hays et al., 2021). Case studies illustrate this impact; for instance, in regions such as Iloilo Province, food bloggers' coverage of traditional dishes and local culinary events has notably boosted tourism, enhancing local economies and attracting visitors who may otherwise overlook these destinations (Elena, 2020). However, there are challenges and limitations to this reliance on food bloggers for rural tourism development. Dependency on influencers can lead to volatile tourism flows, with visitor numbers fluctuating based on influencer activity. There is a risk of overtourism, which can strain local resources and infrastructure. As destinations gain popularity, maintaining cultural authenticity also becomes challenging, as increased visitor demand may pressure communities to adapt or commercialize their traditional practices to meet tourist expectations (Miguéns et al., 2018).

Existing literature on the role of influencers in tourism predominantly centers on urban and high-traffic tourist destinations, leaving a significant gap in understanding their impact on rural economies (Miguéns et al., 2018). While studies have documented general effects of influencers on visitor numbers and consumer behaviour, there is limited research on the specific economic contributions of food bloggers to rural tourism, particularly regarding how these translate to sustained economic empowerment for local communities (Fernandes & Castro, 2023). Furthermore, there is a pressing need for region-specific studies in underrepresented areas like the Philippines and Southeast Asia, where food blogging's influence on rural tourism may carry unique cultural and economic implications. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the distinct dynamics of digital influence in rural settings, contributing to more nuanced and effective strategies for leveraging food bloggers in sustainable rural development.

7. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the influence of food bloggers in promoting gastronomic tourism. Interviews were made to capture diverse perspectives from stakeholders involved as a mechanism for empowering rural economies, with a focus on the rural towns of Iloilo Province. A qualitative study focuses on how individuals perceive and give meaning to different social behaviours in order to explore people's social observations (Tümen-Akyıldız and Ahmed, 2021). This approach will help researchers examine opinions, attitudes, and perspectives into the impact of food bloggers on the dynamics of rural tourism in Iloilo Province.

Data collection involved conducting focus group interviews designed to encourage participants to discuss and reflect on the impact of food bloggers in attracting visitors to rural areas, generating income, and promoting local culture. Focus group discussion is to produce the greatest number of arguments and perspectives within a limited duration. This method might be used as the researcher wants to explain a problem or issue at a deeper understanding than a questionnaire method (Prasad & Garcia, 2017). To capture focus group discussion, gather participants with common experiences together to examine a particular subject of interest, and it is known as an effective way to gather knowledge from all kinds of people (Lune & Berg, 2017).

A total of 25 participants from the province's five districts were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Participants were chosen based on their knowledge, experience and involvement in promoting sustainable gastronomic tourism. Purposive sampling targeted specific stakeholders, including twelve rural business owners, five tourism officials, and three food bloggers, whose roles are directly relevant to understanding the influence of food blogging on rural tourism. Convenience sampling supplemented this by including five rural residents involved in tourism who were readily available and willing to share their insights. Focus group interviews were conducted as part of the data gathering process in order to get participants notion of how food bloggers impacted in attracting visitors to rural areas, generating income, and promoting local culture.

Thematic analysis is a very common method for examining qualitative data, which often consists of detailed descriptive data. Thematic analysis models are valuable across multiple disciplines (Naeem et al., 2023). Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo, allowing the identification of patterns and recurring themes in participant responses, such as economic benefits, cultural pride, and challenges in influencer-driven tourism. This approach provided rich qualitative insights into the role of food bloggers in shaping rural tourism dynamics in Iloilo Province.

8. Findings

This section presents the detailed findings aligned with the objectives of the study. The influence of food bloggers in promoting gastronomic tourism in empowering rural economies in the rural towns of Iloilo Province, Philippines.

The NVivo presentation in the influence of food bloggers in boosting gastronomic tourism rural economies in Iloilo Province. The NVivo-style bar chart shows the coding hierarchy of main themes and sub-themes in the food blogger tourism study. Each bar represents a sub-theme, with its length indicating the frequency or emphasis. This layout visually conveys the weight of each theme shown in Figure 1.

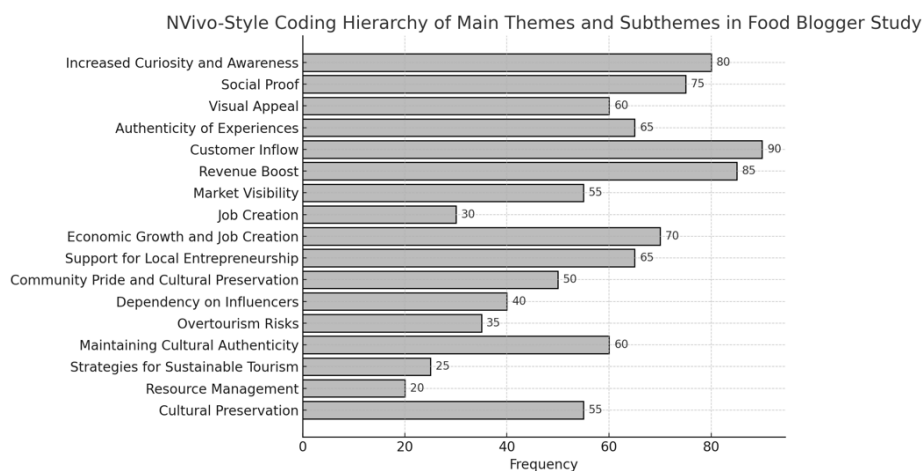


Figure 1: Coding Hierarchy of themes and subthemes

Table 1: Influence on tourist behaviour

Aspect of Influence	Description	Direct Quotes from Participants
Increased Visibility and Tourist Curiosity	Food bloggers' content has raised awareness of rural destinations in Iloilo, attracting local and international tourists. Tourism officials and rural residents observed a notable increase in visitor interest and engagement with local culinary and cultural offerings.	"Since [the bloggers] started posting about our town, we've seen more visitors, even from outside the country." — Tourism Official
		"People now come specifically to try the dishes they see online. It's bringing new faces to our small restaurants." — Local Business Owner
Social Proof and Decision-Making	Participants indicated that food bloggers' endorsements serve as "social proof," legitimizing these rural destinations as worthwhile travel experiences. Visual content, such as food reviews and personal stories, was particularly influential in inspiring tourists' travel decisions.	"When tourists see food bloggers enjoying our food, it makes them want to come and try it themselves." — Tourism Official
		"The photos and stories they share make our place feel like a must-visit spot for anyone interested in local food." — Rural Resident
Types of Content That Drive Interest	Participants noted that specific content, including in-depth food reviews, visual storytelling (photos and videos), and bloggers' personal narratives, effectively captured the appeal of Iloilo's culinary culture and inspired potential tourists.	"People love the way [bloggers] show the food—it's like they're experiencing it with them through the pictures." — Business Owner

The findings on how food bloggers influence tourist interest in rural destinations in Iloilo Province detail aspects such as increased visibility, social proof, and the types of content that effectively inspire travel decisions. Direct quotes from participants illustrate the impact of bloggers' endorsements on attracting both local and international visitors, which is reflected in Table 1.

Table 2: Economic impact on rural businesses:

Economic Impact	Description	Direct Quotes from Participants
Increased Customer Inflow	Local businesses observed a rise in customer visits after being featured by food bloggers, with more tourists seeking out specific dining experiences.	"Since we were featured, we've had a steady stream of new customers, especially on weekends." — Local Restaurant Owner
		"Many tourists come in asking about the dishes they saw on (the blogger's page), so we see more people now." — Cafe Owner
Boost in Revenue	Business owners reported increased revenue due to the higher customer inflow, noting that visitors influenced by bloggers are willing to spend on local cuisine and products.	"Our sales have improved since tourists now recognize us from social media." — Market Vendor
		"We saw a noticeable increase in earnings because people are curious to try what they saw online." — Small Business Owner
Enhanced Market Visibility	Food bloggers' coverage has boosted the visibility of rural businesses, establishing them as recognized spots for regional cuisine and authentic dining experiences.	"We've gained a following just from being mentioned by [the blogger], and people now associate us with the best local food." — Restaurant Owner
		"The exposure online makes our business more known, even to people from other provinces." — Store Owner

The perceived economic impact of food bloggers on rural businesses in Iloilo Province, focusing on increased customer inflow, boosted revenue, and enhanced market visibility. Direct quotes from local business owners illustrate how online exposure have contributed to business growth and recognition, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 3: Empowerment through tourism growth

Empowerment Aspect	Description	Direct Quotes from Participants
Economic Growth and Job Creation	Increased tourism has led to job opportunities in the community, from restaurant staff to tour guides, boosting local employment.	"With more tourists, we've been able to hire additional staff to manage the demand." — Restaurant Owner
		"Young people in our community now have work opportunities here instead of needing to leave for the city." — Tourism Official
Support for Local Entrepreneurship	The rise in tourist visits has encouraged locals to start their own businesses, such as souvenir shops and food stalls, fostering entrepreneurship.	"Many people have started small businesses, seeing the chance to cater to the influx of tourists." — Local Resident
		"I opened a small shop because I knew visitors wanted to take home something unique from our area." — Shop Owner
Increased Community Pride and Cultural Preservation	Tourism driven by food bloggers has fostered a sense of pride in local culture, as residents see appreciation for their culinary heritage.	"We feel proud to share our food and traditions with people from outside; it gives us a reason to preserve them." — Community Elder
		"Seeing tourists enjoy our traditional dishes makes us want to continue our culinary practices." — Local Business Owner
Enhanced Local Infrastructure	The demand from tourists has led to improvements in infrastructure, including better roads, signage, and public facilities, benefiting both locals and visitors.	"The increase in visitors encouraged our community to improve the facilities and roads." — Community Leader
		"Better infrastructure helps not only the tourists but makes life easier for us residents too." — Rural Resident

The ways in which tourism growth, driven by food bloggers, has empowered rural communities in Iloilo Province. Key areas of impact include economic growth, job creation, support for local entrepreneurship, enhanced community pride, and improvements in local infrastructure, with direct quotes from community members highlighting these benefits illustrated in Table 3.

Table 4: Challenges and Limitations

Challenge/ Limitation	Description	Direct Quotes from Participants
Dependency on Digital Influencers	Communities expressed concern over dependency on food bloggers for consistent tourist inflow, as visits can fluctuate with influencers' activity levels.	"If the bloggers stop posting about us, there's a chance the tourists may not come back as often." — Tourism Official
		"Our visibility depends a lot on influencers, and it feels uncertain without a consistent promotion plan." — Local Business Owner
Risk of Overtourism	Increased interest driven by bloggers can lead to overtourism, putting strain on local resources and infrastructure in smaller communities.	"The sudden influx is good for business, but we worry about our resources being stretched too thin." — Community Leader
		"Too many visitors at once can impact the environment and our daily lives, especially in peak seasons." — Rural Resident
Maintaining Cultural Authenticity	Some participants noted challenges in preserving cultural authenticity, as high tourist demand pressures communities to adapt traditional practices for visitors.	"We want to keep our culture genuine, but sometimes we feel we're performing rather than sharing." — Community Elder
		"There's a pressure to cater to tourist tastes, which can dilute the authenticity of our cuisine." — Local Vendor
Seasonal Fluctuations in Tourism	Tourist numbers can be highly seasonal, leading to business instability, as rural areas may experience periods of both high demand and low visitor numbers.	"We're very busy in peak seasons, but it's hard to sustain income during the off-season." — Business Owner
		"When tourists only come during certain times, it's challenging for us to plan and keep operations steady." — Rural Resident

The challenges and limitations faced by rural communities in Iloilo due to food blogger-driven tourism, highlighting issues like dependency on influencers, overtourism risks, cultural authenticity pressures, and seasonal fluctuations, with participant quotes for context, are summarized in Table 4.

9. Discussion

The culinary landscape of Iloilo Province is a vibrant tapestry of authentic and unique dishes that showcase the province's rich cultural heritage and culinary tradition. These dishes not only highlight the creativity of Iloilo's culinary artisan but also serve as a gateway for visitors to experience the province's history and culture through its flavours. Gastronomic tourism has become a driving force in attracting tourists to Iloilo and significantly contribute to province's economic growth. Promotion of food tourism enhances the province's visibility on the global map, enticing travellers to explore Iloilo Province culinary treasures. Food bloggers and content influencers play a vital role in promoting sustainable gastronomic tourism. Sharing stories, stunning visuals and reviews of Iloilo Province culinary gems, food bloggers amplify awareness and inspire tourists among young and tech savvy travellers. The synergy between gastronomic tourism and sustainability ensures that economics gains trickle down to rural communities fostering economic growth. The present study explores how food bloggers contribute to fostering a sustainable gastronomic tourism practice while supporting rural economic growth.

The findings of the study align closely with Social Influence Theory, demonstrating how bloggers' credibility, perceived expertise, and social proof significantly shape tourist behaviours and decisions. Food bloggers, viewed as knowledgeable and trustworthy sources, create social proof by showcasing unique culinary and cultural experiences, effectively positioning rural destinations as desirable places to visit. This credibility, coupled with visually engaging content, amplifies their influence on potential tourists, driving interest and visits to lesser-known areas. For rural tourism development, these insights suggest that communities can benefit from strategic partnerships with food bloggers, creating mutually beneficial collaborations that support sustainable tourism while respecting local resources and culture. Moreover, authenticity in bloggers' portrayals is critical to fostering trust and engagement among tourists; genuine representation of rural lifestyles and traditions resonates more deeply with audiences, enhancing both their willingness to visit and appreciation for local heritage. By emphasizing authenticity and fostering sustainable practices, rural communities can use digital influence to achieve economic growth that honours and preserves their cultural identity.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, this study highlights the significant role of food bloggers in influencing tourism within rural economies, particularly through mechanisms of credibility, social proof, and authentic portrayal. Findings show

that food bloggers drive increased tourist interest and engagement by showcasing local culture and culinary traditions, providing rural areas with a boost in visibility, customer inflow, and economic empowerment.

This study contributes to the literature by applying Social Influence Theory to an underexplored context, illustrating how digital influence can serve as a catalyst for rural tourism growth. Social media has significantly transformed tourism promotions through different ways reaching global audiences. This creates visibility, influence travel decisions and appeal to potential tourists a key player modern promotion. While food bloggers have positive impacts on rural economies, challenges such as dependency on influencers, overtourism risks, and pressures on cultural authenticity underscore the need for balanced and sustainable approaches in digital tourism promotion.

To maximize these positive outcomes, rural tourism boards should establish strategic partnerships with food bloggers who demonstrate a commitment to authenticity and cultural sensitivity. Local businesses can further support these efforts by offering unique, high-quality experiences that align with the bloggers' content, ensuring that tourists receive an immersive experience. Food bloggers, in turn, should aim to collaborate closely with local stakeholders to ensure accurate representation and promote sustainable practices.

This study is limited to Iloilo Province Philippines and focuses on selected participants which is directly involve promoting sustainable gastronomic tourism. It is recommended to include broader geographic scope and incorporate additional categories of respondents to provide a more comprehensive result. Future research could focus on longitudinal studies to assess the lasting impacts of food blogger-driven tourism on rural communities, as well as comparative studies across different regions to understand the cultural nuances of digital influence in tourism. Such research would offer further insights into the long-term sustainability of digital tourism and provide more nuanced recommendations for rural economic development.

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