

***Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation.***

By Emily J. H. Contois and Zenia Kish (Eds.).

University of Illinois Press, 2022, 320 pp.

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A Book Review by

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It's long been said that "taboo topics" of politics, religion, and sex should be left out of polite conversation, like at the dinner table. In *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation*, chapter by chapter, food is used as a conduit for parsing through these typically divisive subjects, challenging this notion once and for all. A collection of interdisciplinary work edited by Emily J. H. Contois and Zenia Kish (2022), the book explores food, identity, and social media. It offers a plethora of case studies and a range of perspectives that shed light into how complex notions of power, authenticity, and influence manifest in food Instagram.

Contois and Kish, both Assistant Professors of Media Studies at the University of Tulsa, have made a commitment to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural representation throughout the book, breaking new ground in the body of academic work focussed on the relationships between food, politics, society, culture, and media. They have collected perspectives from fields such as cultural studies, media studies, and anthropology in addition to other perspectives like those of journalists, artists, and social media influencers. Together, their perspectives present the feedback loop between social media and food culture, presenting primarily qualitative analyses, as both food and Instagram serve as ways to negotiate personal and cultural identities.

The interdisciplinarity of *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation* is showcased throughout the three titular sections of the book. Identity is analysed throughout chapters on #Foodporn (David and Allard, 2022), the cultural politics of "hot dudes and hummus" (Newman, 2022), and the hospitality of black women during the pandemic (Caldwell, 2022) – to name a few. Influence is picked apart throughout chapters on topics like food photography, leftovers, and KC Hysmith's (2022) own account of life as an influencer. Negotiation is – well, negotiated – through chapters exploring "feminist eateries" (Ketchum, 2022), "eating literacy" (Tracy, 2022), and transgressive use of Instagram to break norms like the dominant foodie ideals of "sustainability, minimalism, and healthfulness" (Leer and Krogager, 2022, p. 206).

The cross-cultural representation adds fresh perspectives to existing scholarship in these areas as well. From diet culture in Japan and the rise of #instabae (Okabe, 2022) to food populism, a presentation of how far-right politicians seek to build rapport with "the people" through #relatable food content (Garcia Santamaria, 2022), readers are introduced to vastly different cultural perspectives. These case studies are especially valuable because, while the book examines the ways in which food influencers and content creators use Instagram to negotiate their identities, build their personal brand, and engage with their followers, it also explores the ways in which followers of food content on Instagram do the same. In this way, the reader is able to engage in the same kind of process as they are exposed to new content areas that they may never encounter otherwise – albeit algorithmically.

While the focus on food Instagram is a strength of *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation*, it may also be considered a weakness by some readers who are looking for a broader examination of food and social media, a concern admitted by Kish and Contois, as well. It is becoming more commonplace, for example, for influencers to engage across platforms to curate and maintain their brand and viewership. Scholarship in this field frequently occupies one space or another, meaning either the “digital age” broadly, or focussing on one specific medium. *Food and Social Media: You Are What You Tweet* by Signe Rousseau (2012), for example, provides historical context and a sweeping overview of the food social media “scene” leading up to 2012. One advantage of narrowing the focus on Instagram, as evident in *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation*, is the opportunity to engage and discuss the ethical implications of food content creation and consumption on Instagram in a comprehensive and current way. While focussed on Instagram, it is easy for a reader to understand how similar tensions can be translated across platforms like TikTok and YouTube, for example, which are also both inundated with food content.

*Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation* is a well-researched and thought-provoking book that delves into the complex relationship between food, identity, and social media. It provides readers with an opportunity to explore food Instagram beyond the limits of their own “explore pages” on the platform which, in itself, serves as an opportunity to negotiate their own identities, politics, and culture. It also provokes an introspective experience for the reader to reflect on their own Instagram use. While the platform is reliable for suggesting content “for you” through sophisticated algorithms, *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation*, exposes readers to areas far beyond brunch pictures and runny egg yolks (aka #yolkporn). Instead, it draws attention to spaces on the platform where power, authenticity, and influence are subverted and disrupted. As a result, readers are confronted with “taboo topics” that are present within the subcultures on food Instagram. Instead of scrolling past, engaging the fleeting nature of the platform, readers can sit with new insights put forth in this topical book. *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence & Negotiation* will surely serve as an important time capsule of food and social media.

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### About the Reviewer

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