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Research Article

## CHEFS ON THE DIGITAL STAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF CULINARY PERSONA CONSTRUCTION AMONG MICHELIN-STARRED CHEFS

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### Abstract

This study examines how Michelin-starred chefs represent themselves in digital environments and what culinary persona types they construct through these representations. The research is structured within the framework of Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, Johnston et al.'s (2014) Culinary Persona typology, and the visibility–prestige theory. This theoretical structure ensures that chefs' digital representations are evaluated not only in terms of identity performance but also in terms of symbolic value and professional prestige production. A qualitative research approach was adopted; the official websites, online biographies, and the last 20 posts shared on the Instagram accounts of Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul were analyzed. The data were analyzed through meaning-focused qualitative content analysis; the frontstage and backstage representations displayed in digital environments, professional identity presentations, and authenticity-building practices were evaluated. The findings reveal that chefs' digital personas feature different combinations of professional authority, creative forms of expression, local and cultural references, and lifestyle indicators. The study contributes to understanding the digital visibility strategies of Michelin-starred chefs by providing a conceptual framework for digital identity and professional representation practices in the field of gastronomy.

**Keywords:** Michelin Star, Digital Persona, Gastronomy, Self-Presentation, Social Media

### Introduction

The field of gastronomy has undergone visible transformations in food and beverage production and practices as a result of processes such as digitalization and globalization. Consequently, the social roles of chefs and their visibility in the public sphere have also evolved (Motta & Martin, 2021). Social media—particularly visually oriented platforms—has become a powerful communication tool that enables chefs to directly convey their professional identities, creativity, and brand value to broader audiences (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). In this context, the construction of a “culinary persona” in digital environments has emerged as a strategic element influencing both the individual and institutional success of gastronomy professionals.

Although the existing literature includes studies examining how chefs present themselves on social media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010), the majority of these studies primarily focus on athletes or general celebrity profiles. Comprehensive research investigating the digital persona strategies of prestigious figures in gastronomy, such as Michelin-starred chefs, remains limited. Moreover, although the Michelin Guide has long been positioned as a dominant evaluative authority

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in the creation of gastronomic value (Matta & Panchapakesan, 2021), in recent years some chefs have begun to develop criticisms toward this system and have sought alternative forms of authenticity and value creation. This shift indicates that digital representations and social media strategies are not only associated with professional prestige but are also increasingly connected to personal values and work–life balance (Guraya et al., 2021).

The primary aim of this study is to examine how Michelin-starred chefs construct a digital persona through social media, the self-presentation strategies they employ in this process, and how these strategies are positioned within the context of brand management and the evolving values of the gastronomic sector. The research offers an original analytical framework by integrating Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory with the culinary persona typology proposed by Josée Johnston and colleagues (2014). A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted in the study. The data were collected from chefs' recent posts on Instagram, Michelin Guide promotional texts, and online biographies. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive evaluation of chefs' performances in both the "front stage" and "backstage," as conceptualized in Goffman's dramaturgical framework.

In addition, digital representations should be evaluated not only in terms of identity performance but also in relation to the production of visibility and reputation. Chefs' presence on social media—along with follower engagement, media visibility, and their relationship with award systems—directly influences their symbolic positions within the gastronomic field. For this reason, the study also approaches digital persona construction within the framework of visibility and reputation theory, thereby providing a multi-layered analysis of the processes through which chefs generate professional prestige.

This research contributes to the literature in three main ways: (1) by systematically analyzing the digital persona construction of Michelin-starred chefs and addressing a notable gap in the literature; (2) by revealing the relationship between social media strategies and representations of prestige and authenticity in gastronomy; and (3) by offering conceptual and practical implications for digital brand management and communication strategies for professionals in the sector.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Digital Representation and Chef Identity in Gastronomy**

The field of gastronomy has increasingly become not only a domain of production and service but also a space shaped by digitalization, where chefs operate as visible public actors. In this context, digital platforms provide influential environments for chefs in terms of visibility (Clark et al., 2016), representation (McIntosh et al., 2020), and the construction of image and brand identity (Lee & Tao, 2021). Traditionally, chefs were primarily perceived as labor-oriented professionals working behind the scenes in kitchens (Fine, 2009). However, in contemporary gastronomy, chefs have become public figures through their presence in media, social networks, cookbooks, digital platforms, and the internet (Kirkwood, 2018). Today, chefs are not only professionals who prepare food but also content creators, cultural representatives, lifestyle presenters, and individuals who cultivate and manage personal brands.

Particularly visually oriented digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and X represent some of the most visible environments in which this transformation takes place. Visual aesthetics, storytelling, and elements of personal branding enable chefs to stand out through narratives and imagery (Junkrachang et al., 2021). This development increases the importance of the concept of "persona" in understanding how chefs are represented in digital environments.

For chefs, the construction of personas in digital spaces often begins with visually appealing food images presented to audiences. At the same time, chefs can build a personal identity by sharing their individual values, philosophical perspectives, culinary styles, and aesthetic approaches on these platforms (Johnston et al., 2014). In this regard, Cesiri (2019) argues that in the digital age chefs have

evolved beyond being merely authorities in the kitchen and have become media subjects who engage with their audiences through personal narratives and discourses.

Matta and Panchapakesan (2021), in their analysis conducted through the digital and institutional representations of Michelin-starred chefs, emphasize that chefs are increasingly transforming into iconic figures carrying brand value. In this transformation, media texts, social media platforms, and consumer discourses play an influential role, and chefs reinforce their professional visibility through the persona they construct on social media. For these reasons, today chefs should be analyzed not only through the dishes they prepare and their behaviors in kitchens, but also through what they produce and perform in the digital world. The digital representation of the chef produces a multilayered narrative related to professional prestige, social status, and cultural authority. In order to analyze the transforming chef identity, Culinary Persona Theory, which allows the classification of chefs' digital representations, occupies an important place within the theoretical framework of this study. Studies on digital representations in the field of gastronomy in Türkiye are quite limited, and no research focusing specifically on Michelin-starred chefs has been encountered. Therefore, the study aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the digital persona construction of Michelin-starred chefs who are internationally visible figures of Turkish gastronomy.

### **Culinary Persona Theory**

The first prominent theory regarding chefs' digital identities is Culinary Persona Theory, developed by Johnston, Rodney, and Chong (2014). It provides a conceptual tool used to classify the representations that chefs construct through media and social media. The theory aims to reveal the identity performances that these figures display in front of audiences by analyzing chef representations particularly in television programs, cookbooks, and digital platforms.

This theory, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, demonstrates that the production of prestige in the field of gastronomy goes beyond technical competence and the ability to cook well. According to Bourdieu (2018), cultural capital enables individuals to gain a certain status within the social sphere through elements such as their level of education, aesthetic preferences, language use, lifestyle, and symbolic resources. In this context, it suggests that chefs are also associated with personal narratives, style, images of social class, and media strategies. Therefore, the culinary persona is a strategy that strengthens and reproduces the chef's position within the gastronomic field through visual representation. These representations constructed through media increase the chef's public value while transforming them into recognized and respected figures in the gastronomic domain. According to Culinary Persona Theory, the media representations of individuals operating in the gastronomy world are classified under seven different persona types. The personas are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Culinary Personas and Definitions

<b>Persona</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Homebody	Establishes authority in the home kitchen by addressing everyday cooking needs through simple, practical recipes that require minimal culinary skill.
Home Stylist	Presents cooking as part of an upscale lifestyle project that incorporates aesthetics, pleasure, and privilege.
Pin-up	Represents food and the self as liberated from the burden of traditional domestic labor, emphasizing pleasure, emotional expression, and sexual appeal.
Chef-Artisan	A professional chef who establishes authority through formal training, craftsmanship, advanced culinary skills, and a strong commitment to quality.

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Gastrosexual	Embraces home cooking; displays caring and maternal qualities, yet performs these through the status and skills of a professional chef.
Maverick	An “outsider” figure who gains culinary authority through unconventional approaches such as science, adventure, and journalism, while challenging established rules.
Self-Made Man	Centers on a narrative of rising from poverty through determination and hard work, reflecting a meritocracy-based American Dream.

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**Resource:** Johnston et al., (2014)

These categories do not have to be separated by strict boundaries; a chef may simultaneously embody multiple persona characteristics or may evolve into different roles over time. What is important is the systematic analysis of these forms of representation, allowing chefs’ media strategies, social positioning, and communication styles to be examined through these typologies. In this context, the digital content of Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul examined in this study was evaluated based on these seven persona categories. In doing so, both the validity of existing typologies was questioned and the need for new persona types in the Turkish context was discussed. Although Culinary Persona Theory has previously been applied primarily through Western-centered media and chef representations, it has not been used in the Turkish context to analyze the intersections between local culinary heritage and modern gastronomy. In this study, the digital content of Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul will be classified based on this theoretical framework.

In the literature, there are also studies in which different persona types are produced within the framework of gastronomy and user representations. For example, in the study developed by Kerr et al. (2014), a goal-directed approach was adopted to analyze the culinary-related goals and needs of users living in Singapore. Within the scope of the research, it was examined how technological solutions could be developed to facilitate or enrich users’ experiences in the kitchen, and based on the findings, a total of six design personas—three primary and three secondary—were created. Although the study focuses not on professional chef representations but on domestic user profiles, it is important in demonstrating how persona-based classification related to kitchen practices can be utilized in technological design processes.

Similarly, Rodney et al. (2017) examined the representations of female food bloggers at the intersection of gastronomy and digital media. By analyzing 426 blog posts, the study reveals the existence of a persona type referred to as the “domestic goddess.” The findings indicate that while presenting their culinary practices, female bloggers simultaneously construct an image of the perfect housewife, while also emphasizing their “real” and imperfect aspects in order to establish a connection with their audiences.

In Bergh’s (2024) study, the transformation of alternative persona representations within the professional culinary world is examined. In particular, the study argues that the “chef underground” persona associated with the once-famous chef Anthony Bourdain initially represented a marginal, anti-authoritarian, and queer mode of existence, but over time was transformed by capitalist culture into a consumable “cool” identity. This study demonstrates that chef-related identities evolve over time and can embody multiple attributes simultaneously.

**Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman)**

Persona and typologies alone may not be sufficient to understand how chefs present themselves in digital environments. It is also necessary to examine the interactional and contextual nature of these representations. Self-Presentation Theory, developed by Goffman (1959), provides an important theoretical framework for analyzing the role-taking strategies individuals employ in social interactions (Goffman, 2023). Goffman argued that individuals perform a “performance” in everyday life, and that this performance is presented to an “audience.” According to him, social life consists of

two main domains: the front stage and the backstage. While individuals display strategic behaviors intended to be observed on the front stage, they prepare the elements of this performance in the backstage.

Goffman's theory has been reinterpreted and expanded in the digital age to understand individuals' behaviors on social media platforms. In digital environments, the front stage is considered the "curated" self-presentations that users display through their posts, profiles, biographies, and visuals. The backstage, on the other hand, refers to the preparation process of this content, the moments that are not shared, and the aspects of the self that users keep private (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). In this context, social media becomes a dynamic stage where individuals can control how they wish to present themselves and adapt their strategies according to the reactions of their audience. Furthermore, the features offered by platforms (for example, temporary stories versus permanent posts) play an important role in shaping users' front stage and backstage performances (Hogan, 2010).

There are a limited number of studies in the field of gastronomy that address Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory. In her study, Litovskaia (2023) analyzed the media content (TV shows, magazines, and books) of the famous Russian cookbook author Julia Vysotskaya in the early 2000s to examine how she constructed a public image. Vysotskaya's identity, constructed as a "successful, happy, balanced, and stylish woman," was supported not only by her relationship with food but also by her family life, household order, and personal narratives. The construction of this media persona was examined within the framework of Goffman's theory. It was observed that Vysotskaya presented a certain "front stage" performance in each media channel and conveyed her identity to the audience in an idealized manner through strategic narratives.

In the study by Matwick and Matwick (2020), the front-stage and backstage identity performances of chefs in television cooking programs were examined. In particular, through bloopers and behind-the-scenes conversations, the study reveals how chefs present a more sincere, human, and approachable image to the audience. Within the framework of Goffman's distinction between front stage and backstage, it is observed that while authoritative and professional chef figures come to the forefront in direct communication with the audience during cooking programs, humorous, relaxed, and everyday identities are also brought to the stage through background footage. Such spontaneous moments in the programs of television chefs such as Julia Child, Martha Stewart, and Trisha Yearwood function as tools for establishing a connection with the audience. In the Turkish context, Emine Beder's television program *Kitchen Love* provides a clear opportunity to observe the front stage/backstage distinction. In the program, the studio kitchen functions as the front stage directed toward the audience, allowing the host to present a public image consistent with her religious identity and values; meanwhile, the intimate communication established behind the camera, emphasizing a "family atmosphere," functions as the backstage. The study by Emre Çetin (2015) demonstrates that this format not only focuses on cooking but also makes an Islamic lifestyle visible, thereby establishing emotional and cultural connections with the audience. This example concretely illustrates how the processes of role management and impression management in Goffman's theory are culturally shaped within Turkish gastronomy media.

These identity performances presented by chefs through media are intertwined with broader cultural and structural processes in which public visibility and professional reputation are shaped alongside individual image production. At this point, it becomes necessary to refer to visibility and reputation theories in order to understand how chefs' media representations influence their positions within the gastronomic field. Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory has not yet been systematically applied to digital media within the field of gastronomy in Türkiye. In this study, the theory will be used as a fundamental analytical tool to understand the interaction strategies chefs establish with their audiences by analyzing the "front stage" and "backstage" constructions of their social media presence.

## **Visibility and Reputation Theory**

Today, visibility and reputation are among the fundamental elements shaping the construction of chef identity in the field of gastronomy through media and digital platforms. Visibility refers not only to being noticed in a technical sense but also to a strategically produced form of representational management (Brighenti, 2007; Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018). Tools such as social media, television, and gastronomic guides construct the chef's digital persona through aesthetic preferences, lifestyle narratives, and discursive styles. The continuity of this visibility increases the chef's professional prestige and ensures the reproduction of their symbolic value.

In this study, the concept of "visibility" is evaluated through chefs' levels of interaction and reach in digital environments. Technical visibility is defined through quantitative indicators such as the number of followers, the amount of likes and comments, the frequency of posts, and the diversity of content. Strategic visibility, on the other hand, is examined through chefs' representations on public platforms such as media interviews, television programs, and gastronomic award ceremonies, as well as through the language used in their social media content, their visual editing preferences, and collaborations. The reputation dimension is evaluated through indicators such as the tone analysis (positive/negative/neutral) of content produced about chefs in online and offline media, awards and recognitions received from expert authorities, and rankings in gastronomic guides (Carter, 2006). When evaluated within the framework of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and field, a chef's legitimacy in the gastronomic field becomes possible not only through culinary skills but also through media visibility, social networks, and digital strategies (Grenfell, 2009). In this context, digital media constitutes a field in which chefs can present themselves and even generate brand value.

In the study by Yang and Kent (2014), strategies for increasing organizational visibility and managing reputation through social media use were examined by sampling Fortune 500 companies and leading NGOs. The research demonstrates the contribution of elements such as content planning, frequent sharing, and interaction management to the public image of organizations.

However, it is noteworthy that similar strategic visibility and reputation management approaches have not been sufficiently investigated in the context of kitchen management and chef figures. One of the few studies revealing that chefs' representations in media and digital platforms are associated not only with individual image production but also with sectoral prestige and the generation of cultural capital is the analysis by Matta and Panchapakesan (2021), which addresses gastronomic value regimes shaped by digital media. This study emphasizes that digital visibility, alongside chefs' reputation, has become a new criterion of evaluation.

In the study conducted by García-Henche and Cuesta-Valiño (2022), the professional profiles, visibility strategies, and digital media usage of women operating in the gastronomy sector in Spain were analyzed. The study highlights that women particularly increase their visibility through social media, that Instagram is the most preferred platform, and that these platforms contribute to women's recognition in the public sphere. In this respect, the study provides a comprehensive example of how digital identity construction in the field of gastronomy is shaped within the framework of visibility theory and, by going beyond the limited chef-focused literature, opens a discussion on the multi-layered representations of women in the sector.

The increase in digital representations in the field of gastronomy has produced a multilayered structure in which chef identity is reproduced not only in the kitchen but also through media, social media, and discursive practices. Frameworks such as Culinary Persona Theory, Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory, and visibility theory provide strong analytical tools for examining chefs' performances and representations in digital environments. In line with this theoretical and conceptual framework, this study aims to examine how Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul construct a "culinary persona" in digital environments. In this context, the study seeks to answer the following main research questions:

**RQ1.** Through which persona types and thematic patterns are the digital representations of Michelin-starred chefs shaped?

**RQ2.** What narrative differences and staging strategies are reflected in the digital representations of chefs across individual and institutional platforms?

**RQ3.** How do the approaches of Culinary Persona Theory, Goffman, and Bourdieu manifest and find interpretation within the Turkish context?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative research conducted to analyze how Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul construct a “culinary persona” on digital platforms. In short, the sample of star-winning chefs was inductively examined in order to identify themes emerging from self-presentations and culinary practices (e.g., culinary authority; how food and culinary work are framed as desirable; and the lifestyles presented). These themes were then used to determine overarching persona categories.

### **Sample and Scope**

The sample of the research consists of chefs who serve as head chefs in eight different restaurants in Istanbul listed in the 2024 Michelin Guide and who hold Michelin stars. These chefs are among the qualified representatives of Turkish gastronomy that have gained visibility on an international scale. Having demonstrated their culinary skills through these prestigious awards, these chefs also attract attention through their representations on digital platforms, media interactions, and performances of cultural identity. In the sample selection process, the main criteria included being actively present in digital media, developing public communication strategies, and representing diversity that could reflect different segments of society (Lane, 2011; Rousseau, 2012). Accordingly, the selected chefs differ in terms of their educational backgrounds, career trajectories, age groups, gender, culinary styles (e.g., traditional, fusion, contemporary), and levels of digital media visibility. This diversity enables the study to address the construction of digital personas not only through individual cases but also in a multidimensional manner that represents the contemporary gastronomy scene of Türkiye (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research approach using a purposive sampling strategy, and a census sampling method was adopted in which all individuals within the research population were included. In this context, all eight head chefs who hold Michelin stars in Istanbul were included in the research, thereby ensuring full access to the entire population. This method was preferred because each chef included in the sample possesses rich content and the potential to produce unique data regarding digital persona construction (Etikan et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The main reason for limiting the study to Istanbul is that it is the first and only city in Türkiye included in the Michelin Guide. As of 2024, all Michelin-starred restaurants in the country are located in Istanbul, which has resulted in the research population being geographically limited to this city. Moreover, Istanbul represents a global gastronomic hub where Turkish gastronomy gains international visibility and where media and digital representation practices are highly concentrated (Temizkan & Aktepe, 2023).

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection process was structured to include both individual and institutional digital content in order to analyze how chefs represent themselves in digital environments in a multidimensional manner. First, each chef’s personal website (if available), the “chef” or “our team” sections on the official website of the restaurant where they work, descriptions on Michelin Guide pages, and LinkedIn profiles were examined to compile information regarding the chefs’ professional backgrounds, educational histories, culinary philosophies, media visibility, and professional narratives (Johnston et al., 2014).

Social media data were collected through two channels. On each chef's personal Instagram account, the last 20 posts published before July 25, 2025—the date on which the data collection process for the research was initiated—were analyzed. This date was determined as a reference point in order to ensure simultaneous access to all accounts and to construct the dataset within the same time frame. The study was designed as a cross-sectional qualitative research focusing not on a specific calendar year but on the digital persona configuration present at the time of data collection. The analysis included only main feed content, and Instagram Reels posts were not included in the analysis. However, pinned posts were included in the study even if they were not among the most recent 20 posts. The reason for including only main feed content in the analysis was to ensure methodological consistency and data format standardization. Content in the form of Instagram Reels and stories is temporary, interaction data are retrospectively accessible only to a limited extent, and in terms of visual-textual integrity they are not directly comparable with main feed posts. In this way, the comparability of the dataset was preserved and consistency in measurement criteria was ensured during the analysis process. These contents were examined in terms of caption language, visual composition, hashtags used, thematic orientation (e.g., food, team, events, travel, awards), and forms of interaction established with followers (Page, 2012).

The last 20 posts published before July 25, 2025 on the restaurants' official Instagram accounts were also evaluated, again limited to main feed content. In these visuals, spatial arrangements, plate presentations, the visibility of the chef, relationships with the team, the atmosphere of the kitchen, and the overall aesthetic discourse of the restaurant were analyzed (Herring et al., 2005). Thus, overlaps or differences between the chef's individual narrative and the institution's mode of representation were identified. Through this dual data collection approach, the digital persona construction of each chef could be evaluated both in individual and institutional contexts, making it possible to understand how digital representation is supported by its spatial extensions.

In this study, analyzing the last 20 main feed posts for each chef was preferred in order to ensure methodological consistency and comparability. In Instagram-based research, the unit of analysis is often treated as "post-level data," and feature extraction is conducted based on a specific number of posts (Kumar et al., 2024). Particularly in content-based analyses, each post is evaluated as an independent unit of analysis in terms of visual composition, textual narrative, hashtag usage, and forms of interaction (Al Malik et al., 2022). This approach enables researchers both to construct a standardized dataset and to ensure comparability across different accounts. Similarly, Mittal et al. (2017) demonstrated that thematic and structural patterns can be analyzed through a limited number of Instagram images. In this context, the "last 20 posts" criterion determined in the study aims to provide a temporally consistent and methodologically balanced snapshot representing each chef's current digital persona construction. The study is not designed as a longitudinal examination of identity evolution; rather, it is structured as a cross-sectional qualitative design that aims to comparatively analyze digital representation strategies within a specific time frame.

### **Data Analysis Process**

The data analysis process consists of two main stages. In the first stage, curriculum vitae content reflecting the chefs' professional backgrounds was analyzed. Within this scope, biography texts on personal websites, Michelin Guide descriptions, LinkedIn profiles, and the "chef" sections on restaurant websites were examined. These texts were analyzed in order to reveal how chefs present their career narratives, educational backgrounds, culinary philosophies, and professional authority. Descriptive content was evaluated within the framework of discourse analysis; representations in language use, narratives of success, and emphases on cultural and professional belonging were classified. This stage was structured as a preliminary analytical process aimed at understanding the institutional and professional dimensions of chefs' digital persona construction.

The data analysis process was structured based on three main theories included in the conceptual framework of the study. Culinary Persona Theory provided the primary framework for categorizing chefs' digital representations into typological categories; during the coding process, it was determined

which persona type each post corresponded to. Goffman’s Self-Presentation Theory was used to identify front-stage and backstage elements within the content. Visibility and Reputation Theory (within the framework of Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory) enabled the evaluation of posts in terms of technical visibility (number of followers, like ratios, posting frequency) and strategic visibility (media interviews, collaborations, award ceremonies). Accordingly, code sets corresponding to each theoretical framework were developed, and the data analysis was conducted through this multilayered theoretical perspective.

In the second stage, posts published on each chef’s personal Instagram account and on the official Instagram account of the restaurant where the chef actively works were analyzed. These posts were evaluated as digital content consisting of text and visuals, and the narrative tone, visual aesthetics, thematic orientations, and forms of interaction established with followers were analyzed.

### **Evaluation Process and Criteria**

In the typological classification process, chefs’ digital representations were evaluated using a meaning-oriented qualitative content analysis method, and the contents were classified according to the coding criteria determined for each persona type. These criteria and example indicators are presented in detail in Table 2. During the coding process, example contents that reinforced each persona representation were labeled, and consistency was ensured between visual and textual analyses.

**Table 2.** Culinary Persona Typologies, Coding Criteria and Example Indicators

<b>Persona Type</b>	<b>Coding Criteria</b>	<b>Example Indicators</b>
<b>Homebody</b>	Practicality, speed, and accessibility	Emphasis on “15/30-minute meals”; “5-ingredient” recipes; use of ready/pre-processed products purchased from markets; everyday home kitchen environment
<b>Home Stylist</b>	Aesthetic taste, refinement, and lifestyle presentation	Elegant table settings, decorative plating, natural light and stylized photography; emphasis on the home, table, accessories, and ambiance accompanying the meal
<b>Pin-up</b>	Sensory pleasure, self-indulgence, and sexuality	Close-up shots showing messy, flowing, or dripping food; poses emphasizing personal appearance (body, face, clothing); seductive gaze, mimicry, and body language
<b>Chef-Artisan</b>	Professional competence, artistic creativity, and craftsmanship	Kitchen photos in chef jackets/uniforms; use of technical culinary terms (marmalade, consommé, reduction, etc.); presentation of plates as “minimalist,” “graphic,” or works of art
<b>Gastrosexual</b>	Care and nurturing displayed through culinary skill	Cooking with professional techniques in a home environment; preparing meals for guests/family; narratives emphasizing sharing, nourishment, and home
<b>Maverick</b>	Challenging rules, experimental approach, and eccentricity	Scientific techniques (fermentation experiments, laboratory aesthetics); unusual ingredient pairings; critical approaches to traditional recipes; narrative of “I did it this way”
<b>Self-Made Man</b>	Determination, social mobility, and individual success narrative	Career stories of rising from poverty or hardship; narratives of “early days” or the “back kitchen”; emphasis on personal effort and discipline; discourse linking success to individual struggle

**Resource:** Johnston et al., (2014)

## Reliability and Validity

In order to increase the validity and reliability of the study, multiple data sources were used, thereby enabling cross-checking among the findings. The coding process was conducted systematically by the researcher, and transparency was ensured throughout the analysis process through the use of a codebook. The data analysis process was primarily carried out manually. The GPT-5 Pro model was used as an auxiliary tool for limited tasks such as identifying visual elements and suggesting descriptive codes. The model was used at a limited level to identify objects, spatial elements, and basic compositional features in visual content; however, conceptual coding, persona assignment, and thematic classification decisions were made by the researcher. A standardized prompt structure was adopted in the use of the model. The primary prompt used was as follows: “Describe the visual elements in this Instagram post in an objective and descriptive manner. Do not interpret, assign a persona, or produce conceptual inferences.” Model outputs were not used directly. Instead, the researcher conducted a comparative reading between the model outputs and the original content and independently performed interpretive and theoretical coding.

Final coding decisions were made by the researcher, and consistency was ensured through comparative analysis conducted by two independent researchers. A separate filing system was created for each chef, in which website content, LinkedIn profiles, and Instagram posts were documented and analyzed separately (Nowell et al., 2017). Coding procedures were conducted manually by the researcher, and the classification process according to themes and persona types was organized using Excel and a note-taking method. To ensure the systematic progression of the process, analytical notes were maintained throughout the research, and similarities and differences were evaluated comparatively. Through this approach, the original context of the content was preserved and qualitative depth in interpretation was achieved (Tracy, 2010).

Only publicly available data were used in the study. Private messages, comments, or any elements that could violate individual privacy were excluded from the analysis. Although the chefs’ names are explicitly used in the study, the evaluation was conducted at a descriptive level and analyzed within the context of identity construction, professional representation, and discursive strategies. The purpose of the study is not criticism but rather to present a cultural analysis of gastronomic representations.

## Findings

In this section, the gastronomic identities constructed by eight Michelin-starred chefs in Istanbul on digital platforms are analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings are structured based on Culinary Persona Theory (Johnston et al., 2014), Goffman’s Self-Presentation Theory (1959), and the cultural capital approach; each chef’s digital persona is evaluated across different theoretical dimensions. Table 3 presents the general information about the chefs. The information collected regarding the chefs’ Instagram accounts was obtained on July 25, 2025. These figures may vary on different dates.

**Table 3.** Information About Chefs

	<b>Chef Name</b>	<b>Restaurant Name</b>	<b>Number of Stars</b>	<b>Number of Followers</b>	<b>Number of Posts</b>	<b>Instagram Address</b>
1	Fatih Tutak	Türk	2	139K	120	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/fatih_tutak/">https://www.instagram.com/fatih_tutak/</a>
2	Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir	Araka	1	19,5K	632	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/zeynep-pinartasdemir/">https://www.instagram.com/zeynep-pinartasdemir/</a>
3	Cenk Debensason	Arkestra	1	17,4K	1081	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/cenkdebensason/">https://www.instagram.com/cenkdebensason/</a>
4	Maksut Askar	Neolokal	1 and Green Star	110K	1303	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/maksutaskar/">https://www.instagram.com/maksutaskar/</a>
5	Serkan Aksoy	Nicole	1	10,3K	44	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/serkannaksoy/">https://www.instagram.com/serkannaksoy/</a>

6	Cihan Çetinkaya	Mikla	1	5758	141	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/_cihancetinkaya/">https://www.instagram.com/_cihancetinkaya/</a>
7	Yoshizumi Nagaya	Sankai by Nagaya	1	5581	163	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/yoshizuminagaya/">https://www.instagram.com/yoshizuminagaya/</a>
8	Emre Şen	Casa Lavanda	1 and Green Star	10,1K	96	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/mresn/">https://www.instagram.com/mresn/</a>

### **Culinary Persona Typologies: Multiple Representations and Hybrid Identities**

Although traces of multiple persona types were observed in all eight chefs evaluated, the primary, secondary, and occasionally tertiary representations for each chef were carefully distinguished. These analyses reveal that the identity performances maintained by chefs in digital environments are intertwined not only with gastronomic competence but also with aesthetic strategies, cultural values, leadership, innovation, and public relations. The dominant personas of the chefs are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Chefs' Personas

Chef Name	Primary Persona	Secondary Persona	Tertiary Persona
<b>Cenk Debensason</b>	Chef-Artisan	Home Stylist	Homebody
<b>Cihan Çetinkaya</b>	Chef-Artisan	Home Stylist	Self-Made Man
<b>Emre Şen</b>	Chef-Artisan	Maverick	Home Stylist
<b>Fatih Tutak</b>	Chef-Artisan	Home Stylist	Maverick
<b>Maksut Aşkar</b>	Gastrosexual	Self-Made Man	Chef-Artisan
<b>Serkan Aksoy</b>	Home Stylist	Chef-Artisan	Maverick
<b>Yoshizumi Nagaya</b>	Chef-Artisan	Home Stylist	Maverick
<b>Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir</b>	Home Stylist	Chef-Artisan	Pin-up

Based on independent readings and interpretations conducted by the researchers, the distribution of the chefs' primary personas indicates a clear dominance of the Chef-Artisan type. According to Table 3, Cenk Debensason, Cihan Çetinkaya, Emre Şen, Fatih Tutak, and Yoshizumi Nagaya are primarily positioned within the Chef-Artisan category, whereas Maksut Aşkar is primarily categorized as Gastrosexual, and Serkan Aksoy and Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir are primarily situated within the Home Stylist persona type. This finding suggests that digital representations are largely concentrated around gastronomic craftsmanship, professional competence, and technical authority. At the same time, it also demonstrates that in the digital narratives of certain chefs, alternative persona strategies—such as lifestyle-oriented aesthetic curation (Home Stylist) or care- and nurturing-based professional presentation (Gastrosexual)—have become increasingly visible.

When the chefs' digital and discursive representations are examined, the Chef-Artisan persona emerges as the dominant identity. Emphasis on seasonality, the use of local ingredients, technical mastery, and craft-oriented plating practices constitute a common axis in the digital narratives of Cenk Debensason, Cihan Çetinkaya, Emre Şen, Fatih Tutak, and Yoshizumi Nagaya. This finding indicates that Michelin-starred chefs largely construct their digital visibility through the lens of professional kitchen discipline and gastronomic mastery.

In the secondary level persona strategies accompanying this dominant identity, Home Stylist and Chef-Artisan representations become particularly prominent. An aesthetic language of presentation, minimalist visual composition, and spatial curation are especially evident in the posts of Fatih Tutak, Yoshizumi Nagaya, Serkan Aksoy, and Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir. In contrast, elements such as kitchen management, institutional experience, consultancy activities, and award representations emerge as factors supporting the Maverick persona.

In the digital narratives of some chefs, more distinctive persona combinations also attract attention. In the cases of Emre Şen and Cihan Çetinkaya, Homebody elements become visible through references to nature, production spaces, and an intimate narrative tone. In contrast, the Maverick

persona in the digital representations of Fatih Tutak and Serkan Aksoy emerges through innovative dishes and experimental approaches that reinterpret traditional culinary codes. Meanwhile, the digital representation of Maksut Aşkar differentiates itself through an emphasis on care, sharing, and cultural continuity, thereby aligning more closely with the Gastrosexual persona.

Overall, the findings indicate that the digital personas of chefs exhibit multilayered and hybrid structures rather than singular identity performances. These representations, largely structured around the Chef-Artisan axis, are further reinforced by secondary persona strategies related to aesthetics, professionalism, and innovation.

### **Chef Representation Through Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory: Frontstage and Backstage Constructions**

The analysis conducted within the framework of Goffman’s (1959) theory of the presentation of self reveals that the digital representations of Michelin-starred chefs demonstrate a strategic permeability between frontstage and backstage performances rather than a strict dichotomy. Frontstage representations are constructed through aesthetically planned plating presentations, a controlled visual language, and indicators of professional achievement. In contrast, backstage representations are shaped through references to production processes, team labor, relationships with nature, and cultural memory.

For some chefs (e.g., Fatih Tutak and Yoshizumi Nagaya), the frontstage is characterized by strong impression management built upon high technical skill and dramatic visuality, while the backstage is reinforced through the visibility of cultural references and creative processes. In other cases (e.g., Emre Şen and Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir), the backstage becomes more prominent through depictions of nature, interactions with producers, and everyday culinary practices. This situation corresponds closely with Goffman’s notion of the “strategic production of sincerity.”

Overall, the findings indicate that digital platforms function not merely as aesthetic showcases for chefs but as multilayered stages where professionalism, authenticity, and cultural meanings are simultaneously negotiated. In this respect, Goffman’s dramaturgical theory provides a functional analytical framework for interpreting the construction of chefs’ digital personas.

### **Gastronomic Narratives in the Context of Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory**

In this section, the gastronomic narratives of eight Michelin-starred chefs are analyzed based on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu conceptualizes cultural capital in three primary forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Within the scope of this study, the chefs’ educational backgrounds, career experiences, narratives related to local and international culinary heritage, and their professional trajectories are examined within the framework of these layers of cultural capital. In this way, the aesthetic, ethical, and symbolic values carried by the chefs are considered in a holistic manner.

#### ***Embodied Cultural Capital: Nature, Memory, Locality, and Craft***

Embodied cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, sensibilities, and dispositions that individuals acquire through long-term processes of socialization (Bourdieu, 1986). In the gastronomic narratives of the Michelin-starred chefs examined in this study, this form of capital becomes visible through relationships established with nature, local production practices, references to personal and collective memory, and craft-based culinary approaches (Ignatow et al., 2017).

In the narratives of Emre Şen, embodied cultural capital is constructed through direct engagement with production spaces, an emphasis on seasonality, and a “garden-to-plate” philosophy. The continuity established with the natural environment allows the kitchen to be positioned not merely as a production space but as an integral part of a broader lifestyle practice. Similarly, Zeynep Pınar Taşdemir’s gastronomic narrative places family heritage, local culinary knowledge, and traditional

production techniques at its core. This memory is translated into a contemporary aesthetic language through restrained and minimalist plating presentations.

In the case of Fatih Tutak, embodied cultural capital emerges through the reinterpretation of personal history, local culinary memory, and apprenticeship-based learning processes within the framework of modern techniques. The transformation of traditional flavors into contemporary gastronomic narratives demonstrates how this form of capital is preserved while simultaneously being reproduced in new contexts.

Overall, embodied cultural capital in the chefs' digital and discursive representations appears to concentrate around the notions of authenticity, continuity, and craftsmanship. This structure suggests that gastronomic identity is constructed not solely through technical competence but through lived experience and embodied knowledge.

### ***Institutionalized Cultural Capital: Education, Prestige, and Professional Legitimacy***

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to the formal recognition of an individual's knowledge and competencies through institutions, educational processes, certifications, and indicators of prestige (Bourdieu, 1986). In the gastronomic narratives of the chefs examined in this study, this form of capital becomes visible through international culinary experiences, professional training obtained in prestigious restaurants, symbolic distinctions such as Michelin stars, and various forms of institutional representation (Benson, 2006).

In the narrative of Yoshizumi Nagaya, institutionalized cultural capital generates strong professional legitimacy through the integration of the Japanese Kaiseki culinary tradition with European haute cuisine techniques. His restaurants operating in different countries and the presence of multiple Michelin stars demonstrate how this form of capital transforms into internationally recognized professional authority. This structure also illustrates the transnational circulation of cultural capital beyond geographical boundaries.

The gastronomic narrative of Cenk Debensason, on the other hand, transforms institutionalized cultural capital into an aesthetic performance through his formal education (Paul Bocuse Institute), connections with international culinary networks, and the conceptualization of experiential restaurant formats. The knowledge accumulated through formal education functions in digital representations not merely as background information but as a fundamental reference point that legitimizes creative culinary practices. Similarly, the representation of Cihan Çetinkaya is shaped through professional experiences gained in prestigious kitchens, consultancy activities, and relationships established with international gastronomic networks. The capital acquired within institutional culinary structures enables local culinary knowledge to be articulated within a global gastronomic discourse and positions the chef as a carrier of professional expertise.

These findings indicate that institutionalized cultural capital plays a central role in producing competence, credibility, and professional authority within the chefs' digital representations. At the same time, when combined with embodied cultural capital, this form of capital contributes to the emergence of multilayered and hybrid gastronomic narratives.

### ***Hybridization and Transformability of Cultural Capital***

The findings indicate that in the gastronomic narratives of Michelin-starred chefs, cultural capital exhibits a hybrid and transformable character rather than a fixed and singular structure. Embodied cultural capital (locality, memory, craftsmanship) and institutionalized cultural capital (education, awards, and professional networks) are constructed in digital representations not as mutually exclusive forms, but as interrelated layers that operate simultaneously.

This hybrid structure enables chefs to reconstruct local culinary knowledge within a universal gastronomic language. Local ingredients, traditional techniques, and narratives rooted in personal memory are combined with international culinary experiences, contemporary presentation styles, and

indicators of institutional legitimacy, thereby producing gastronomic narratives with high symbolic value. In this way, cultural capital emerges not merely as a legacy inherited from the past but as a strategic resource that is continually reproduced and circulated through digital platforms.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a comprehensive framework that integrates both theoretical and practical contributions by examining the digital representations of Michelin-starred chefs. At the theoretical level, the applicability of Culinary Persona Theory within the Turkish context has been demonstrated, revealing that persona types function not as fixed categories but as context-sensitive and interrelated structures. Goffman's frontstage–backstage framework has been reinterpreted within the context of digital gastronomy, showing that chef identity is constructed not only through culinary practice but also through digital performances and narrative representations. In addition, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been extended through the analysis of chefs' digital narratives, serving as a complementary analytical tool that explains how aesthetic, ethical, and symbolic values are reproduced within digital environments.

At the practical level, the study offers directly applicable insights for gastronomy professionals, digital communication strategists, and brand consultants. The findings highlight the importance of persona-oriented content planning in enhancing chefs' digital visibility and demonstrate, through concrete examples, how persona clusters such as Chef-Artisan, Maverick, and Home Stylist operate in combination. This framework provides a strategic roadmap for chefs and restaurants seeking to develop effective digital representations. Furthermore, the study points to the need for gastronomy education institutions to integrate topics such as digital identity management, media aesthetics, and cultural representation into their curricula, emphasizing the importance for aspiring chefs to develop digital communication competencies alongside technical culinary skills.

## **Limitations**

This study is limited to the digital representations of eight Michelin-starred chefs located in Istanbul who were evaluated within the scope of the 2024 Michelin Guide. Therefore, the findings represent only a highly visible and elite segment of the Turkish gastronomic landscape. Chefs who do not hold Michelin stars but maintain an active digital presence were not included in the scope of this research. As a result, the broader diversity of chef profiles within the gastronomy sector remains outside the boundaries of this study.

In addition, the data collection process relied exclusively on Instagram and publicly accessible web content. Dynamic forms of content such as private messages, comments, Reels, or temporary story posts were excluded due to issues related to data privacy and access restrictions. This limitation constrains the analysis of interaction-oriented content that may play a significant role in the construction of chefs' digital personas.

Furthermore, the study adopts a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth analysis based on a limited sample. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire gastronomy sector or to different cultural contexts. The data analysis process was carried out manually by the researcher, and the interpretation of the content inherently involved a degree of subjectivity. Although artificial intelligence tools were used to support the coding process, the researcher's interpretive judgments may have influenced the results.

Finally, the research is based on time-bound content, considering only the posts shared by the chefs up to a specific date (before 25 July 2025). Since chefs' persona strategies may evolve or be reshaped over time, the findings should be interpreted as representing a snapshot of digital representations within a particular period.

## Suggestions for Future Research

This study provides original insights by analyzing the persona-based representations of Michelin-starred chefs operating on digital platforms. However, in order to achieve a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of digital representation practices within the field of gastronomy, future research should consider the following directions.

Future studies may extend the scope beyond Michelin-starred chefs to include local chefs, cooks working in women's cooperatives, gastronomy students, or home cooks who have gained popularity on social media. Such comparisons may reveal how chef personas are constructed not only within prestigious culinary contexts but also across different social and professional layers.

Longitudinal studies could examine how chefs' digital representations evolve over time and through which stages their content production strategies develop. This approach would make it possible to understand how different persona types transform and adapt across different periods.

In addition, future research may incorporate representations across other digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, X (Twitter), Pinterest, or personal blogs, allowing for comparative analyses of platform-specific persona strategies. By analyzing comments, likes, and user interactions on chefs' posts, researchers could also investigate how persona construction is perceived not only by the content creators but also by their audiences. Such participatory analyses may shed light on the bidirectional nature of digital persona formation.

Beyond qualitative approaches, future studies could also employ survey research with larger samples or artificial intelligence-supported big data analysis to quantitatively evaluate the prevalence of persona types, their influence on audiences, and their relationship with brand value. These directions would enable a deeper understanding of the multilayered effects of digitalization in gastronomy and further develop the theoretical framework of digital personas.

Finally, studies focusing on gastronomy students' self-presentation practices and perceptions of chef personas on digital platforms could explore how chef identity is learned and internalized in the digital age within culinary education contexts.

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