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“Everywhere You Look, You’ll Find Food”: Emerging Adult Perspectives towards The Food Media Landscape

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***“Everywhere You Look, You’ll Find Food”*: Emerging Adult Perspectives towards The Food Media Landscape**

This study explores what emerging adults value in food media, i.e. food-focused content and personae in media. Emerging adults (18-25) are an important target group for food media as they transition towards nutritional independence and consume media substantially. Seven semi-structured focus groups were conducted with thirty-seven Belgian participants. Thematic analysis revealed three themes (*hedonism, ability, information*) grouping nine subthemes (*entertainment, sensory appeal, convenience, familiarity, cost, autonomy, education, health and fitness, and innovation*) characterizing emerging adults’ food media experiences. Incidental exposure and interpersonal influences also mark their food media consumption. This demonstrates food media’s interwovenness in emerging adults’ media habits. Further research should consider these themes and complexities, including their potential impact towards food-related habits and media use.

Keywords: emerging adults – food media – focus group – media habits – consumer behavior

Introduction

Now more than ever, media and food have become centrally intertwined as aspects of our everyday habits (Leer and Povlsen 2016). Or, as Tania Lewis formulates (2020, 2):

Over the past decade the world of food, from grocery shopping and home cookery to restaurant going and food politics, has been quietly colonized by the digital. Meanwhile, the realm of the digital has been invaded by all things food related.

This “realm of the digital” includes digital media that overflow with food-related content (De Solier 2018, Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021), alongside more traditional and print media that have been covering food topics for a much longer period (Polan 2011, Mennell 1996).

Food media, which the current study defines as any media format, content, or featured persona (e.g. celebrity chefs or food influencers) that focuses on food, are thus omnipresent.

Media and media use can also impact and drive nutritional habits (Valente et al. 2020),

making them valuable components within nutritional research to understand dietary behaviors (Keser et al. 2020, Krogager 2016).

This close relationship between media and food has yet to receive more attention among scholars. In both traditional and more recent models concerning nutritional impact, such as the social ecological model (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002), the Determinants Of Nutrition and Eating (DONE) framework (Stok et al. 2017), and the Reactivity to Embedded Food Cues in Advertising Model (REFCAM; Folkvord et al. 2016), food media are viewed as a separate factor influencing nutritional behavior. A large body of empirical research has supported this perspective. For instance, watching television food adverts leads to more unhealthy snacking (Halford et al. 2007, Harris, Bargh, and Brownell 2009), and engagement with food content on social media equally has an impact on dietary behaviors, including higher consumption of unhealthy foods and increased symptoms of certain eating disorders (Baldwin, Freeman, and Kelly 2018, Turner and Lefevre 2017). Several studies have also applied specific media platforms, such as TV and social media, as tools to promote healthier dietary behaviors (Clifford et al. 2009, Leak et al. 2014, Tobey and Manore 2014, Adam et al. 2015). Different age groups have been included in this area of study, from children (Robinson et al. 2017) and adolescents (Scully et al. 2012) to young and older adults (Harris, Bargh, and Brownell 2009, Sidani et al. 2016). Yet, we can ask ourselves whether this isolated, separate perspective of food media effects in research still reflects the reality of today's mediated environment, where food topics are omnipresent (De Solier 2018, Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021, Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020). The abovementioned models are straightforward in their approach to food media and can therefore be implemented easily. However, when applying subsequent outcomes to interventions, the importance of how such models approximate the real-life experiences of audiences with food media, regardless of the dietary messages they promote, arguably

increases. Therefore, exploring these real-life audience experiences in the context of food media is warranted to uncover whether this separate view of food media in nutritional research is appropriate.

As food media content is increasingly saturating many and various media platforms (De Solier 2018, Lewis 2020, Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021), perhaps a straightforward approach in terms of media perspectives must also be scrutinized. When it comes to media exposure and use, there are two competing perspectives: a deliberate, active, selective media exposure on one hand (Valkenburg, Peter, and Walther 2016, Sundar and Limperos 2013, Rubin 1981, Rosengren, Wenner, and Palmgreen 1985, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973, Rubin 2009), and a more passive, incidental, encountered exposure on the other (LaRose 2010, Ruggiero 2000, Van den Bulck 1995, Vraga et al. 2019, Bode 2015). The growth of media content, which has extended to user-generated content, and platforms in the media landscape has already led some researchers to combine these perspectives and distinguish between high and low choice media environments (Bode 2015, Thorson and Wells 2015, Vraga et al. 2019). On social media, for instance, active control of media exposure is sometimes only partial, because as users choose initially to engage with certain people, media or content types, they may end up being exposed to content they would otherwise not have been interested in (Bode 2015). In this sense, media exposure and use is not always clearly active or passive and the two perspectives can intertwine in the media consumption process. In the context of food media, Ngqangashe et al. (2021) have already shown that adolescent food media use can be both incidental and selective, and that selectivity differs depending on the food media platforms. Perhaps in the day-to-day experiences with food media, a less conscious, more complex food media consumption process occurs in practice as well, which is something the present study will explore further.

This current study will be carried out among emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is a transitional phase of life for individuals between their late teens to mid or late twenties, marked by more independence and a search for direction in many aspects of their identity and life (Arnett 2000, 2006). Because of these changes and increased independence, the latter including more independent food choices, this period is argued to be key in generating long-term healthy habits (Nelson et al. 2008). Additionally, emerging adults spend copious amounts of time with various forms of media (Perrin 2015, Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013), which behave as both an instrument for socialization and a means to express and explore their identity, thereby playing a key role in their development (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013). They are also said to adhere strongly to what is referred to as "persona culture" (Vandendriessche and De Marez 2019). This practice involves a connection with media personae, who regularly figure in the various media platforms emerging adults interact with most and have a substantial impact on this age group (Marwick 2015, Boon and Lomore 2001, Lewallen, Miller, and Behm-Morawitz 2016). Concerning food behavior and media use, studies have mainly focused on college or university students among emerging adults, without stressing diversity regarding socioeconomic status (SES) (Clifford et al. 2009, Keser et al. 2020, Nelson et al. 2008). Scant research has included lower-educated emerging adults or those with a lower SES (Leak et al. 2014). Because emerging adulthood may take on a very different form depending on factors like socioeconomic status (Arnett 2006), this demographic must be included to provide a complete image of food media experiences among this group.

To summarize, food media are ubiquitous (Leer and Povlsen 2016, De Solier 2018, Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021, Lewis 2020), especially for emerging adults (Perrin 2015, Kirkwood 2018, Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013), whose phase of life can predict their lifelong relationship with food (Vidgen and Gallegos 2014). The aim of this

paper is to explore how emerging adults navigate and perceive the food media landscape. More specifically, we will seek answers to the following research questions: (1) How do emerging adults use and experience food media on a day-to-day basis? (2) Which, if any, complexities are noticeable within the food media use of emerging adults? And (3) How do these complexities relate to existing models and theories concerning food behavior and media use? Answering these research questions will help gain a better understanding of how emerging adults use and experience food media, in addition to assessing whether existing theories and models concerning food behavior and media use correspond to actual food media consumption. This knowledge can help in tailoring successful nutrition and food media interventions to this age group.

Method

Study Design

The study methodology is described based on the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines for reporting qualitative focus group research (Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig 2007). This study was carried out using semi-structured focus group interviews and relied on a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1994) of the data. Focus groups have been used in other food-related research (Rabiee 2004), and suits our central goal to exploratively understand the more complex feelings and attitudes of emerging adults in their interactions with food media. We utilized photovoice techniques in this study, which consist of the participants recording certain experiences through photographs and is often used in participatory research (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice can help participants verbalize their experiences and is appropriate among more vulnerable groups, allowing for more inclusivity and flexibility (Aldridge 2014). The specific application of this technique in the current study is explained under data collection.

Of the seven total focus groups, three were held at the University of Antwerp, another three at community youth centers and one at the school the participants of that group attended. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 110 minutes and was conducted by one main moderator, assisted by another moderator who took field notes during the conversations. The interviews all took place between November 18th and December 16th 2019. Participants received a €15 gift card after the interview.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

Anyone aged between 18 and 25 could participate. A stratified sampling method was used to guarantee comparable distributions of gender and socioeconomic background in our sample. This, first, because nutritional research has predominantly involved women (Caperchione et al. 2012). Second, while nutrition interventions are most necessary for lower socioeconomic emerging adults (Vidgen and Gallegos 2014), these groups are often overlooked in research (Clifford et al. 2009, Keser et al. 2020, Nelson et al. 2008, Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013). Limited research has included more socio-economically vulnerable emerging adults (Leak et al. 2014); the current study aims to contribute in closing this gap by proportionately including lower SES emerging adults.

Participants were recruited by means of stratified convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Invitations were shared via flyers, mailings and social media. Lower socioeconomic groups were targeted through vocational schools and community centers. Interested participants voluntarily registered by completing a short online intake survey recording their sociodemographic characteristics to assess to which stratified subsample they should be assigned. They were unaware of the stratification and used procedures. In some cases, and especially among lower socioeconomic groups, volunteers from the community centers guided this process.

We discerned two types of SES - lower and higher - within our participant subsample groups, based on their mother's highest obtained educational degree (Arnett 2015). In Belgium, educational attainment is based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and then recoded into three categories: lower-educated, middle-educated and higher-educated individuals (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2018, UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2011). We opted for these classifications and randomly assigned participants with middle-educated mothers to either lower or higher SES focus groups.

We organized a focus group interview for each of the targeted stratified subsamples, aiming for at least five and at most eight participants per group. One interview group, with only female lower SES individuals, ultimately only had three participants. Therefore, an additional interview for this group was scheduled. Thirty-seven emerging adults participated in total. Table 1 gives an overview of the focus group compositions and subsamples.

[Table 1 near here]

This study was approved by an independent ethics committee, namely the Ethics Advisory Committee on Social and Human Sciences of the University of Antwerp (Ref No: SHW_19_45). All participants provided informed consent before the focus group interviews began.

Data Collection

A week prior to the interview, participants were asked to gather photos of their food media encounters and cooking behaviors. These photos were used solely to help start and stimulate the focus groups by asking for further explanations. In two lower SES groups this photovoice technique was omitted to alleviate the participation threshold. Here, photovoice was replaced by top-of-mind questions involving food media, yielding equally useful and comparable data to the other groups. Before the start of the focus groups, participants completed a short

questionnaire on paper detailing their demographic characteristics (Table 3) and additional questions concerning certain food-related behaviors (intake frequency of different meal or food types, cooking and grocery shopping frequency; Table 4). Here, the researchers also introduced themselves and explained their interest in the research topic.

During the focus groups a semi-structured interview guide designed by the study coordinators was used (Table 2), which was pilot-tested among two groups consisting of seven and six participants respectively. All interviews were audio recorded and moderated by one researcher, assisted by another researcher who provided field notes of the focus group conversations.

[Table 2 near here]

The interviews begun with general, open-ended questions to explore the food media landscape as it is experienced by emerging adults. Participants were told that the focus would be on food media, which were defined towards them as any type of food-focused media and content on any platform, ranging from printed cookbooks and magazines to Instagram posts and Facebook videos; everything except traditional food-related advertising and health campaigns. In this explorative phase, participants also shared their photovoice materials to further the conversation. Next, the interview focused on specific influences within participants' food media consumption from their personal environment, media personae, organizations and brands. Participants were asked to write these types of influences that came to mind on post-its and arrange them on a blank poster. This exercise was followed up with questions detailed in Table 2. Two other topics – self-perceived influences of food media during shopping and cooking – were also discussed in variable length during some focus groups, but are not considered within the scope of this study.

Data Analysis

Frequencies were calculated for the questionnaire results. All focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim with the help of field notes made by the assistant moderator. Excerpts used in this article were translated from Dutch. Two coders independently identified themes per area - food media in general, food media personae, and food media organizations and brands - using a deductive grounded theory approach and NVivo 12 software. These researchers coded one different focus group each in order to establish a preliminary codebook and compare the emerging topics. They then coded the remainder of the interviews separately following this codebook, discussing and rectifying differences during the process as well as adding new topics if necessary. These initial analyses were used to deduct overarching themes perceived and valued by participants across all food media areas that were discussed.

Results

Sample Characteristics and Food-Related Habits

In total, 37 Belgian emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25, with a mean age of 21.32 ($SD=1.68$) years old, took part in the focus groups. A slight majority of them were female (57%), had a higher SES (51%), and were students (70%) who lived with their parents (62%). Table 3 details the demographic characteristics of the participants.

In terms of participant food-related behaviors (Table 4), the majority of the participants (56%) indicated they cook at least a few times a week, although a large portion (30%) reported to cook once a month. Most participants (57%) reportedly go grocery shopping once or a few times a week. Almost everyone in this study specified they eat freshly prepared meals (89%), as well as fruit and vegetables (99%) at least a few times a week, but also expressed they eat ready-made meals (87%) and fast food or take out (90%) fairly

regularly, between once a month and once a week. It is important to note that these are self-reported behaviors and social desirability in these responses may be present.

[Table 3 near here]

[Table 4 near here]

Focus Group Findings

Findings from our focus group interviews reveal that the emerging adults in our sample mostly consume food media through these specific media platforms: television, social media, websites (including Google search and blogs), and print media. Participants mainly discussed positive food media anecdotes on all these platforms, especially on social media, indicating that they seem to enjoy consuming food media on those platforms.

During the focus group conversations three overarching themes, *hedonism*, *ability*, and *information*, and nine subthemes, *entertainment*, *sensory appeal*, *convenience*, *familiarity*, *cost*, *autonomy*, *education*, *health and fitness*, and *innovation* emerged that capture how emerging adults experience food media in their everyday life. Groups of subthemes related to each other on a higher level of abstraction, so we introduced three overarching themes, *hedonism*, *ability*, and *information* to respectively group them. All themes were brought up consistently across focus groups and were also mentioned simultaneously throughout the interviews. An overview of these themes and their descriptions is given in Table 5. We will discuss the themes and respective subthemes in descending order, according to the number of participants alluding to them. Within each subtheme the predominant media format(s) and persona characteristics are considered, as well as noteworthy relative demographic differences where applicable.

[Table 5 near here]

Hedonism

This first theme combines the subthemes *entertainment* and *sensory appeal*, which both contribute to a predominantly enjoyable and pleasant food media experience for our emerging adult participants. Overall, this theme mainly comes from participants' discussion of food media on television and social media.

Entertainment. *Entertainment* is the first important subtheme among our participants. Food media are a source of entertainment, relaxation or humor for them, mainly through television and social media in our sample. *Entertainment* seems to be a standalone goal in many cases, as these emerging adults indicate that they would not necessarily prepare the food being shown, for instance, or that they would engage with food media for any other reason than their entertaining value:

“I think it's just nice to watch, not like I think 'I'm going to really make that', but just really... it's relaxing.” (#29, female, lower SES).

Although the majority of our participants expressed they cook often, our cooking frequency results (Table 4) were divided, as a large portion of our sample seemingly only cooks once a month; this could reflect the divide between viewing food media and actually preparing related content.

Personae within food media (e.g. celebrity chefs or food influencers) play a significant role in this subtheme; the way a persona behaves - their charisma, extravagance, or silliness adds to the enjoyment. This is reinforced by statements such as these:

“In the end it's less about the food but more about the person.” (#27, male, lower SES)

“But it's really more for the memes and his personality than for the food.” (#2, female, higher SES).

Food media personae thus seem to be valued within this subtheme over the food-related content depicted at times. Within our sample the occurrence of this subtheme seemingly differed across multiple demographic traits; men especially seemed to value this subtheme, along with higher SES emerging adults.

Sensory Appeal. *Sensory appeal* was a second dominant subtheme in this study; with emerging adults often noting how the food-related content they see in the media landscape tastes good, looks the part, or is aesthetically satisfying in yet other ways. When food media are made attractive in this manner, it seems to become an additional pull factor for participants to follow up on the food media content by looking up the recipe, recreating it, or going out to dine at the featured business:

“If you watch 'Dagelijkse Kost' by Jeroen Meus he usually says at the end of his dish like 'you can read it on the website' and then I also go there if it looks good to me.” (#19, male, higher SES).

Similar qualities are also sought for within food media personae, who are judged according to certain external appeal standards participants have, such as cleanliness or their voice:

“Especially just because she has a super annoying voice and I honestly think that her food never really looks good.” (#30, male, higher SES).

The same aspects are applicable to the broader production value of food media; it has an impact on the way food media or related personae are regarded by these emerging adults.

This subtheme was mentioned most in the context of social media, mainly Instagram, as well as print media such as cookbooks.

Ability

The theme *ability* groups the subthemes *convenience*, *familiarity*, *cost* and *autonomy*. Across

these themes, emerging adults seem to pay attention to whether food media cater to and respect their own personal degree of understanding, preferences, budget, skillset, creativity, and autonomy. Participants bring up this theme mainly when sharing their experiences with print media, Google search, and social media. This overarching theme occurred most among higher SES participants.

Convenience. Another important subtheme that pertains to how food-related content is displayed in media, is *convenience*. Emerging adult participants want food media to be presented in a straightforward, easy to understand manner, and that a wide variety of knowledge is easily accessible and filterable:

“It's an easy simple book. ... It's easy to read, no too much text. It's all right.” (#26, male, lower SES).

In terms of recipe content, our interview subjects value required ingredients being few, readily available or simple to find, and having a useful role in the dish. Likewise, recipes need to be quick and easy to make, and should not require too much or advanced equipment. When recipes do not meet these criteria, it seems to form a threshold for our participants who subsequently will not engage with the medium or will not recreate the food featured:

“There's so much listed that you only need a tiny bit of, that I think it's a shame to buy all that to maybe just make it once.” (#25, female, lower SES).

This subtheme also seemed to emerge most often in the context of social media, followed by cookbooks, certain websites and Google search. The only notable demographic difference here pertains to SES; higher SES participants apparently valued this subtheme quite a bit more than lower SES participants.

Familiarity. Next, participants express the importance of *familiarity* in food media. This mainly through their discontentment towards food media content or personalities not fitting in with their personal tastes or what they find "normal", stating they would rather adhere to food media they know, that fit their tastes and they enjoy:

“Yeah I dunno, I see that and then I think yeah and sometimes ingredients come in that you think huh I don't know what that is really and then that idea is gone already.” (#45, female, lower SES).

Similarly, participants enjoy traditional, classic cooking and therefore also personae associated with such content. Food media personae that give a familiar or even familial impression are also valued by our participants:

“I think he has like a familiar quality. It could just as well be your uncle or your brother.” (#1, female, higher SES).

Furthermore, this subtheme arises through participants discussing recipes that yielded successful results in the past, leading them to become more acquainted and trusting with the food media, persona or brand in question. *Familiarity* was mentioned most alongside print media, specifically cookbooks, followed by social media. Female participants especially appeared to value *familiarity* in food media, along with lower SES participants.

Cost. This subtheme, along with *autonomy* and *innovation*, was not mentioned by the majority of participants in this study. However, they did emerge in almost all the focus groups consistently, also across our stratified sample characteristics: gender and SES.

Emerging adult participants pay attention to the potential price tag of what they see in food media, or consider their own budget when engaging with food media. They value when recipes in food media content are cost-effective and appreciate food media personae who consider *cost* in their food media content:

“Yeah Jeroen Meus, from the program ‘Dagelijkse Kost’, it’s food that isn’t too hard to make, you don’t need too many products to make it and they’re also not that expensive to buy.” (#19, male, higher SES)

In contrast, when a food media persona does not seem to consider or respect money according to some participants, it incites negative reactions:

“And if I think of how many times I’ve sat at home because I didn’t have enough money for food then I get kind of angry so those are really videos [of someone ruining food] that you can’t really think about too much.” (#43, female, lower SES)

Not only content, but the food media platform itself, mainly print media, is also considered and sometimes explicitly chosen or avoided because of its *cost* or financial benefits:

“There are nice restaurants in there or like hotels with a lot of discounts and that’s just nice when you want to take your girlfriend out to dinner.” (#16, male, higher SES)

“Yeah for example you look for a pasta or something for example and you just look it up on your phone how to make it and you have it right away instead of that whole book. A book like that usually costs some money and to make some food I’d rather look it up on my phone than have to buy a whole book.” (#31, male, lower SES)

Male emerging adults discussed this *cost* subtheme more, along with higher SES participants.

Autonomy. Participants in our study want to be autonomous and want their *autonomy* to be respected when consuming food media and adopting what they see in their own kitchens. In our study, this subtheme emerged mainly when discussing print media such as cookbooks. Specifically for recipes they see in food media, emerging adults seem to adapt them to their own preferences and diets:

“Yeah it’s fun to learn new dishes but then after a while you just want to, or at least I want to make it my own.” (#11, male, higher SES)

“So then I swapped that for vegan yoghurt. It was the same, but it was good. I just changed the recipe a bit myself.” (#28, female, lower SES)

Some participants also express not wanting to view or use certain food media because they seem to make them feel restricted in their possibilities to cook and eat what they want:

“Yeah following that whole step-by-step plan for me it’s just yeah. I just grab what’s in my fridge or what I have lying around and I make something out of it. Following steps from a cookbook, following a recipe I don’t do that, no.” (#6, male, higher SES)

“No I don’t follow books, I don’t follow the internet. I just do it, with what I have I’ll do something with it.” (#26, male, lower SES)

This subtheme is mainly made clear by respondents in a negative way, by saying they do not engage with certain food media because they may restrict their *autonomy*, rather than indicating that some food media do allow *autonomy* and valuing them for that aspect. This subtheme seems more important for lower SES emerging adults in our study.

Information

This final theme combines three subthemes that relate more generally to information emerging adults see and want to see in various food media: *education, health and fitness*, and *innovation*. Generally, participants seem to want to learn something from food media and pay attention to who provides that information. Emerging adults also compare this information with their own health and fitness-related perceptions and goals, using that information when it suits those goals and rejecting information or personae relaying information when it or they do not fit their goals. Lastly, several participants engage with and value food media that present new information, so they themselves can try or learn things that are novel to them. This overarching theme is discussed more among higher SES participants in our focus groups, and is mainly mentioned in the context of social media, Instagram and Facebook in

particular.

Education. An often-recurring subtheme among our participants is *education*, where they seek to educate themselves in some way with food media they are exposed to or find them compelling out of an interest or curiosity. This mainly seemed to occur through Instagram, cookbooks, and Google search in our study. Participants often want to learn or be immersed in a food-related topic they are already invested in, such as fitness, vegetarianism or veganism, for instance:

“Yeah to me... it's purely informative because I'm like really interested in fermentation and then often see what other people use to implement it themselves, so to me it's purely informative.” (#20, male, higher SES).

Additionally, some participants have specific educational desires to learn about either food preparation, associated health benefits, or the broader societal and environmental impact of food. In this sense, this subtheme of *education* is broad and can be categorized further according to different food topics. Unambiguous expertise and credibility of food media, also through the related persona or brand, relates to this subtheme and holds importance among our participants:

“She's so wannabe you know, she's not a chef, right, she's a housewife who cooks a bit.” (#34, female, lower SES).

To some degree the subthemes *entertainment* and *education* are complementary, because these participants often still find enjoyment from food media through learning, but it seems to go beyond the purely hedonistic enjoyment we observed in *entertainment*. *Education* seemingly occurred more among higher SES participants.

Health and Fitness. Throughout the different conversations, many participants explicitly mention *health or fitness*-related arguments when speaking about food media, mostly in the context of social media such as Instagram. This seems to be an underlying motive or goal influencing their perception of certain food media and associated personae. In this context, certain food media are used to achieve this goal, including a food media persona's lifestyle, or to evaluate how their food-related habits relate to their goal:

“Those fitness Youtubers usually have ideas about healthy food. At the beginning it was difficult to introduce more variation. Like a salad, in the long run it'll be the same every day and this way you get a different perspective on how you can eat healthy without exaggerating.” (#24, female, higher SES)

Alternatively, some food media personae are criticized for promoting seemingly unhealthy practices by participants:

“He uses too much butter.” (#35, female, lower SES)

Alternatively, some participants are frustrated by the discourse concerning healthy and unhealthy food within the food media landscape, indicating they would prefer a less polarized perspective, rather encouraging moderation within nutrition. Cases like these also show that health-related topics occupy these emerging adults within food media.

Innovation. Lastly, emerging adults in our study show affinity towards food media that show them something new, trendy, that they otherwise would not eat, or that depict food and food practices that participants are not used to seeing in their current environment or culture:

“Those are recipes that I wouldn't look up myself, let me put it that way. Mostly more special things or yeah original things.” (#5, female, higher SES)

“I put Joe & The Juice. It’s a juice but yeah, it’s a hip brand. I saw it on Instagram and when I drove past it I had to wait for someone so yeah, I went in.” (#2, female, higher SES)

“Not on Instagram but on Reddit. Then it’s Asian cooking, so yeah a lot of things that you’re not used to here.” (#26, male, lower SES)

Likewise, respondents perceive food media personae negatively if they are not innovative or trendy:

“Well, isn’t Piet [Huysentruyt] a bit outdated?” (#2, female, higher SES)

“Yeah, he’s really passé.” (#15, male, higher SES)

This subtheme *innovation* emerged mainly in the context of social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, higher SES participants mentioned this subtheme far more than lower SES emerging adults.

At first glance, this subtheme contrasts and perhaps contradicts the subtheme *familiarity*. For some of its characteristics this is certainly possible; although the themes and subthemes in this study are not mutually exclusive, it may be that certain participants value food media that depict content outside their comfort zone and introduce them to something new, while other participants prefer food media to be inside the realm of what they know and like. However, it is also possible that these two subthemes overlap in some emerging adults. It is feasible that while participants want to see, learn, or be exposed to something new, they want this novel food media content to come from a source they know and trust, for instance, to assure that it will not result in a negative viewing/learning/cooking/eating experience.

Interpersonal Influence and Incidental Exposure

Alongside the overarching themes and respective subthemes, two phenomena especially stand out in participants' interactions with food media: *interpersonal influence* and *incidental*

exposure. The emerging adults in our study do not navigate the food media landscape alone, but seem to be considerably influenced by their social circle:

“I wrote down my mother [as inspiration source] for example. Mother's kitchen it's what you grow up with and yeah I think that they inspire us and pass on tips for later and that so yeah that they definitely influence you.” (#23, male, higher SES).

Personal contacts are mainly discussed from this context of influence. The people that seem to inspire participants in our study most regarding food media are family members, predominantly their parents:

“My mom has HelloFresh and keeps all the recipes and I also leaf through them sometimes because it's all in a folder for inspiration. The nice ones I take out and take with me to make at my dorm.” (#5, female, higher SES).

Friends also seem to play a role, but their influence is weaker among emerging adults who live with their family full-time. In a number of situations, participants also exert their own influence on their social contacts:

“Yeah so the second photo I have is a tweet that I thought was brilliant. [...] I forwarded that to my friend group like oh my god guys, this is what we should do when we're away on weekend.” (#9, female, higher SES).

The second noticeable food media phenomenon in this study is *incidental exposure*. Participants experience certain food media interactions as being purely coincidental, not relating to a deliberate media choice or information seeking behavior:

“[For me] they're also just things I encounter because you click on it once and then it pops up multiple times and then you keep on watching and it keeps coming.” (#11, male, higher SES).

Their coincidental experiences with food media also echo the omnipresence of food media (Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020):

“Everywhere you look, you’ll find food. All you have to do is drive along the street, and there’s another McDonald’s sign.” (#26, male, lower SES).

Discussion

Although food and media have become two heavily intertwined notions (Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020) and food media are pervading across media platforms (De Solier 2018, Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021) for emerging adults especially (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013, Kirkwood 2018, Perrin 2015), much research continues to consider (food) media as a separate factor influencing people’s food-related behaviors. The present study explored just how emerging adults experience and navigate the food media landscape and which elements shape those experiences by identifying themes and subthemes, as well as associating themes with certain media platforms and food media personae characteristics. In doing so, we aimed to shed some light on the complexity within food media consumption and compare our findings to existing theories and models relating to media and nutritional behaviors.

The first research question in this article concerned the day-to-day use and experience of food media among emerging adults. Three overarching themes and nine subthemes emerged from our focus groups that characterize the everyday experiences and attitudes emerging adults have towards the food media landscape. Taken together, food media for emerging adults are an *appealing* source of *entertainment* that also *teach* them something, potentially something *innovative* or that relates to a *health or fitness* goal they have. When considering food media, emerging adults pay attention to the *convenience* and understandability of the content, the *familiarity* of what/who is pictured, the associated *cost*, and whether their *autonomy* in terms of skills, preferences and creativity is respected when they are viewing – or even recreating – food media content. Participants in our focus groups mention our uncovered themes simultaneously, indicating that they come together in shaping

what emerging adults find important in their food media experiences. In their study among adolescents, Ngqangashe et al. (2021) show that food media are used in different ways for different reasons. The current study found that emerging adults too value several different aspects when engaging with food media through our uncovered themes and that the various themes are associated with certain media platforms. Additionally, our findings relate the different themes with traits food media personae exhibit according to our participants, revealing that emerging adults' evaluation of their food media experience also transcends to the people they see there.

These themes coincide with various previous findings in media-related and food-related research, including studies that combine these topics. First, *hedonism* and its subthemes figure in such research. *Hedonism* is a known media gratification (Oliver and Bartsch 2010, Stafford, Stafford, and Schkade 2004, Oliver and Raney 2011, Bartsch and Viehoff 2010), and *entertainment* also emerges in social media uses and gratifications work (Alhabash and Ma 2017, Park and Goering 2016). The high occurrence of *sensory appeal* relates to taste as a nutritional predictor (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002) and food choice motivator (Onwezen et al. 2019, Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle 1995), and can be linked to the concept of food porn, which highlights the visual attractiveness of food in various media (Taylor and Keating 2018, McBride 2010, McDonnell 2016). Ngqangashe et al. (2021) list food porn as a motive for consuming food media among adolescents, alongside other *entertainment* motives. *Sensory appeal* can also be brought back to the prominent role our visual system plays in food selection, reinforcing the notion that “the first taste is always with the eyes” (van der Laan et al. 2011, 296).

Second, themes from this study involving *ability* also echo previous media and food research. *Convenience* resonates with previous social media uses and gratifications studies (Manasijević et al. 2016, Whiting and Williams 2013, Alhabash and Ma 2017). This

subtheme has also been cited as a determiner of nutritional behaviors (Ashton et al. 2016, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002), a food choice motivator (Onwezen et al. 2019, Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle 1995), and a predictor of food delivery app usage intentions (Ray et al. 2019). *Familiarity* has been shown to impact trustworthiness, evaluations and persuasion within media (Dunn 2019). It is also an influence on food choice (Ensaff et al. 2015, Pollard, Kirk, and Cade 2002) and a food choice motivator (Onwezen et al. 2019, Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle 1995). Unfamiliarity with food has been associated with negative feelings such as neophobia (Aldridge, Dovey, and Halford 2009), which in turn affects acceptance of foods (Henriques, King, and Meiselman 2009). *Cost* is another food choice motivator (Onwezen et al. 2019, Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle 1995) and influences nutritional habits (Ashton et al. 2016, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002).

Additionally, money and wealth in general fascinate media consumers (Hay and Muller 2012) and have been linked to ethicality considerations for media influencers (Leban et al. 2021). *Autonomy* is a main development during emerging adulthood (Nelson et al. 2007), which this age group exercises through their media use (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013). Moreover, young peoples' desire for *autonomy* motivates nutritional habits (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2000, Powell et al. 2021) and has been marked as an important consideration for food intake influences (Stok et al. 2016).

Lastly, *information* and subthemes reflect study outcomes concerning food and media as well. *Information*, *education*, and *health and fitness* are consistent with previous social media uses and gratifications research (Alhabash and Ma 2017, Park and Goering 2016, Manasijević et al. 2016, Rosenberg, Mano, and Mesch 2017). *Information* and *education* have been cited as prominent motivations to engage with virtual food communities (Jacobsen, Tudoran, and Lähteenmäki 2017) and with food media in general (Ngqangashe et al. 2021), alongside *health and fitness* motivations (Ngqangashe et al. 2021, Chung et al. 2017).

Education and health and fitness have been recognized as predictors of nutritional behavior and motivators or barriers for healthy eating among youth and emerging adults (Ashton et al. 2016, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002). *Health and fitness* are also shown to be highly discussed and depicted topics among emerging adult women online (Lynch 2010), and motivate food choice (Onwezen et al. 2019, Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle 1995). *Innovation* – wanting to learn or see new, unknown or trendy things – relates to media gratifications research (Bae 2018, Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher 2004) and has also been linked to health media motivations (Park and Goering 2016), as well as food media motivations (Ladhari et al. 2019).

The echoing of multiple themes from this study in both nutritional and media research seems to confirm the notion that food and media are heavily intertwined behavioral aspects (Lewis 2020), especially among emerging adults who spend a lot of time with various forms of media (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard 2013, Perrin 2015, Vandendriessche and De Marez 2019).

Our findings reveal that the food media landscape emerging adults find themselves in is marked by interpersonal influences and incidental exposure to food-related content. These two phenomena combine and juxtapose different perspectives of media consumption and influence, which makes these two findings important complexities within food media to consider in future research.

In our focus groups, participants mainly name people – media personae and personal contacts – when discussing food media and their influence, in comparison to brands and organizations. This recognition of different influential people in food media, that range from personal contacts to different kinds of media personae such as celebrity chefs and food influencers, suggests an opportunity for social influence. Social influence involves “a change in the belief, attitude, or behavior of a person (the target of influence), which results from the

action of another person (an influencing agent)” (Raven 2008, 1). These influencing agents have also been termed socialization agents (Barber 2013, Johnson Jorgensen and Ha 2019, Higby and Mascarenhas 1993), opinion leaders (Shan, Chen, and Lin 2020, Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020), knowledge-fixes (Barnes 2017), talking labels (Barnes 2017), and information networks (Hertzler and Frary 1995). Previous research on social influence regarding food has recognized both personal contacts (Higby and Mascarenhas 1993, Burke 1999, Hertzler and Bruce 2002, Chen and Antonelli 2020, Sobal and Bisogni 2009, Hertzler and Frary 1995) and food media personae (Barnes 2017, Abbots 2015, Lane and Fisher 2015, Johnston and Goodman 2015, Goodman and Jaworska 2020, Cifelli et al. 2020) as influencing agents, although to our knowledge scarce research has studied these two types of food influencing agents together (Caraher, Lange, and Dixon 2000, Jalali, Keshvari, and Soleymani 2020). Among emerging adults, influencing agents are known to shift, from family to friends or from family to media, for instance (Barber 2013, Caraher, Lange, and Dixon 2000). This convergence of two distinct types of influencing agents present in food media according to our findings, and their changing importance to emerging adults as they go through life changes and start to cook more (Barber 2013, Caraher, Lange, and Dixon 2000), complicate the food media landscape and its potential impact for emerging adults. It is not clear from our study, for instance, which person or group of people is valued more or has more influence. This is thus a first complexity we found in the food media experiences of emerging adults which requires further attention in future research.

The introduction to the current article alluded to the possibility of a more complex food media consumption process among emerging adults, one where selective and incidental media exposure and use can both occur. Our study confirms the findings by Ngqangashe et al. (2021) among adolescents, that food media exposure among emerging adults is also not merely active and selective, but that incidental exposure occurs as well. Ngqangashe et al.

(2021) also show that personal connections form an added incidental food media exposure mechanism by sharing, tagging, sending, etc. food media content for users to see and interact with (Ventura, Cavaliere, and Iannò 2021, Ngqangashe et al. 2021). Our present study also found that personal contacts seem to form part of this incidental exposure in food media among emerging adults. Moreover, we show how participants themselves contribute to others' incidental exposure to food media as well. The combination of emerging adults' both active and incidental exposure to food media, and the way personal contacts seem to contribute to incidental food media exposure, forms the second complexity in the food media experiences of emerging adults, thereby answering the second research question of this study.

As both media personae and personal contacts represent influential agents in the food media landscape for emerging adults, and this age group does not always seem to select their food media content deliberately and actively, food media consumption and impact may become increasingly complex to study. Food media for emerging adults, as indicated by previous work (Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020), thus seem very subtly intertwined with their everyday interactions with media and personal contacts. Moreover, the overlap of the current study's themes with existing food-related research may indicate that they represent attitudes that go beyond just food media, but also cross over to food in general. Thus, food and media are not only connected habits (Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020), but perhaps also share similar attitudes when it comes to food media. These arguments present a response to our third research question by showing that food media consumption indeed seems too subtle and too closely connected to broader food-related research findings, and therefore cannot be viewed as a separate factor impacting nutritional behavior, contrary to previous models (Folkvord et al. 2016, Stok et al. 2017, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French 2002). Studying food media in the future will also require several, sometimes contrasting, theories of

media use and influence simultaneously to capture its consumption, preferences, and impact in a more complete way.

In some areas of nutritional health, there have been calls to extend nutrition intervention targeting to emerging adults, who are at times underrepresented in these attempts (Abbot et al. 2012, Burke, Young, and Papadopoulos 2016), and who can be more difficult to reach for health interventions (Whatnall et al. 2019). In this regard, our study contributes to a better understanding of this target group through the exploration of their everyday attitudes to the food media content they consume on a daily basis. These attitudes may hint at more overall intrinsic attitudes or values about food and nutrition, which can potentially impact both how certain food media content is consumed (Worsley 2003) and how certain food choices are made (Fotopoulos, Krystallis, and Anastasios 2011). Therefore, further research and consideration of these attitudes is warranted. The current article also provides a relatively underexplored perspective of food and media being intertwined and proposes that food media specifically should be considered as an integral, intertwined factor in nutritional research. Lastly, we posit that more traditional perspectives of nutritional impact, media use and influences should be reconsidered to account for this relationship between food and media, as well as interpersonal influences and incidental food media consumption.

Although focus groups were adequate to give us a rich exploratory overview of food media aspects experienced and valued by emerging adults, the method in this study owed to a few limitations. The demographic differences mentioned within certain subthemes, for instance, can only be interpreted as indications of potential differences between these demographic groups due to the limited sample size ($N=37$). Future research should seek to confirm or negate these indications. The convenience sampling method posed another potential limitation, as we sought participants with a pre-existing interest in food and media, who therefore are more aware of this environment or spend more time with it than those

whose interest is not as high. This assumes some self-selection bias, implying that our findings may not reflect the general attitudes and perceptions of food media among the general emerging adult population in Belgium. Future quantitative studies among larger samples will shed light on the potential general applicability of the current results.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings from this study suggest some implications for future nutritional research involving media, as well as related policies and interventions. First, we have shown that food media should be considered as an integral influential factor by nutritional researchers and policymakers, instead of a separate influence. This is due to the inherent connection between food and media as habits (Leer and Povlsen 2016, Lewis 2020), along with the overlap between our findings and similar research in both media and nutrition. Involving food media and day-to-day experiential attitudes can thus contribute to the creation of successful food (media) campaigns for emerging adults.

Second, many themes in this study were raised simultaneously by participants. This implies that although the theme *hedonism* ranks higher than *information*, for instance, one should not necessarily receive sole attention above the other. Instead, nutritional and food media interventions for emerging adults should look to fulfill several of these aspects they find important, ideally through interdisciplinary creators who hold separate expertise in these themes to ensure the effectiveness of these interventions. Additionally, precisely which themes or subthemes are more important among emerging adults when engaging with food media is not clear from this study. This creates opportunities for future research to discover how they rank for a larger group of emerging adults, potentially among specific media platforms or food media personae.

Third, future food media research and practical implementations should acknowledge both explicit and implicit behaviors and attitudes. Our study has shown food media interactions to be rather complexly intertwined, subconscious, and influenced by social circles at times. Further research can explore this complex interplay of factors that underlie emerging adult food media consumption and attitudes. Our findings indicate certain demographic differences at play, which should also be analyzed in more depth in order to construct useful segmentations of emerging adults within food media. This will allow researchers and policymakers to target this age group more effectively in nutritional interventions, as they have been underrepresented in such attempts in the past.

Lastly, this study can be an initial step towards the creation of meaningful target segments of emerging adults within nutritional behavior that include their food media attitudes. The themes uncovered may reflect certain values this age group holds, which, when explored in more depth, might predict their preference for specific food media content, platforms, or related personae, for instance. It is clear from our findings that such segmentation attempts should include both explicit and implicit, underlying factors, as emerging adult interactions with food media can be subconscious and intricately linked with their social connections. A greater complexity is thus at play in emerging adult perceptions of food media that should be explored further.

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Declaration of interest

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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Tables

Table 1: Focus Group Compositions

Focus Group	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i> Male	<i>n</i> Female
Higher SES, mixed	6	3	3
Higher SES, male only	7	7	0
Higher SES, female only	6	0	6
Lower SES, mixed	4	1	3
Lower SES, male only	5	5	0
Lower SES, female only (1)	3	0	3
Lower SES, female only (2)	6	0	6
Total	37	16	21

Table 2: Semi-structured focus group interview questions

Photovoice probing question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose two photos that contain communication about food and nutrition and place them on the table. What do they show and why did you choose them?
Photovoice follow-up questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this something you view/read/use often? If so, why? Does anyone else [in the focus group] view/read/use/know this? Would anyone else [in the focus group] view/read/use this? Why or why not? Are there any other examples of media communication about food and nutrition you can think of, that you do not see among the photos? What are they? Of the photos and examples you all have mentioned here, which ones do you use? For which purpose(s)? Which ones do you not use at all? Why not? Would you consider using it in the future? Which photos or examples do you not know at all? Which of these examples in the photos did you search for actively? Why? Which of these photo examples did you come across coincidentally? Where/how was this? What was your impression? Does anyone else [in the focus group] recognize finding something coincidentally like this? Of all these examples, can you tell us which you view/read/use most and least? Why? Are the ones you view/read/use most the most enjoyable to use, or is there another reason?
Interview questions concerning food media influences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When it comes to communication concerning food, many different people share their experiences and opinions. Write down the people that inspire you in terms of food. This can be your personal contacts, media figures like celebrities, chefs or food bloggers, or organizations and brands. When you write these people down, also think of the people that might be on the photos you brought with you today.
Follow-up interview questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why do they inspire you? Why are they such a big inspiration to you? How do they inspire you? <i>Specific to personal contacts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who do you think once inspired them? Do you inspire them in the same or a different way? <i>Specific to media figures:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you know (of) them? What do you like about them? Do you simply know them or do you also follow them in a certain way/on a certain platform? Why or why not? Do you think these people all communicate in the same way? What about the way they communicate speaks to you the most? Would you incite you friends or family to follow them too? Why would you recommend these people? How would you convince your friends/family members to follow them? Do you know any other media figures/influencers or food bloggers/food guru's/celebrities/TV chefs we haven't discussed yet?

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- Are there any media figures, influencers, TV chefs, food guru's, you really dislike? Can you explain why? Can you give them advice on how to do better? Do they communicate differently?
 - If you would have to name one of the media figures we discussed as the person that inspires you most, who would it be?
 - *Specific to brands and organizations:*
 - Are there any other organizations or brands that want to teach us something about food, cooking, or eating? Who? What do you know about them? How do they do this?
 - What is your opinion of all these people/media figures/brands/organizations sharing messages about food, cooking, and eating?
 - Do you think these messages about food, cooking, and eating are influential? Who are they most influential to according to you?
 - Of everyone and everything we talked about today, who is the best person, media figure, organization, or brand to teach people about recipes and cooking?
 - Of everyone and everything we talked about today, who is the best person, media figure, organization, or brand to teach people about food advice?
 - Of everyone and everything we talked about today, who is the best person, media figure, organization, or brand to teach people about weight loss?
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Note. In the focus groups where photovoice was omitted, participants were asked to name top-of-mind food media messages, defined as “any media message about food or nutrition, excluding traditional advertisements and health campaigns”.

Table 3: Focus Group Participant Demographics (N=37)

Characteristics	n (%)
Nationality	
Belgian	37 (100)
Gender	
Male	16 (43)
Female	21 (57)
SES	
Lower	18 (49)
Higher	19 (51)
Living Situation	
With parents	23 (62)
Fully independent	8 (22)
Independent during the week	6 (16)
Occupational status	
Student	26 (70)
With part-time job	14 (38)
Without part-time job	12 (32)
Employed	7 (19)
Full-time	4 (11)
More than half-time	3 (8)
Unemployed	3 (8)
Permanently incapacitated for work	1 (3)

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Table 4: Participant Food-Related Habit Frequencies (N=37), n(%)

Food-Related Habit	Frequency							
	Never	A Few Times a Year	Once a Month	A Few Times a Month	Once a Week	A Few Times a Week	Almost Daily	Daily
Cooking	1 (3)	2 (5)	11 (30)	2 (5)	.	12 (32)	7 (19)	2 (5)
Grocery shopping	2 (5)	2 (5)	3 (8)	7 (19)	10 (27)	11 (30)	2 (5)	.
Eat freshly prepared meals	.	.	1 (3)	.	3 (8)	6 (16)	21 (57)	6 (16)
Eat ready-made meals	.	1 (3)	6 (16)	11 (30)	15 (41)	3 (8)	1 (3)	.
Eat fast food and take out	.	3 (8)	11 (30)	11 (30)	11 (30)	.	.	1 (3)
Eat fruit and vegetables	12 (32)	12 (32)	13 (35)

Table 5: Food Media Themes and Subthemes Emerging from the Focus Group Interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Description
<u>Hedonism</u>	Entertainment	(Needs to be) a source of enjoyment, relaxation or humor. Reflected in food media personae through importance given to their charisma, extravagance or goofiness.
	Sensory Appeal	(Needs to be) aesthetically attractive. Relates to food itself by looking or being tasty, or well-presented, and to personae in their external appeal (e.g. their looks, voice).
<u>Ability</u>	Convenience	(Needs to be) presented comprehensibly and straightforwardly (by personae). Food media content is easy to find and widely accessible, and recipes are quick and easy with few, simple, and easy-to-find ingredients.
	Familiarity	(Needs to be) familiar or known. (Necessarily) strikes a similarity with their preferences or accustomed surroundings. Materializes in a preference for more traditional food media they know or have tried, or that is in their own language. Reflected in personae through their familiar/familial presence.
	Cost*	(Needs to be) financially advantageous or responsible. Reflected in ingredients, the medium itself, or persona behavior.
	Autonomy*	Needs to respect personal creativity, skills, and dietary behaviors. Expressed through a dislike towards authoritarian statements or rules and a disinterest in (steps within) food media content in favor of their own imagination. In contrast to other themes, this theme is mentioned solely from a negative perspective.
<u>Information</u>	Education	(Necessarily) teaches something or presents (new) knowledge on a food-related topic. Credible expertise is also valued on the part of food media personae.
	Health & Fitness	(Necessarily) helps them in their various goals to become healthier or fit. Food media are a tool for achievement and evaluation of their behavior in relation to these goals.
	Innovation*	(Necessarily) presents new and uncommon food-related content. Emerges through preferences for culturally different or novel methods, upcoming trends, and a dislike towards overly traditional content or personae.

Note. Themes and respective subthemes are ordered according to the amount of participants that discuss them, from discussed by most participants to least participants overall (N=37).

* Subthemes mentioned by less than half of all participants, but still emerged consistently across focus groups with different demographic characteristics.