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Cooking the Nation: Popular Culinary Vlogging Performances and Food's Political Aftertaste on Kenyan Digital Platforms



A Kenyan food vlogger preparing a meal.
Image AI generated by James Ogone
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In Kenya, performative culinary vlogging has emerged as a distinct sub-genre of food blogging on social media platforms. The practice involves popular amateur cooks recording and posting videos of themselves preparing dishes. In terms of form, the videos radically depart from the simple instructional nature of standard food vlogs and venture into the domains of artistic performance. This paper interrogates how Kenyan popular chefs creatively forge a discursive digital space by exploiting the affordances of the platform environments. In this “discursive foodspace” (Makela 2016), mundane food recipes are transformed into spectacular performances. It would be interesting to unveil how the performer-audience engagements on the platforms yield symbolic gestures that eventually give food new contextual meanings. In addition, the paper explores the intrigues of cultural politics that performative culinary vlogging engages in on Kenyan social media. This involves making sense of the micropolitics within the Kenyan society that play out in the cultural understandings of food, its preparation, and consumption. The culinary activities and utterances of the popular chefs often trigger vibrant online discourses that locate food at the core of the nation's politics of socio-cultural differentiation. Further, the paper seeks to investigate how digital culinary vlogging is implicated in contemporary reform politics in Kenya. As witnessed in the Gen Z protests in Kenya in 2024, the nation's digitally woke youth have built a reputation for their online expression of political protest. It would be scholarly rewarding to read the culinary activities and utterances of the popular chefs as well as the comments of their audiences within the scope of contemporary protest politics in Kenya. To put into perspective the dynamics of food discourse in the digital culinary vlogging in Kenya, I adopt the notion of gastropolitics (Appadurai, 1981; DeSoucey, 2016). This will enable a nuanced framing of symbolic politics, contentions, and cultural meanings that characterize the performances of digital culinary vlogging culture in Kenya.

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