



DietWise
SYSTEMIC CHANGES | EMPOWERED CITIZENS

Deliverable D2.3

Mapping relevant influencers by describing their
needs, attitudes, and practices

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
AI	Artificial Intelligence
APC	Author Processing Charges
CA	Coordination Action / Consortium Agreement
CF	Co-Funded Partnership
CfP	Call for Proposal
D&C	Dissemination and Communication
DECP	Dissemination, Exploitation and Communication Plan
DoA	Description of Action
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
F2F	Face-to-Face
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HEU	Horizon Europe
HQ	Headquarter
IO	International Organization
JRC	Joint Research Centre
KM	Knowledge Management
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LFI	Lead Financial Institution
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
NGO's	Non-Governmental Organizations
RCA	Responsible Cooking Alliance
SMAs	Social Media Accounts
WP	Work Programme
WP#	WP followed by a single digit number referring to a specific Work Package

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1. Executive summary

The interviews conducted with influencers and platforms in Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania have highlighted shared values, key themes, and specific cultural insights essential for developing effective nutrition guidelines, tools, and strategies. Across all countries, authenticity, practical advice, and flexibility in dietary communication are strongly emphasised, favouring realistic, user-centred, and evidence-based messaging over rigid approaches.

Influencers stress the significance of promoting health and sustainability, balanced by a realistic allowance for comfort and traditional foods. Notably, the prevalent intention-behaviour gap, in which consumers wish to eat healthier but do not due to barriers such as cost, taste, and convenience - is recognised as a critical obstacle.

Distinct national nuances also emerged. In Belgium, resistance to digital tools like apps, especially among the older population, underscores the need for inclusive and intuitive design alternatives. Greek influencers express strong preferences for collaborations aligning with their values and mission, particularly motivated by opportunities to counter misinformation with credible, science-based guidance. Lithuanian influencers echo similar sentiments, highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive, simple, and inclusive communication strategies.

Furthermore, larger platforms confront technical and operational limitations when integrating nutritional information, indicating a need for feasible, resourceful solutions that uphold content integrity.

Thus, future strategies should emphasise empowering approaches for realistic dietary changes, avoiding overly simplistic or guilt-inducing messages. Trust-building, scientific credibility, cultural sensitivity, affordability, and accessibility remain pivotal considerations, particularly for lower-income groups, ensuring nutrition advice is both practical and sustainable.

2. Introduction

2.1 Project background

The DietWise project seeks to advance systemic and inclusive approaches to promoting healthy and sustainable food consumption. In today's complex digital environment, consumers are constantly exposed to a vast array of food-related information, which is often mediated by online influencers. Food influencers have significant power to shape dietary choices and food-related attitudes, particularly among younger audiences and those active on social media. Understanding and leveraging this influence in a responsible, evidence-based manner is critical to the success of nutrition communication strategies.

Within this context, mapping and engaging influencers is considered a strategically important activity. Influencers are not only powerful content creators but also trusted intermediaries between public messages and personal choices. Identifying the most relevant actors is crucial to understanding their key drivers and beliefs, as well as their alignment with national nutrition guidelines. This is particularly relevant for DietWise, which aims to create tools and environments that support citizens in making better food choices while promoting integrity and transparency in food communication.

2.2 Purpose of the report

This report, Deliverable D2.3 'Mapping relevant influencers by describing their needs, attitudes, and practices', is intended to contribute to this aim. Its primary purpose is to explore the key drivers, beliefs, and potential for alignment between influencer-generated content and established dietary guidelines. Through in-depth qualitative research, we aim (i) to improve understanding of the underlying motivating factors for influencers, (ii) identify features of additional tools and apps that may potentially boost and strengthen their business case and (iii) investigate how nutrition guidelines can provide added value to their followers.

2.3 Scope of research

The scope of this research included the three DietWise pilot countries, namely Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania. A qualitative approach was adopted, relying on in-depth interviews with influencers in each national context. This methodology enabled the project partners to capture rich, nuanced perspectives and to uncover cross-cultural similarities and divergences. Insights from this report will inform later phases of the project, particularly the development of integrity principles and communication guidelines that are both effective and ethically grounded.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology employed in the study, which utilised qualitative, semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights. The participant selection criteria, their demographics, the number of interviews conducted per country, and the processes followed for data collection and analysis are presented in detail. Additionally, it reflects on key challenges encountered and lessons learned during the research process, providing a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach.

To gain deeper insights, we conducted in-depth interviews with key influencers in the three pilot countries: Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to guide the process and ensure consistency with the objectives of the interviews. The interviews began with background information about the project and outlined its purpose. The guide included a series of questions designed to explore the influencers' underlying motivations, beliefs, and needs regarding healthy and sustainable recipes, as well as their use of IT tools and apps and their desired features and functionalities. Additionally, the interview addressed the influencers' interest in joining the project's Responsible Cooking Alliance (RCA), a voluntary initiative that guides influencers in aligning their recipes with nutrition guidelines and promoting sustainable practices.

The interview guide was drafted in English, with the option for partner countries to translate it to their national languages. The task leader prepared the initial draft, which was reviewed and refined after feedback from all project partners. The interview guide is provided as Annex 1 of this document.

To support data collection, the task coordinator also created a standardised interview summary template, which partners used to compile responses. The summary template is also included in this document as Annex 2.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted, including 5 in Belgium, 4 in Greece and 5 in Lithuania.

To select relevant interviewees, the Belgian partner, VIGL, adopted a targeted approach, focusing on influencers particularly relevant to the Flemish context. They began by reaching out to well-known influencers with a strong presence in Flanders and a large social media following. Additionally, they included popular recipe platforms, recognising their significant influence on public food choices. VIGL also prioritised influencers already engaged with health and sustainability topics. In some cases, existing connections between VIGL and the influencers facilitated the outreach. This combination of criteria proved effective, resulting in successful engagement with several influencers who provided valuable insights during the interviews.

The Greek partner, IHU, carried out desk-based research to identify food bloggers, dietitians, and celebrity chefs active on social media platforms. Their primary focus was on Instagram metrics, with occasional consideration of TikTok. Specifically, for dietitian content creators, they also leveraged their personal and professional networks. All identified creators were contacted via email and received a brief outlining the purpose of the interview, their expected role, and an overview of the project. IHU reached out to both high-profile creators (with over 100,000 followers) and mid-size creators (10,000–100,000 followers). From the high-profile group, they received one response and conducted one interview. Engagement was stronger among the mid-size creators, with responses from 4 out of 5 and interviews conducted with 3 of them.

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The Lithuanian partner, PHB, selected influencers through a combination of personal networks and desk-based research. Initially, they approached larger influencers but shifted their focus to smaller ones after finding that the bigger profiles were not interested in participating. This change in strategy proved successful. PHB contacted influencers with a short and clear message designed to capture their attention quickly. To reduce the effort required from the participants, they opted to conduct the interviews via email rather than organising in-person or online meetings.

Project partners identified participant recruitment as the main challenge during the interview process. Engaging potential participants proved difficult, and in many cases, influencers did not respond to the outreach emails. However, once participants were successfully recruited, the overall experience was very positive. Those who agreed to take part were highly responsive and enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and insights. Many were notably open during the interviews, resulting in rich and engaging conversations. No significant difficulties were encountered during the interviews themselves.

The project partners used the interview guide provided by the task leader (SAFE) to conduct the interviews and recorded responses using the standardised interview summary template. Once all interview reports were completed and translated to English, SAFE compiled the key findings and conducted a comparative analysis of the collected responses. The main insights are presented in the section below.

4. Key findings

4.1 Background and general motivation

This section explores insights gathered from interviews with various influencers, including nutritionists, lifestyle bloggers, and chefs, focusing on their content types and audience demographics. It highlights key motivational drivers such as personal passion for health and sustainability, audience engagement, brand collaboration opportunities, and the pursuit of credibility and leadership in the sector. Additionally, it examines success metrics used to measure engagement and impact, along with trending themes like plant-based diets, fitness, allergen-free options, and viral recipes, emphasizing the role of health and sustainability in shaping influencer strategies.

The interviews conducted in Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania covered several types of influencers: nutritionists, chefs and entrepreneurs, public-private organisations, established food content creators, photographers, and authors, recipe platforms, registered dieticians, and food bloggers. Their content type mostly involves easy, accessible, and well-tested food content and recipes. Organisations and platforms extend their focus to newsletters and campaigns, while established authors and entrepreneurs focus on healthy eating and lifestyle. Their content is often associated with emotional well-being and the idea of a balanced approach to healthy eating. The audience demographic is quite diverse depending on each case, but all interviewed influencers target people seeking better health through food - a pattern that may reflect a selection bias in our sample, as not all influencers in the broader population necessarily share this focus. Some influencers in Belgium target specific people experiencing digestive issues or low energy, or those appreciating "pure Belgian" accessible food content. Almost all the interviewed Greek and Lithuanian influencers target young mothers or families wanting to improve cooking habits for their kids. They have a stronger presence among the women demographics, especially those aged 30-50, and they increasingly recognise that younger demographics are attracted by viral content. Larger food organisations target citizens without any subgroup focus. Notably, one Lithuanian influencer extends their target audience specifically to students, office workers, and even foreigners looking to improve their knowledge of local food.

Besides a personal passion for food, home-cooking, health, and sustainability, many interviewed influencers across the three countries reported being motivated by personal experiences, deep-rooted connections to food, and wanting to inspire their followers to achieve positive change. They often emphasise these drivers over financial gain and follower increase, especially in Belgium. Some influencers mention specific strong personal beliefs as motivators, such as the preference for plant-based diet or wanting to reduce the leftovers waste. They also overwhelmingly prefer long-term brand collaborations that align with their values and personal beliefs, being cautious about overly commercial messaging and viral 'extreme' or 'rigid' trends. Additional themes include respecting the authenticity that their followers demand and embracing a sense of social responsibility.

Consequently, many of the interviewed influencers prioritise perceived positive impact and followers' engagement as success metrics. These can be measured through video completion rates, number of views, comments, collaborations, website click-throughs, use of discount codes, and growth in number of followers. Many actively consider and prioritise follower feedback and adapt their engagement strategy

accordingly. Larger organisations measure success via weekly analytics: pageviews, time spent on website, number of users, and engagement on social media platforms. Notably, while likes and reach are mentioned to measure their success, several influencers always clarify that genuine follower engagement and feedback matter more to their personal definition of success. In this regard, some influencers note that likes are not necessarily aligned or consistent with the attracted audience and their actual engagement, showcasing the preference for increasing their reach as a more valuable metrics. While actively using health and sustainability for their engagement strategies, most influencers prefer flexibility, arguing for a balanced diet that includes both healthy and comforting recipes. Overall, all interviewed influencers oppose a rigid, “always-healthy” eating, associating it with reduced engagement and pushback from their followers. Across all three countries, they overwhelmingly emphasise positive, non-judgemental communication as essential to maintaining their reach, inspiring healthier choices, and achieving a positive long-term impact. A clear cross-cutting trend involves practical health messaging centred around simplicity, clear communication, and flexibility. Additionally, there is a significant focus on local, seasonal, and plant-based choices in their perception of health and sustainability, but without removing traditional foods. Notably, one Greek influencer stresses the crucial need for authenticity, lamenting the high number of ‘perfect dishes’ or ‘diet plans’ circulating online and causing stressful experiences to citizens.

4.2 Beliefs and needs regarding healthy and sustainable nutrition

This section explores the awareness, promotion, and public perception of healthy and sustainable recipes, alongside the key criteria used to determine their health and environmental impact. By examining these factors, we aim to highlight the intersection of nutrition and sustainability, providing insights into how culinary practices can align with both personal well-being and planetary health.

Across the three countries, health and sustainability result at the core of the work of most of the interviewed influencers. Compared to sustainability, health is more often considered the ‘baseline’, while sustainability is being increasingly integrated into their approach. Even if a few influencers do not consider them as ‘primary parameters’, they still recognise their importance, and emphasise related characteristics of the recipe itself, such as nutritional value and ingredients. A common view of influencers is that the promotion of healthy and sustainable recipes increases their credibility and leads to positive responses and feedback from their audiences. However, as anticipated in the previous section, influencers overwhelmingly seek balance, promoting both healthy meals and traditional comfort foods. They tend to firmly reject rigid, one-size-fits-all messaging, even if this messaging prioritises healthy and sustainable nutrition. Especially if they place high importance on improving credibility, they criticise and avoid hype diets and short-lived trends.

The most important criteria they adopt for determining health and sustainability are the presence of fresh, whole ingredients (especially fruits and vegetables) with a special emphasis on seasonality. Other criteria include limited refined carbs, moderate meat intake, and healthy fats. Several influencers already consider the available nutrition guidelines for their recipes (e.g., the Belgian food triangle). However, one influencer in Belgium is highly critical of these simplified nutrition tools, arguing that they are often too vague to be adopted for every single recipe, promoting a black-and-white messaging that does not reflect the reality of most people. They emphasise that one recipe does not make a person (un)healthy, reflecting the general trend for a balanced diet that still allows for traditional comfort foods in moderation. In this regard, they implement clear plate-building guidelines (e.g., half the plate for vegetables...) without calorie counting to assess health and sustainability. Notably, some influencers mention the recipe’s easiness and

deliciousness as additional criteria, with some Lithuanian influencers emphasising the nutrient-dense aspect, meaning ingredients that are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, fibre, and protein. The quantity and quality of these ingredients are emphasised, expressing an avoidance of excessive sugar, fat, and harmful additives. Interestingly, one Lithuanian influencer emphasised that the recipe's foundation in evidence-based information significantly increased their confidence in its health benefits - both for themselves and for their followers.

4.3 Knowledge and use of nutrition guidelines

This section explores creators' awareness of national nutrition guidelines, including the sources they use, as well as their perceptions and willingness to align content with these recommendations. It also examines potential barriers and misconceptions, such as concerns about audience acceptance, conflicts with popular trends, or challenges related to the clarity and accessibility of the guidelines themselves.

Among the interviewed influencers in the three countries, most are at least aware of national nutrition guidelines, even if they might not implement them directly. They use a variety of evidence-based sources, such as scientific literature and experts (e.g. registered dietitians), scientific and peer-reviewed journals, and databases (e.g. PubMed, GoogleScholar, EBSCO). The focus on evidence-based sources and relevant alignment is most striking among the interviewed Belgian influencers who reference and seem to trust the Belgian/Flemish official dietary guidelines, as well as other external sources such as the Superior Health Council and Gezond Leven, particularly for the principles of healthy nutrition, often treating them as a reference point. A few of the interviewed Belgian influencers have reported no longer relying on external sources due to their own expertise acquired over the years. On the other hand, some of those interviewed in Greece and Lithuania report using online accounts (e.g., dietitians on social media) or the internet more broadly as their trusted sources for nutrition information. Interestingly, one Greek influencer explicitly stated that beyond established, evidence-based sources (e.g., doctors, biologists), they also turn to what they described as "empirical" experts - self-proclaimed individuals with years of personal engagement in health and nutrition. Notably, this influencer was unfamiliar with the official national food-based dietary guidelines, initially assuming that the Mediterranean Diet itself served as such a guideline. They also expressed a willingness to incorporate nutritional recommendations into their recipes, but only if those guidelines aligned with their personal beliefs.

Based on the trends already identified in the previous sections, it appears evident from the interviews that the influencers consider nutrition guidelines mostly useful, relevant, and evidence-backed, but not without some concerns or reservations that might also relate to their personal beliefs. For instance, one Belgian influencer expressed scepticism about simplified tools like the Belgian food triangle, preferring a more nuanced, balanced, and flexible approach. This is clearly dominant across the three countries. More generally, influencers in all three countries showcase openness and willingness to align their content with nutrition guidelines, as long as the advice and communication are non-prescriptive. Most want these guidelines to be integrated naturally and not be perceived as "preachy" by their audiences. Even those already integrating guidelines into their content emphasise the need to remain approachable, realistic, and inclusive for all, translated and communicated through clear and simplified "everyday language". As already mentioned, a few influencers across the three countries reiterated that they would be open to adopting them only if they deemed them "close to their own beliefs". Since they did not elaborate extensively on this point, it can be argued that they would likely prioritise what currently appeals and is received positively by

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their audience, even if it (partly) contradicts the official guidelines. This is an important point to take into account as we plan the next phases of the project.

There are several barriers and misconceptions identified by the interviewed influencers in the three countries. A crucial challenge is the presence of public confusion about who is truly knowledgeable. The online context of media sensationalism and lack of “verified qualifications” enables misinformation. Even if some influencers may partake in this, this context damages the qualified ones who genuinely make a positive impact, including by spreading knowledge and use of official nutrition guidelines. Additionally, as several influencers explicitly mentioned the presence of fresh, seasonal ingredients as a crucial criterion for healthy and sustainable nutrition, they pointed out their lack of accessibility and affordability as two major challenges, especially for low-income audiences. This is a major gap between nutrition advice and what their audience needs. Another reason why several influencers prioritise consistent messaging and showcase high support for a balanced, realistic, and authentic diet lies in their competition with those influencers who instead promote hype-based diets that are not sustainable long term. Some influencers are known to jump on every possible food trend that arises, contributing to conflicting dietary trends (e.g., raw, keto) that cause even more confusion among citizens.

A crucial barrier reported by the influencers is the intention-behaviour gap. Even if many consumers showcase the right intentions and want to eat healthier, this does not always reflect their behaviour. Three factors remain critical in driving consumer behaviour: convenience, cost, and taste. This important barrier leads some influencers to adopt a “small win-win” approach, which implies that they focus on providing recipes that remain tasty but more balanced. Another example would be focusing on healthier desserts, especially since many audiences still demand traditional comfort foods. This approach simultaneously tackles the prevailing misconception that healthy meals are complex, impractical for the average person, or that healthy recipes have a higher cost.

Additional challenges further complicate the situation. Some interviewed influencers emphasised hard audience beliefs, arguing that sometimes people are simply not interested in change or improvement. This type of beliefs can amplify other common barriers and misconceptions, such as lack of self-motivation and simple ingredient misconception, such as the fact that many consumers still think of processed prepackaged bread as a healthy option, despite it being an ultra-processed food. It is imperative to recognise that some users consider a high adherence to a plant-based diet highly restrictive or forced, which is why influencers overwhelmingly support a balanced approach instead. This challenge may vary across different social media platforms, as some influencers have reported distinct behaviours between Instagram and TikTok users.

Especially in recognition of these hard audience beliefs, most influencers do not want to place the blame on the people. Instead, they often blame the lack of a unified and clear narrative that would effectively address this prevailing confusion. The current abundance and contradiction of information should be addressed through short, clear, simplified language inclusive for all. To promote nutrition guidelines, a crucial gap exists between sharing informative advice and keeping the content light, creative, and visually engaging. This is worsened by the fact that influencers often oversimplify nutrition, as can be seen in the promotion of certain products or supplements, which are sometimes praised as “quick fixes” despite a lack of strong scientific evidence to support these claims. In this regard, many emphasise that healthy eating should not become an additional source of stress, to avoid negative psychological consequences and even further misconceptions. This is yet another reason for their overwhelming support of balanced dietary advice that recognises the reality and struggles of daily practice, avoiding restrictions. One Lithuanian influencer emphasised the importance of consistency, arguing that many substitutes marketed as “healthier” food choices are not necessarily so, giving the example of vegan milk and reiterating that they

damage people's understanding of what healthy nutrition is. In their opinion, people still lack the understanding that they can eat everything and still be healthy by following a balanced diet.

4.4 Needs and expectations related to tools and apps

This section explores the current use of nutrition-related digital tools, desired features such as AI-powered suggestions, content customisation, verified nutritional data, and audience analytics, as well as the perceived value of the RecipeWatch app and its potential business benefits. These include enhancing business cases, boosting credibility, improving audience engagement, and enabling customisation for diverse dietary needs, providing a comprehensive understanding of how innovative digital solutions can transform nutritional guidance and user experience.

The influencers interviewed across the three countries reported diverse experiences in relation to the use of nutrition-related digital tools or apps. Some of them are aware of different existing health apps, especially well-established food tracking or calorie-counting apps (e.g. "MyFitnessPal"), which they use both personally and professionally. Many influencers report that apps are popular mostly among younger audiences, thus prompting their use only if they target a younger audience. A few well-established influencers emphasised that a lot of their older followers still prefer physical cookbooks. Generally, their use of digital tools is somewhat limited, especially in cases where they have developed their own app through their publisher. This potential conflict of interest is directly relevant to the development of the RecipeWatch app and must be considered. Furthermore, the majority of influencers across the three countries reported either no or limited particular use of digital tools, especially in Greece and Lithuania. Many emphasised that they have felt no particular need to use digital tools in their experience, with a few open to learn as long as their audiences do not feel intimidated or judged. Specifically, recipe platforms may consult experts but are hesitant to implement any digital tools due to integration challenges with their large-scale recipe database.

Influencers identified several features they would like to see in future digital tools, including more science-based content supported by links to original, high-quality sources. They emphasised the importance of practicality and alignment with their personal philosophy over hyped content or commercial trends. In this context, a built-in fact-checking function to debunk nutrition myths was seen as particularly valuable. Many also highlighted the benefit of integrating recipe suggestions with automated grocery lists, making it easy for users to know exactly what to purchase in the supermarket for a given recipe. An additional added value would be providing suggestions for cooking meals with leftovers, spreading awareness of food waste and contributing to its reduction. Additional desirable features include weekly meal planning, an editable shopping list, adjustable servings based on the amount of people for a dish, the option to tick off purchased items in real-time, an inventory overview of present items in the pantry. However, these features are already present in many existing apps, including those developed by influencers' publishers. An interesting addition would be to include approximate prices or links to supermarkets in the weekly meal planning shopping lists. A voucher system with supermarkets could be implemented to incentivise the use of these tools. Others pointed out allergy and intolerance indicators (e.g., gluten, lactose) per recipe, personalised meal plans based on calorie needs and nutrition guideline-based suggestions, including tips for ingredient substitutions.

From a technical perspective, a key desirable feature would be an interface that is user-friendly, accurate, and visually appealing. Influencers also emphasised the importance of including real photos of the final

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dish, detailed preparation steps, and a clear list of ingredients. For some, these would be particularly compelling features, especially if enhanced with precise measurements in grams (rather than approximate portion sizes) and step-by-step guidance. This level of detail would be beneficial for all users, particularly those who may not be familiar with essential actions, such as preheating the oven, before starting a recipe. One Greek influencer stressed the need to consider features that combine information with practicality and convenience, while avoiding the use of “guilt-tripping messages” such as “high sodium!” or “high saturated fat!” alerts. They argue that most people lack the necessary knowledge to fully understand these messages and suggest that a more effective approach would involve enabling users to quickly scan ingredients and receive smart alternatives or usage suggestions, prioritising simplicity and a user-friendly communication style. AI integration would be a useful and recognised addition that can help implement these potential features effectively while cross-checking them with expert-verified nutrition facts. AI-powered content suggestions may be combined with audience engagement analytics and educational content to support the influencers’ objectives. Particularly interesting ideas in this regard include recipe generation based on available ingredients at home, recipe ideas centred around a specific ingredient, seasonal eating guidance based on the users’ region, local shopping maps, photo-based recipe suggestions and even a personal meal library with customised cooking tips and healthier choices/suggestions.

As previously mentioned, a primary consideration on for the RecipeWatch app is the potential conflict of interest between promoting RecipeWatch and the existing apps already developed by the influencers’ own teams. Notably, one Belgian influencer expressed concern about institutions aiming to achieve the same outcomes as influencers, arguing that this approach places them in direct competition, particularly when developing similar tools, such as apps. This highlights a critical consideration for refining our strategies to engage with influencers effectively. Nonetheless, from a hypothetical standpoint, even influencers who share this view acknowledge that a potential business advantage of using the tool lies in the opportunity to reach a broader audience by joining forces. Furthermore, in line with previous identified insights, most of the interviewed influencers expressed interest in promoting RecipeWatch if the tool is presented in an inspiring, supportive way, without being preachy or too instructive. An example would be to suggest adding more vegetables instead of simply suggesting to remove meat (positive reinforcement). Many see various benefits from using these tools, especially improved credibility, fostering audience trust, and receiving practical assistance in recipe development for retail or events. Nonetheless, it is imperative to mention that this expressed support remains a conditional interest, as it would mostly depend on how the (ingredient) suggestions are communicated – influencers are overwhelmingly cautious of any form of “corrective tone” toward their audience. Broader outreach and the potential to gain additional public trust emerge as the most compelling incentives for engaging influencers. However, the content must align with their individual values and missions - which can vary widely - adding complexity to the overall engagement strategy. In this context, a prudent approach would be to avoid imposing rigid standards in the development of the digital tools wherever feasible. On the other hand, recipe platforms already integrating official nutrition guidelines in their content emerge as particularly interested in promoting RecipeWatch and would even consider paying for its integration if the tool meets quality standards and adds value. It would be seen as an asset in scaling their extensive recipe database. Additionally, most influencers from Greece and Lithuania may be open to promoting the app, provided that user simplicity and clarity are prioritised. They would first want to explore the app themselves and gain a deeper understanding to assess whether it aligns with their personal values and mission. Crucially, they would also consider whether the app could enhance audience engagement and strengthen their brand’s image as responsible, trustworthy, and modern, particularly in appealing to younger audiences.

4.5 Readiness to participate in initiatives

This section explores the key factors influencing participation in initiatives like the RCA, including incentives such as financial benefits, personal beliefs, networking opportunities, and recognition, as well as potential concerns like time commitment that may deter engagement. By examining both the motivating drivers and hesitations, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of what attracts or discourages individuals from joining such programs.

Overall, all interviewed influencers expressed at least some openness to participating in initiatives, although the extent of their interest varies depending on a number of key factors. Across the three countries, the most common considerations include alignment with personal values, a sense of authenticity, respect for their individual experience, and a collaborative rather than competitive approach. A consistent theme across interviews is that financial incentives are generally seen as secondary. Influencers prioritise long-term partnerships that reflect shared values over one-off collaborations. These repeated insights make it clear that our engagement strategy should focus on respectful, equal partnerships that bring together the influencer's reach and the institution's knowledge.

The most attractive elements of the proposed collaboration are those that offer inspiration through practical action and guidance that is integrated and supportive, rather than imposed. It is important that the content aligns with each influencer's work and their understanding of what their audience needs or expects. In this context, communication should be transparent and genuine, highlighting shared credibility, a contribution to public health, and the potential for lasting, meaningful change in people's lifestyles. For recipe platforms, a key incentive lies in technical feasibility. As mentioned earlier, they are more likely to participate if they are confident that integration with their existing systems will be simple and secure. Influencers are particularly mindful of protecting their authenticity and credibility. The interviews made it clear that they are only willing to collaborate if the project respects their beliefs and values. Their own experience and personal story matter deeply to them, and many are wary of feeling dismissed or undervalued by institutions, especially when there is a perception of top-down messaging.

Other meaningful incentives for joining the RCA include personal interest, opportunities to build their networks, and connections with stakeholders who share their goals and can help strengthen their credibility. Relevance to their content, along with increased visibility and audience engagement, are also natural incentives that should be used strategically. While some influencers raised concerns about being adequately compensated for their time, effort, and financial investment, the key factors mentioned earlier remain the most important motivators when used appropriately. The challenge lies in the diversity and complexity of influencers' personal goals, beliefs, and values. As noted, one of the main concerns is the sense of competition with institutions. One Belgian influencer, for example, expressed distrust towards institutions that, in their view, attempt to replicate the success of influencers without involving them in a meaningful way. This is clearly a sensitive issue, and it is essential to approach influencers as equal partners and avoid creating a sense of rivalry. That same influencer also criticised research funding that is used to prove what they feel are "obvious facts", such as the already visible impact of influencers on people's lives.

Interest in the RCA was evident among influencers in all three countries, though many expressed the need to first evaluate potential conflicts of interest. They want the chance to explore the content once it is finalised and assess whether it fits with their own positioning. Several said they are open to observing how the project develops and to identifying synergies with DietWise's mission, but they also stressed the need to clearly define their role before committing. Many influencers said they would be more willing to collaborate with initiatives that already have an established platform, and that they place strong

importance on messaging that is clear, nuanced, and credible. Above all, they do not want to be seen as amateurs. Instead, they want to be recognised as partners who can contribute reach, insight, and expertise.

Most influencers support the idea of forming a dedicated network grounded in scientific evidence, which they believe is exactly what people need – not more noise or confusion, but trustworthy guidance from relatable voices.

Another widespread concern is making sure that any digital tools are actionable, accessible, and supportive rather than judgemental. Influencers are keen to avoid sounding preachy or prescriptive to their audiences. They want to motivate and inspire, not correct, and so they consistently advocate for a positive tone when sharing recommendations. Some influencers expressed concern over overly rigid criteria in digital tools, arguing that one recipe should not define a person's lifestyle. Instead, the focus should be on overall dietary patterns. They also want to make sure that the tone and features of any tool do not conflict with their content or alienate their audiences. A few also mentioned worries about limitations on creativity.

Throughout the interviews, many influencers returned to the importance of authenticity. They want to ensure that their involvement does not feel like just another showcase project with little real-world impact or a lack of scientific grounding.

For recipe platforms, a specific concern is the scalability of their recipe databases. They are willing to participate, but only if the tools can be integrated smoothly and support the size and complexity of their existing systems.

5. Cross-country comparison of key trends and variations

The key findings from the influencer interviews highlight notable common trends across Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania, along with some important country-specific variations.

In Belgium, interviewed influencers and platforms tend to prioritise authenticity, health, and sustainability in their content. Their focus is on delivering practical, accessible, and evidence-based recipes, often drawing on themes rooted in Flemish food culture and incorporating seasonal and plant-based ingredients. While health and sustainability remain central concerns, there is also an emphasis on balance – promoting both nutritious meals and traditional comfort foods. A clear shift is evident away from rigid, one-size-fits-all messaging, with a preference for flexible and nuanced nutritional guidance. Many influencers and organisations place high value on partnerships that reflect their core values and mission, favouring long-term, meaningful collaborations over short-lived, trend-focused campaigns. These core trends are also widely reflected among Greek and Lithuanian influencers.

Belgian influencers and platforms aim to make healthy eating accessible and enjoyable, emphasising simplicity, clear communication, and flexibility. In their integration of sustainability, they focus significantly on local, seasonal, and plant-based choices, but without removing traditional foods. In their view, health and sustainability are intertwined in such a context. This repeated emphasis on balance indicates an overwhelming preference for flexibility, preferring recipes that are both healthy and comforting, without strictly adhering to rigid or extreme diets. A positive, non-judgemental communication style is non-negotiable, as they prioritise an empowering approach to inspire their audience rather than appearing overly prescriptive. They are open to the use of digital tools as long as they remain practical, science-

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backed, and respect content ownership. Platforms would prefer tools integrating seamlessly with their existing systems and large databases and are preoccupied with the potential lack of nuance and flexibility in this context. It is important to note that potential conflicts of interest may arise, as some influencers' teams have already developed their own apps or tools. Thus, engagement strategies should be adjusted accordingly.

As discussed in the previous sections, Belgian influencers pointed out crucial specific challenges and differences. One influencer demonstrated a sensitive influencer-institution tension, arguing that health institutions view influencers as competitors rather than collaborators, potentially limiting opportunities for effective partnerships. Similarly, existing simplified nutrition models or guidelines are sometimes perceived as too vague when compared to the more personalised and nuanced advice provided by influencers. It is clear that influencers demand respect and want to be considered valued partners, aligning potential collaborations with their values and expertise. This is an evident recurring trend in Greece and Lithuania. Furthermore, Belgian influencers pointed out their concern on the overwhelming prevalence of misinformation, as spreading it on social media is extremely easy. Their expectations from projects and initiatives like DietWise are to create more credible, evidence-based tools, content and role models. While influencers observe a strong intention among consumers to adopt healthier eating habits, actual behaviours often fall short due to three fundamental barriers: convenience, cost, and taste - highlighting a persistent intention - behaviour gap. This disconnect is further complicated by resistance to digital tools among certain demographics, particularly older Belgian consumers, who tend to favour tangible and straightforward resources like cookbooks over apps, which may seem complex or intrusive in daily life. On a broader scale, larger recipe platforms face technical and scaling challenges when attempting to integrate detailed nutritional data across vast databases without exhausting resources. These platforms also express a strong preference for maintaining control over their content, resisting data scraping or external extraction.

Therefore, to be effective and well-received, any proposed tools or collaborations must respect influencers' values and missions, aligning with their commitment to authenticity and evidence-based guidance. Seamless integration with existing platforms is essential, with features such as customisation, allergy filters, and personalised meal plans helping to enhance user experience without adding complexity. Long-term engagement strategies should prioritise sustainable behaviour change, promoting achievable steps and supportive messaging over rigid rules. Tools should avoid over-simplification, offering nuanced and culturally sensitive guidance that complements individual contexts rather than imposing uniform solutions. Crucially, initiatives must address affordability and accessibility to ensure that healthy eating is a realistic option for all, particularly lower-income groups.

As previously noted, the key trends identified are broadly shared by the Greek and Lithuanian influencers interviewed - particularly the emphasis on realism, authenticity, and the use of practical, user-informed tools - though some country-specific variations do emerge. In Greece, influencers tend to place even greater importance on personal beliefs and preferences. While generally open to collaboration and participation in initiatives such as RecipeWatch, they consistently stress the need to assess for themselves whether such projects align with their values and objectives. The potential for broader networking and the creation of a cohesive, trusted network to address the current landscape of information overload is seen as a strong motivator. As discussed in section 4.3, one major challenge they face is the persistence of deep-seated misconceptions and resistant attitudes (hard-audience beliefs) among segments of their audience. Like their Belgian counterparts, they acknowledge the fundamental importance of cost, taste, and convenience, as well as the challenges these factors pose to healthy eating. In this context, influencers emphasise the importance of avoiding blame and adopting a communication

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style that steers clear of guilt or shame. Recipes and suggestions should not become an additional source of stress but instead support audiences in realistically integrating dietary advice into everyday life. As such, their messaging focuses on a balanced and flexible diet that accommodates both nutritious and traditional comfort foods, mirroring the approach taken by their Belgian counterparts. Overall, Greek influencers are receptive to the concept of digital tools and apps, provided they are simple, user-friendly, and accessible. They see potential in such tools to enhance audience engagement and strengthen their scientific credibility. However, they expressed a desire for more detailed information and the opportunity to evaluate the offering independently before committing to any partnership.

The Lithuanian influencers interviewed share many of the key attitudes, preferences, and concerns identified in Belgium and Greece, though with some notable variations. A particularly relevant distinction lies in their strong emphasis on meeting audience demands, prioritising content that is directly relevant to their followers' interests and everyday realities. Several influencers also raised the issue of financial compensation, underlining the need to recognise and reward the time, effort, and expertise they contribute to collaborative initiatives.

One influencer highlighted a critical concern around consistency in public health messaging. They argued that so-called "healthier" food substitutes can mislead audiences, undermining their understanding of balanced nutrition. The idea that one can enjoy a variety of foods in moderation and still maintain a healthy lifestyle remains poorly understood among many audiences. Lithuanian influencers identified this lack of consistency as a major barrier to sustainable behaviour change, particularly in the face of time constraints that make it difficult for most people to prepare meals from scratch on a daily basis. As a result, recipes are often reserved for special occasions, raising valid questions about the ongoing relevance of tools like RecipeWatch in everyday contexts.

Another identified challenge is the potential mismatch between influencer audiences and DietWise's target groups. While most Lithuanian influencers primarily engage with women and families, DietWise aims to reach vulnerable groups such as older adults and adolescents, necessitating careful consideration of outreach strategies. Despite these challenges, Lithuanian influencers showed interest in digital tools related to meal and grocery planning, which they consider valuable for their audiences. They also believe app adoption would increase if incentives such as discount codes or prize opportunities were included. However, all these features currently fall outside the scope of the DietWise project.

Nonetheless, these country-specific insights offer actionable opportunities. Influencers noted the widespread perception that healthy eating is time-consuming and expensive, a view often fuelled by aspirational content and highly stylised food imagery shared by a certain type of influencers. DietWise could actively counter this narrative by showcasing down-to-earth meals, affordable ingredients, and realistic images. Finally, Lithuanian influencers stressed the importance of simplicity and clarity in communication. Overly complex or technical information tends to alienate their audiences; therefore, DietWise tools should present science-based knowledge in an approachable, easy-to-understand format to enhance engagement and trust.

6. Conclusions

The interviews conducted with influencers and platforms across Belgium, Greece, and Lithuania reveal a series of shared values, recurring themes, and contextual nuances that can inform the development of nutrition-related tools and strategies. Thus, they have been instrumental in mapping their needs, attitudes, and practices. Across all three countries, there is a strong emphasis on authenticity, realism, and the promotion of practical, accessible, and evidence-based dietary advice. Influencers consistently stress the importance of flexibility and nuance in communication, steering away from rigid, one-size-fits-all messaging in favour of supportive, user-centred approaches that reflect real-life challenges.

Health and sustainability are widely prioritised, though influencers also recognise the value of balance, allowing space for comfort foods and traditional meals within a healthy eating framework. A shared concern lies in the persistent intention - behaviour gap, where consumers express a desire to eat better, but are often constrained by factors such as cost, taste, and convenience. These factors are consistently identified as key obstacles to sustained dietary change.

Resistance to digital tools, particularly among older demographics in Belgium, underlines the need for inclusive, intuitive design and alternative formats. Crucially, this report flags a potential conflict of interest between endorsing RecipeWatch and the influencers' own team-developed apps. Meanwhile, Greek influencers highlight the importance of value alignment and personal assessment before engaging in collaborations, with a strong preference for partnerships that respect their mission and offer opportunities for meaningful networking. They are particularly motivated by the potential to counter widespread misinformation and promote more credible, science-based guidance. Lithuanian insights reflect similar dynamics, reinforcing the call for culturally sensitive, empowering communication strategies.

Influencers highlighted a range of key features that would add value to future digital food tools. High on their list were science-based content with links to credible sources, practical functionality, and alignment with personal values over commercial trends. Desired features include built-in fact-checking to address nutrition myths, integration of recipes with automated grocery lists, meal planning tools, leftover-based suggestions to reduce food waste, and allergy or intolerance indicators. While many of these functions exist in current apps, including those developed by influencers' own teams, added innovations such as approximate pricing, supermarket links, and voucher systems were seen as promising. Technically, the tools should offer a user-friendly, visually appealing interface with real dish photos, clear preparation steps, and precise measurements. Influencers also stressed the importance of avoiding judgmental health messaging in favour of smart, user-friendly ingredient suggestions. AI integration was seen as a powerful enabler to deliver personalised, educational, and engaging content, such as seasonal meal ideas, photo-based recipe suggestions, and ingredient-driven cooking inspiration, while ensuring nutritional accuracy and ease of use.

Technical and operational limitations faced by larger platforms must also be addressed. Integrating nutritional data at scale requires careful planning to avoid overwhelming resources and compromising content control. Any proposed solutions must therefore be both technically feasible and respectful of platform integrity.

Moving forward, successful engagement strategies should prioritise long-term, empowering approaches that promote small, achievable changes rather than prescriptive rules. Tools and campaigns must avoid oversimplification and guilt-based messaging, focusing instead on building user trust, enhancing scientific credibility, and maintaining cultural relevance. Affordability and accessibility remain critical considerations,



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particularly for lower-income groups, to ensure healthy eating becomes a realistic and sustainable option for all.

7. Appendix 1: Interview form

Introduction

1. Greeting and Context Setting

a. Briefly explain the project background and the purpose of the interview:

"Today, we would like to understand your thoughts and experiences about providing recipes and cooking advice and how they relate to your work as an influencer. We also want to explore how initiatives or apps could help support your efforts and provide added value to your audience.

The aim of our project is to align cooking advice with national dietary guidelines, which are a key set of recommendations that provide guidance on food choices, nutrient intake, and dietary behaviours to help individuals prevent diseases, maintain optimal health, and meet their nutritional needs. Dietary guidelines are the result of a lengthy, collaborative process involving multiple scientific, governmental, and public health organisations. This process ensures that guidelines are based on the latest scientific evidence and are tailored to the specific health needs of a population.

Through this interview, we aim to gain deeper insights into your efforts to promote healthy and sustainable recipes, assess your awareness and perception of nutrition guidelines, and explore your willingness to participate in a voluntary initiative to help you align your cooking advice with nutrition guidelines. Additionally, we seek to understand your interest in promoting digital tools or apps that facilitate the adoption of these guidelines."

Section 1: Background and General Motivation

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and your journey as an influencer?
- How would you describe the kind of content you create?
- How do you decide what content to feature?
- What sparked your initial interest in creating nutrition content?
- Who is your target audience? Any specific demographics you focus on?

- How do you measure the success of your content?
 - Is it engagement-based (likes, comments), follower growth, increase of collaborations with brands, impact on people's dietary choices, etc.?

- What role do health and sustainability play in your personal life and in the content you share with your audience?
- Do you think that your audience values this kind of content? Why or why not?

[Definitions:

Health: a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Sustainability: the responsible interaction with the environment to avoid the depletion of natural resources and ensure long-term ecological balance. It involves practices that protect biodiversity, reduce pollution, conserve energy and water, and promote the use of renewable resources to maintain a healthy planet for future generations.]

- What motivates you to engage with initiatives or campaigns related to health and sustainability?
 - Examples: personal passion, audience demand, brand alignment, or other factors?

- In your opinion, which are the main incentives for promoting healthy and sustainable recipes with your followers?
 - Examples: good publicity, credibility, increase number of followers, content generation, learning opportunity, revenue increase, networking opportunities (collaborations with other influencers), become a local pioneer on dietary sustainability, demonstrate corporate social responsibility, helping people develop a healthy lifestyle, growing a community in this niche, etc.

Section 2: Understanding Beliefs and Needs Regarding Healthy and Sustainable Recipes

- Have you previously used or promoted any healthy and sustainable recipes in your content?
 - a. If yes:
 - What made you decide to promote them?
 - How important is for you that the recipes you promote are healthy and/or sustainable?
 - How do you determine whether a recipe is healthy and/or sustainable?
 - How does your audience respond?
 - b. If no:
 - Is there a reason why you have not promoted this kind of recipes?
 - What would make such recipes appealing or unappealing for you to promote?

- What do you think your audience may expect or want from you when it comes to nutrition-related content?

- What sources do you trust when researching nutrition information?

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- How important is scientific backing for you when choosing to promote healthy and sustainable recipes?
- Are you familiar with the concept of nutrition guidelines?

If yes: how do you perceive them?

- Would you be willing to take nutrition guidelines into account when promoting healthy and sustainable recipes?
- How do you balance engagement-driven content with evidence-based nutrition advice?
- What do you believe are the key challenges in adhering to healthy and sustainable nutrition, both for yourself and your audience?
 - What are the biggest misconceptions about nutrition that you have noticed among influencers?
- Are there any misconceptions or barriers your audience might have about following healthy and sustainable recipes?
 - How would you address them?
 - Do you feel there are any gaps between the nutrition advice you provide and what resonates with your audience?
- In your opinion, how can healthy and sustainable recipes provide added value to your followers?
- Are there any specific themes or messages that resonate particularly well with your audience when you talk about nutrition? (e.g., vegetarianism, veganism, fitness recipes, gluten-free, viral recipes etc.)

Section 3: Features of Tools and Apps

- Have you used tools or apps related to health and nutrition for personal or professional purposes?
 - a. If yes:
 - What features were the most helpful?
 - Were there any gaps or areas for improvement?
 - b. If no:

- Why haven't you used them?

- What features or functionalities would you find most valuable in a tool or app that supports the promotion of healthy and sustainable nutrition?

- Examples: AI-powered content suggestions, meal planning, recipes, shopping list, audience engagement analytics, educational content, brand partnership tools and sponsored content matching, access to expert-verified nutrition facts and content, affiliate programme integration (i.e., earning commissions by promoting evidence-based nutrition products or meals), nutrition certification programs (to gain credibility and verified knowledge), etc.

- Would you be interested in promoting an app (RecipeWatch) that allows users to scan the content of existing recipe websites, social media profiles and apps and suggest personalised recommendations in line with nutrition guidelines and from a sustainability perspective?

[The app addresses alignment with national dietary guidelines from the citizen side by empowering them to 'correct' each recipe so that it is healthier and more sustainable. The RecipeWatch will help citizens to gain knowledge about what is unhealthy or unsustainable and give them the skills to modify their eating habits.]

- How could such tools or apps strengthen your business case as an influencer?

- Would they help you better connect with your audience, improve content creation, boost credibility? E.g., when making it possible to tailor recipes to certain dietary needs within the audience (high protein, plant-based, etc.).

Section 4: Collaboration and Initiative Participation

- What factors influence your decision to participate in initiatives or collaborations related to nutrition?
 - Examples: financial compensation, alignment with personal beliefs, audience fit, potential for growth, etc.

- What would make an initiative or partnership stand out to you as particularly valuable or appealing?

- Are there any concerns or hesitations you might have when participating in such initiatives?

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- Would you be open to joining our project's voluntary initiative, the Responsible Cooking Alliance (RCA), which aims to guide influencers to comply their recipes with nutrition guidelines and promote sustainability practices?

[This initiative enhances responsible influencing when it comes to healthy and sustainable diets, guiding influencers by assessing how much their actions meet national dietary advice and how much their content promotes sustainability practices in food provision or cooking (e.g. do they promote healthier and more sustainable choices, provide weekly meal planning, promote efforts to reduce food waste?).

A self-evaluation system will be created to set standards and allow evaluation of how much activities of influencers are in line with nutrition guidelines. The more compliant with the nutritional guidelines influencers are, the higher their evaluation will be. The influencers will be able to join this initiative voluntarily, as well as choose the extent to which to participate in it.]

Section 5: Open-Ended Reflections

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences or needs as an influencer when it comes to nutrition, tools, or collaborations?
- Do you have any suggestions or ideas for tools, apps, or initiatives that could better support influencers like you?

Closing

- Thank the influencer again for their time and insights.
- Confirm next steps, if applicable (e.g., sharing findings, providing follow-up information).

8. Appendix 2: Interview summary form

Project Name: DietWise

Task: 2.3

Interview Date: [DD/MM/YYYY]

Country: [Country Name]

Interviewer: [Interviewer Name and Organisation]

Interviewee: [Interviewee Name]

1. Background and General Motivation

- Influencer Profile: [Brief description of the influencer's background, content type, and audience demographics]
- Motivations for Creating Nutrition Content: [Key reasons mentioned by the influencer]
- Success Metrics: [How they measure engagement and impact]
- Role of Health & Sustainability: [Importance given to health and sustainability from a personal and professional point of view]
- Motivation and Incentives for Engaging in Initiatives Related to Health and Sustainability and Promoting Healthy/Sustainable Recipes: [Main motivators, e.g., credibility, revenue, collaborations]

2. Understanding Beliefs and Needs Regarding Healthy and Sustainable recipes

- Promotion of Healthy and/or Sustainable Recipes: [Yes/No + reasons]
- Audience Response: [Positive/Negative + expectations]
- Criteria for Determining Health & Sustainability: [Key factors influencers consider]
- Trusted Sources for Nutrition Information: [Examples provided]
- Willingness to Adopt Nutrition Guidelines: [Yes/No + reasons]
- Gaps in Nutrition Advice vs. Audience Needs: [Observed disconnects]
- Challenges & Misconceptions Identified: [Barriers faced by influencers & their audiences]
- Popular Themes Among Followers: [E.g., veganism, fitness, weight loss]

3. Features of Tools and Apps

- Experience with Nutrition Apps/Tools: [Yes/No + Key features they liked/disliked]

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- Desired Features in a Nutrition App: [E.g., AI content suggestions, audience analytics, meal planning]
- Interest in Promoting "RecipeWatch": [Yes/No + Reasons]
- Potential Business Benefits from Using Such Tools: [E.g., audience engagement, credibility, content improvement]

4. Collaboration and Initiative Participation

- Key Factors Influencing Participation in Initiatives: [E.g., financial incentives, brand alignment, audience demand]
- Appealing Aspects of a Collaboration: [What would make them join]
- Concerns About Participation: [Any hesitations mentioned]
- Interest in the Responsible Cooking Alliance (RCA): [Yes/No + Reasons]

5. Open-Ended Reflections

- Additional Comments from the Interviewee: [Anything else they shared]
- Suggestions for Improving Nutrition Tools & Initiatives: [Innovative ideas or requests]

Summary of Key Findings

- Main Trends Across Interviews in [Country Name]: [Common patterns observed]
- Country-Specific Challenges or Differences: [Challenges emerged in-country]
- Any Additional Suggestions to Be Considered