A Survey of Food Blogs and Videos: An Explorative Study

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A SURVEY OF FOOD BLOGS AND VIDEOS: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore what types of food blogs and videos exist, what their common practices are and their popularity levels. Through a content analysis of four videos or posts from 25 different producers or blogs, respectively, a total of 200 pieces of content were coded and analyzed. The coding focused on main ingredients, sponsorship, type of video or post and number of views or comments. It was found that blogs were written for a specific audience, in terms of blog types, while video producers were more multi-purpose. This could be because of sampling method or because blogs are often sought after, while videos tend to appear in viewers’ timelines. The two types of content varied in set-up, as well, as 85% of videos offered no background or commentary and 87% of blog posts contained more than one paragraph of additional information. Because of the way blogs are set up, number of comments had to be recorded instead of views, which led to a skewed measure of popularity. In conclusion, video producers tend to cover more types of recipes while bloggers focus more on one niche.
Introduction

Food is something that has drawn humans together for ages, as it is something everyone needs and is a central part of many cultures. Digital social media is something increasingly prevalent in society, for better or worse. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of social media is “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” (Social, 2018). From 2005 to 2015, adult use of social media increased from 7% to 65% (Perrin, 2015). This growth has slightly leveled off, increasing to just 69% as of Jan. 10, 2018 (Social, 2018). Because food is so integral to society, it would logically follow, then, that it would become a popular topic on social media, as well.

Visit most social media sites, either food-specific or more general sites, and there will be user-generated photos of food, either their own creation or a particularly eye-catching dish from a restaurant. According to Zagat, a national review site, 60% of diners browse social media for food images and of them 75% say they chose a restaurant based solely on those photos (Herklots, 2016). Holmberg (2016) showed that adolescents use social media as a means of showing off their food. They purposely arrange food in a visually appealing way to serve almost as advertisements to their peers. Unfortunately, most of the time the food they post is unhealthy, high in calories and low in nutrients. Holmberg suggests that these posts can sometimes be even more persuasive than advertisements for adolescents and their peers on social media.

This trend of posting unhealthy foods can have unintended consequences. Pila, et. al (2017) examined if there is a link between food on social media and eating disorders. This study found that while there is no way to determine if social media can be a cause of eating disorders, it was indeed linked. Pila, et. al studied images marked with the hashtag “#cheatmeal” and found that these images were often goals for people on diets. Cheat meals refer to eating something outside of a particular diet plan. For example, people on a low-carb diet would consider pizza or pasta a cheat meal. Oftentimes, though, these images were meals similar to what some people have as a normal, non-cheat meal. This can lead to an unhealthy encounter with food online.

Not all food posts on social media are negative, however. People often post images of their food during or post-travel (Wang, 2017). This study found five primary motivations for sharing food: self-image projection, self-archiving, information sharing, social and relational, and emotion articulation. When people post about food on social media, though, Vidal (2015) found that users do not express their emotions in words, but rather through emojis and emoticons. It should be noted, though, that Vidal’s study was confined to Twitter with its then-limit of 140 characters.
Outside of that Twitter limit, people on the internet have no shortage of food-related posts. As of “July 2012, Technorati ranked more than 16,000 food blogs, including both recipe and restaurant review blogs” (Lofgren, 2013). These blogs, Lofgren explains, have renewed ordinary people’s desire to share recipes. They offer a way for people to share culture through food. Beyond the cultural appeal, some people are enticed by money. In 2015, the YouTube food channel “charliscraftykitchen” brought in approximately 29 million views per month and a monthly ad revenue of $127,777, after YouTube took its cut (Ives, 2015). On this channel, a young girl named Charli makes treats like cupcake marshmallow pops and posts videos each week. If done well and right, individuals can make a significant amount of money from food blogging or vlogging.

It seems clear that the food industry is coming to rely on social media. In his 2012 book, Rousseau discusses the rise of food on the web, culinary plagiarism, health and eating disorders, reviews, and attention and critiques on the internet. Whether restaurants like it or not, the internet is shaping their customers’ interactions.

Outside of social media, the internet as a whole has impacted how people find recipes. Allrecipes is essentially a crowdsourced online cookbook with contributions from about 85 million home chefs. According to their website, they receive 1.5 billion visits per year, and 95 recipes are viewed per second (Allrecipes, 2017). Although there is no way to know if all 1.5 billion of these visits actually resulted in viewers making the recipes, it is likely that many did. Allrecipes does not just stop with Americans, however, as they boast 19 sites that reach 24 countries (Allrecipes, 2017).

There are new media forms that are becoming popular now. One such form is podcasts. Full Plate is a weekly podcast that features a full recipe during the time of the show. The host, Kacie Kelly, cooks along with the podcast so those following along don’t have to worry about being behind on preparing vegetables or re-unlocking a phone with chicken-covered hands. Food is also featured in longer videos, often found on Facebook. For example, Topgolf has 12 minute long videos that showcase a challenge similar to the Food Network show Chopped. Two Topgolf chefs compete for the chance to move forward into the finals. To watch the other episodes, viewers go to the Topgolf Facebook page.

Food blogs, as previously mentioned, are incredibly popular on the internet today. From culinary journalists to chefs to “mommy bloggers,” there is a wide variety of types of food blogs. Some blogs do not offer original content, but serve as aggregate sources of food media, from crowdsourced recipes to podcasts to editorial type articles. A newer type of media has begun to rise in popularity. These are short videos, usually between 45 seconds and two minutes, that depict a fast-paced bird’s eye view of a full recipe. The most prevalent of these videos are put out by Buzzfeed under the name “Tasty.” Now, Tasty has its own app and cooking products, and other profiles have begun to produce these videos.

Food blogs and videos are two different types of media that serve a similar purpose. Both seek to share recipes with people by way of the internet. Videos are obviously a visual
form of media while blogs are written. For the most part, videos only contain the recipes, not any story from the producer, although there are some exceptions. Blogs, on the other hand, are created more as a way for people to connect, sharing stories and then also including a recipe. Food blog is a widely used term to refer to anyone who blogs about recipes, reviews restaurants or writes about anything else related to food (Lofgren, 2013).

This leads to the focus of this study, which will revolve around food blogs and videos. This research is intended to discover what types of blogs and videos exist, what their common practices are and their levels of popularity. It is hypothesized that both blogs and videos will have high viewership, that is over 1 million views, based on the understanding of the prevalence of social media and the internet in 2018. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the types of posts will be similar and will cover a wide variety of ingredients and producer themes. Finally, it is hypothesized that many posts and videos will be sponsored.
Methods

A content analysis method was used for this study. This was chosen as a way to systematically record data from various videos and blog posts. A total of 100 videos and 100 blog posts were chosen, broken down into 25 producers or blogs as sources. This means that from each source, four individual videos or posts were chosen and analyzed. A combined random and convenience sample was used to determine the sources for this project. The blogs were primarily chosen based on aggregate lists on the internet of food blogs from the past two years. They were chosen randomly, however when the lists were broken down into themes (i.e. vegan, family, international, etc.), one of each type was chosen. For the videos, once one was found on a Facebook timeline, many of the following videos were chosen from the suggested videos in the sidebar. However, in order to reach 25 different sources and to have some variety in the type of videos, some previous knowledge of video producers was employed to find them and complete the list.

The videos and posts were summarized based on the summary guidelines that can be found in Appendix 1. This information was then recorded in a Google spreadsheet. Next, the summarized information was translated into code using the codebook in Appendix 2, and also recorded in a Google spreadsheet. Then the data was combined, analyzed and translated into graphs.

Because blogs and videos are similar and different, some of the characteristics coded for during this project were the same for both and some were different. Each blog or producer was given a number between one and 25, and four of each were selected. Other similar characteristics were producer or blog type, video or post type, main ingredient and whether or not they were sponsored. A list of six popular types was created before coding began and included multi-purpose, vegan, vegetarian, baking, health, paleo and other. Video type was broken down into recipe only, 10 seconds or less of background and more than 10 seconds of background. Blog type included recipe only, one paragraph of background or multiple background paragraphs. Finally, the main ingredients chosen were vegetable, bean, chicken, pork, beef, fish and other. To be considered sponsored, the blog post, video or video caption had to include a clear indication of sponsorship.

Videos were also coded for presence or absence of music, voice and captions. The type of visuals, either hands-only or hands and body, as well as the number of views were also recorded. Blogs were also coded for type of visuals, either photos or photos and video, and number of comments.
Results

The majority of blog and producer types were found to be multi-purpose. The least common type for both was paleo. See Figure 1.1 for a full list of producer types.

The majority of the videos, 85%, contained only the recipe with no background information or additional commentary. The other 15% contained more than 10 seconds of background information or commentary, usually delivered throughout the video. However, 87% of the blogs contained more than one paragraph of background information or comments throughout the post, 9% had one paragraph of background information, and only 4% contained no background.

The main ingredient in the recipes varied between the two sources. In both cases, the majority ingredient was “other,” and the second-most for both was vegetables. After that, however, they varied more considerably. See Figure 1.2 for more details.

It is difficult to evenly compare the popularity of the blog posts and the videos, as the view count for videos is available to the public to see, but it is not available for blogs. For videos, the view count was recorded. For blog posts, the number of comments was recorded. Because of this difference, the numerical difference is high between the two sources. For example, the highest number of video views was 62 million and the lowest was 13,000. Rather, for the blogs, the highest number of comments was 339 and the lowest was 0. For a more complete listing, see Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4.

An interesting finding involved the sponsorship of videos. Only 3% of analyzed videos were sponsored, and 5% of blog posts were sponsored. These numbers are much lower than they were assumed to be. See Figure 1.5 and Figure 1.6.
The blog posts were analyzed for what visuals they contained. All blog posts contained photographs, and 4% also included a video in the post. On the posts that contained videos, all from the blog A Pinch of Yum, the videos were all similar to one another and generally similar to the videos analyzed for this project, showing a pair of hands making a dish while names of ingredients appeared over the visuals. See Figure 1.7 for visual breakdowns.

Videos offered more pieces to be analyzed. The presence of music was overwhelming, as 99% of videos contained music. See Figure 1.8. More split, however, were the videos that contained voice in the form of voiceover, narration or conversation. Of the 100 videos analyzed, 84% did not include any form of voice. See Figure 1.9. Whether or not videos had voice had little impact on the presence or absence of captions. Captions in this case refer to text on top of the video either listing ingredients, steps or some sort of other information. In total, 91% of videos contained captions. This overwhelming majority indicates that video producers are aiming to attract and cater to viewers to watch videos without the sound. See Figure 1.10. The final video component analyzed was the type of visuals in the video. The majority of the videos, 80%, showed only a set of hands creating the recipe. The other 20% showed hands and body. Now, this differed between videos. Some hands-and-body videos began with an introduction from a person that showed their whole body. Others appeared more like a cooking show, with the chef walking the viewer through the recipe, often looking
directly at the camera. The differences between these were not coded. See Figure 1.11.
Discussion

The results of this study show that it is difficult to compare blogs and videos, especially in terms of popularity and viewership, at least from a public perspective. Furthermore, the most prevalent blog or producer type was different for blogs and videos. The blogs were more spread out, with only 28% of them being multi-purpose, while the video producers were 68% multi-purpose. This could be from the method of selection, since the blogs were more hand-picked while many of the videos were chosen in a snowball-type method. That is, in choosing the video producers, once one producer was picked, the next was often found in the “recommended videos” section, rather than a new Facebook search. However, it could also be because bloggers are often told to find a niche market. A quick Google search will bring up countless articles about choosing a blogging niche. Readers turn to blogs for something specific for which they are looking. Videos, on the other hand, are often more general. Some of the most popular producers, like Tasty and Tastemade, are broad producers whose videos appear on the timelines of many Facebook users. If they produced niche content, it would have less of a chance of being applicable and appealing to the viewers who will encounter it on social media.

One challenge with this study was measuring the viewership of blogs. Because the number of viewers is not available to the public, the number of comments had to be recorded in its place. However, this is a very skewed, unrepresentative number, as there are many people who view blogs who do not comment on them. It was considered to record video comments instead of views to create a more even means of comparison, but even that would be very skewed. On Facebook, where the videos are shown, many people comment on videos and pictures simply to tag someone else to draw their attention to it. On blogs, there is no real means of doing this, as people do not have accounts for blogs. So, blog comments are often thoughtful responses, questions or adaptations for the blogger and other readers to see.

An interesting finding was how few posts were sponsored. Only 5% of blogs and 3% of videos were sponsored. This likely is because of the method in which the posts were found. Sponsored videos are more likely to appear in a viewer’s timeline, but were not as available on the producer’s page. Once the 25 video producers were selected, the remaining videos were found by going to their specific page, rather than scrolling through the Facebook timeline, hoping to find a video from the correct producer. Because of this, many of the sponsored posts were likely passed over, skewing those results. On a separate note, some of the blog posts analyzed were from a few years ago, as posts were chosen at random. Some blogs had an alphabetical list of recipes, so choosing one might lead to a post from 2018 and the link above it would lead to a post from 2014. It has only been in recent years that bloggers have been compelled to write that a post is sponsored by a company, so
it could be that some of these posts were simply from too long ago to have been marked as sponsored.

There are many future directions for this research. As previously mentioned, very little research has been done on food blogs and videos. A future study could focus on the viewership of videos or readership of blogs to better understand who these viewers are and what motivates them to consume this media. Furthermore, studies could focus on one specific provider, either of videos or blogs, and compare more than four posts to uncover trends and more in-depth data about what tactics are most useful in attracting viewers. Another study could look into BuzzFeed’s Tasty and their app, One-Top appliance and campaigns to understand how Tasty became so popular. Finally, a study could look at the other types of food media mentioned, like podcasts, aggregate blogs and mini television episodes.

Throughout this study and in my personal life, I have discovered I have a particular taste both for videos and blogs. When it comes to videos, of the producers analyzed here, Tasty is definitely my favorite. I enjoy how predictable they are and the variety Tasty offers. I downloaded the Tasty app a few months ago, and it has been a great way not only to waste time but also to find easy recipes. I even used one of Tasty's steak videos as inspiration for a birthday dinner I was cooking. Prior to that experience, I had never cooked steak, so I was fully trusting the Tasty producers. The dinner was a success! It was delicious and cooked almost perfectly.

One of my favorite platforms, however, was not examined in this study. Luxury Food London shows a few British chefs, most notably Gordon Ramsay, in what looks like home kitchens. I rarely watch the videos with anyone else. I find that although Gordon Ramsay is often shown on television in Hell’s Kitchen or other such shows as a foul-mouthed, rude, unkind man, when he is in a calmer, more home-like setting he is a much better teacher. I consider myself a somewhat proficient cook, having spent much time in the kitchen during my childhood helping my parents, but these Gordon Ramsay videos have taught me a lot about technique. They are longer than most other videos, often ranging from four to 10 minutes, but they go deeper into the recipe. It’s like having a short Food Network show.

When it comes to blogs, I will admit I didn’t love any of these. I’ve found that I prefer recipes to be recipes and blogs to be blogs. When I’m looking for a specific recipe, I don’t want to read about the author’s deep conversation they had with their friend that was inspired by these cookies. I just want the cookie recipe. However, that’s not how blogs are designed. Blogs serve as a way to bring the readers and the author together. They allow people to share in an experience that they never would otherwise. And that’s perfectly fine. I just know that if I am looking for a recipe, I’ll go to Tasty or Food Network’s website or Google in general.

I wrote my own food blog while I studied abroad in Italy in Spring 2017. It contained no recipes. Instead, it was the story of my time in Europe told through images and
descriptions of the food I had and the food I made. I used WordPress as a platform, at the website thetastetestblog.wordpress.com. My roommate and I came up with the title “The Taste Test” before I left, after I threw some vegetables together to make a quick pico de gallo that was delicious for not having followed a recipe. I wasn’t very good at keeping up with it, though, and despite my attempts to keep up with it in America, I couldn’t find the same compelling stories that kept me writing in Italy. That said, it was a fun exercise for me to try. I learned how difficult keeping a twice-weekly blog is. I also learned that while it was hard, it was also a lot of fun. I would love to try blogging again, although I think I would branch out from just food in the future.

My favorite food-based media, though, is the Full Plate podcast and website. As I wrote in the introduction, Full Plate is a weekly podcast hosted in iTunes, an Android application and on fullplaterecipes.com. For full disclosure, I do know the host of Full Plate, Kacie Kelly. That, however, is how media content grows on the internet. The creators reach out to their friends and family, asking them to subscribe, review and share their content. I shared one of Kacie’s posts about how going to farmers markets and choosing locally grown food can be good for your budget. Not only did I want to help Kacie, but her post was well-written, and it was a topic that applied to the people in my social network. The podcasts are fun and easy to listen to, as Kacie tells stories about her cooking experiences. When she has guests on the show, they play quick-answer games, and there’s always a story about Kacie’s dogs. I’ve begun to look forward to Monday mornings when the new episode is released, and I have picked out a couple of her recipes I want to make.

Little research currently exists about food videos and blogs on their own. The current research covers the media forms in comparison with eating disorders, travel or some other sort of overarching theme. This study was intended to draw conclusions comparing these two media forms on their own. As previously stated, as of 2012, there were at least 16,000 food blogs (Lofgren, 2013). While there is no conclusion on the current number of blogs, it can reasonably be assumed that the number has grown. A search will bring up lists of the 10, 25 or even 100 best food blogs, so it can be reasoned that many of these blogs are popular.

On the other hand, video producers are much harder to find through search engines. The videos examined in this study were all found through Facebook. A Google search for “food videos” will offer many YouTube videos, often from Food Network, or links to magazine websites that also include videos. When on Facebook, the most common video sources are Tasty, Goodful, Tastemade, Delish and Food Network. For this study, I purposefully did not choose all of these, in an attempt to create some diversity. The smaller number of popular producers indicate a smaller number of video producers overall. That said, Facebook’s algorithms dictate how new producers are shown to people in recommended sections or “chosen for you” posts. This tends to discourage smaller, newer producers from entering the market.
In looking at both the blogs and videos, it is very difficult to compare popularity on the consumer side. Videos on Facebook have a “number of views” section that allows anyone to see how popular and widespread the video is. Blogs, however, do not have that information posted publicly. To adapt for this study, the only way to possibly analyze readership was to record number of comments. This is an unfair way to judge readership, as there are many blog posts that even I have personally read on which I have not left comments. In fact, I do not know if I have ever left a comment on a blog post.

Finally, the purposes of videos and blogs have distinct differences. The short, one or two minute videos on Facebook are meant purely to share a recipe. There are some exceptions that were not studied here, like Gordon Ramsay’s five minute videos with discussion of technique, how flavors blend well together and why he likes the recipe. There were even some exceptions in this study, with Tasty videos released during Black History Month that featured stories of recipes from Africa and the Caribbean as told by immigrants or their descendants. For the most part, however, the videos only shared a recipe. Blogs, however, overwhelmingly shared a story with the recipe. Sometimes it was a simple paragraph about how much their family liked this recipe, but most of the time it was a multi-paragraph description of their life at the time, detailing how they were debating quitting their job and then finally the recipe they always make for dinner when they are stressed.

These differences create two very different experiences for consumers. For people who need a quick on-the-go recipe, a video or a visit to Google or a recipe aggregator site is most likely the best decision. These sites also often contain a wide variety of recipes and are not limited to one specific type. Blogs are often the better choice for people who are looking to form a sort of internet relationship with someone. For people looking to learn about someone else’s life and get personal backstory to every recipe they find, blogs are a better choice. Furthermore, blogs tend to be more specific, so someone following a certain diet would likely have more luck looking for a blog. Whether a reader is vegan, paleo or gluten free, there is most likely a niche blog that fits their lifestyle.

In conclusion, this exploratory study aimed to find descriptive information about food blogs and videos that had not previously been studied. Through the analysis of 200 pieces of content, common practices, characteristics and types of blogs and videos were discovered. Popularity levels were more difficult to measure and compare. This study confirmed that food has a prevalent and ever-growing place in social media, and that blogs and videos have different characteristics that can attract different audiences. Blogs revolve around storytelling, while most videos are informational.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary Guidelines

1.1 Video Summary Guidelines
Producer
Video Title
Video Type
Producer Type
Main Ingredient
Sponsored?
Music?
Voice?
Captions?
Type of Visuals
Number of Views
Summary
Link

1.2 Blog Summary Guidelines
Blog Title
Author
Blog Type
Main Ingredient
Sponsored?
Post Title
Post Type
Type of Visuals
Number of Views
Number of Comments
Link
Appendix 2: Codebooks

2.1 Video Codebook

(1) Video ID
   Record Video ID Number (Vxxx)

(2) Producer
1 - Healthy Seasonal Recipes
2 - Tastemade
3 - Bon Appetit Magazine
4 - Tasty
5 - NTD Taste Life
6 - Tastemade Español
7 - Recipe 30
8 - Food Network
9 - Jamie Oliver
10 - Foodbeast
11 - Spoon University
12 - Sweeten
13 - She Likes Food
14 - Twisted
15 - The Recipe Critic
16 - Yellow Teeth
17 - Tasty Vegetarian
18 - Goodful
19 - So Yummy
20 - Luxury Food Worldwide
21 - Home Cooking
22 - Proper Tasty
23 - Grilled
24 - Munchies
25 - The Tasty Vegan

(2) Type of Producer
1 - Multi-purpose
2 - Vegan
3 - Vegetarian
4 - Baking
5 - Health
6 - Paleo
7 - Other

(3) Type of Video
1 - Recipe Only
2 - Recipe with ten seconds of background
3 - Recipe with more than ten seconds of background

(4) Main Ingredient
1 - Vegetable
2 - Bean
3 - Chicken
4 - Pork
5 - Beef
6 - Fish
7 - Other

(5) Sponsored
   1 - Not sponsored
   2 - Sponsored

(6) Music
   1 - No music
   2 - Music

(7) Voice
   1 - No vocalizations
   2 - Vocalizations

(8) Captions
   1 - No captions
   2 - Captions

(9) Type of Visuals
   1 - Hands only
   2 - Hands and body

(10) Number of Views
   1 - Between 1 and 10,000
   2 - Between 10,001 and 50,000
   3 - Between 50,001 and 100,000
   4 - Between 100,001 and 500,000
   5 - Between 500,001 and 1 Mil.
   6 - Between 1.1 Mil. and 10 Mil.
   7 - Between 10.1 Mil. and 50 Mil.
   8 - 50.1 Mil. and over
2.2 Blog Codebook

(1) **Blog ID**
   Record Blog ID Number (Bxxx)

(2) **Author**
1 - Hungry Girl
2 - Pioneer Woman
3 - Serious Eats
4 - Orangette
5 - Cannelle et Vanille
6 - 80 Breakfasts
7 - Oh Ladycakes
8 - Thinly Spread
9 - Clean Food Dirty City
10 - Smitten Kitchen
11 - Cakeyboi
12 - Tartelette
13 - Spoon Fork Bacon
14 - Naturally Ella
15 - Tinned Tomatoes
16 - The Tofu Diaries
17 - Eat Drink Paleo
18 - Sprouted Kitchen
19 - Love and Lemons
20 - Casa Costello
21 - The Crazy Kitchen
22 - My Little Italian Kitchen
23 - The Fit Foodie
24 - A Pinch of Yum
25 - Peanut Butter Fingers

(3) **Type of Blog**
   1 - Multi-purpose
   2 - Vegan
   3 - Vegetarian
   4 - Baking
   5 - Health
   6 - Paleo
   7 - Other

(4) **Type of Post**
   1 - Recipe Only
   2 - Recipe with one paragraph of background
   3 - Recipe with more than one paragraph of background

(5) **Main Ingredient**
   1 - Vegetable
   2 - Bean
   3 - Chicken
   4 - Pork
   5 - Beef
   6 - Fish
   7 - Other

(6) **Sponsored**
1 - Not sponsored
2 - Sponsored

(7) Type of Visuals
1 - Photos
2 - Photos and Videos

(8) Comments
0 - 0 Comments
1 - Between 1 and 10 Comments
2 - Between 11 and 20
3 - Between 21 and 50
4 - Between 51 and 99
5 - Over 100