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A Study on College-Aged Students Habit of Reading Online Food Blogs

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A Study on College-Aged Students Habit of Reading Online Food Blogs

Have you ever consulted an online food blog when choosing a restaurant to dine in? Back in times when the Internet was not so prevalent, people received information mostly from television or print sources, such as advertisement flyers or magazines. However, with the development of the internet, the way people seek for information has been altered. TV news and print sources are no longer the major means of knowledge. According to a professor, Jill Walker Rettberg, in digital culture, “We have moved from a culture dominated by mass media...to one where participatory media is becoming the norm.”. People now prefer to look for information provided by either professionals or amateurs online. Moreover, the presence of online food blogs has also changed consumers’ decision making. According to the rankings made by famous Taiwanese blogging forum, *Pixnet*, out of the most popular 100 blogs, food blogs account for a largest proportion among all the other categories. People now tend to search for information in food blogs before deciding which places to eat. However, in “Bloggers’ Motivations and Behaviors,” researchers argue that despite the fact that blogs represent a new and interesting platform, most of the information they provide is unproven (472). But why do people still read them?

What influence do online blogs have? According to Txàber Allué’, in his paper, “Food Sector Communication and Online Influencers,” it is said that with the rise of the Internet, “online influencers, whether bloggers or people with important digital profiles, have assumed a decisive role in creating opinion” (312). Therefore, compared with traditional advertisement, which is mostly composed and sent out by the company itself, people now tend to give more “credibility” to bloggers who stand for no organizations or companies. Other researchers, Hsu Yu Hsuan and Tsou Hung-Tai, also agreed with the influence of online blogs. In their research

“Understanding Customer Experiences in Online Blog Environments,” they claimed that “blogs have more impact on purchase decisions than social networks...providing a trusted resource that influences purchase decisions” (512). Moreover, in the article, researchers also pointed out that “experience...is difficult to imitate” (512). Therefore, bloggers provide personal experiences of buying or using the products online that eventually alter consumer behaviors. In addition, three researchers, Yang Wen I, Huang Yun Kuei and Lin Yu Hsiang, did a research focused on the comment in movie blogs. They first indicated that a blog should contain a title, content and comments, and then claimed that “blog comments may be regarded as a kind of electronic word of mouth” that influence consumers’ purchasing behavior (202). Hence, online users’ comment below the posts is one of the significant factors that governs readers’ decision making. Despite the fact that the studies mentioned above focus more on bloggings for product advertising, rather than online food blogs in particular, they can still be used to analyze how readers respond to food blogs because these blogs are merely different in content, not in nature.

Then, what is the influence of an online food blog? In “Online Communities and the Sharing of Extraordinary Restaurant Experiences,” researchers addressed that a person who writes food blogs is “a foodie is a person who is very very very interested in food” (qtd. in Watson). Foodies collect their dining experiences and voice their judgement on the dishes they eat in restaurants. Also, in their research, it is mentioned that “a knowledge of the ingredients...a cultivated ability to distinguish and compare the taste and olfactory sensations and also the vocabulary to express and discuss the experience” are required in a food post to stimulate the imagination of readers that ultimately influence their decision making over what places to dine in (298). Furthermore, in Su Yi-Jie’s paper, “A Study on the Effects of Food Blog’s Experience on Purchasing Intention,” she conducted a survey to find out that people

put more emphasis on the visual elements within the food post, and “information system quality has positive effect on users’ attitude toward food blogs” (65). Besides, an article published by Focal Press also introduced the release of a new book that teaches bloggers to take good pictures of portrait-worthy dishes. This indicated that the quality of the food post, including food photographs and word description, plays a decisive role in influencing consumers’ dining choices. On the other hand, another research also pointed out a significant element within food blogs, that is, online users’ comment. According to Do-Hyung, Park, Lee Jumin, and Han Ingoo, “the quality of on-line consumer reviews has a positive effect on consumer purchasing intention” (140). Hence, online users’ comments below are the significant factor that governs readers’ decision making. Therefore, it is clear that food blogs indeed have become a dominant figure that governs consumers’ dining choices.

Therefore, the motivation for choosing this topic is due to the growing phenomenon of reading online food blogs among college students and the society. TNS Global Market Research Company once conducted a survey about online use among different age groups. According to the survey result of Internet usage, young people took up the biggest proportion among other age groups. Moreover, almost 90% of the online users aged 18 to 24 have a habit of reading online blogs. Also, not only I, but almost all of my friends consult online food blogs before deciding which restaurant to book for the gathering, which stirs the interest in me for investigating the forces behind the act of reading online food blogs for college students. In addition, few researches focused on the elements within the food posts that attract readers to read and affect their final decision. Most researches emphasized the sharing and massive influence of dining experiences as a whole. After reading this research paper, college readers should be clear about what attracts them the most within the food post and perhaps food bloggers can adjust or enhance their elements within the food posts

to better promote their blogs and restaurants.

Therefore, concluding the previous studies, two main research questions came up:

1. How influential are online food blogs on college students?
2. What elements within the food post attract college students' attention the most?

To help find out the answers to the research questions proposed above, a questionnaire was conducted to collect the data of the habit of reading online food blogs among college students. The survey was composed of two forms of investigation: online questionnaire and face to face interview. The questionnaire was given out online through *Facebook*. There were in total 14 questions, including respondents' profiles and their habit of reading online food blogs, such as frequency, reasons for reading them, and most importantly, what they look for in the posts. All of the questions were multiple choice questions for single answers and multiple answers. In addition, other than the questionnaire itself, the researcher also used interview to further understand the reasons behind each answer so as to compensate what questionnaire lacked of. In sum, 64 responses were collected; 5 students were interviewed. Most of the respondents were from Fu Jen University; only one third of which were from other schools.

The results and findings are as follows:

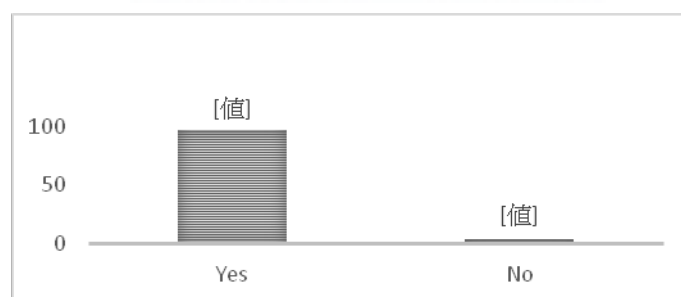


Fig. 1 Have you read online food blogs before?

Fig. 1 shows that over 95% college students have read online food blogs

before, while only two students claimed that they have never done so.

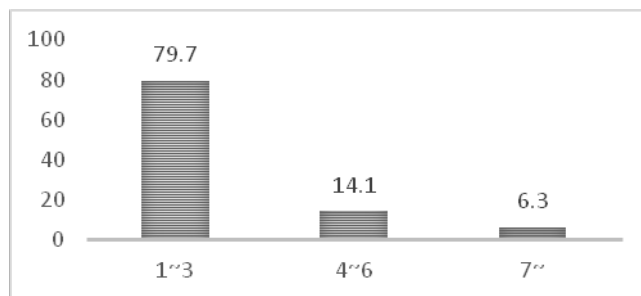


Fig. 2 How frequently do you read online food blogs in a week?

In Fig. 2, all the respondents answered that they read online food blogs at least once to three times a week. More than 20% students claimed that they read food blogs five times a week in average.

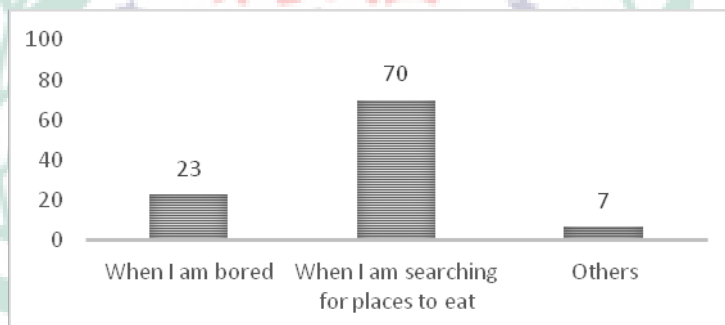


Fig. 3 When do you read food blogs?

Fig. 3 shows that 70% of the students read food blogs when they are in need of finding places to eat, while 30% of students read food blogs for pure entertainment.

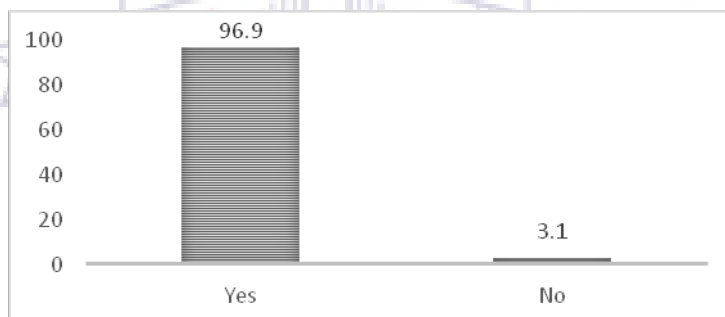


Fig. 4 Have you paid visits to the recommended restaurants after reading the posts before?

This figure indicates that more than 95% students claimed that they have paid real visit to the recommended restaurants after reading posts.

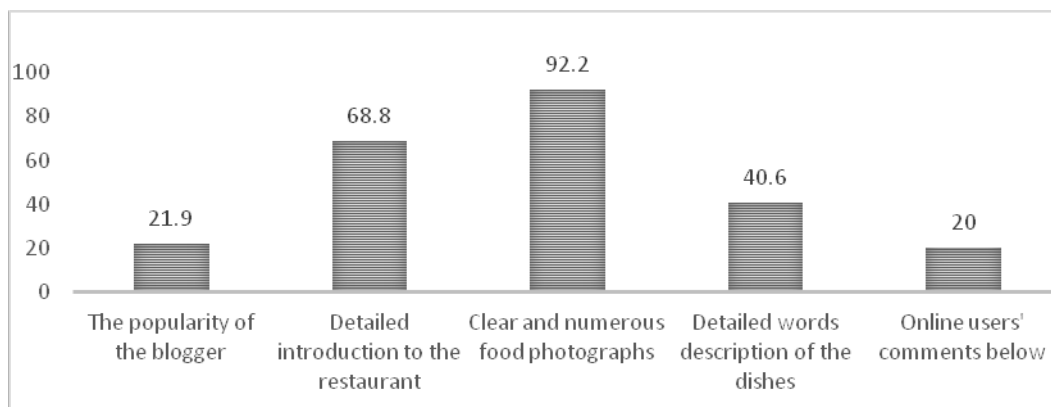


Fig. 5 What elements within the food post attract you? The elements are: 1. Posts composed by famous bloggers 2. Detailed introduction to the restaurant. 3. Clear and numerous food photographs. 4. Detailed word description of the taste of dishes. 5. Online users' comments below.

The outcome is: Clear and numerous food photographs > detailed introduction to the restaurant > detailed word description of the taste of dishes > the popularity of the blogger > online users' comments below.

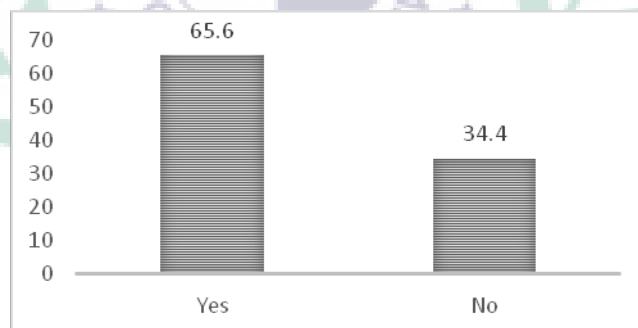


Fig. 6 Have you ever experienced disappointments after visiting the recommended restaurant?

Over half of the respondents answered yes; while almost 35% answered no.

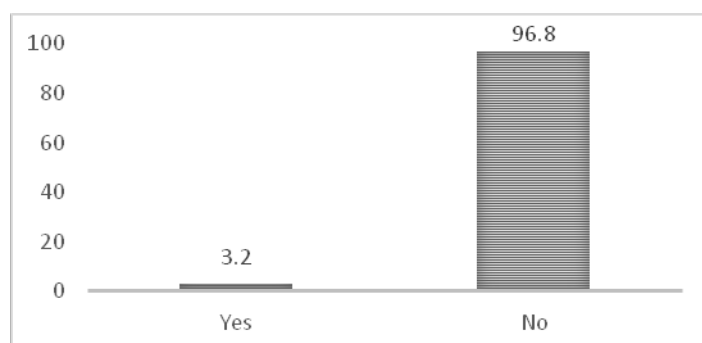


Fig. 7 Do you comment below the posts whether you are satisfied or disappointed with the recommended restaurants?

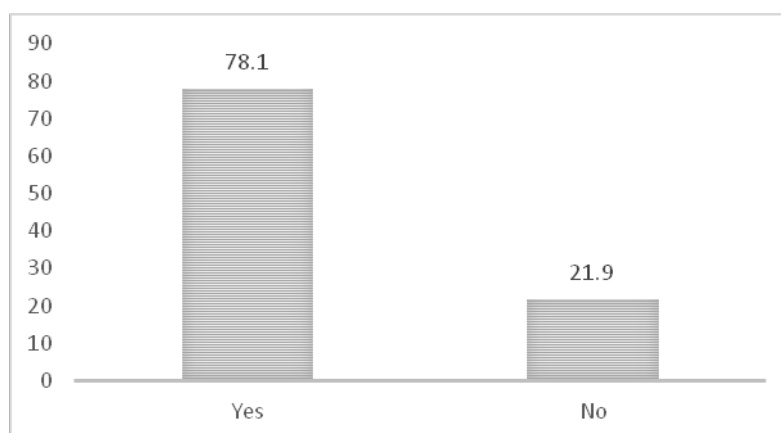


Fig. 8 Have you ever suspected that bloggers may receive benefit for writing posts for the restaurant? (e.g. coupon, free meal, etc)

78% of students have doubted that it's possible for bloggers to receive benefit from restaurant owners for writing food posts.

As a result, the survey result answered to the two main research questions of this paper. First, the results of Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 explained the importance of food blogs on students' decision making. The result of Fig. 1 is consistent with the survey result conducted by TNS Marketing Research Company that around 90% of college students have read online food blogs before. Also, reading food blogs is not merely an entertainment. Food blogs have become a dispensable consulting tool for college students when deciding which restaurants to dine in. Moreover, Fig. 5 also confirmed the influence of online food blogs. Almost every food blog reader except for two respondents has been under the influence of online food blog that these readers have paid visit to the recommended restaurants after reading food posts. Second, Fig. 6 best answered the question two about the exact elements within the food post that attract readers' attention the most. From the result of Fig. 6, it is clear that college students tend to look for blogs with numerous food photographs, and word description is the second information students pay attention to

within a food post, which is consistent with previous studies that food photographs and word description are influential elements that govern students' decision making. This result indicated that what readers look for is how the dishes looks, rather than other additional information.

Then, although the survey result answered the research questions of this research paper, there are still two points worth discussing, which are the importance of food photographs within the food post, and the influence of online users' comments below the post. First, to explain why food photographs come first to college students' eyes in Fig. 6, I came up with two possible reasons: 1. Visual information comes before written information in this generation. 2. Readers are aware of the fact that word description can be subjective. First, five interviewees were asked to give detailed explanations about their choices of elements they look for in a food post. Five interviewees all answered that the reason why they chose food photographs as one of the elements that draws their attention in the food post was because pictures cannot lie. Despite the fact that bloggers might use professional editing techniques to let the dishes shine; however, basically what you see is what you eat in the restaurant. Also, one interviewee mentioned that word description cannot stand alone to effectively persuade him to visit the recommended restaurant. According to Lu, Chia-Nin, "information passing is mostly composed of language, written text, and visual information, and among these three elements, visual information is the most direct one. Our brain can directly receive message from pictures and videos. These messages can be stored in memory and strike a chord with readers" (21). Therefore, within a food post, clear and numerous food photographs can be directly received by readers. To prove the importance and influence of food photographs within food blogs, I checked the top 10 food blogs on the famous blogging platform, *Pixnet*. One of the common grounds of them is the abundant photographs of dishes. The photos are all

clear and of high quality. This can confirm to effect of food photographs inside a food post. Second, despite the fact that word description about the taste of the dishes is essential according to scholars Pamela Watson and other researchers; however, according to the article “Building Bridges with Bloggers,” written by Tom Vaughan, words can be subjective because there might be some exchange of interest between the blogger and the restaurateurs. Two of my interviewees both answered that what comes out of the famous blogger’s mouth may not always be authentic because he knows how to tailor their words to readers’ interest. Moreover, according to Pamela Watson, Michael Morgan and Nigel Hemmington, there are two types of bloggers, professionals and amateurs. Therefore, some amateur food bloggers may use dull and unexpressive vocabulary, which can lead to readers’ overlooking the written information in the food post. All these explained the result of Fig. 6 that food photographs being more influential than word description.

Next, there seems to be an inconsistency of my survey result and previous studies. In literature reviews, according to researchers Do-Hyung, Park, Lee Jumin, and Han Ingoo, online users’ comments can govern consumers’ purchasing intension. However, according to my survey result in Fig. 5 and Fig. 7, the influence of comments do not seem significant as they do in the previous study. These two figures indicate that students usually don’t leave any comments after reading the post and they hardly read these comments either. To further understand respondents’ reasons for their answers, I interviewed 5 interviewees about their perspectives on this. Two interviewees said that they don’t read comments because they care more about the photographs and word description. Three interviewee answered that they actually prefer to read comments and trust them more than they trust the food post itself. One of the three interviewees said that he knows the fact that experienced bloggers know how to tailor their words to readers’ taste so as to attract more online population.

Therefore, online users' comments are more genuine than posts composed by famous bloggers. This explanation can be confirmed by my survey result in Fig. 8. According to Fig. 8, 77% of students have suspected that bloggers may receive benefits from the restaurant owners for writing articles and promoting for them. Moreover, three and four months ago, there are news about bloggers writing untrue posts promoting products for companies because there was an exchange of interests between the blogger and the company. After this news, many online users started to mistrust some famous bloggers and suspect that bloggers might write exaggerated posts for the sake of money. However, according to my survey result, despite the fact that there is a growing phenomenon of mistrusting some bloggers, food blogs are still influential and readers put more emphasis on the content itself, not the comments.

In conclusion, online food blogs have drastically influenced how people decide their dining places, and through the survey results and interviews, food photographs turn out to be the most influential factor inside the food posts that govern college students' decision making over diverse restaurants. Also, the survey result highlighted that the majority of college students don't have preference for specific online food blogs. Therefore, it is clear that people are more drawn to visual information than textual information when reading online food blogs. Moreover, although readers might sometimes mistrust bloggers' posts, bloggers' words are still more influential than online users' comments below. Hopefully, in the future, bloggers can work more on their photo editing within their food post and also try to establish reliability to effectively recommend restaurants to readers.

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Appendix

Topic: A Study on College-Aged Students Habit of Reading Online Food Blogs

Survey:

Section A: personal profile

1. What university do you study in?
2. What grade are you in?

Section B: habit of reading online food blogs?

1. Have you read online food blogs before?
yes no
2. How frequently do you read online food blogs in a week?
1-3 times 4-6 times more than 7 times
3. When do you read food blogs?
when I am bored when I am searching for places to eat others
4. What elements within the food post attract you?
posts composed by famous bloggers detailed introduction to the restaurant
clear food photographs detailed description of the taste of dishes online users' comments below the post
5. Have you paid visits to the recommended restaurants after reading the posts before?
yes no
6. Have you ever experienced disappointments after visiting the recommended restaurant?
yes no
7. Do you comment below the posts whether you are satisfied or disappointed with the recommended restaurants?

___yes ___no

8. Have you ever suspected that bloggers may receive benefit for writing posts for the restaurant? (e.g. coupon, free meal, etc)

___yes ___no

9. Food blogs you usually read

___ Felix ___ Joyce 食尚樂活 ___捲捲和土豆拿鐵 ___愛吃鬼芸芸·愛旅遊

___魔鬼甄與天使嘉 ___others

10. Are you willing to have a further interview with me to share your opinions? If yes, please leave your name and email below.

