



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:  
The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

## **CONTRADICTIONS OF THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY: MAKING SENSE OF DIGITAL FOOD SNAPS**

Jessica Nicole Larsen  
University of Illinois at Chicago

Beyond our biological needs for food, food cultures are arranged from series of complicated and often contradictory magical thinkings, where ideologies of food do not match practices (Kaufman, 2010). The introduction of mobile-social photography into everyday food space has disrupted patterns of thinking about the boundaries between technology and food space, provoking reconsideration of the cognitive and sensory orientation of the individual toward a meal, as well as the social appropriateness of the translation of a meal from a private to a public event. This theoretical discussion is aimed at making sense of these reconsiderations, and addressing the relationship between mobile-social photography and what it means for the contemporary eater to engage with food.

Taking and sharing online photos of everyday activities can seem trivial and not ideologically valued. Food photography has been claimed to affect restaurant experience, create conflict between chefs and consumers, and has been ridiculed for its amateurism. On the other hand, like many online social practices, digital food photography may be a method of self-representation and have important social value. Ultimately, however, the ideological criticism of food photography contradicts with its existence as a popular practice among the social collective.

This argument conceives the practice of sharing food photos online using the concepts of mediation and remediation to reflect this contradiction in our imagination of the digital foodscape. The digital photo shared online represents the practice of photography and the values inherent in forming identities and sharing ourselves in the constellation of online social spaces (Larsen & Sandbye (2014) coin this as a 'digital snap'). This discussion conceives digital food snaps as both a remix of the values embedded in photography and online sharing as well as the values of sharing and connecting through food offline remixed in digital space. The resulting claim is that digital food snaps are a transforming the cultural meaning of and reshaping the values of our engagement with food.

### **Popular Aesthetic, Online Food Photography, and Sharing**

Amateur photography is a way to observe the collective imagination of the "popular aesthetic" (Bourdieu, 1965). Criticism of food photography reflects varied standards for

what photography 'should' be. Professionalized photographs possess high-art qualities and symbolize the ideal sought by amateurs. This professionalized standard perpetuates the production, interpretation, and acceptance of images in the form of that standard (Gonzalez, 1992). Thus, the bulk of food photographs, produced by amateurs, seem to fall short of 'good' - allowing the practice of taking photos of food to seem amateurish itself.

Digital photos are an abstraction of reality and embodied version of something real (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). A contradiction is built into the simple viewing of a photograph: on one hand is the cultural ideal that photographs should represent reality, on the other, we must acknowledge that photographs are manipulated and reality is fabricated through them. This tension is exacerbated by the idea that, as copies, remediated things are not authentic. Placing a photo online - perpetuating a copy of a copy - exacerbates this tension even further.

Digital snapping is a new way to engage with photography, but quality-based criticisms and questions of authenticity are also critiques of analog photography. Thus, it's not specifically the 'digital' piece of the food snap that is disdained in popular thought, but more likely the insertion of that photographic practice into the traditionally non-digital engagement of eating.

Furthermore, given its low barriers, digital photography is changing what it means to share photographs. Camera phones elevate the mundane to a site of news and visual archiving (Daisuke & Ito, 2003) and everyday life is remediated as a socially acceptable way to visibly connect with others. The everyday image is something the amateur can create; but it is also something others can relate to and comment on (Murray, 2008). Also, online content sharing platforms have shifted our gaze to archiving ourselves online, and using digital snaps as a means of everyday self-expression and articulation of our public life (Burgess & Vivienne, 2013).

Digital snaps also serve as "an instrument for peer bonding and interaction" (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 62) used to fulfill the desire to create community within a fragment technical society. Collective nostalgia for 'simpler times' (Petrusich, 2012) - where feelings of connectedness were valued - can be alleviated via imagined communities created through sharing, liking, and commenting on online photos. These communities remediate notions of community possessed offline, in that everyday life is a common ground for conversation.

### **Offline Food Culture Remediated in Digital Space**

A social function is shared among the practice of photography, sharing online, and communing through food. Food is a culture of sharing and a nonverbal way we communicate meaning with others that permeates everyday life (Greene & Cramer, 2011). An important element of this culture is selective identity construction - we expresses social relationships via who we decide to share a meal with in the same way we express our biological food identity through our food choices. Likewise, online we construct specific relationships between our communities and ourselves through choices of what, where, and when to share photos.

Both modernity and information society have made these identities problematic by overloading exposure to food-related information, creating struggle in the biosocial need to classify and categorize cuisines or form guidelines for what to eat. Digital food snaps are a way to help categorize and organize these identities. Making public statements through food talk, including digital snaps, structures our experience of food, crafts our identities and constructs our social world, and has intensified in the age of the blogosphere (Ferguson, 2014).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Ultimately, digital snaps are prevalent online, which contradicts with the ideological criticism of their practice as trivial. The present argument outlined this practice as a remediation of photography culture, the culture of sharing online, and the concepts of community and self-identification associated with food culture. Although we imagine food to be an unimportant object of attention, food is content we are naturally drawn to share online due to tendencies to form identity through food and curate our identities online. Digital practices are shaping our contemporary food culture and some online practices, such as digital snaps of food, are entrenched in layers of cultural significance both online and offline.

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