

Youtube, the new source of information and food standards for young women

Maxime David

Phd student

Le Havre Normandy University
25 Rue Philippe Lebon, 76600 Le Havre
Nimec laboratory : ANR Alimnum project
maxime222david@gmail.com

Pascale Ezan

Professor

Le Havre Normandy University
25 Rue Philippe Lebon, 76600 Le Havre
Nimec laboratory : ANR Alimnum project
pascale.ezan@univ-lehavre.fr

Stéphane Mallet

Assistant Professor

IAE Rouen Normandy
3 avenue Pasteur, 76000 Rouen
Nimec laboratory : ANR Alimnum project
stephane.mallet@univ-rouen.fr

Caroline Rouen-Mallet

Assistant Professor

Rouen Normandy University
3 avenue Pasteur, 76000 Rouen
Nimec laboratory : ANR Alimnum project
caroline.rouen-mallet@univ-rouen.fr

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Abstract

Still under-explored, Youtube has become a source of information and food standards, by promoting healthy food. A netnography was carried out, on a corpus of 86 videos "What I eat in a day", concept of videos mainly taken by women, who film their food over one day. Our results underline that the desire to eat healthily displayed in the videos conveys a stereotyped and gendered vision of food, often hiding an underlying desire to lose weight. Moreover, the representations of food conveyed, although studied in a French context, with a very strong food culture, are closer to American representations. The findings of this study should be considered from a social marketing perspective. They can provide keys to understanding how young adults approach the theme of healthy eating, in order to take the phenomenon into account in health policies.

Key words

Social media, youtube, healthy lifestyle, influencers, eating behaviours, young women

Introduction and objectives

Since the health crisis, consumers' desire to eat healthily has increased (Aksoy et al, 2021). In addition, the trust in the food system, but also in the messages of the institutions, is increasingly low. The consumer may then feel a sense of loss and is looking for answers on what to eat. In this context, social media are increasingly emerging as sources of information about food, especially among young adults (Ventura *et al*, 2021). On social media, communities, often made up of young women, are formed, all sharing common values : the quest for an ideal body, the search for nutritional information, self-control (Boepple and Thompson, 2016 ; Chung et al., 2017 ; Deighton-Smith and Bell, 2018). Influencers become role models, trusted by communities (Jin et al., 2019). Positive health benefits for adolescents and young adults can be expected from these nutritional and physical models, but on the other hand, they are likely to have negative consequences when such advice is followed obsessively leading to behaviours reminiscent of orthorexia (Bratman and Knight, 2000). While studies have addressed the links between food practices and social media, particularly on the link between Instagram and the emergence of eating disorders, few have explored the food content present on Youtube. Yet, on the platform, many videos address daily life and food, which proves to be interesting research material to better understand the representations and food practices conveyed (Burgess and Green, 2018). This type of video is very popular and exploring it opens perspectives in social marketing. This study aims to identify if Youtube is a platform that conveys food norms, but also the particularities of food claimed to be healthy.

Literature review

Social networks are now part of the daily life of millions of young people. Soaking up the essence of Web 2.0, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube or even more recently Tik Tok, have managed to impose themselves in the digital landscape, accumulating millions, even billions of regular users. According to the Pew Research Center's study (2021), Youtube's usage is increasing. Nearly 81% of American adults say they have already used the site and 54% use it daily. These sites are both places of sharing, exchange, socialization, but also information. This last dimension is far from being negligible. For example, many people use social media as

a source of information about health (Zhao and Zhang, 2017). This phenomenon is also seen among adolescents, who place more importance on content from automatic sources, recommendations, peers, having a sufficient number of likes, or having significant notoriety (Goodyear et al, 2018). This monitoring of health information, is even more relevant in a global pandemic context, where they are more numerous than ever (Cinelli et al, 2020). The topic of food, as it relates to health issues, is also valued by social media users. As Nelson et al. (2019) point out, social media are full of content about food. The information conveyed about it on these platforms can then impact consumer choices (Zilberman and Kaplan, 2014 ; Klassen et al, 2018). There are gendered differences in how healthy content is perceived and the mechanisms generated by that perception (Nelson et al, 2019). For example, men do not show more desire to eat a dish when it appears healthy to them. Conversely, there appears to be a positive correlation in women between perceiving a dish as healthy and developing an urge to eat it. In general, women are more sensitive to the issue of healthy eating than men, but also more likely to change their behavior when exposed to this content. In addition, young adults are open to receive healthy eating advice from social media, but on the other hand are more reluctant to disclose their personal information for this purpose (Klassen et al, 2018). Moreover, the contents published by influencers on Instagram is particularly related to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle (de Jesus Oliveira Mota et al, 2019). Both through the proposed diet, but also through product placements. Another study, focusing on children, highlighted that VLOGs posted by influencers about food could impact the eating behavior of this population (Coastes et al, 2019). Beyond influencers, some research has also addressed the influence that certain trends could have on social networks. For example, the healthy trend could act as a motivational vector for some individuals, but as a brake for others (Vaterlaus et al, 2015). The trend related to #fitspiration, a contraction of fitness and inspiration, has also been identified (Carrot et al, 2017; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018; Ratwatte and Mattacola, 2019). The contents linked to this hashtag, often proposed by young women and participate in the reinforcement of body standards perceived as difficult to achieve and related to thinness, which can lead to a decline in self-esteem and body image (Carotte et al, 2017; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018; Ratwatte and Mattacola, 2019). In addition, research has often addressed the link between the use of social networks, social comparison and self-esteem, which can then generate negative consequences on the mind and on female eating behaviors (Tiggemann et al, 2018; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018; Ratwatte and Mattacola, 2019). The results of these studies show the relationships between these links, promoting the development of restrictive behavior, which can lead to anorexia. The impact of social media in the development of orthorexia has also been discussed (Turner and Lefevre, 2017). The objective of this research is to better understand what is transmitted through the daily food videos, taking into account the discourses, the representations and the nature of the food presented.

Methodology

Data collection : This research is based on the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2019). During an initial one-month immersion phase, within the most popular French influencer channels, we identified a recurring video concept that seemed relevant to our research. These are the "What I eat in a day" videos, which have the concept of presenting the entirety of one's diet over the course of a day, from the preparation in the kitchen to the tasting. Conveying both discourses on nutrition, but also food practices, we considered that these videos represented a relevant material considering our objective. By searching for "What I eat in a day" videos, via the Youtube search engine, but also through the recommendations proposed by the algorithm, on the right side of the interface, a corpus of 86 French videos could be constituted. All the speeches of these videos, as well as 654 screenshots were collected. In addition, nutritional data were collected. These are based on a method called "SU-VI-MAX". Intended for health

professionals, this one, based on a photo manual indexing more than 245 foods, allows to estimate from visual benchmarks the quantities of food consumed.

Data analysis : Discursive and visual data were analyzed using the eclectic coding method proposed by Saldana (2016). This emergent coding, inspired by grounded theory, has the advantage of adapting to data of varied nature. The estimates obtained by the SU-VI-MAX method were then used to perform nutritional calculations in order to determine the nutritional balance of the plates presented by the Youtube women in relation to the recommendations recommended by the institutions, but also quantitative data (calories, macro-nutrients, micro-nutrients). These calculations were made by a team of nutritionists. Finally, the discursive, visual and nutritional data were triangulated. This allowed us to better understand the discrepancies between the speeches of the Youtube women, who often claim to eat healthily, and the nutritional reality of the plates.

Findings

This study highlights three main results. First, it confirms how YouTube has become a medium for transmitting food standards and information. Indeed, the video medium lends itself particularly well to the exercise, because it allows time for the videographers to develop their words, as well as a narrative framework, often in an intimate setting. This staging of the intimate sphere promotes both the feeling of closeness, the Youtube women addressing the camera as their confidant, but also reinforces the authenticity. All this contributes to reinforce the trust, the value added by the Youtubers and facilitates the assimilation of information. Within the videos, Youtube women offer recipe ideas, but also nutrition advice. As a result, Youtube women act as true expert figures, even though they may not have the qualifications to provide nutritional advice. This normative transmission is also very gendered and linked to representations of female nutrition. The dishes promoted are therefore mostly vegetable, low in calories and animal products (such as meat) are often banned. The second result underlines the sometimes narrow border in the representations, between healthy eating and thinness. This desire for thinness is often displayed in a less explicit way than the will to eat healthily. But these two ideas cohabit in the majority of the videos. The slim body is often shown as a proof of the benefits and the control of its diet. It happens that this one represents the major part of the video's vignette. Tips claimed to be healthy are proposed, mainly aiming at making the dishes less caloric. Nutritional analysis confirms the phenomenon. : 15% of female Youtubers manage to exceed 1800 kCal during their day. One third of female Youtube propose a diet with a caloric intake of less than 1000 kCal, which is less than half of the daily intake recommended by the AFSSA (2001) (estimated at 2200 kCal for a woman). Finally, the third result highlights mimetic processes, leading the Youtube women to reproduce and advise the same dietary practices. One of the most telling examples is the way many female Youtubers prepare their breakfast. Traditional French breakfasts are giving way to many varieties of smoothies, inspired by the American way. The use of supplements, which are often the same, are also present in more than a third of the videos. The very way of thinking about cooking is changing, as it should not take too much time, be simple and if possible, be able to be used to prepare several meals during the week. This phenomenon leads to the erasure of cultural differences in favor of a gendered generational culture, based on a standardized female body appearance coming from North America. Within these videos, the French food culture is being supplanted by North American food culture.

Discussion and conclusion

The results obtained lead to a reflection on several points. Firstly, if we could expect to find the feminine dimensions of food through videos made by women, they seem to be exacerbated.

Three quarters of the videos present a very feminine food symbolism, with a lot of fruits and vegetables, a reduction or even an elimination of meats and low-calorie dishes. Thus, 40% of the Youtube women are vegetarian or vegan, while this type of diet is followed by 2% of the French population (Dauchet and Jung, 2019). These videos convey gendered normative models of how it is appropriate to eat as a woman (O'Doherty Jensen and Holm, 1999). On the other hand, the videos exposing women's daily diets incite them to slim down, in a more or less explicit way, through the image, the speeches, but also through the nutrition presented. This raises the question of the influence of social media on body dictates, including in contents illustrating daily life. Finally, the results suggest that the boundaries of food cultures tend to blur with social media. The relationship to commensality and gastronomy, which is representative of French food culture (or latin food culture), is fading away in favor of an American-inspired culture, in a rather functionalist vision. This raises the question of the homogenization of food cultures, including in countries where there is a strongly culturally rooted model. Nevertheless, this study has limitations. This study focused on videos from a single country. It could be interesting to study how female Youtubers expose their daily food in other countries to better understand the transmission of norms and the mechanisms of homogenization of food cultures.

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Appendix

Table summarizing all results

Youtube is a platform transmitting information and food standards
The representations of food conveyed are very gendered, maintaining stereotypes.
The diets are mainly based on plants, with low caloric intake. Most animal products are banned.
The majority of diets are far too low in calorie intake and induce a desire for thinness.
Within these videos, the French food culture tends to fade away, giving way to an American food culture.