



# Women's Perceptions of Usefulness and Ease of Use of Four Healthy Eating Blog Characteristics: A Qualitative Study of 33 French-Canadian Women



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## ABSTRACT

**Background** Healthy eating blogs are knowledge translation tools used by nutrition and dietetics practitioners for helping people improve their health behaviors and food choices.

**Objective** Our aim was to explore women's perceptions of the usefulness and ease of use of healthy eating blog (HEB) characteristics that might increase potential users' intention to use them as tools to improve their dietary habits.

**Design** We conducted qualitative research using semi-structured individual interviews.

**Participants** Thirty-three women (mean age of 44 years; range=27 to 61 years) living in the Quebec City, Canada, metropolitan area were studied.

**Intervention** Four existing HEBs, written by French-Canadian registered dietitians (RDs) whose main objective was the promotion of a healthy diet, were explored by women during individual interviews. A standardized open-ended interview questionnaire based on the Technology Acceptance Model was used to identify women's perceptions about characteristics of type of blog content delivery, RD blogger's delivery of information, blog layout, and blog design.

**Main outcome measures** Women's perceptions toward the contribution of HEB characteristics to the usefulness and ease of use of those tools to improve their dietary habits were measured.

**Analyses performed** Interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed through an inductive content analysis using NVivo software.

**Results** The most useful characteristics of type of blog content delivery identified by women were recipes, hyperlinks, and references. Among characteristics of RD blogger's delivery of information, most women reported that interaction between blog readers and the RD blogger created a sense of proximity and of connection that was helpful for improving their dietary behaviors. Women's perceptions toward various characteristics of blog layout and design were also discussed.

**Conclusions** Incorporating specific characteristics when designing HEBs should be considered by RDs and future research to promote the use of those tools to support dietary behavior change efforts of internet users.

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**G**ROWING AND EVOLVING WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGIES have changed how people get and share health information.<sup>1,2</sup> Blogs are an integral part of this new communication era and are defined as web-based personal journals with dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order.<sup>3</sup> Blogs are interactive in nature, as they are developed to facilitate and accommodate multiple changes in content and frequent updates,<sup>4</sup> making them promising knowledge translation tools in health care.

According to the theory of the Technology Acceptance Model,<sup>5</sup> two factors—perceived ease of use and perceived

usefulness—can predict the intention to adopt an information technology by influencing one's attitude toward it. The perceived ease of use is defined as the degree to which the user “expects the target system to be free of effort,” while the perceived usefulness is defined as the degree to which the user believes that “using a specific application system will increase his job performance.” The few studies on blogs showed that perceived usefulness and ease of use of blogs are positively correlated with a person's attitude toward blogging, which in turn significantly influences their intention to use it.<sup>6,7</sup> Other factors, such as perceived visual

attractiveness, may influence intention and continuation of use, as well as influence perceptions of usefulness, enjoyment, and ease of use.<sup>8-11</sup>

Healthy eating is a matter of concern and interest for an increasing proportion of Canadians.<sup>12</sup> This trend is reflected by a high prevalence of use of web-based meal idea resources, such as food-community websites and blogs among adult internet users.<sup>13</sup> Blogs provide a new opportunity for registered dietitians (RDs) to engage with their readers to help them improve their dietary habits.<sup>14</sup> To the best of our knowledge, only one study has sought to understand blog interface preferences among blog readers and revealed sex differences; women preferred blogs with a higher proposition of images in the layout, while men preferred blogs whose layout featured more text than images.<sup>15</sup> However, whether specific characteristics of healthy eating blogs (HEBs) could enhance their use by women is currently unknown. This study aimed to explore women's perceptions of the usefulness and ease of use of HEB characteristics that might increase their intention to use them as means to improve their dietary behaviors.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants and Recruitment

French-Canadian women living in the Quebec City metropolitan area were recruited through the mailing list of the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods at Laval University and through ads in local newspapers. Interested women were included if they were aged  $\geq 18$  years old, had internet access and used it more than once a week, and consumed five or fewer portions of fruit and vegetables (F/V) per day (assessed by a 24-hour dietary recall administered by an RD). Low consumption of F/V was an inclusion criterion because we were interested in participants who had suboptimal dietary habits, and consumption of F/V has been identified as a good predictor of overall diet quality.<sup>16</sup> Fifty-seven women responded to our recruitment call, of whom five did not meet our inclusion criteria and 19 were no longer interested after they received further information about the nature of their participation. Participants received no honorarium and all gave written informed consent. This project was approved by the Laval University ethics committee (project number 2012-204/024-10-2013).

### Data Collection Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually by a female facilitator between April and June 2013 at the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods at Laval University. Investigators had experience conducting qualitative research. The female interview facilitator attended several training sessions in qualitative research in advance of study implementation, and had no contact with study participants before screening. Participants were informed that interview sessions were being audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim to accurately capture participants' thoughts for data analysis. Participants were also informed of the research objectives. After completion of an online sociodemographic questionnaire, participants explored popular French-language HEBs written by Canadian RDs with the assistance of the interview facilitator. Individual interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes.

## RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

**Research Question:** What are women's perceptions of usefulness and ease of use of healthy eating blog characteristics that might increase their intention to use them as means to improve their dietary behaviors?

**Key Findings:** This qualitative research, which included 33 adult French-Canadian women, suggests that healthy eating blogs could help improve women's dietary habits if their content and design characteristics are congruent with their preferences and expectations, such as the inclusion of recipes, a search pane and keywords to facilitate navigation, posts that are well structured, and relevant references.

We selected HEBs by typing the following French keywords in the Google search engine: *blog* or *blogue* and *nutritionniste* or *diététiste* (dietitian). We included the first six blogs that met the following criteria: written in French by a Canadian RD, targeted human nutrition as the unique topic, had as its main objective the overall promotion of a healthy diet (ie, did not focus on a specific diet-related disease), published a minimum of 1 new post each month, and had a minimum of 12 posts since blog creation before data collection.

A standardized open-ended interview questionnaire was developed based on our literature review, our previous experience of studying blogs,<sup>17</sup> and the constructs of the Technology Acceptance Model.<sup>5</sup> As shown in Figure 1, questions aimed to identify participants' perceived usefulness and ease of use of HEB characteristics related to four main themes: type of blog content delivery, RD blogger's delivery of information, blog layout, and blog design. The clarity of the interview questions was validated with eight women who did not take part in the main study. Pretesting results identified that two of the initial six selected HEBs provided redundant information and lengthened the interview process without benefit, and thus were removed. The final four HEBs included two written by independent female RDs and two written by female RDs embedded in a larger health-related website.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics and mean  $\pm$  standard deviation were determined for all quantitative data of the online socio-demographic questionnaire using Statistical Analysis Software.<sup>18</sup> The steps of an inductive content analysis<sup>19</sup> inspired our analysis of individual interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. Two authors performed the coding independently using NVivo qualitative research software<sup>20</sup> and then compared their themes to reach consensus on the terminology to be used for each. A third author validated the resulting categories. A fourth author was available throughout the process of analysis to resolve discrepancies. Selected quotes that best reflect the perceptions of women were transcribed from French to English by an English-language medical editor.

## RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the 33 French-Canadian women (mean age of 44 years; range=27 to 61 years)

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