



# Food for thought: Exploring how people think and talk about food online

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the ways in which people communicate about food online by analyzing food-related conversations on Reddit, a social news networking site. The Meaning Extraction Helper (MEH) was used to analyze 2 corpora and define central themes related to online food talk. In light of these themes, the researchers discuss socio-cultural components shaping the food conversations in our society in general as well as healthy versus unhealthy communities, and provided specific directions for future empirical research.

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Food is a foundational part of our daily lives as everyone has a relationship with food in one way or another. While we all think about food on a daily basis, few of us in the social sciences take the time to actually think about the impact of food cognitions. One way to examine and better understand how we think about food is to explore the ways in which we talk about food.

Much research has found that the ways in which people talk or write about certain topics can reveal important psychological, behavioral and social processes and outcomes (e.g., Blackburn, Brody, & LeFebvre, 2014; Pennebaker, 2011; Yilmaz, 2016). Furthermore, by analyzing peoples' language, researchers can accurately infer information about someone's gender (Burger, Henderson, Kim, & Zarrella, 2011), age (Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008), status in a group (Kacewicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2013), and personality type (Schwartz et al., 2013). In fact, recent research suggests that language can serve to identify a person's "psychological signature", or the specific psychological makeup of the individual (Boyd & Pennebaker, 2015).

Researchers have recently started to uncover how the language of food can reveal information not only about the origin of food but

also its connection to psychology more broadly. For example, in research on health behaviors, Chung (2009) found that people who used more first person singular pronouns in their online diet diaries tended to experience more weight loss compared to others. Similarly, Lyons, Mehl, and Pennebaker (2006) showed through website analysis that pro-anorexics used language focused on the act of eating versus recovering anorexic websites that used language to show increased cognitive reflection. Researchers have also found the words used to describe healthy or unhealthy food were predictive of influencing people's psychological states, such as being less attracted to food (Turnwald, Jurafsky, Conner, & Crum, 2017) or even increasing the consumption of healthier food (Turnwald, Boles, & Crum, 2017). Food then is tied to the way people think and act in the world and the words used by people to describe that food reveals their thought process (Lakoff, 2006).

Given the wide range of access we now have to online language written by millions of users, our goals to better understand big questions about people has become more attainable. That is, the access to millions of users allows researchers to study human behavior in a larger context. Online communities in particular have provided researchers with a crucial context to study how groups talk about particular topics and what that might reveal about that group's culture, norms and behaviors (Kramer & Chung, 2011). For instance, one such study has looked at pro-anorexic online communities to learn more about people with eating disorders (Gavin, Rodham, & Poyer, 2008). Results showed that these online

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communities were able to create a bond with other people that were pro-anorexic through their discussion, and as a result reflected a strengthened pro-anorexic group identity.

Another line of research explored people's relationship to food by examining their social media use. For instance, one study used Twitter to learn about people's perceptions related to daily food events (Vidal, Ares, Machín, & Jaeger, 2015). Researchers extracted thousands of tweets that referenced breakfast, lunch, dinner, or snacks to discern different themes related to these meals. One notable theme revealed that tweets containing references to healthy or unhealthy food were related to consequences of food consumption. More specifically, one twitter user described eating healthier food after exercise (i.e., *Healthy dinner after a killer workout*) while another twitter explained the desire to eat junk food late at night (i.e., *I don't care that it's 11:00. I want to go somewhere and eat an extremely unhealthy snack*). This study highlights the critical role social media can play in identifying the relationship between eating patterns and their impact on the health of individuals.

Although several studies examined the effects of language use on people's perceptions of food (Vidal et al., 2015) and relevant behaviors (Chung, 2009; Fried, Surdeanu, Kobourov, Hingle, & Bell, 2014; Weintraub & Aronson, 1969), very few studies have explored how language used by people can reflect their thoughts or feelings about food or food-related issues. Based on various implications of food on human life, this study will explore how people communicate about food, and how people's thoughts and behaviors are informative when trying to understand their consumption patterns and food-related culture, broadly speaking.

## 1. Food perceptions

Several studies at the intersection of language use and food examined the cognitive and emotional effects of certain words on people's perceptions of food. One study documented that specific words in restaurant menus were used to describe food that was more expensive, whereas "linguistic fillers", or words that appeared to be more vague were used to describe food that was less expensive (Jurafsky, 2014). Other comparative studies have also found that traditional words (e.g., *old fashioned*) were paired with cheaper food, whereas more expensive food was labeled with words that described food preparation (e.g., *process*) or provided information about the quality of the food (Freedman & Jurafsky, 2011). Chahuneau, Gimpel, Routledge, Scherlis, and Smith (2012) found that cheaper food, such as mashed potatoes, used the word *real* to help describe the food compared to more expensive food that used words such as *creamy* or *smooth* to connote a rich taste.

This body of work documented that using different words to describe expensive and inexpensive food affected people's perception of food differently. For example, while selling potato chips, advertisers attempted to use language that appealed to people from high socioeconomic backgrounds compared to low socioeconomic backgrounds through the use of negative emotion words (Freedman & Jurafsky, 2011). Results showed that expensive potato chips contained more negative words compared to cheap potato chips. This study also showed that expensive potato chips contained more complex language (e.g., *never fried*), whereas inexpensive potato chips contained words related to tradition (e.g., *time-honored*). In other words, the language used by advertisers revealed information about a target group's set of values.

Overall, language used to describe food influences our perceptions of food. For instance, when food is described using evaluative language rather than descriptive language, people justify the cost of high-priced food based on a heightened sense of taste and satisfaction (Wansink, Ittersum, & Painter, 2005). Similarly, emotionally

charged words (e.g., *dirty*) used in food menus tend to be viewed by people as higher in quality and value compared to words that are considered more traditional (Chahuneau et al., 2012). While expensive food is described using sexual words, such as *sultry*, inexpensive food is described using words associated with addiction (e.g., *these cupcakes are like crack*).

Other work has also shown that people judge food differently based on the words used to describe the food. For example, one study examined hundreds of restaurant menus and found people were less attracted to healthy descriptions compared to unhealthy descriptions (Turnwald, Boles, et al., 2017). Researchers argue that these words have the potential to influence not only how people conceptualize food but make choices regarding their eating habits. Furthermore, recent research has found that language has the ability to not only reflect people's perceptions about food, but shape their behavioral responses. For instance, recent experimental research found that people are more likely to choose vegetables as a meal component when described using indulgent (e.g., *zesty ginger-turmeric sweet potatoes*) language compared to other types of language descriptors, such as healthy (e.g., *wholesome sweet potato superfood*) (Turnwald, Boles, et al., 2017). Such slight variations in language changed peoples' food consumption, and the subtle manipulation of food cognitions via language use has the potential to drive healthier food choices downstream (Turnwald, Boles, et al., 2017).

Furthermore, past research has shown that studying people's perceptions about a given topic can reveal opportunities for clinicians to target and change people's perceptions and behaviors (Stanton, Boyd, Pulverman, & Meston, 2015). For instance, one such study explored the language of childhood sexual abuse victims. Researchers argued that these language markers have the potential to help change clinicians intervention treatments given that a portion of treatment includes studying changes in victim's perceptions. In the context of people's food preferences, understanding which words will influence people's choice will help practitioners design healthier food campaigns. Indeed, researchers have recently argued that indulgent words placed on healthier food items may invite people to choose healthier food options (Turnwald, Boles, et al., 2017).

In light of the past research on language use and food descriptions, it is plausible to argue that language use reflects people's perceptual, cognitive and emotional states. Given that language is used to evoke cultural norms, values and behaviors, the examination of online language can shed light on today's food culture, and its prospective effects on eating behaviors. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

**RQ1.** What type of language do people use online to talk about food?

## 2. Online food talk in healthy and unhealthy cities

As psychological factors are associated with individual-level behaviors, capturing psychological profiles unique to different geographic regions can inform us about society-level behaviors (e.g., communicative, political, economic). To explore the connection between personality traits across the US and socio-cultural factors, Rentfrow et al. (2013) examined whether unique psychological characteristics were distributed across the nation. Their analysis identified three geographical clusters representing psychological profiles, and associations with political, economic, social and health (PESH) metrics. Specifically, the researchers grouped the nation into friendly/conventional, relaxed/creative, and temperamental/uninhibited clusters. Distinctions among three different clusters allowed the researchers to outline practical implications

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