






What Makes People So Fond of Food Travel Vlogs? A Preliminary Study

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Abstract. The large consumption of food travel vlogs during the COVID-19 pandemic shows its potential for destination promotion. However, little research has been done on this video form. This study explores the difference in food travel vlogs, short videos, live videos, and DMO promotion videos (DPVs) and concludes four distinctive characteristics of food travel vlogs (storytelling, authenticity, intimacy, and presence) through 38 semi-structured interviews. A Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model-based conceptual framework is proposed to help understand the mechanism underlying the influence of food travel vlogs on travellers. This study hopes to provide theoretical and practical implications for destination management and vlogging practices.

Keywords: Food travel vlog · Storytelling · Authenticity · Intimacy · Presence · Stimulus-Organism-Response model

1 Introduction

Gastronomy advertising has become a recent trend in destination marketing [4]. With the recovery of the travel industry, local food is being increasingly considered a destination's crucial competitive advantage; more DMOs tend to launch digital marketing campaigns like video promotions to advertise local food to entice travellers [4]. Traditionally, travellers have been influenced by DPVs while nowadays they are more easily affected by UGC travel videos thanks to the prevalence of social media. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the consumption of UGC food travel videos has grown significantly [6]. Therefore, UGC food travel videos could be an alternative way to boost food tourism.

Food travel vlogs stand out for their popularity among mainstream UGC food travel video forms [2]. The top street food vlog channels on YouTube gained millions of followers and billions of views in 2020, showing great marketing potential [2]. Local DMOs should pay attention to this video form and leverage it for food tourism promotion [2]. So far, there is still a scarcity of studies on food travel vlogs and there is little knowledge about this emerging video form and its underlying mechanism of influencing traveller behaviours [9]. To address this gap, this paper explores the difference in travellers' perceptions toward vlogs, other mainstream UGC video forms (short videos and live videos)

and DPVs. The aim is to explore the distinctive characteristics of food travel vlogs which are attractive to travellers so as to explore the mechanism underlying the influence of food travel vlogs on travellers.

2 Literature Review

Travel vlog (video blog) refers to a casual, conversational video form featuring “a travel vlogger converses with an audience in front of the camera and narrates their experiences while showing viewers what they are engaging in, eating, feeling or hearing at a destination” [8, p. 605]. Currently, food travel is one of the hottest topics in travel vlogs. However, it has received little academic attention [9]. Yousaf [9] was identified as a pioneering attempt in this field. Drawing on the SOR model, he examined the vlogger-viewer relationship and confirmed the applicability of the SOR model to explore the food travel vlog phenomenon. The SOR model suggests that a stimulus induces an individual’s cognitive and emotional state, which in turn leads to behavioural responses [5]. Li et al. [5] highlighted the SOR model’s powerful flexibility and its suitability for exploratory studies. Since the key stimulus factors of food travel vlogs and viewers’ psychological processes associated with food travel vlogs remain a mystery, the SOR model can still be applied to bridge this gap. In addition, despite emotions are seen as critical drivers of social media users’ behaviours, little effort has been made to explore their role in the context of food travel vlog. As an emotion-oriented model, the SOR model can also be used to address this gap [5]. Taken together, this paper exploits the SOR model to explore the mechanism of food travel vlogs in influencing traveller behaviours.

3 Methodology

The researchers conducted an exploratory qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. Between May and August 2022, 38 interviews including 17 interviews with worldwide famous food travel vloggers and 21 interviews with the general audience who like watching food travel vlogs were carried out. Evidence shows that 9–17 is the ideal sample size for interviews to reach saturation, this study fully met this standard [3]. The gender ratio was nearly equal in each group. To hear from a wide perspective, this study adopted maximum variation (purposive) sampling. Vloggers with subscribers ranged from 100 to 2.35 million across all influencer levels were interviewed. As for the general audience who attended interviews, their age ranged between 20 and 72 years, and they came from diverse ethnic and education backgrounds. Guided by the SOR model, the key questions asked were: Q1. How do you see the difference in food travel vlogs, other UGC video forms (i.e., short videos and live videos), and DPVs? Q2. What emotions do you expect viewers to have when watching your vlogs/How would you describe your emotions when watching food travel vlogs? Q3. How did food travel vlogs influence viewers/you after watching (e.g., any behavioural intentions triggered)? NVivo 12 was used for thematic analysis after data collection.

4 Findings and Discussions

In general, most participants did not have a rich experience of watching live videos; they therefore talked more about the difference in the other three video forms. In a way, it may reflect that food travel live videos have not yet become that popular on social media right now and that food travellers are more influenced by short videos and vlogs. Though, all interviewees stated that they prefer food travel vlogs compared to other video forms. Overall, for food travel short videos, live videos, and DPVs, sensory stimulation, interaction, and advertising were identified as their most distinguishing features. As for food travel vlogs, their four competitive advantages are described below.

1. Storytelling. According to the participants, short videos (mostly less than 30 s) are “snippets” of life experiences with limited details, where most short videos only present what vloggers are eating and emphasise the attractiveness of food, without sharing their thoughts on food price, taste, and culture that participants care about more. Being consistent with a prior study [1], participants stressed that DPVs (usually within 1 min) are more like a commercial showcasing destination selling points and collage of beautiful visuals and also lacking in narrative. In contrast, vlogs are longer videos commonly 10 min long but make participants feel that they can fully tell stories and details of the food travel experience. Vlogs tend to always have a storyline and thus the audience can get rich information and insights and have a more intuitive and in-depth understanding of the destination food experience. In contrast, live videos are not as competitive as vlogs in terms of storytelling due to the longer duration of the video and viewers’ short attention spans.

2. Authenticity. Under the context of travel video research, perceived authenticity can be understood as unedited, practical, and realistic information of tourism products [7]. Overall, participants reported that they perceive a lower level of authenticity from short videos and DPVs compared with vlogs and live videos due to two reasons. Firstly, participants believed that both video forms only showcase the positive or aesthetic side of the attractions to drive traffic. Secondly, due to the short duration, they tend to focus on the food and neglect the dining environment or full experience. In contrast, participants’ experiences with live videos and vlogs are recognised as more authentic. Authenticity is a key feature of live videos as they are unpolished videos which allow broadcasters to engage and chat in real time with the audience. With respect to vlogs, they also have the strength in reflecting the genuineness of on-site experience. For example, they are shot by using common portable devices like smartphones and capture the raw and original scenery and experience. Additionally, vloggers’ narrative tends to be believed as authentic as the vloggers are considered as individual travellers rather than marketers. Lastly, the longer video length enables vlogs to present the whole picture of food travel experience which can help the audience better understand what it would actually be like in reality.

3. Intimacy. The level of perceived intimacy varies by video forms. Different from short videos and DPVs where the videos tend to be created by professionals, the video creator tends to be more involved in live videos and vlogs. For live videos, there is a strong connection between streamers and viewers because of instant interactions. As for vlogs, a bond between vloggers and viewers tends to be created as viewers perceive intimacy with the vlogger. As reported by participants, if they like vloggers’ identities,

personalities, opinions, and the ways they express themselves, they would have a feeling of closeness to vloggers and thus influencing their behavioural intention towards travel, for example. In the existing vlog literature, scholars have used the concept of parasocial interaction to describe such sense of intimacy [10].

4. *Presence.* Participants emphasised that they perceive a high level of presence from vlogs and a low level of presence from DPVs. From a videography standpoint, DPVs are normally third-person perspective videos whereas vlogs are largely recorded from a first-person perspective, which makes people feel like they are actually on a trip led by vloggers. From a narrative perspective, as narrative is rarely used, DPVs can show the audience what they can see at the site but cannot really show the audience what they can feel at the site. Besides, their narrative way is usually formal and commercial. Contrastingly, vloggers normally describe their in-the-moment feelings in detail and in a casual way like a friend thus is more approachable. In terms of content, DPVs are keen on showcasing destination resources at a macro level while vlogs show engaging micro stories which are close to life. For instance, stories with more interactions and connections between vloggers and local people and places. Participants also pointed out the weaknesses of creating the sense of presence in short and live videos. Short videos are good at providing sensory stimulation; however, it is hard to be fully immersed in a short time; poor internet connection is a constraint for live videos. Findings showed that a mega-vlogger strongly believed that vlogs could be the best way to make the audience feel immersed and feel like they are really there compared to other forms.

Guided by the SOR model, storytelling could be seen as the key stimulus factor of food travel vlogs (S). In the context of vlog, storytelling represents a holistic impact because vlogger's performance and videography (audio-visual elements) are also parts of storytelling as they are used to cooperate with narration [8]. Authenticity perception, intimacy perception, and presence could be seen as viewers' cognitive evaluations of storytelling cues, which could be used in the organism construct (O). The answers to Q2 revealed participants' emotions when watching food travel vlogs. In general, participants experience positive emotions whilst watching the video, and happiness/joy and excitement have been mentioned most. Thus, these emotions could be used as organism factors as well (O). Regarding behavioural outcomes (R), according to the answers to Q3, food travel vlogs could trigger viewers' travel desires. Participants said that if they are attracted by a food travel vlog, then they are likely to have a positive destination image and visit intention, adding the video to their favourite list and using it for future travel plans and sharing it with families and friends who are potential travelling companions. More importantly, food travel vlogs can induce actual travel. Evidence shows that some participants did travel to certain destinations inspired by food travel vlogs.

5 Conclusion

Food travel vlog is an emerging UGC travel video form about which we know little. As a preliminary study, this paper contributes to the extant literature in two ways. Firstly, it proposes that storytelling, authenticity, intimacy, and presence are the distinctive characteristics of food travel vlogs as well as the keys to understand why food travellers are so fond of vlogs rather than other mainstream UGC video forms and DPVs. So far,

the roles of these four factors especially storytelling in facilitating travel behaviours have been less examined in travel vlog research, which needs more attention. Secondly, this paper suggests a SOR-based conceptual framework which is hoped to explain the mechanism underlying the influence of food travel vlogs on travellers. This paper also provides practical implications: DMOs are recommended to incorporate food travel vlogs into marketing campaigns as this paper demonstrates the competitiveness of food travel vlogs. Strategies such as shooting own vlog style videos, forwarding outstanding vlogs on own platforms, and encouraging vlog creations could be considered. For vloggers, this paper helps them better understand the audience's needs, which is favourable for their vlogging practices.

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