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Hybridizing food cultures in computer-mediated environments: Creativity and improvisation in Greek food blogs

Soo Hee Lee ^{a,*}, Marios Samdanis ^a, Sofia Gkiousou ^b^a Kent Business School, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7PE, United Kingdom^b Independent Blogger, London, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ways in which food blogs influence the evolution of food cultures in computer-mediated environments. Food blogs provide a unique setting in which to study individual creativity and improvisation, as they make everyday food practices visible, public and transmittable. This paper proposes a cultural framework of human–computer interaction (HCI) and applies it to the context of food blogging. It stresses the effects of remediation on hybridisation of disciplines, roles and practices, which in turn lead to individual creative practices in the form of bricolage. Three case studies of Greek food blogs abroad are analysed to illustrate the proposed framework and to develop research implications for human–food interaction (HFI).

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1. Introduction

The study of ‘food culture’ is a long-standing topic in cultural studies and sociology (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Lindholm, 2008). The literature addresses issues, such as the origins of national cuisines, the creation of tastes or the impact of migration flows on food culture. Food cultures are broadly understood to be social, hybrid and ever-evolving phenomena (Burke, 2009). Coupling a cultural perspective with technological attributes of human–food interaction (HFI), this study aims to uncover an area of food practice that is hard to explore without the use of digital media: everyday creativity and improvisation by individuals within food cultures. Food blogs and social media contribute to the evolution of food cultures primarily in two ways: they accelerate the exposure and transmission of food practices to a broader audience, while simultaneously rendering more visible and public practices which had previously been private, as bloggers and users increasingly share information and experiences concerning food (Choi and Blevis, 2010; Choi and Blevis, 2011; O’Hara et al., 2012).

This research shed light on the ways in which food blogs become interactive platforms of representing food cultures, allowing bloggers and users to participate in culinary experiences and

adapt or innovate recipes (Deuze, 2006). The main objective of the research is to understand the ways in which a national cuisine can be represented in computer-mediated food cultures, while identifying the ways in which food blogs allow bloggers and consumers to interact with each other and develop hybrid food practices (Burke, 2009).

This distinction between representation and interactivity has been addressed in new media studies using the concept of ‘remediation’, which explains how ‘transparency’ and ‘reflectivity’ lead to the evolution of new media forms from older ones (Bolter and Gromala, 2005). In the context of food blogging, ‘transparency’ refers to the effective representation and communication of certain recipes and culinary practices through digital media which give little room for improvisation, while ‘reflectivity’ shows users’ interactivity and improvisation to be compelling experiences at the interface. Remediation influences food cultures in both cultural and technological ways and intensifies the process of hybridisation.

To understand the effects of remediation on hybridisation of food cultures, we introduce a new analytical framework concerning cultural effects of human–computer interaction (HCI). By reviewing the relevant literature (Foth et al., 2011), we have identified three hybridising effects of remediation: (1) *hybridisation of disciplines*: computer-mediated food cultures integrate knowledge and skills that range from programming to photography, videography and writing about food practices; (2) *hybridisation of roles*: food blogging is seen to be a hybrid role, while users

* Corresponding author. Fax: +44 1227 82761187.

E-mail addresses: s.h.lee@kent.ac.uk, creativeinterface@gmail.com (S.H. Lee), marios.samdanis@gmail.com (M. Samdanis), sofiagk@gmail.com (S. Gkiousou).

often blur the boundaries between the expert and non-expert; and (3) *hybridisation of practices*: in computer-mediated food cultures, food practices and technologies are deeply intermingled, so that food cultures cannot be realised without digital technologies. Hybridisation provides a novel context in which computer-mediated food cultures arise, while the agency of blending, re-inventing and mixing cultural and technological elements takes place as ‘bricolage’ (Burke, 2009; Deuze, 2006). Interestingly, this transition from representation to bricolage stresses the cultural effects of HCI, as social media provide platforms of cultural integration for culinary practices in cross-cultural, hybrid and interdisciplinary contexts.

In this study, we examine three popular food blogs of Greek cuisine to capture the experiences of food bloggers who are mainly Greeks nationals or people of Greek descent living in countries other than Greece. These have been selected as examples of food-related content in cross-national settings which represent evolving cultural and food traditions, ultimately using the social medium to disseminate and re-evaluate them. Greek cuisine has been selected for this research because of its lack of institutionalisation in terms of training systems, rules and grades, compared to French or Spanish cuisines. It represents a case in which the social and cultural dynamics of culinary practices, including internationalisation, depend less on professional chefs, graded restaurants and industry associations and more on the ways in which ordinary people maintain and develop food practices.

The key argument of this paper is that food blogs mediate the evolution of food cultures, accelerating the exchange of information and knowledge about food, while also broadening the spectrum of hybridisation and interactivity. On the one hand, food blogs provide a platform for the sharing of original versions of food practices, while on the other hand, user participation and interactivity (O’Hara et al., 2012) enable hybridisation of food practices based on structured improvisation (Hebdige, 1979) and bricolage (Deuze, 2006). This has also been described as ‘mass innovation’ (Leatbeater, 2010) and collaborative creativity (Choi and Blevins, 2011).

The paper is organised as follows: the first part discusses the interplay between originality and hybridisation in food cultures, and then outlines the proposed framework of ‘cultural effects of HCI’. The second part provides contextual background to the field of food blogging. The third part presents three illustrative cases of Greek food blogging as a conjoint narrative after explaining the research design, method and objectives of the case studies. Finally, we analyse the findings in the light of the proposed framework and discuss the implications for future HCI research.

2. Human–food interaction: remediation, hybridisation and bricolage

Food cultures reflect a fundamental paradox: they express a sense of ‘collective authenticity’ of national cuisines (Lindholm, 2008) but they are also constantly open to creative practices of individuals who act as bricoleurs, blending new elements with traditional structures (Deuze, 2006). As sources of authenticity, food cultures accommodate practices and habits that preserve traditions and distinguish national identities, often becoming means of ‘cultural transmission’ to diffuse elements of a culture to different contexts. For instance, the cuisines of France, Italy and Spain often dominate contexts other than their countries of origin, shaping trends and significantly influencing the cuisines of those other contexts (Steinberger, 2009).

Authenticity can take on different meanings depending on whether it is discussed individually or in reference to collective traditions. Whereas collective authenticity aims to maintain

traditions that shape the identity of a nation or region (Lindholm, 2008), ‘individual authenticity’ is often associated with originality and uniqueness, and requires the presence of a creator in a specific time and place (Benjamin, 1969). Food practices that express collective authenticity can be easily reproduced, if one can accurately follow an original recipe, but individual authenticity as a unique and ‘auratic’ experience is not reproducible, while reversioning erodes it (Benjamin, 1969). Hence, we can identify two definitions of authenticity that apply to food cultures: collective authenticity that refers to traditional food cultures; and individual authenticity that incorporates originality as creativity and improvisation.

Viewing authenticity purely as a collective process that preserves food traditions is unilateral and unidirectional, without taking into account cultural hybridisation by which food practices evolve and change over time. Burke (2009) defines ‘cultural hybridity’ as a ‘kind of mix’, a ‘cross-over’, a ‘pot-pourri’, and a process of heterogenisation that departs from and deconstructs homogeneous notions, such as national or class identity. Often unintentional and sometimes unavoidable, hybridisation is interpreted as a process which has both positive and negative consequences and ‘assists economic globalisation as well as being assisted by it’ (Burke, 2009, p. 2). Hybridisation sets the conditions for individual and collective creativity, which takes place as cultural bricolage (Burke, 2009) based on ‘structured improvisation’ (Hebdige, 1979). In food cultures, traditions as sources of collective authenticity form the structures based on which individuals improvise as bricoleurs.

On closer examination, the evolution of food cultures usually shows a story of hybridisation within and between national contexts. At the high end, *haute cuisine* radically invents and re-invents culinary practices, as chefs become bricoleurs, blending materials and concepts in novel ways and transferring elements from one context to another. For instance, ‘nouvelle cuisine’, a movement in French gastronomy between 1970 and 1997, hybridised classical cuisine and re-shaped French culinary identity (Rao et al., 2003). It was surpassed in the late 1990s by the Spanish ‘nueva nouvelle cuisine’, which signified ‘how Spain became the New France’ (Svejenova et al., 2007). A generation of Spanish chefs trained in Lyon took over the French gastronomic legacy and transferred knowledge and practices from France to Spain, while also radically re-inventing the Spanish cuisine (Svejenova et al., 2007; Steinberger, 2009). While such chefs exercise individual creativity by re-inventing dishes, their food practices quickly become institutionalised or largely acknowledged as characteristics of their particular cuisine.

Nevertheless, French or Spanish cuisines largely owe their uniqueness to institutionalised practices, such as the training, grades and affiliation of chefs (Rao et al., 2003), elements which are almost absent in cuisines such as the Greek. In contrast to the French and Spanish cuisines, in which key actors or institutionalised practices act as gatekeepers for authenticity, Greek cuisine has been shaped mainly by cultural and social dynamics in local communities which maintain certain food traditions. Cultural and social factors, for instance, have shaped Greek culinary practices which have emerged out of necessity, such as the lack of ingredients during World War II, or hybridisation of culinary practices following population flow in the Balkans, Asia Minor and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea (Yiakoumaki, 2006). However, a process of intensive hybridisation, which has taken place since Greece’s entry to the European Union in 1992, has resulted in significant changes to Greek cuisine, including the introduction and progressive integration of products and ingredients from other European countries, such as parmesan cheese from Italy, which have extensively penetrated the Greek market and are used in local dishes, especially salads (Yiakoumaki, 2006).

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