# #FOODPORN

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# Abstract

My original analysis consisted of examining social media's implications of food and its subcultures. Although the intention was to discuss food subcultures and how food porn became a viral trend, after analyzing the research, my results were unexpectedly different. Food porn is not only a trend but a result of the implication of advertisement and how these images stimulate other commodities than just persuasion. Advertisement and marketing companies have helped build recipes for how food should be portrayed. Users on social media platforms like Instagram have used sugar, spice, and everything nice to create an updated recipe for essential food promotion with a pornographic twist. While this seems absurd, viewers have been caught in the gaze unknowingly due to the discreet obscene promotion. This analysis has helped me view the trend of food porn in a unique way that I did not reckon before. Rather than originally focusing on the act of food porn I have honed in on a perspective of how the images have impacted the media and users of the media.

## Introduction

Media has modified the perception of food and its culture(s) in society because media suffices as a form of communication in a variety of ways (commercialism, advertisement, books, magazines, visual art, etc). Advertising and marketing companies use media as an outlet for promotion due to the existence of televisions, radios, and the internet. An eruption of food imagery on social media platforms has created the utilization of the controversial term *food porn*, meaning images that portray food in an aesthetically pleasing manner. The expression was coined from Rosalind Coward's 1984 book *Female Desire* and considered controversial as it insinuated a pornographic gaze towards food. The sharing of food images have been considered to be an "inimical part of a digital culture" and "a universal symbol of social sharing and social gaze above all, human solidarity" (Ibrahim, 1). Food culture has generated a consumer society in addition to several subcultures and has encouraged an adjustment in eating habits.

## History of Food Advertisement

It may be well argued that food porn can be considered a type of advertisement that has stemmed from commercial advertising on television. According to encyclopedia.com, food and beverages were the most advertised type of product on television commercials with an amount of ten to fifteen commercials running every hour. Advertisements were released by individual or group manufacturers, marketing boards, wholesalers, retailers, and distributors. The sixteenth century marked the beginning of modern advertising due to the invention of printing. During this era, the target audience for these advertisements were the upper class because the food and

drinks being promoted were intended for their indulgence. Print advertising expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the development of newspapers, as a result, this prompted the development of efficient distribution and marketing of goods.

During the roaring twenties, advertising was deemed to be a usual approach for marketing companies. This was because consumerism reigned in the 1920s as a result of the immense availability of jobs and an increase in wages. The utilization of advertisement continued to increase with a substantial amount of business emerging from the food industry. Radio networking was established in 1926 and this helped increase the income of advertisement companies because they were allowed to promote products between songs. In the 1930s magazines marketed towards women included about twenty percent of food and drink advertisements. After the introduction of television advertising in the 1960s, the food industry developed methods for pulling the attention of their target audiences. Advertising companies vowed to target children by promoting cereals like apple jacks and cocoa puffs that included toys in the box. As displayed in figure one, many of the cereal boxes included animations of animals in a friendly manner. The images included smiley faces and the color yellow; two commodities that are known for boosting moods in a positive way. This method of consumer attraction is duplicated on social media platforms, like Instagram. Food photography is accentuated through images of Instagrammers enjoying food to their fullest extent and salaciously inviting other users to have the desire to do the same. Other advertising companies stimulated ideas to target children, such as Mcdonald's Happy Meal -- served in a red cardboard box with a


[Figure 1. This photograph was taken from an article titled *How Cereal Transformed American Culture* on Mentalfloss.com]

smiley face intended for children under the age of twelve. Companies decided to create thirty to forty-five-second commercials that would promote food in the most delicious way possible. One advertisement that had a subliminal appeal for adults was the burger. Fast food companies like Wendy's and Mcdonald's would commercialize beef burgers that glistened in the light, the beef patty would be imprinted with patterns from the "barbecue grill", sheltered by a vibrant, green lettuce leaf elegantly placed on top of a bold, red, plump tomato slice, which is then covered by a blanket of cheese gradually melting between the two sesame seeded buns (with just the ideal amount of seeds sitting equidistant from each other on the surface of the bun). After the introduction of the internet, advertisement in the 2000s consisted of banners and websites created from manufacturers. Some of the websites were even marketed towards children just as the television commercials were. Postopia.com, a site that is no longer available, was created in 2001 by the company *Post Cereals.*



[Figure 2. & Figure 3.Photograph taken google images of Postopia.com]

Children had access to games that featured cereals like Honeycombs, Fruity and Cocoa Pebbles, and other brands. The website helped improve sales of the cereal because children were viewing the cereals through the games and wanting to buy them. Advertisements continued to heavily surface the internet as it evolves. Youtube, a video sharing website has included video advertisements before the actual content of the user as a means of marketing. Other platforms like Instagram and Facebook are loaded with photos that advertise products related to each user's recent searches and likes. As a result of my interests pertaining to recipes and restaurants, many of the advertisements on my page include mobile food delivery apps, new recipes, and restaurants within a radius of where I live. Since other "foodies" like myself exist, the content is being circulated by resharing, reposting, and recreating to spark the interest of discourse communities.

## The Rhetoric of Food Imagery

Advertising companies are catching our gaze through overly-scrumptious imagery of food and brainstorming new ideas about the appeal and packaging of their products to food consumers. White Castle, an American fast food chain famous for their burger sliders, used the technique of enticing consumers with their "stripper pig" commercial to promote their BBQ pulled pork sliders. The commercial with a running time of thirty seconds introduces a person in a pig costume dancing in a burlesque style. The setting insinuates that it is a nightclub. Seconds into the pig dancing, a gush of barbecue sauce is poured on top of them in slow motion. This method is well thought out by food bloggers on Instagram who are actively searching for ways to boost followers and expand their food pages. Is the lighting okay? Do the filters help enhance the image in any way? According to a food photography article on *Shopify.com*, there are four essential steps to getting ideal food pictures:

***Plating*** - How the food is arranged. (Unless you are displaying a salad, which calls for a messy mixture, this step is important to attract people no one wants a dish that appears rushed).

[Figure 4. This photograph was taken from an article titled *The Art of Plating* on cbc.ca]

When food is plated at restaurants they are usually separated by nutritional value. If the meal includes a meat, carbohydrate, and a vegetable...they usually occupy a different section of the plate and meet at the middle or not touch to make it appear as if there is more food on the plate than there actually is. When the meal is being plated includes a dessert such as a slice of cake, it is usually surrounded by syrup drizzled in an aesthetically pleasing way, similar to figure four.

***Lighting*** - How light brings out the "good" side of your food.

[ Figure 5. This photograph was taken by Instagram user *@gianna_ciaramello* of a Colossal Falafel Burger.]

Lighting can make or break an image. As a viewer, I do not want to strain to see what is being portrayed. If the photo is taken in a poorly lit atmosphere, it tells viewers that the restaurant may be an atmosphere of evening dining, or that the restaurant is not family friendly. The ambiance might be a quiet, quaint space or on the contrary, a booze-filled room with hipster vibes, voices of people at high volumes and televisions blasting sports channels. When the lighting is well lit, viewers might consider the atmosphere being one that is open to having children dine in. Maybe the time of day portrays that it is breakfast or lunch time as opposed to dinner. This may also

complicate what onlookers think the atmosphere could be since a restaurant with dim lighting is easier to differentiate.

***Editing*** - Filters and/or touch-ups that can be applied to the photo.


[Figure 6. This photograph was taken from an article titled Food Photography 101 on Shopify.com]

Editing is an important factor in photography of any form. Models are enhanced to have the audience gape and desire them. Food is edited in this same manner to appeal to consumers. This enhancement to fit the desires of consumers is the reason food porn is an appropriate term to describe the gaze of food. When filters are applied to photos, as shown in figure six, the colors are bolder than they were before. This makes the food more appealing to viewers since color has been proven to increase moods and stimulate visual attraction.

***Composition*** - How the shot is framed.

When it comes to composition the person responsible for taking the photo (because not all are photographers) can take advantage of showing multiple angles of the food. The audience has been invited to examine close-up images exposing the texture of the ingredients. Like figure seven below,  food such as cheese is made to look extra appealing by drawing close-ups of it

oozing on top or out of a dish. This close up stimulates viewers visually but also persuades them to make their dish in the same way. If I attempt to make a recipe I discovered online, I get disappointed if it does not come out like the picture. I have the desire to make it look as visually appealing as it did online. Others might feel the same way, not only through social media photos but by watching cooking shows on television. Similar to the model example aforementioned; people aspire to physically look like the model or look just as good in the clothes they are modeling.

[Figure 7. This photo is taken from a recipe uploaded to BonAppetit.com titled Best-Ever Grilled Cheese Recipe]

The article ensures that after following these steps, users are bound to get a substantial amount of activity on their pages. While activity boosts on platforms such as Instagram, it serves as a means of promotion for restaurants to increase the amount of patrons visiting.

Color is another factor that plays a big role in what viewers find visually pleasing. Rebecca Lewis, a head dietician and blogger for a website *HelloFresh.com* writes about the

scientific relationship between food color, mood, and flavor in her blog. Lewis explains the science behind how our brains respond to food imagery. She states that endocrine glands such as, pituitary and pineal regulate serotonin allowing us to feel happiness. Lewis explains how each how food color affects the brain and makes us believe it should have a certain taste:

The color **red** stimulates energy and equivalates to the sweetness. Red is a bold color that is used to bring attention in other situations, using the example Lewis uses, a red traffic light.

**Orange** and **yellow** stimulate happiness and equivalate to a moderate sweetness. These colors are paired with happiness and optimism (the same reference I used when explaining the designs of the cereal boxes targeted toward children).

**Green** is associated with a sour taste but, correlates with energy and eco-friendly. Many vegetables are green and many eco-friendly products are green: a reason people associate green things as wholesome for the body, hence, “going green”.

Foods that are **blue** and **purple** are associated with relaxation and people inquire that they taste bitter. Lewis declares dark foods like coffee and pure cacao are dark and experience with dark foods allow us to insinuate that other dark foods will most likely be bitter.

**White** foods are assumed to taste salty and connect to calmness. White is associated with cleanliness, simplicity, and purity. Lewis proclaims restaurants serve food on white plates to allow the food to create a juxtaposition between the color of the food against an all-white background.

Lewis' blog explains why shoppers are searching for bright, yellow bananas and the darkest berries at the grocery store, and if that cannot be found, hasta la vista! On Instagram, photos of salads usually incorporate bright red, grape tomatoes, red onions (which are really a hue of a deep purple), an assortment of colored bell peppers, avocado, and other salad ingredients to create a color palette that sparks the eye of viewers.

In an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants*, Spongebob aspired to sell a product named '*pretty patties*' (a colorful variation of the original Krabby Patty which resembles an average American burger). The citizens of Bikini Bottom laughed at Spongebob because the patties were unusual colors and suspected them to taste unusual due to their appearance. A resident of Bikini Bottom even exclaimed that patties are not meant to be one color. The same assumptions I have made about things that seemed out of the ordinary like white chocolate or commodities that are not food...for instance, the Black Sand Beach in Hawaii.

[Figure 8. A photo of the Spongebob episode 'Pretty Patties' taken from google images]

This cartoon analogizes four experiments conducted by authors Cynthia N. Dubose, Armand V. Cardello, and Owen Maller. Dubose, Cardello, and Maller are apart of the Behavioral Sciences

division of the Food Sciences Laboratory located in Natick, Massachusetts. The abstract in their Journal of Food Science reveals that the four experiments were conducted to assess the effect of food color on flavor identification of non-carbonated beverages and to assess the interactive effect of food color and flavor levels on the perceived flavor intensity and hedonic quality of beverages and cake. In other words, the purpose of the study was to examine the effect of food color on flavor identification. In one experiment, participants were given beverages and directed to wear red-eye goggles underneath a fluorescent red light to mask the color of each beverage and participants were asked to identify the flavor. The experiment resulted in remaining participants not having the ability to guess the flavor until they were allowed to see the color of the beverage. As a child, I remember the candy Air Head, (a taffy-like, candy belt) releasing a mystery flavor in the color white. You would have to guess the flavor without knowing the color. Their other candies came in an assortment of colors and flavors like green apple, blue raspberry, cherry, grape, etc. Dum-Dum lollipops had the same idea as Air Head. The company would insert mystery flavor lollipops into an assortment of other flavored lollipops and leaving a question of what the flavor could be. The factors aforementioned are all methods for stimulating visual hunger. A concept formed by Charles Spence and his team in *Eating with Our Eyes: on the Color of Flavor* -- Spence says visual hunger is a natural desire, or urge to look at food, but could also be an evolutionary adaptation because our brains enjoy seeing food knowing it will most likely precede in consumption.

## The Influences of Food Imagery on Dietary Choices and Eating Habits

Besides food imagery working as a stimulate towards the viewer's brain to fancy the food being exhibited, it influences what viewers choose to consume. Eva Symone Hoogstins, a student at Lunds University, conducted a study to examine whether or not social media influence young adults' food choices through social learning. Hoogstins stated in her thesis that 'Food & Drink' is the second most popular category among active and daily Pinterest users. Pinterest is a website and mobile application company that allows users to discover information shared on the internet through the form of images, GIFs (a lossless format for image files that supports both animated and static images), and videos. Instagram (a photo and video sharing social networking service) is another platform that impacted users' food choices. Yelena Mejova, a research leader of the ISI Foundation in Turin Italy and Sofiane Abbar, a senior software engineer at Qatar Computing Research Institute, analyzed ten million Instagram posts worldwide mentioning the hashtag food porn. They stated in their abstract the purpose of the analysis was to examine if food porn associates with unhealthy food choice identical to how pornography contributes to unrealistic views of sexuality. Mejova and Abbar discovered forty-six percent of the posts mentioned the hashtag food porn and many of posts that were liked being from donut or cake shops, but their research surprised them. Their analysis revealed several unexpected results: one being that food porn has created a new dimension of promoting healthy lifestyles, in addition to healthy food posts having a thousand more followers than posts featuring unhealthy foods.

There is a stigma that comes along with people who are healthy eaters and that has contributed to the establishment of healthy eating as a subculture. Furthermore, clean food is now a trend. Many companies, especially fast food, are promoting the use of no longer utilizing genetically modified organisms in their food and including greater quality ingredients. High-end grocery stores like Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Aldi, and Fairway are on the rise because of the organic, gluten-free, vegan, cruelty-free and eco-friendly products they promote. It allows consumers to feel positive about changing their diets while playing a part in an upscale culture of being able to afford quality food. The same culture portrayed on Instagram when users aim to seem wealthy and earth-friendly. Instagram users have associated healthy eating with "gym life", another subculture on Instagram, and started a movement of weight loss journeys that many Instagrammers are beginning to try by changing diets or investing in tummy teas, coffees, and lollipops. As a result, some people have let social media influence a restriction in their diets, such as:

- ***Pescetarianism*** - A diet consisting of only fish and other seafood, but excluding animal flesh.
- ***Veganism*** - Abstinence from the use of animal products mainly in relation to dieting, but also an ideology that spurns the commodity rank of animals.
- ***Vegetarianism****:* A diet that excludes animal flesh and sometimes other animal products for moral, religious, or health reasons.

Additionally, these restricted diets have been transfigured into subcultures due to the controversy and support they receive from online communities. For example, while the trend of veganism is on the rise, there is always bashing on the sidelines. Users have found a way to

collaborate and build new recipes, budgets, and diets to either share with other members of the community or recruit and expand for personal reasons. This same method is used to help people join fitness groups and change the way they eat all through photo sharing and commenting. In Chia-Fang Chung's, *When Personal Tracking Becomes Social: Examining the Use of Instagram Eating* sixteen women are observed while they establish healthy eating habits through Instagram. It was recorded that many of the women found Instagram more useful for their weight loss journeys than other platforms such as Myfitnesspal and Weight Watchers. According to Chung, Instagram is much more visually stimulating [than MyFitnessPal], it really makes the people more real, or it makes the goals more real. I agree with Chung because many Instagrammers upload photos of their progress and the food they indulge in during their journeys (most of which are greens or low caloric foods). After examining how food visually stimulates the brain, there is no question as to why the right photo could not persuade a viewer to give it a try. Chung's point of view supports my statement that food porn is more than just imagery. It has formulated discourse communities, safe spaces, moral opinions and points of views, comfort, and encouragement. This is signified by the number of comments posted under images consisting of inspirational messages from users who are showing moral support.

## Conclusion

After extensive research on food porn and the effects it has on users of social media platforms, the culmination of my analysis is understanding that food images have a significant impact that urges users to gratify toward substantiated subcultures of food in the media. The traditional routines of advertisement have cultivated methods for persuading their target audience

through mediums like the radio, internet, television, and print. Furthermore, social media platforms have used the same techniques to build expansive food imagery pages and blogs. The connections formed in my paper have proven food imagery in the media suffices more than just a form of advertisement. It has formulated contemporary food subcultures, established supportive online cliques, and generated new communities.

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