

Growing online:

Activist identities in the 'Grow Your Own' English blogging community

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1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of people engaged in growing their own food both through community initiatives and individually (DEFRA 2010; Miller 2015; The National Allotment Society 2019). This trend could be an indication of significant and potentially influential practices and ideologies in Western societies that oppose the current globalised food system: gardening can be seen as a grassroots space to express concerns related to finite and declining resources such as soil and water and a way of both reconnecting production and consumption and disengaging from the globalised neoliberal food system (Larder et al. 2014; McClintock 2014).

An increasing number of those who grow their own food – the activity known as ‘Grow Your Own’ (hereafter GYO) – are sharing information about their growing and harvesting experience through social media (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013; Hearn et al. 2013), an umbrella term that refers to a variety of digital platforms such as social networking websites, photo and video sharing sites, virtual worlds, and blogs (Aichner and Jacob 2015). While technology writers have proclaimed the impending death of blogs, depicting them as outdated media, recent research has shown their vitality and long-lasting popularity, and attested to the uniqueness of these online social spaces where users learn from one another (Head et al 2017; Pettigrew, et al., 2016). Despite this, following a proliferation of academic studies focusing on blogs from 2004 to 2008 (Larsson and Hrastinski 2011), scholarly interest in this area seems to have somewhat decreased (Elega and Özad 2018), arguably due to the rise in popularity of competing, more recent online ‘self-publication’ platforms such as microblogging and social networking websites that offer researchers new opportunities for exploration (Head et al 2017; Pinjamaa and Coye 2016). Although it is challenging to find accurate statistics about blogs due to their highly dynamic and decentralised nature (Schmidt 2007), recent figures provided by the blogging platform Tumblr show that, as of January 2019, the

site had close to 456.1 million blog accounts, up from 392 million in the previous year (Statista 2019). Moreover, the blogosphere is not only numerous but also active. For instance, a survey of British bloggers that aimed to measure activity on their blogs indicates that, of the 93% of respondents, 41% reported that they received between 1,000 – 10,000 unique visitors per month, with the most popular blog categories being: lifestyle, parenting and family, fashion and beauty, travel, and food (Vuelio 2017). These figures demonstrate the enduring relevance of blogs in today's digital landscape and highlight the need for a revival of academic research in this area. Furthermore, while there have been studies that focus on food blogs, including those that approach them from a linguistic perspective (e.g., Diemer and Frobenius 2013), food blogs, especially their contributions to digital food activism, remain underexplored.

In this chapter, we focus on the GYO Blogging Community in England, and argue that GYO blogging represents a form of digital food activism, defined as “an internet-based, organised effort to change the food system or parts thereof in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media” (Schneider et al. 2018: 8). Through a detailed linguistic analysis using the tools of critical discourse analysis, we demonstrate how these bloggers construct themselves as “social actors” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). We first identify sub-topics, grouped into three overall topics that provide an overview of discourse as evidenced in blogs on a macro level. As Van Dijk (1980: 132) notes, “discourse topics seem to reduce, organize and categorize semantic information of sequences as whole” so that we cognitively perceive and memorize it in particular ways; these are linked to how on a micro level, discourse is constructed through specific linguistic strategies. Through a detailed language analysis using the tools of critical discourse analysis, we then demonstrate how these bloggers construct their sense of self vs others through referential/predicational strategies (construction of social actors) (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) as they understand themselves as active, responsible and self-sufficient common-sense environmentalists, with the power to change current harmful practices in agriculture. They thus take on the “capitalist system of production, distribution, consumption and commercialisation [in order] to change the food system by modifying the way that they produce, distribute and/or consume food” (Siniscalchi and Counihan 2013: 6).

One of the key ideas underpinning this study is that food is a critical resource through which activism is materialized and around which activist practices can be mobilized. There is a growing body of research on food activism, largely through the lens of community-based food production and ethical consumerism (Adams et al. 2015; Certoma and Tornaghi 2015; De Hoop and Jehlicka 2017; Larder et al. 2014; McClintock 2014; Thompson 2012; Tornaghi and Van Dyck 2014), and a more recent strand of research looking specifically at digital food activism (Eli et al. 2016; Lewis 2018; Schneider et al. 2018). However, little attention, if any at all, has been given to the ways through which these activists emerge linguistically as drivers of social change and negotiate an identity that brings them close to: other digital communities that strive to impact the way our capitalist world is run (see Svensson et al. 2015 – for examples of other digital activist communities); and those who construct their lifestyle discursively through food-related texts (e.g. Johnston and Baumann 2015, Tominc 2017). Our paper is therefore a contribution at the intersection of food, discourse and digital media studies in line with Androutsopoulos' (2011) call for a more ethnographically-grounded user-related approach to social media language (see also Thurlow and Mroczek 2011 and Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019).

This paper is composed of four parts. First, we review the literature related to blogging, digital activism and digital food activism, the section being followed by a description of method and data. Then we move on to provide an overview of the topics identified in the nine most influential food activist blogs in England in 2016. This sets the stage for our critical discourse analysis of three selected blogs through which we study on a micro level (as opposed to a macro, topic level) how these writers linguistically construct themselves as part of an activist community. The final section briefly summarizes the key findings of the study and highlights its unique contribution to the field, as well as identifies avenues for further research.

2 Constructing Identity through Blogging: Grow Your Own as Digital Food Activism

2.1 Building Community Identity through Blogging

Over the last decade, social media platforms have become an integral part of many people's everyday lives (Fuchs 2017), supporting social interaction and community formation (Hunsinger and Senft 2013; Van Dijck 2013). Blogs, the focus of the present study, are a particular type of

social media; they are essentially personal and easy-to-manage websites presenting content in reverse chronological order (Schiano et al. 2004). Blogs have developed into a relevant component of modern-day popular culture (Baumer et al. 2008) and one of the most used and relied-on online information sources (Johnson and Kaye 2004 2014).

Blogs also serve as tools for self-presentation. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is a fruitful framework through which to examine the dynamics of self-presentation on social media as performance (e.g. Azariah 2016; Dmitrow-Devold 2017). By understanding this in terms of a *front stage* and *back stage*, where the latter is the place where individuals retreat and step out of their role and thus where a more *authentic self* resides, Goffman emphasizes the rather porous dichotomy between the *public* and the *private*. The private refers to the realm of personal intimacy, to something hidden or withdrawn, while the public constitutes what is open, revealed, or accessible (Weintraub 1997). On social media, however, a blurring of the public/private spheres is even more prominent (Boyd 2011), and the front stage is magnified, leading to *hyper-ritualisation*, an editing of real life and an exaggeration of its rituals (Goffman 1979).

As social media became more and more embedded in people's daily routines, "material world" social practices are reformulated in texts and discussions online (Shaw 2012). Van Dijck (2013) discusses the implications of social media for self-presentation, and highlights how these platforms can provide individuals with a stage for crafting a self-image and promoting such an image beyond their intimate circles. In particular, blogs, as Rose (1996) points out, are a form of social media often used by those pursuing personal fulfilment through expressing individual identities. Blogs, in fact, allow people to present highly selective versions of themselves to a variety of interconnected audiences (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2011), giving individuals greater freedom to express their hoped-for identities (Jung et al. 2012).

Guadagno et al. (2008) go a step further and, based on the theories of Foucault (1988), consider blogs a form of online self-presentation and self-expression. It has also been suggested that the essence of blogging is a form of vanity culture enacting social ranking, in a rat race for maximum attention and slick self-promotion (Lovink 2008). In a study looking at how Norwegian teenage female bloggers perform selves in their blogs over time, Dmitrow-Devold (2017) finds that the girls

develop and perform a *blogging self*, an identity/character that is not fixed but relational, situated in everyday interactions with the mainstream blogging community, and becoming, in certain cases, an integral part of the girls' offline experiences. Blogs act as virtual megaphones for citizen journalists and institutional entrepreneurs (Kozinets et al. 2016); they are the next step in a culture of burgeoning narcissism stemming from reality TV and other elements of the modern media environment (Lenhart and Fox 2006). Along the same lines, De Solier (2013) considers blogs a form of productive leisure – a way of expressing a sense of creativity and a feeling of 'making something' in a post-industrial world.

However, while blogs operate as a medium for the expression of identity, they are also a means for community creation (Gurak and Antonijevic 2009). Considering blogs as genres that are characterized not by their content but by the "kinds of uses to which they are put, and the ways these uses define social identities and communities", Myers (2010: 15) argues that successful bloggers write for people like themselves, creating a sense of community (ibid.: 24). In her study on feminist blogs, Keller (2012) argues that, through blogging, teenage girls are actively reframing participation in feminist politics, enacting political agency by sharing personal experiences, forming communities, and creating global networks through which feminist information can be disseminated. Keller's (2012) and Soon and Kluver's (2014) studies highlight the affordances of blogs for community creation, but also indicate how these platforms can aid digital activism, an issue discussed in the following section.

2.2 Blogs as Platforms for Digital Activism

Digital activism encompasses different forms of activism that utilize digital technologies (Gerbaudo 2017) and can be defined as "social and political action exclusive to the Internet" (Vlavo 2017: 6). According to Gerbaudo (2017), since the late 2000s, digital activism has been shaped by a technological orientation, which he describes as *cyber-populism*, that considers the mass web of commercial services controlled by corporations such as Facebook and Google as spaces that, despite their inherent capitalist biases, activists need to harness so as to take advantage of their mass outreach capabilities. Hereof, Tornberg and Tornberg (2016) highlight the agenda setting and framing affordances of social media that, like mass media, can frame issues and events, shaping people's perceptions.

Activists increasingly wield the power of digital technologies to penetrate organizational boundaries and enable social and political change (Ghobadi and Clegg 2015), and websites such as blogs can be important platforms for expressing dissent and expanding the realm of public free speech. Focusing on the informational affordances of blogs, Sánchez-Villar et al. (2017) establish that there is a clear connection between blog usage and political involvement and activism, and suggest that the more useful a blog is perceived the more influence it will have on individuals' political activism. Bloggers can stimulate online discourse around current critical issues and challenge traditional media and political authorities (Bar-Ila, 2005; Bosch 2010). In her study on the Australian feminist blogging community, Shaw (2012) discusses the notion of *discursive activism*, "speech or texts that seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within these discourses, denaturalizing what appears natural" (Fine 1992: 221, cited in Shaw 2012: 42). Shaw (2012) finds that participation in this blog network is an expression of discursive activism in that it challenges and critiques the ideology of mainstream discourses aiming, at least in part, to change them. Collectively and independently of the country of origin, prior research on blogs and politics agrees that these platforms have effects that extend far beyond the personal sphere, with bloggers often cooperating, despite their individualized actions, to build collective identity and make a larger collective impact (Soon and Kluver 2014).

2.3 Grow Your Own as Digital Food Activism

De Hoop and Jehlicka (2017) observe that there has been little academic connection to date between food self-provisioning, GYO and food activism. This is surprising as foraging, GYO, the trading of food and treating food preparation as primary sources of pleasure and entertainment are practices congruent with local food movements and, in turn, food activism (Siniscalchi and Counihan 2013). Food activism is defined as "an action that takes aim at the capitalist system of production, distribution, consumption and commercialization" and considers people's discourses and actions to make the food system or parts of it more "democratic, healthy, ethical, culturally appropriate, and better in quality" Siniscalchi and Counihan (2013: 6).

GYO blogs are essentially food blogs. In the last decade, food blogs have become one of the most popular and authoritative sources of food-related information, addressing the multiple meanings and

motivations of food consumption, and informing and influencing consumers' opinions and purchases (Denveater 2009; Kilian et al. 2012). As Schneider et al. (2018: 6) argue, by offering such information these sites often fill "an information gap" with facts that are otherwise "difficult to obtain", using "the digital realm to redefine and/or expand food transparency, and to disseminate otherwise 'hidden' information to citizen-consumers who may share these concerns." In this sense, blogs emerge as online platforms "*fostering and mediating* activism" (Schneider et al. 2018: 8. italics orig.). GYO blogs can be, therefore, can be understood as venues that enable the emergence of digital food activism. As an Internet-enhanced and/or Internet-based activity (Vegh 2003), digital food activism encompasses forms of food activism that are both enabled and shaped by and through digital media and occur mainly on these platforms (Eli et al. 2018).

Although an increasing number of people are growing their own food (DEFRA 2010; Miller 2015; The National Allotment Society 2019), and sharing their GYO experiences and practices online through blogs and other social media (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013; Hearn et al. 2014), there has been no published research connecting the online activity of people practicing GYO to digital food activism. As we note in the introduction, the intersection of the emerging body of research in the fields of GYO and digital food activism is an area of interest worthy of further study. There are significant numbers of individuals taking up domestic production and consumption of their own food and seeking to shorten supply chains. There are also significant numbers of people writing gardening and lifestyle blogs. This review of the literature has stressed the need for more empirical research into the blogging of GYO as an avenue of digital food activism and it is hoped that this study may bring some new insights into this emerging field of study.

3 Method and Data

This paper is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), an umbrella term for a number of linguistic approaches to discourse analysis that pay critical attention to issues related to ideology and power in discourse. CDA aims to demonstrate how injustices or "social wrongs" are produced and reproduced through discourse, including the simplistic construction of identities (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak 2001, Fairclough 2001). Following Wodak and others' (e.g., Reisigl and Wodak 2001) discourse-historical approach to CDA, we first conduct topic analysis and report on the overall

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topics that appear in the corpus; these provide the “global meanings” of a specific discourse, define the overall coherence of a discourse and can thus affect the way it is memorised and reproduced (Van Dijk 1987: 48; 2009: 62). Further, a more detailed linguistic analysis of three selected texts is then performed, aiming to demonstrate qualitatively how GYO activist identities are constructed in digital discourse on a micro level.

The overall topic analysis is based on a corpus of blogs, written by Grow Your Own gardeners and found by searching “best GYO blogs” and “top UK garden blogs” in Google (June 2017). Purposive sampling was used to narrow down the material; all bloggers studied met a well-defined set of criteria to allow for reliable comparative analysis: all bloggers were British and primarily focused on the domestic growing of food within a private garden or allotment. These searches resulted in a number of curated lists from the mass media and businesses with a commercial interest in bloggers – such as those that sell blogger contacts to companies wishing to promote their products and PR agencies, e.g. Vuelio, Feedspot Blog, and more.

A number of blogs appeared on more than one of these lists, and therefore arguably can be perceived to be the most popular, and therefore influential, in the GYO blogosphere. The sample of nine blogs was then developed containing overall 218 blog posts collected over a six month period from April 2016 until September 2016, coinciding with the main British food-growing season.¹ Of the selected blogs, two were written by men, five by women, one by a married couple, and one by two male friends. In this corpus of blogs, key sub-topics were distinguished and grouped within the three overarching topic categories of Environment, Economics and Food & Health. Each sub-topic was identified as a key-word based on the available data by two authors of this paper; results were then compared and contrasted. The final categories were decided based on overlap of sub-topics in both analyses. As these categories are often interconnected and overlapping, environmental and economic concerns, for example, are often found in the same sentence. In many cases, all three categories can be found within a single blog post.

¹ Ten blogs were initially selected, but as one was later removed from the Internet, so the study was based on nine remaining blogs. The data was reduced from 218 (all blogs that demonstrated activism) to 18 (blogs selected for further topic analysis) by selecting two individual posts from each blogger (one representing implicit and one explicit activism, following Counihan’s (2003) definition).

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Three blog posts among those that demonstrated a form of activism were then randomly selected for further language analysis, although they were checked for representability of the overall corpus. These blog posts are “Why bread is so damn important” (from the blog ‘Life on a Pig Row’, 1 April 2016), “Full of beans - a recipe for Broad Beans and Mint Hummus” (from the blog ‘Urban Veg Patch’, 8 Aug 2016) and “Contaminated compost” (from the blog ‘Mark’s Veg Plot’, 22 Sept 2016).

4 Overview of Blog Topics: Environment, Economics and Food & Health

While these topics – Environment, Economics and Food&Health – may not mark the blogs as activist writing per se, sub-topics provide more evidence for anti-capitalist, change-advocating activism, as advocated by Counihan (2003). Within the environment category, recurring sub-topics across the nine representative blogs (identified by letters A-J) were wildlife, peat-free compost (peat is a substance primarily sourced from lowland raised bogs – an increasingly rare habitat in the UK and across Europe – and its extraction generates greenhouse gases), composting, organic methods, climate change, seed saving and heritage seeds, water saving and food miles (i.e. the distance food travels from the place of production to the place of consumption, e.g. consumer’s plate) (see Table 1).

Table 1 – ‘Environment’ Category by Blog Identifier

	Environment							
Blog identifier	Attracting Wildlife	Peat-free Compost	Composting	Organic Methods	Climate Change	Seed Saving / Heritage Seeds	Water Saving	Food Miles
A	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y		
B	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
D	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y		
E		Y	Y	Y				
F			Y	Y		Y		
G	Y		Y	Y				
H	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
J	Y		Y	Y		Y	Y	Y

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Environmental issues and concerns were apparent throughout. Most of the bloggers explicitly state that they use organic methods and use products that are environmentally friendly. They also explain why they use them. In one of the blogs, Life on a Pig Row, the post “More Food Less Lawns: The Future of Micro-Farming is You” argues for the need to cut down on food miles, which harm the environment, and suggests that GYO is everyone’s responsibility. Another blogger (Mark’s Veg Plot) is concerned with the environmental impact of importing bamboo, offering coppiced hazel (referred to as “they” in Example 1), as a local alternative:

Example 1

“they are made from renewable resources, grown locally, which is good because it removes all the negative aspects of importing bamboo [...] what about the environmental impact of shipping the goods? How much forest is felled to make way for plantations of bamboo?”

As seen in the example above, the blogger is concerned with the negative impact transportation and deforestation have on the environment.

Instances of food activism related to ‘economics’ were produce-related costs and saving money, recycling and upcycling (i.e. reusing discarded objects or material to create a product of a higher quality or value than the original) of materials, large corporations (with a stance opposing them), shopping locally / alternative food networks (AFNs) and free products (that they may have received to review). This can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 – ‘Economics’ Category by Blog Identifier

Blog identifier	Economics					
	Costs and Money	Saving	Repurposing	Large Corporations	Shopping Locally / AFNs	Free Products
A	Y		Y			
B	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
C	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
D	Y		Y			
E	Y		Y		Y	
F	Y			Y	Y	

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G		Y		Y	Y
H		Y	Y		
J	Y	Y	Y		Y

Many blogs, as the following extract from Life on a Pig Row’s post demonstrates, encourage people to grow from seed rather than buy, stressing the economic side of the issue:

Example 2

“Is growing from seed worth it? Damn right it’s worth it. This is hard economics, seed is cheaper and a way for us to learn the worth of plants”.

The same blogger, when comparing the price of willow poles (believed to be from Europe) and bamboo canes (from Asia) that retail at half the price, recognises another economic problem and addresses the reader with a rhetorical question, “How much does a bamboo-grower or worker in the Far East earn for their efforts?” Through this, he points towards the exploitative nature of capitalism, where workers in certain non-European economies work at a fracture of a cost as compared to those in Britain, often without environmental and other protection. As seen here, bloggers are generally very concerned about the capitalist system and its impact on the environment, making it difficult to separate the two discourses.

Within the Food & Health category, common sub-topics amongst the bloggers were the sharing of recipes, taste comparisons between home-grown produce and produce resulting from intensive farming methods, preserving food (e.g. jam making) and health concerns such as the nutritional value or levels of chemicals in home-grown produce in comparison to shop-bought.

Table 3 – ‘Food & Health’ Category by Blog Identifier

	Food & Health			
Blog identifier	Sharing Recipes	Taste Comparisons	Preserving Food	Health
A			Y	Y

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B	Y	Y	Y	Y
C		Y	Y	Y
D		Y	Y	
E		Y	Y	Y
F	Y			Y
G	Y	Y	Y	
H		Y	Y	Y
J		Y		

Safety of food that is consumed, as well as dietary health, was a key consideration for the bloggers. There were many comparisons between the perceived taste and quality of home-grown produce and that purchased from supermarkets as well as the produce’s nutritional value. In one post of ‘Dig my Veg’ blog, the author states that she has decided to utilise her front garden for growing vegetables. This can be considered a form of direct activist stance and action in a society such as UK, where traditionally one’s front lawn is seen as a place for conforming with the neighbourhood, e.g. front-staging, as opposed to back-stage activities of everyday lives (cf. Goffman 1959).

Concerns regarding food and health were also raised in the comments section of the blogs: in ‘Mark’s Veg Plot,’ for example, the commenters discuss the safety of the chemical glyphosate found in genetically modified food and its potentially detrimental effect on the gut biome. Through the comments, these topics are further explored in detail and experiences are shared, as evident from blog post “Contaminated Compost” analysed in the following section. Health was one of the main reasons given by one of the bloggers for becoming a vegan. She largely consumes her own home-grown fruits and vegetables and as a result, believes her life to be less complicated, while also having health benefits. In Example 3 she links health (and body weight) to environment and ethics:

Example 3

“There has been no measuring, weighing or thinking about what I’m eating other than having fun creating things using as much produce from the garden. I’ve loved the food knowing that it is totally cruelty-free and and I’m doing my bit for the environment.”

It is perhaps not surprising that these topics – Environment, Economics and Food & Health, were found to be discussed in GYO blogs; what is fascinating is the breadth and depth of knowledge about gardening and food preparation displayed in these blogs, and the tightly-knit sense of community and mutual support seen through posts and discussions. In the next section we turn our focus to community and support, as we unpack some of the posts in detail, demonstrating how these food activist bloggers discursively construct a positive sense of self as they contrast themselves with big corporations, supermarkets and the capitalist food system in general.

5 Construction of activist identities in three GYO blogs

In this section we demonstrate how GYO bloggers discursively construct activist identities through three blog posts specified in the Method section. The blogs are written in a form of a diary with links to other websites; through them, their writers document their everyday lives focusing on gardening and other food-related activities as they reach out to the reader through an informal, often conversational style characteristic of the genre (Myers 2010). In so doing, they construct the reader as someone interested in GYO, although not yet necessarily part of the community: some of their posts therefore function as tools through which to inform and convince. While the composition of the blog audience remains varied, the authors use linguistic devices, such as the inclusive pronoun “we”, that reassure readers of inclusion (following Myers 2010). Most blogs also include comments from other bloggers, and there is clear evidence of a GYO community through these discussions, containing a sense of solidarity and support. It is also worth noting that as multimodal texts (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011), all blogs also include images of gardening activity, often to demonstrate growth of plants, diseases or the final produce – the latter usually with some pride.

5.1 “You lunch out on lies”: Construction of “us” and “them” in food activist blog

“Why Bread is so Damn Important,” asks the writer of the first blog post in the title of this highly persuasive text. Through it, he sets out to argue the case for home baking bread. The blogger begins the post by metaphorically explaining that he will be dragging “a soapbox across the garden to the top of a hill” to set the stage for convincing the reader not to buy bread at the supermarket, but to make it at home. ‘Shouting from a soapbox’ is metaphorically used in various forms throughout the

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blog: speaking from an imagined podium, the author is aiming to persuade the readers to change their practices, but suspects that his persuasive power may not be strong enough (the soapbox “straining beneath our muddy feet”, “creaking”, we are “wagging in the wind”). Thus other linguistic strategies are deployed through which the reader is gradually brought to the side of the writer.

Before bringing the reader to his side, the reader is constructed as the other, as “you” who have been told about ingredients in supermarket bread, about the production of chicken and beef and how “fast food kills us” but have continued to perceive “food as fuel,” that is, something that provides calories regardless of pleasure. “You” might even know the “lies”, that is that supermarkets create farm names² and that Fairtrade certification is “shit” created for hipsters (possibly such as “you”):

Example 4

“It’s another lie. You lunch out on lies. You eat lies. You shit lies. On a good day you’ll tell people it’s a lie as you dig into fairtrade chocolate that is about as fair about trade as you are about being asked to pay 5p for a plastic bag [...] You know lies. [...] You know best. You tell us everyday. It’s your body. Your mind. Your planet. This is our bread.”

As Example 4 demonstrates, the blogger creates a positive “we” group (those who bake “our bread”) in contrast to a negative “you”—someone who is well aware of the ills of the contemporary food system but chooses to ignore them. The repetition of “you” to address and construct the audience is characteristic of blogs, making readers think they are being talked to directly, while projecting particular characteristics onto them. Myers (2010:97) highlights how the use of pronouns in blogs engages readers and gives them a sense of participation in the group concerned. In example 4, the anaphora emphasises the target subject (“you”), making audience members feel uncomfortable, with the aim of making them recognise the hypocritical ways they may act on a daily basis (e.g. buying Fairtrade products). The key word in this example, “lie,” helps the author to construct “the other” as a superficial hipster who claims to be environmentally aware by purchasing – and even promoting – Fairtrade products, which is a marketing strategy that, according to the

2 In 2016, some British supermarkets (Tesco), have branded products – especially imported ones – with invented farm names in order to make them sound more local (British).

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blogger, is not as fair as it claims to be.

The writer, however, cannot be fooled by the “feel good” environmentalists who claim “moral superiority”, but are in fact driven not by necessity but by “hippy, dippy need to connect to the earth” and, as the author mockingly suggests, the fake need for a windmill in the garden to grind their home-grown barley.³ As opposed to this, and stressing class differences, the author bakes bread at home not because this is a fashionable lifestyle choice, but because unlike today, when bread in supermarkets is “cheap, ridiculously cheap”, “we came to making bread because we couldn't afford to go to the supermarket more than once a month.”

Commodification of anti-capitalist sentiment and its often elitist lifestyle narrative, here represented through the image of the hipster, on the one hand, and the bloggers-activists analysed in these blogs on the other, exposes friction around anti-capitalist activism online as discussed by Giraud (2017: 130). In this case, the bloggers disassociate themselves from the reader constructed online as “you”. In turn, as the text turns towards “we”, the tone of the narrative changes to highlight positive practices that contrast with the lies the constructed reader has been living by.⁴ The activist lifestyle is presented as genuine and slow, and, as we will further show below, involving someone who does not enjoy supermarket food. Rather, real activists bake bread at home, and give it to their friends and family, and through this, “make them happy, make them smile.” The reader, too, is now drawn into this idealised image of bread making by having qualities projected onto them that contrast to “lies”: by receiving bread from the writer (“we give it to you with love, with care”), the hope is that “you will try” to do the same. Through baking their own bread, the readers will hopefully realise “that the time you put in was paid back to you a million fold.” In other words, through bread making the reader is transformed from the distant “you” to one of “us” in an effort to demonstrate that bread making transforms people, making them better and more informed citizens. Through bread baking, they become activists.

³ “Hippy dippy” is defined by Oxford dictionary as an informal (and pejorative) expression for “[r]ejecting conventional practices or behaviour in a way perceived to be vague and unconsidered or foolishly idealistic.” The authors of this blog consider some people’s rejection of conventional farming practices as shallow, although their categorisation of such a hipster is generally rather stereotypical.

⁴ Although, for multiple possible meanings of collective deictics such as “we”, see Reisigl and Wodak (2001).

5.2 Supermarkets, food and identity

One of the recurring concerns of bloggers throughout the corpus are supermarkets, presented mostly as the antithesis of the ‘natural’ and healthy lifestyle that these bloggers seem to seek. Supermarkets are also a culprit when it comes to farming as their low pricing squeezes farmers and therefore reduces the quality of food. Thus, as the text from the ‘Urban Veg Patch’ blog discusses a recipe for Broad Bean and Mint Hummus, the ability to “easily make your own” hummus is opposed to the supermarket product that not only does not contain ingredients that “come from your own patch” but is, as one commenter of this text suggests, also too salty. This concern is further supported by the blog author herself, as she concludes that other supermarket food is also “overloaded with salt.”

The blogger’s solution is to “cook everything from scratch in my own kitchen with salt rarely added”. This is part of her argument for home preparation of food, also put forth by other bloggers and commenters. Through contrast, the blogger shows that food grown at home is tastier: broad bean hummus made of produce grown by oneself is always superior to the store bought because it not only tastes better but also because growing and eating her own broad beans is a way of bypassing supermarkets’ limited choice of produce: in discussion with other bloggers, the writer reveals in the comments section that she did not even like broad beans before she started growing her own because she hated “ordinary” broad beans for which she “developed a loathing /.../when dished up reheated in parsley sauce, with tough skin on, at school.” Growing her own, however, she can choose to grow a variety she likes, as for example red broad beans, the growing of which she described in this post. Likewise, she can make hummus from a variety of vegetables and pulses (e.g. beetroot, which she mentions) that are not available in the supermarket.

The bloggers of ‘Life on a Pig Row’ similarly shows disdain for supermarket food. They not only indicate that home-made bread is tastier than store-made, but also claim that supermarket bread is “full of ingredients that could keep it white and fresh through a nuclear winter”. To this image of everlasting white bread the authors juxtapose the bread prepared by themselves, which is not only “unique” (as opposed to mass-produced supermarket bread) but also therapeutic. Taking a philosophical stance, the authors notes that bread “saved us from a life of apathy, of never questioning, of accepting the status quo,” especially in relationship to food and agriculture. Bread made at home can therefore “do” things for the bakers. It was the baking of bread that taught them

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how to slow down in life as they waited for it to rise and then bake. It was bread that “keeps you at home and stops you from window shopping or impulse buying in the supermarket.” Here, the supermarket is negatively evaluated not only because it sells non-natural food, but also because it consumes time (“pointless wandering around supermarkets”) and is disconnected from local communities (shopping centres are not comprised of “local identity”), while baking bread at home does the opposite.⁵

The contrast between “our” bread and that from the supermarket is further highlighted using the rhetorical device of repetition (epistrophe) where the idea of “our bread” is made increasingly important as the text progresses; at the end of every paragraph the author repeats “This is our bread” until it culminates with a direct address to the reader, directing them to action (bake bread themselves). Example 5 shows the final line in each paragraph of the blog post:

Example 5

This is our bread.

This is our bread.

This is our damn bread.

This is our bread, it saved us from a life of apathy...

Set yourself free, bake some bread.

Given the informal nature of blogs, Myers (2010) finds that questions and directives are used quite frequently. Similarly, in Example 5 the authors use the informal style to project their ideas onto readers by issuing unmitigated directives (“Set yourself free, bake some bread”). Such involvement of the reader into the discourse is commonly achieved through the rhetorical device of repetition, as Tannen (2007) finds for conversational and political discourse, a combination of which could be said to be the discourse in this blog.

⁵ This is an interesting argument, not least because it is generally thought that buying food in the supermarket actually saves time in making/preparing food.

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“Identity and ideology in digital food discourse: Social media interactions across cultural contexts” Bloomsbury.

5.3 “We must keep on trying”: Growing food organically

The two analytic sections above are primarily concerned with the topics of health and economy, two of the corpus topics identified in the previous section. The text from the third blog, ‘Mark’s Veg Plot’, relates to the third, the environment. The blog is an example of a text written for a specific, very narrow audience in mind because the topic, herbicides in compost, is likely to attract a very limited group of readers (those interested in organic farming, hence familiar with technical vocabulary), another feature characteristic of successful blogs (Myers 2010: 91). Through discussion of compost contamination, the author and his blog readers create an online community of those concerned with such contamination as they discuss their own experiences as well as urge others to act. The blog post starts with a report on (and an embedded link to) a scientific article that highlights the finding that a “high proportion of commercial composts are contaminated with residues from weed-killers” which affect vegetables. The author urges “amateur gardeners” to read it, and everyone else to “raise the profile of this issue, and lobby” for this particular weed-killer to no longer be used.

Through the discussion, two groups – indexed by lexical choices – are created. An in-group consisting of “us” is constructed to represent the side of compost users (“we”, “every amateur gardener”, “everyday gardeners (millions of)”, “growers”), while an out-group of “them” consists of compost producers (“producers”, “compost manufacturers”, “commercial brand”, “companies”, “Big Business”). “We” are represented as actively doing various things to tackle this problem: publicising and lobbying about the problem, revealing the effects of contamination on plants, sharing the ways to test compost for contamination, encouraging a boycott of the product, involving a third party (e.g. a celebrity) to put on pressure through the media, posting on garden forums, contacting MPs and so forth, all telling examples of how online and offline lives and actions are intertwined. These efforts, however, are simultaneously portrayed as futile because “when big business is involved, the amateur gardener doesn’t really have a strong enough voice,” because the problem is denied and responsibility for contamination hard to prove. It’s a battle where one group, though numerous and engaged, is unable to take on the other, more powerful one.

Through their comments, other bloggers and commenters reconfirm their sense of shared identity as they commit to continuing their work, research and actively trying to change the system. By

questioning even the most widespread labels that are seen to guarantee being friendly to the environment and health, they turn a critical lens on the label ‘organic’, which they see as “another sales term with little other meaning”.⁶ The deconstruction of the term “organic”, coupled with disappointment with contaminated compost, indexes a larger mistrust in labelling and British legislation, as the “gardening products do not fall under the EU” so there is no body or legislation to control composting of what is termed organic products (in Britain, however, the term organic is not certified). The discussion concludes with a reassurance that the group – the writer, “you” and “Sue” (another blogger commenting) - , will continue fighting this problem through publicising the issues. As Mark says at the end of the comments section, “[w]e must keep on trying” as he thanks other for doing “whatever [they] can” to spread information.

6 Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that bloggers in the present study are deeply passionate about producing their own food. Their use of language, especially positive self-representation strategies (as opposed to negative representation of others), constructs them as educated individuals who understand the wider neoliberal globalised food system. Through description of a range of activities, including an informal group that allows for discussion of issues to do with gardening, they represent themselves as striving to learn new skills and techniques to improve their own production and consumption and production of food in post-industrial modernity. They also construct themselves as relative experts who provide guidance in these areas to others, inviting them into the fold of GYO. The acts of GYO and of blogging about it can be seen as creative production or productive leisure (De Solier 2013) as both are important aspects of use of leisure time in a society which has been disconnected from the domestic growing of food (Tornaghi and Van Dyck 2014). Rewards appear to be reaped at the physical level and experienced through the senses, including pride in one's accomplishments and a connection to earth and the environment, as evidenced through the three main topics identified in the study: environment, economy and food & health. The deep level at which they experience the activities of GYO (involving the senses and feelings of self-empowerment, such as, for example, through the evident camaraderie in the comments section of the blogs through which they support and encourage each other, e.g. “I agree with what you say”, “long comments are a good sign”,

6 Compare a similar critical observation related to the term “fair-trade” earlier on.

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“Identity and ideology in digital food discourse: Social media interactions across cultural contexts” Bloomsbury.

thanks for “thoughtful insight” etc.) suggest that GYO has the capability to move food activists beyond a consumer-oriented approach to politics and to develop a relationship to food more in line with the environmental beliefs of alternative food movements (Click and Ridberg 2010).

GYO blogs could be important platforms for expressing dissent and public free speech (Ghobadi and Clegg 2015) and have the potential to make audience members more attentive to social problems around them and more active in their own lives. The blogs can be seen as a critical vehicle in moving people from thoughts and ideas around food politics into action, as evidenced by the comments under analysis. In our qualitative analysis, we demonstrate how these writers – through various linguistic strategies such as referential and predication strategies – urge audiences to change their ways, shifting from their current harmful practices to more ethical and sustainable ones. As the analysis has shown, there are multiple layers of power within the discourse of these blogs - the authors exert influence over their readers by raising awareness of issues, educating them and influencing their actions and purchasing power. The authors also exert power over the businesses and organisations they are in apparent opposition to by challenging the labelling practices of big food industries, publicising their own activities to shorten the food chain, save money and encouraging others to do the same.

While this study offers some insight into an emergent online community, is only a small contribution to what appears to be a growing area of interest in digital food discourses. The study would have benefited from the addition of in-depth interviews with GYO bloggers to ascertain more detailed information on their motivations and by investigating the practical and ideological outcomes of posting their narratives online. However, this study could be replicated on an ethnographic basis allowing researchers to compare discursive practices of similar communities across different countries and cultures and interrogate the impact of gender, race and class, which would make additional contributions to our understanding of GYO blogging and the construction of activist identities.

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