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Recipe for Success

A qualitative investigation into the role of social capital in the gendered food blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

The genre of food media, as a sub-sector of lifestyle media, has blossomed into one of the most widely consumed forms of entertainment in the twenty-first century. Despite shifting trends, the food industry as a whole remains a gendered industry, with an over-representation of male chefs and professionals. By contrast, female writers have come to dominate the digital sphere of food blogging.

This research project aims to uncover how female food bloggers have used the medium to turn leisure pursuits into professional careers, positioning themselves as experts in the gendered space of food media. Using a theoretical framework informed by feminist social theory, food studies, and Bourdieusian capital theory, this qualitative study relies on semi-structured interviews to investigate how female bloggers draw on various forms of capital to create pathways to success in the field of food media.

Findings presented here suggest that social capital plays an important role in the food bloggers' successful trajectories from amateur to expert. The data also reveals that while food blogging's popularity is on the wane, social media channels such as Instagram represent the "next wave" of opportunities for monetising leisure pursuits. This research makes an empirical contribution to the disciplines of media studies, food studies, gender studies and sociology, and lays groundwork for future study of food media and the economic opportunities for women in digital media.

1 INTRODUCTION

I feel people are genuinely eager to help... you know, some people just like message me and say, "Oh I'd love to get involved because I just love what you do" - like, for free! And it's been fantastic to have support from established food personalities. They would come to my events and write about them, or blog about them, which has been really amazing exposure. So I think the whole kind of peer relation in the food world... to me, has been really fantastic. (Blogger 2)

Paralleling the rise of 'lifestyle media', a category of popular media that celebrates self-improvement and 'productive leisure', the specific niche industry of *food media* has seen a popularity surge in the twenty-first century (Gelber 1999; de Solier 2013). Essential to human survival, food represents "one of the most pervasive sources of value in human existence" (Curtin 1992: xiii) and plays a crucial role defining cultural and political identities. Once considered too banal to merit serious analysis, the study of food has become a growing focus across many disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and the growing field of food studies (Bell and Valentine 1997; Avakian and Haber 2005). Yet while researchers in the social sciences have responded to the call for investigation into food preparation and consumption, questions around how *food culture* shapes society, and the inextricable role of *food media* in the process, remain relatively under-researched (Holak 2014).

Although the convergence of food and media can be traced back to the earliest editions of recipe cookbooks, the phenomenon has dramatically accelerated with the advent of cooking shows in the television era, with a contemporary proliferation of 'celebrity chefs' and 'food influencers' in print, television, and digital media fuelling a growing and lucrative micro-industry in an of itself (Hollows et al. 2004; Rousseau 2012; Tominc 2014). While television and print remain the dominant channels in food media, the twenty-first century has seen new forms of digital media challenge the 'traditional' hegemony of print and television. The Internet has become the primary site of reflexive self-formation (Giddens 1991), with social networks and online communication touching all aspects of contemporary life. According to Rousseau (2012a), the significance of online activity to society is "at least as much about being in a network as [it is] about providing content... inhabiting the space of social media is as important as what comes out of being there" (2012a: 97).

Online activity is a pervasive part of daily life for much of the world's population, and is affecting how humans identify as part of new, online, often trans-national communities and networks (Castells 2009). Among the many forms of digital media, blogs hold a unique position in that they showcase digital self-creation in real time, and provide an opportunity to study media audiences as producers as well as consumers (Papacharissi 2007). Today, there are over 200 million total blogs online, and those belonging to the 'lifestyle' genre (including those pertaining to food) are among the most widely read. While precise numbers are unknown, due to the high rate of blog registration and inactivity, 2012 report listed 16,000

active food blogs in the U.S. (Lofgren 2013), while the U.K.-based Foodies 100 network of food blogs lists 5,000 active members in 2017 (Foodies 100). In addition to contributing to the strengthening of social capital in the form of online communities, blogging has provided many of its authors with opportunities to build their economic capital (Bourdieu 1986; Reay 2004). Hundreds of food bloggers have successfully transformed what began, for many, as a leisure pursuit, into successful careers in professional food writing and publishing, often earning comfortable incomes from advertising, brand sponsorships, and other means of monetisation (de Solier 2013; Burton 2016).

The blogosphere remains a gendered space, with several studies noting the dominance of male producers among the top-rated blogs overall (Harp and Tremayne 2006; Stavrositu and Sundar 2012); however, this gender imbalance is reversed in the niche area of food media, where the vast majority of successful blogs are run by women. 90 of the U.K.'s 100 most successful food blogs on the 'Foodies 100' list (i.e. those with the largest audience size, and highest engagement) are owned and operated by female producers, with similar statistics reflected in the U.S. This question of gender balance is even more striking when considering that a mere 18.5 percent of professional chefs in the U.K. are women (Sachs et al. 2014; National Office of Statistics 2016; Olbrich 2016).

1.1 Research Objectives and Potential Contributions to Academia

The study presented below is an exploration of the phenomenon of food blogging, and an inquiry into how female bloggers have used the opportunities provided by these digital platforms to build successful careers in the food sector. By interviewing elite subjects in the field of food blogging, and employing a theoretical framework informed by feminist social theory, Bourdieusian capital theory, and interdisciplinary food studies, this qualitative study investigates the following question: *How do female bloggers build capital in an industry that has historically devalued their place in it?*

This research makes an empirical contribution to the disciplines of media studies, food studies, gender studies and sociology, and captures the theoretical background required for further investigation into the subject.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Literature Review

This section of the study will present and examine existing literature on the history of food media, in order to provide the context for this research. Since gender relations in food media form the basis of this investigation, feminist literature on food labour, media, and food blogging, are also explored here. Finally, this section presents social capital, as outlined by Bourdieu, as a framework through which to examine gender relations in the niche field of food blogging. The qualitative data was gathered by interviewing bloggers, writing in English, who

are either based in the United Kingdom or whose readership is primarily based there, and as such, the theoretical backdrop focuses on the U.K. as well – occasionally, global or U.S. statistics are cited, to provide context and perspective.

Food Media History: From Print to Digital

[The] ancient manuscript Apicii - De Re Coquinaria, bearing the name of Roman epicure Marcus Apicius, [dates] to the fifth century, making it the oldest surviving cookbook... The existence and preservation of De Re Coquinaria - Latin for 'the subject of cooking' - is a good reminder of a curiosity about food that potentially dates to the beginnings of language and communication (Rousseau 2012: 5)

Echoing Foucault's "technology of the self" (1988) and Giddens' "reflexive project of the self" (1991), the media have emerged as the central forces shaping individual selves in late modernity, and this relationship is vividly illustrated by the boom of 'lifestyle media', including the sub-field of food media, which elevate the "moral process of self-improvement" to a national and even international pastime (de Solier 2013: 34). Since at least the 1990s, this global popular culture, combining leisure, privilege, and taste signalling, has shaped human lives through the media, ushering in a "neoliberal vision of individualisation, meritocracy and social mobility" (De Benedictis and Orgad 2017).

Food media also has roots in shaping political identity. The term 'food media' today encapsulates many different iterations, but the first form was the cookbook. Long a neglected genre, in recent decades the humble cook's manual has attracted deeper analysis for its significance as a cultural artefact, communicating much more than recipes and cooking instructions. Appadurai (1988) has described cookbooks as representations, "not only of structures of production and distribution and of social and cosmological schemes, but of class and hierarchy" (1988: 3). Brownlie and Hower (2007) go so far as to claim that cookbooks have "always had a political agenda," providing cover for their (mostly female) authors to resist oppressive patriarchal structures, by imbuing the books' narratives with personal, often coded interpretations of their history and environment (2007: 230). While cookbook authors' political motivations likely varied throughout history, the genre, and its close association with a nurturing, female archetype, attracted both fervent fandom and snobbish dismissal (Bower 1997).

Despite many predictions to the contrary, cookbooks today are more popular than ever, with U.K. sales of over £87 million in 2011 making them one of the most reliable sectors in publishing (Orr 2011). Part of their enduring popularity can be traced to the boom in television-led 'celebrity chef' phenomenon, which has seen a strong correlation with book success; many of the best selling cookbooks in the U.K. are written by celebrities, most of whom grew their profile on TV (Hollows et al. 2004). Televised cooking originated in the U.K., and early stars of the medium included veteran food connoisseurs such as Julia Child, Delia

Smith, and Keith Floyd. But it was the Food Network channel, launched in the U.S. in 1993 and made available in 155 countries, which cemented the genre of food television as a global phenomenon; with over 90 million viewers, a 2006 report called the Food Network “one of the most watched networks” in the world (Rousseau 2012b: 17). Today, the names Nigella Lawson, Nigel Slater, Gordon Ramsay, Rick Stein, and Jamie Oliver – whose 23 books have broken records ever since the publication of his debut, *The Naked Chef* (1999) – are inseparable from their culinary media personas. In line with the cookbook genre’s success story, a 2010 Nielsen report estimated the value of celebrity chef brands at over £4 billion in the United States alone, with no signs of waning (Nielsen 2010; Johnston et al. 2014).

The fluid relationship between TV food celebrities and print writers demonstrates the interconnectedness of various forms of food media throughout its history, and the same pattern persists in the digital age. A niche market of cookbooks written by food writers who started out as bloggers has grown steadily since the early 2000s, when the first food bloggers began turning their hobby into a source of income, often beginning with advertising revenue through the blog, and later, monetising their writing with the help of sponsors and brand partnerships. According to Ganda Suthivarakom, a former food blogger and director of the magazine *SAVEUR*’s website, “in 2004, to be a food blogger was to be an outsider in the world of food media. Today, it couldn’t be more different” (Suthivarakom in Lofgren 2013). This development is notable because it represents a change in interest on the part of the audience, who today are more accustomed to consuming a mix of digital, broadcast, and print media. It also points to the strengthening influence of amateur and hobby cooks in an arena (food writing), which had previously been accessible only to those who had earned their proverbial stripes via one of two ways: by working in professional kitchens, or by pursuing a journalistic career in food (Rousseau 2012b; Johnston et al. 2014; Cairns and Johnston 2015).

The modern phenomenon of blogging has fascinated media theorists since its inception. Herring et al. (2004) trace the emergence of the first “weblogs” to around 1997, and the medium’s explosive growth in the early 2000s saw millions of bloggers bring their voices into a digital sphere that had very few barriers to entry. The majority of blogs were informal in nature, “tackling unconventional and intimate topics with a whimsical, direct and deeply personal tone” (Papacharissi 2007); themes ranged from political commentary to personal travel logs and lifestyle advice. According to de Solier, early blogs’ huge popularity served to blur the distinction between professionals and amateurs, bringing a new class of producers into previously elite arenas:

The boom in blogging as a form of knowledge-based productive leisure...has seen the Internet become the main battleground for the culture wars between amateurs and professionals in post-industrial knowledge society...some see them as making an important contribution to knowledge society; others see them as destroying it (de Solier 2013: 147)

A sub-genre of the wildly popular lifestyle blogosphere, food blogs, where authors shared recipes, stories, food reviews, and inspiration, rose to prominence in the early 2000s. Most authors had little, if any, professional background in food, and many shared adaptations of existing recipes from cookbooks by chefs, often adding their own commentary or “twist” on, for example, a Jamie Oliver original.

As blog readership rose into the millions, online advertisers, PR agencies, and publishers began to take notice, and began pitching bloggers for partnerships and book deals. What started for many as a hobby soon became a ‘monetisable’ opportunity to earn an income, turning a leisure pursuit into a professional career in publishing (de Solier 2013: 146). Arguably the quintessential contemporary example of this phenomenon is Ella Mills, a former model who began blogging in 2011 under the name *Deliciously Ella*, after being diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. Mills documented how switching to a vegan diet free from “unnatural”, processed foods alleviated her symptoms, and, despite possessing no culinary qualifications or experience in the food industry, quickly built a viral following among a young, health-conscious audience who were attracted to her simple recipes and promises of wellbeing. To date, Mills’ blog has garnered over 100 million page views since launching in 2012, and she is widely considered to be one of the most successful U.K.-based bloggers in the industry, having published four best-selling cookbooks, opened three cafes, and launched a range of retail products under the *Deliciously Ella* brand. By garnering bona fide ‘celebrity chef’ status through blogging alone, Mills has attracted both fervent admiration and a fair share of criticism for her perceived role in promoting the ‘clean eating’ trend that has skyrocketed in recent years (see Wilson 2017 for a succinct critique of the ‘clean eating’ phenomenon).

While Mills represents the most commercially successful iteration of the amateur-to-celebrity-chef trajectory, several food bloggers preceded her rise, and many have followed suit. Today, hundreds of food bloggers have successfully transformed their amateur hobby into successful careers in professional food media, often earning comfortable incomes from advertising, brand sponsorships, and other means of monetisation, and the overwhelming majority – close to 90% – are female (de Solier 2013; Burton 2016). Although extensive academic attention has been paid to food writing and cookbooks (Mennell 1985; Appadurai 1988; Bower 1997; Narayan 1997; Johnston et al. 2014) and blogging (Herring et al. 2004; Harp and Tremayne 2006; Papacharissi 2007; Stavrositu and Sundar 2012; Vasquez and Chik 2015), respectively, there is a dearth of research on the place of food blogs within the canon of food media, and what their success tells us about the cultural zeitgeist (Lofgren 2013 and de Solier 2013 being two recent exceptions). This research project hopes to address this gap, and to contribute to the literature by focusing on the unique role of gender dynamics within food media, and blogging.

Gender in Food Media

Humankind’s relationship to food has been shaped by gender for a long time; as such, food practices represent useful case studies for examining gender relations in society. Bell and Valentine (1997) trace the birth of binary gender roles with regards to food and ‘home-making’

to the early days of industrial capitalism in Europe, when formerly communal lifestyles – in which production (farming, weaving, baking) and reproduction (cooking, eating, child rearing) took place in the same location – were split off into public (workplace) and private (home/kitchen) spheres, respectively (1997: 69). The effects of this split have been so profound that even today, in most societies, research bears out that “women continue to carry the responsibility for the mental and manual labour of food provision” (Allen and Sachs 2007: 1) and food and its preparation are strongly coded as feminine (Innes 2001).

Indeed, despite some changes in societal attitudes towards gender and food, many stereotypes remain tightly bound with femininity in the collective imagination. Examining the persistent classification of male/female labour taxonomy, Kraus (1993) argues, “the division of labour between genders is a social construction and a social structure, but, like every established order, it appears to represent the so-called natural order of the world (1993: 161). Narayan (1997) posits that the ‘mundanity’ of food work, and its connection to women’s place in the private sphere, led to its lack of attention in academia and cultural study, suggesting that these protracted norms extended beyond the social world into the professional.

Unsurprisingly, gender stereotypes are pervasive in food media, too. Cairns and Johnston’s study (2015) found that, although women are represented among the leading celebrity chefs in food media, “there is still a sharp divide between the nurturing, home-focused female *cook* and an aggressive, professional male *chef*” (2015: 11). In examining the importance of ‘self-making’ and branding for celebrity chefs, Hollows et al. (2014) suggest that male chefs benefit from treating cooking as a hobby, turning their meals into ‘special events’ (2014: 183), whereas female chefs ‘sell’ better when they play up to the image of the ‘domestic goddess,’ that feminine archetype popularised by the British food writer Nigella Lawson. An extensive study on culinary personas by Johnston et al. (2014) found that:

(1) culinary personas are highly gendered and organised around the traditional sexual division of labor and a split into market and nonmarket work; (2) feminine personas circumscribe their culinary expertise to the domestic sphere, effectively feminising their cultural authority as devolved from unpaid foodwork; (3) masculine personas employ a wider range of discourses to legitimise their value as cultural producers both inside and outside of the professional kitchen (Johnston et al. 2014: 12)

The division between public and private food ‘personas’ is also perpetuated in the restaurant industry itself, where less than 20% of head chefs in the U.K., and less than 18% of chefs in the U.S., identify as female (Sachs et al. 2014; National Office of Statistics 2016; Olbrich 2016). While there are likely multiple causes for the discrepancy, Kludt (2016) argues persuasively that women are under-represented in the top tier of restaurant leadership primarily because the industry does not accommodate specific needs of female employees when they choose to have

children; “A complete lack of support for pregnancy and childbirth sends a clear message to anyone for whom it's a possibility: This world is not for you” (Kludt 2016: online).

Although decisions around motherhood and maternity leave affect many women, and certainly play a role in perpetuating bias against female-identifying employees in the workforce, it is wrong to generalise the issue to all female-identifying professionals. Adkins has warned of the problems inhering in the assumption that femininity's traditional 'home' in the private sphere can only be emancipated through its movement to the public, economic sphere (Adkins in Adkins and Skeggs 2004: 6). At the same time, glorifying the domestic sphere as the ultimate dominion of female-identifying humanity is also problematic. A more productive approach to challenging traditional gender relations would be to dismantle binaries altogether, by understanding that males, females and non-binary people may choose to inhabit feminine and masculine characters and relationships to food in both private/domestic and public/economic spaces (Moi 1991; Adkins and Skeggs 2004; Leer 2016).

In line with this argument, Martin (2005) locates in the act of food writing a “challenge-to-western-dualism” – an opportunity to break down dichotomies of self/other and high/low culture through communicating the eating, consuming, and sharing food, as well as circumventing the dominance of Western ideas of 'literature' and 'media' (2005: 44). In Martin's words, the negotiation and mediation of food, “that most universal of experiences, seems a likely medium where future disciplinary-transcending studies might fruitfully be pursued” (Ibid: 44). The research presented here makes the case that female food bloggers represent a useful case study for the examination of gender roles in a specific industry, because they have found ways to seamlessly leverage their perceived position in the private sphere (domestic, non-economic), while also straddling the public sphere (via print and digital media, building economic capital) with their chosen platform. A theoretical framework with which to test this hypothesis is provided below.

Theoretical Approaches to Analysing Food and Gender Studies

The contemporary influence of celebrity chefs as culinary authorities is linked in part to “changing patterns of authority legitimation in Western societies, as modernity [transforms] into late modernity” (Tominc 2014: 318). Lifestyle media's celebration of 'aestheticised leisure' plays into the modern propensity for defining identities through leisure practices and conspicuous consumption (Hebdige 1994; Berger 2000). Some theorists go so far as to classify food media and other lifestyle media consumption as an embodiment of the commercial, neoliberal state, and neoliberalism (Broad in Frye and Bruner 2012; De Benedictis and Orgad 2017). Regardless of the political connotations of these trends, it is clear that they present a useful lens through which to examine power relations in society today.

In order to measure how food bloggers negotiate their position within both private and public spheres, Bourdieu's (1986) proposed metaphorical model of social space, in which humans negotiate their identities and social relations through embodying various forms of capital, is

particularly helpful (Bourdieu 1986; Adkins and Skeggs 2004). Despite predating the 'digital age', Bourdieu's theories are remarkably prescient; in contrast to the technologically determinist accounts that tend to dominate in theories of the Internet and digital public spheres, "Bourdieu's *relationalism* enables an enhanced recognition of cultural and collective factors and the power struggles running through digital practices" (Austin 2016: 114). Although Bourdieu himself did not address gender theory in detail in his own writing, his mode of social analysis is popular among feminist theorists who seek to "undo or overcome the traditional individual/social or private/public divide" (Moi 1991: 1020).

Bourdieu's theories of *habitus* and *field* are closely linked to his writings on capital, and are worth briefly revisiting here. Conceived as a framework to illustrate individual agents' relationship to their social structure, a person's *habitus* consists of their socialised norms that inform their behaviour; "habitus captures how we carry within us our history [and] how we make choices to act in certain ways and not others" (Meton in Grenfell 2008: 52). Illustrating the wider context in which individuals operate, Bourdieu's *fields* represent the social arenas in which individuals express and reproduce their dispositions, and where power struggles over different forms of capital take place. According to Gaventa (2003), "field theory helps us to understand how certain actors can be powerful in some fields but much less so in others, even though capital can sometimes translate between fields" (Gaventa 2003: 7).

Bourdieu introduced the idea that "power and dominance derive not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources" (Crossley in Grenfell 2008: 88). According to this theory, capital is the ultimate measure of accumulated labour and value, and presents in three fundamental forms:

"[As] economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the forms of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986: 47)

By presenting cultural and social capitals as alternatives to economic capital, Bourdieu demonstrates how non-monetary assets, such as cultural knowledge and social bonds, act as resources for social mobility, and as such, become sought after and valued in a variety of social contexts.

A robust literature on food studies, labour, and digital media, has drawn on Bourdieu's concepts to examine patterns in the industry (Bell and Valentine 1997; D'Sylva and Beagan 2011; Tominc 2014; Parsons 2015). Studying how food and food practices become markers of social hierarchy, Naccarato and LeBesco's (2012) developed a new concept, *culinary capital*, "to make sense of food as an economic and cultural commodity...and to understand how this is connected to the work of creating and sustaining a sense of Self" (2012: 1). In examining how

Bourdieu's theory helps explain gender divisions in the labour market, Kraiss's writing (1993) is particularly illuminating:

Once women left the house to participate in the value-producing economy, the division of labour between genders resting on the dichotomy of public and private [had to be] restructured... In other words, women's jobs had to be created. And this social arrangement works by a generalisation of the central theme in the male/female taxonomy: by devaluing the labour of women (Kraiss in Calhoun et al. 1993: 165)

Kraiss argues that in the twenty-first century, newly-created 'women's jobs' were devalued in the economic labour market, in order to preserve social hierarchies based on patriarchal dominance. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, the skills most often associated with 'women's work' – "dexterity, linguistic fluency, sociability, flexibility going as far as submissiveness, quickness, accuracy" – became associated with social capital, rather than cultural or economic capital (Ibid: 165).

While different forms of capitals can be converted into other capitals (e.g. economic → cultural; social → economic), these processes are complex and tend to be difficult to pull off in culturally dominant fields. According to Reay (2004), the main questions regarding gender differences in capital accumulation is, "why women have been able to accumulate only certain kinds of capital and why they have been equally limited in converting the capital they have gained into other types" (Reay in Adkins and Skeggs 2004: 60). Although Reay's skepticism about women's opportunities to convert capital is valid, given the gendered history of many social fields (food media included), the reality may be changing, as this research will investigate. This study presents female food bloggers as an ideal case study through which to examine capital negotiation in a gendered field. Its conceptual framework is presented below.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

This research is predicated on the findings, elucidated above, that food media is a gendered sphere, with a strong overrepresentation of female producers (90%) in the food blogosphere contrasting the historic dominance of male chefs in the wider food sector (85%). In understanding these societal trends, Bourdieu's ideas on the different forms of capital – economic, cultural, and social – present "important resources in the boundary work and demarcation of moral hierarchies when considering what counts as legitimate/illegitimate" (Parsons 2015: 5). Since this research is interested in questions surrounding new opportunities for a population (females) to build incomes and careers (economic capital) in a field in which they are generally under-represented (food/ media), the logic of Bourdieu's theory suggests that other forms of capital accumulation must be at play.

A guiding hypothesis for this research posits the following: That female food bloggers, despite lacking economic and cultural capital in the food industry, successfully leverage their position as "experts" in the field through the accumulation of social capital in the food blogosphere.

Part of this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that “one can enter the...blogosphere with relatively little social, political, and economic capital” (Harp and Tremayne 2006: 247), making its opportunities attractive to women seeking to build up expertise and legitimacy in the food sector, despite not having as many professional food qualifications as their male counterparts. By interviewing a sample of ‘successful’ bloggers, all of whom have managed to turn their leisure pursuits into full-time careers – in other words, to turn their social capital directly into economic capital – this research sets out to test the hypothesis outlined above.

Expanding on Bourdieu’s concept, this study accepts the definition outlined by Putnam (1995), who describes social capital as composed of “networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (1995: 664-5) and Halpern (2005), who describes social capital as “a *network*; a cluster of *norms, values, and expectancies* that are shared by group members” (2005: 10).

2.3 Research Question

This study represents an attempt to: (1) understand current practices in the gendered sphere of food blogging; and (2) investigate the role of social capital in female food bloggers’ success. The qualitative approach of this study is rooted in a desire to sample a range of practices, trends and attitudes across the spectrum of food blogging, and food media more generally. The following research question guides the study: *How do female bloggers build capital in an industry that has historically devalued their place in it?*

The chosen focus of social capital narrows the scope of the work, allowing in-depth analysis of gender, capital and opportunity in a specific social field. As lifestyle media, and food media in particular, continue to dominate the cultural landscape, a better understanding the balances of opportunity, inclusion, and exclusion in this field is imperative. This case study sets the groundwork for further study into the dynamics of gender, as well as class, and racial divisions, in the field of food media.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Rationale for Chosen Methodology

The objective of this research is to shed light on how female food experts have used new opportunities in digital media to turn what began, for many, as a leisure pursuit, into a full-time career. Because the research question is concerned with *how* this social process comes about, qualitative interviewing of elite subjects was thus determined as most appropriate method, in order to investigate subjective experiences in the sample. Qualitative interviews are best employed where the researcher seeks to understand the meaning of respondents’ experiences and ‘life worlds’ (Warren 2002: 83), and can provide insights into events in the private sphere, away from the public eye (Lilleker 2003). Kvale (2006) identifies interviewing as being “in line with feminist emphasis on experiences and subjectivity, on close personal

interaction, and on reciprocity of researcher and researched" (2006: 481), further emphasising its efficacy for the chosen topic of study.

It was briefly considered whether the research might benefit from a combined methodological approach. A discourse analysis of food blogs would allow a large-scale comparison of how different bloggers communicate through text and design, and interact with their online audience. However, this approach could not provide rich enough data about the bloggers' personal lives, attitudes, and motivations, and would thus be better suited to a different research question; a dual methodology was thus rejected.

Whereas qualitative interviews are generally conducted with individuals who represent the demographics of some general population, *elite* interviews focus on members of society who are considered experts in a specific field, providing the researcher with an insight into the minds of actors who have played a role in shaping society (Richards 1996). Established food bloggers are considered to have shaped the contemporary food media sector, often setting trends for the industry, and can thus provide a wealth of information on how hobby cooks and food enthusiasts have used the medium of blogging to build social capital in the sector (see Harvey 2011:4 on subjective definitions of 'elite' subjects). Because the research question focuses on the accumulation of capital, this information is best explored via the 'depth interview' technique outlined by Berger (1998), which allows the researcher to investigate particular issues, such as "hidden feelings or attitudes and beliefs of which a respondent may not be aware or that are only dimly in her consciousness" (1998: 55). Although the research is guided by a hypothesis, its primary objective is to better understand subjective practices among female bloggers, and thus a semi-structured interviewing method, following an interview guide, was deemed most appropriate.

3.2 Ethical Considerations and Potential Limitations

One challenge inherent to elite interviewing is the need to balance neutral objectivity with approaches that will encourage the respondent to open up and trust the researcher. According to Miller and Deutsch (2009) "the singular nature of the individual of interest means it is critically important for the researcher to develop a relationship of trust and respect" (Miller and Deutsch 2009: 161). Nurturing this trust necessarily requires the researcher to relinquish some control over the proceedings; for example, gauging the interviewee's mood and willingness to share personal details, and modifying the questions and prompts throughout the interview as a result. Holstein and Gubrium (1998) emphasise that a level of active participation is necessary for deep qualitative research, arguing that is incumbent upon the researcher to set "general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher's interest" (Holstein & Gubrium 1998: 125). This approach can result in an overemphasis on flattery, suggestive prompting and bias on the part of the researcher, and as such, repeated evaluation of researcher reflexivity is paramount throughout the process.

Being responsive to practical and unpredictable limitations is especially relevant to elite interviewing, as elite subjects are by definition harder to access (Richards 1996; Tansey 2007; Robinson 2014). Mauthner et al. (2002) argue for “contextualised methods of reasoning” in considering ethical implications, particularly with regards to feminist approaches to questions of power relations. It is likely that the researcher’s own gender (female) had some bearing on the relationship developed during the interviews, and while this may have been advantageous for the building of trust, it may have also encouraged some bias. Although some level of bias is unavoidable, care was taken to practice reflexivity throughout the interview process, in order to avoid unduly influencing the conversation flow.

A further ethical consideration is that anonymity, even when requested by the subject and granted by the researcher, cannot always be guaranteed for elites, due to their status in society. Quotes pertaining to personal lives and details of the subjects can potentially identify the interviewee to the reader, even if their names are anonymised (Richards 1996; Miller and Deutsch 2009). This study adhered to the principle of informed consent (Warren 2002), and respondents in the study were informed of their right to request anonymity before each interview. One blogger requested to not to be identified in a published version of the study. Because it could not be guaranteed that the LSE Media Department would not share the research in a public forum, as a result, all twelve participants in the study, as well as their blog titles, were anonymised, to ensure that the blogger could not be identified by process of elimination. All respondents received an Informed Consent Document (Appendix 2) in advance of the interview, stating that the conversation would be recorded; all 12 gave their verbal and/or written consent that the conversation would be recorded and used for the purpose of the study as outlined. The design of these ethical procedures was approved by the LSE department of Media and Communications in advance of the data-gathering phase.

3.3 Sampling and Access

In order for food bloggers to be considered ‘elite’ subjects, they must be shown to hold a position of privilege and expertise in their industry (Richards 1996; Burton 2016). This research is premised on the argument presented in the literature review: that established food bloggers represent a sub-sector of food writers, who come from both amateur and professional backgrounds, and who have legitimised their position as food experts in media by beginning their career in the digital sphere of blogging (Rousseau 2012b; de Solier 2013; Johnston et al. 2014; Cairns and Johnston 2015).

For the purpose of the research, an ‘established’ food blogger was defined as a food writer who (at time of the data collection’s begin: April 2017) owns and manages a food blog that is still active online, and who has translated the success of the blog into at least two, if not all, of three other media channels: (1) a book deal (cookbook or memoir); (2) a feature in national news media; and/or (3) a social media following of over 10,000. All three criteria reflected the fact that the blogger made most, if not all, of her income via the blog, and served as proxies for economic capital.

A sample of 35 food bloggers, all of whom fit the above criteria, was purposefully selected to create a long-list of respondents. Following direct outreach to all bloggers on the long-list via email, website contact forms, and social media channels, 12 agreed to participate in the project within the time frame of the research (May 2017-July 2017), and data gathered from the final sample of 12 respondents form the basis of this study. In three cases, a “snowball” sampling method was used, in that the researcher asked a participating respondent to make an introduction to another blogger on the list. Where employed, this method helped build credibility with the respondents.

3.4 Research Tool and Design Pilot

Research tools, such as a consent form, topic guide, and coding approach, were developed following a literature review around qualitative methodology best practices (Richards 1996; Warren 2002; Banaji 2006; Kvale 2006). In examining how researchers can measure Bourdieu’s concepts in social research, Crossley argues that, one cannot simply ask, *‘how much capital do you have?’* Rather, proxy measures such as education level, ownership of ‘cultural goods’ and access to social networks should be employed (Crossley in Grenfell 2008: 91). Following the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, questions in the interview guide (Appendix 3) were designed to investigate proxy measures for economic capital (income streams from the blog), the social field (experience in professional food media), cultural capital (qualifications), and social capital (relationships, mentors, and networks).

A pilot study, addressing the same research question, was conducted to test and improve upon the chosen approach and its tools. Three food bloggers from the sample of 12 were interviewed using an interview topic guide that covered questions relating to three general themes: (1) field and cultural capital; (2) digital media; and (3) social capital. The data from the study was coded using a semi-structured thematic analysis framework. The pilot yielded rich set of data, and brought to light some limitations of the topic guide and interview procedure. As a result of the pilot, changes were made to the interview guide, in order to better test for gender representations in the food bloggers’ personal experiences, which the pilot study had not adequately addressed. The updated topic guide (Appendix 3) was amended to cover the topic areas: (1) field and cultural capital; (2) economic capital; (3) social capital; and (4) gender relations.

Interviews usually proceeded in the order of questions as listed in the topic guide (i.e. beginning with questions field and cultural capital, economic capital, progressing to social capital, with gender questions usually touched upon towards the end), with some exceptions. This chronology of the questions was determined to be the most advantageous to setting up a natural flow to the conversation: For example, field and cultural capital questions (“Can you tell me about your background?”) were determined to be ‘warm-up’ questions, while social capital questions (“Who has inspired you on your journey?”) required an established rapport between the researcher and interviewee. The three bloggers in the pilot study were contacted with the updated questions on gender, once data collection for the main study resumed.

3.5 Coding and Analysis

An inductive approach to data coding and analysis was employed, by which categories of themes were identified in the transcribed data (Ezzy 2002). This coding method was used in order to complement the semi-structured nature of the interview style, and to allow themes to emerge from the data naturally (Kvale 1996; Braun and Clarke 2012).

The semi-structured interview process meant that respondents had often addressed issues without prompting – as such, an open coding analysis allowed similar answers or quotes to be grouped together, and summarised according to the emerging theme (Ezzy 2002: 90). First, quotes related to the research question and guiding hypothesis – field and *cultural capital*, *economic capital*, *social capital*, and *gender relations* – were identified and isolated according to each topic. Second and third line-by-line readings of the transcripts elicited more specific sub-categories, which were summarised in thematic headings.

4 RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Following the interview process, some statistics on the bloggers' educational background, experience, and income streams, were collected in a table (see Appendix 1) to gain an overview of the sample. Beyond these rudimentary statistics, most of the data was coded and categorised according to themes in its original, transcribed form (see Appendix 4 for an example of a transcribed interview). In the section that follows, blogger demographics are briefly summarised, and the qualitative data then integrated into the discussion, in the form of relevant quotes. Quotes are presented in condensed version, with certain naturalistic speech elements removed for brevity. Identifying details have been redacted where necessary. Bold formatting is used to highlight particularly relevant statements.

4.1 Sample Demographics and Overview

The majority of bloggers in the sample were self-taught cooks, with only four out of twelve having any formal chef's training. All twelve bloggers had completed third-level education of some kind, and five had completed a diploma or degree in a writing-related field. This echoes de Solier's (2013) findings that over 75% of bloggers have advanced degrees, and confirms the perception that most successful food bloggers do not have a professional background in food. All twelve had turned to blogging full-time after undergoing a career change. Eight began blogging as a hobby, while still working in their previous careers, and eventually focused on blogging. Four made the change to full-time blogging after taking maternal leave from their previous careers, but only one of these four (Blogger 9) had previously worked as a chef in the food sector.

The average amount of time it took for a blogger to turn the blog hobby into a career was around two years, depending on when the blog was first set up. Early pioneers of the medium took longer (between 2-3 years) to 'establish' their blog, while newcomers to the field were

able to build an audience and earn an income from the blog at a faster rate (less than a year). The earliest blog had been established in 2007, while the youngest blog had begun publishing in 2016.

The most common source of blog-related income is through sponsor partnerships, in which corporate, usually food-related brands pay bloggers to write posts featuring their products. Six out of the twelve bloggers listed book advances from publishers, and/or book sales, as their main income sources.

4.2 Field and Cultural Capital

Emphasis on 'Self-taught' Credentials

In the process of enquiring about bloggers' background in the field of professional cooking and food media, almost all of the bloggers placed strong emphasis on 'self-taught' credentials, and expressed deference for other "experts". This theme was in line with de Solier's (2013) finding that food bloggers tend to express their respect for their professional counterparts (chefs, food writers in print), seeking to "complement professional material media with their own amateur perspectives" (2013: 148). The bloggers in the sample were emphatic that their success and expertise in preparing, photographing, and writing about food was self-taught, while simultaneously expressing their admiration for "real" professionals:

I always still have this sort of impostor complex... I did this event in Bristol, with some of the most amazing female chefs and food writers... I was just like, "Noo! I haven't really achieved anything yet!" I feel kind of uncomfortable being put together with like, ten amazing women. It's almost embarrassing! (Blogger 2)

I didn't know much about blogging really. I'd always liked writing and always liked cooking, and it seemed the obvious thing to do. I just wanted to write down my experiences. They were all very... clichéd, in a way- I was very aware that I was writing what many people had written before, and probably much better [than me]. (Blogger 8)

But then people started reading it! And then I was like, "Oh, Gosh, what is this?" I was getting comments, and I had no idea what I was doing. And I discovered that I was an actual blogger, about food – by accident! (Blogger 10)

The bloggers' acknowledgement of their own amateur beginnings was expected, especially considering that the majority of the sample had not completed qualifications in food. Still, the vehemence with which these food writers play down their credentials by referring to their success as "accidents," resulting in "impostor complex," is striking, and supports Johnston et al.'s (2014) finding that "feminine personas circumscribe their culinary expertise to the domestic sphere [of] unpaid foodwork" (2014: 2), in contrast to traditionally masculine food

personas, who do not shy away from aggressive self-promotion (Brownlie and Hewer 2007; Naccarato and LeBesco 2012; Hollows et al. 2014; Leer 2016).

4.3 Gender Relations in the Field

When the conversations directly addressed the gender balance and potential biases in the field, many respondents stressed the differences between the wider food industry and the blogging community. This finding was unsurprising, given the statistics and theories elucidated in the literature review above. Blogger 5, who had worked in several high-end restaurants before turning to writing, described “kitchen culture” as hostile to female bloggers:

Yes. It's mostly men in kitchens. And also, as a blogger, as a female blogger in a restaurant... they all make fun of you. You're not seen as legitimate, you know? I think you can't compare the two. (Blogger 5)

All bloggers with professional kitchen experience described it as “unpleasant” and even “hostile” for women. Blogger 9 had quit her job as a chef when she became pregnant with her first child, and her reflections on the restaurant industry were critical:

Working in the restaurant was horrendous. Yeah, it's awful. I mean, as inspirational as [celebrity chef name redacted] is... he's an amazing, kind guy, but his kitchen is like any other kitchen, you know what I mean? So... it was rough. It was tough. It did things to my sense of identity. It's all hierarchy, and actually people feel like they have to be horrendous to you. I left as soon as I had my son, and started writing for [national newspaper name redacted]. (Blogger 9)

These findings support both Kraus (1993) and Narayan's (1997) arguments that women's food labour is devalued, especially when measured against spheres in which men are dominant. The second quote supports Kludt's argument (2016) that the food industry's “motherhood trap” excludes many female chefs from building on their careers in the restaurant industry when they have children, forcing them to retreat entirely, or reinvent themselves as food writers – although a larger sample of chefs-turned-bloggers who took maternal leave is necessary to draw any conclusions.

In contrast to the wider industry's hostility, the blogging community provided a creative outlet for women who were “passionate” about food, but who didn't necessarily have the qualifications of a chef, and often worked full-time in a different career, according to Blogger 10:

When I started out properly, in 2011, we were just people who had these unique ideas for a blog, and all very passionate - there were some men, but mostly women - but women who also had a career, and did that on the side because they were really passionate about it (Blogger 10)

That the contrast between the gendered kitchen and the gendered food blogosphere came through in the interviews is no surprise, and confirms the literature and hypothesis of the study. It also provides some support for Stavrositu and Sundar's (2015) finding that flexibility of the medium, agency and passion are driving forces for why women set up blogs in the first place.

4.4 Social Capital

Strong Social Bonds in Online Food Communities

The questions designed around social capital elicited strong data in support of the study's hypothesis that social capital plays an important role in female bloggers' paths to success. Almost unanimous references were made to the importance of "community" bonds, both between bloggers and their audiences, and within the blogging community itself. Blogger 1, who makes most of her income from advertising revenue based on blog visits, described her international audience as a "connected" community:

I have followers in Australia, and the US, and Saudi Arabia, and like... random places. And what connects us is the fact that we're really into cooking and we like to celebrate food. (Blogger 1)

Several bloggers emphasised the role of social media platforms in providing opportunities to interact with both audience members and other bloggers. The most commonly cited social media platform was Instagram, which many bloggers used to promote their blogs, as well as to share personal stories, ideas, and inspiration. Blogger 2, who had left a career in academia to focus on her blog and supper club event business, described Instagram communities as a refreshing change from her previous social circles, and also highlighted it as a source of collaboration opportunities:

The contrast to the academic world, I just felt that the whole world of foodies is so inclusive and friendly. My main social platform is Instagram, and it's just incredible how much positive feedback [I have received]. I've met so many amazing people through Instagram, and new collaborations were formed because of it. (Blogger 2)

References to social media channels' influence were plenty, but seasoned bloggers pointed out that the emergence was recent. Blogger 3, who had been writing full-time for over 7 years, described "first, second and third waves" of new bloggers entering the sphere. She highlighted the evolving nature of online support networks within blogging communities:

There are more Facebook groups and Instagram groups [now], where people are more supportive to each other's work... that's quite a recent development, because... before then, blogging was quite a solitary thing, and an individual thing, and it was

hard... to connect with other bloggers without feeling that sense of competition. But I think that everyone has now realised that... there's plenty of room for everybody.
(Blogger 3)

Blogger 3's reflections on the changing nature of online groups provide valuable historical context for how bloggers' accumulation of social capital evolved, suggesting that as the number of bloggers grew, the process became more amenable to newcomers. Echoing Blogger 3's sentiment, Blogger 6 was enthusiastic about the idea of sharing an audience with other passionate food writers:

The community is absolutely key, so whether that's Facebook groups, or people you meet at events, I think you learn so much from each other... that's really significant in your development cycle as a blogger. And what's really interesting because of that, is that you have new people come in... and they look 100 times more professional than ours did when we launched, you know, six, ten years ago, because of course they have the benefit of everyone's experience. And I think that's a great thing. (Blogger 6)

Several interviewees made references to friendly competition among food bloggers as a positive thing. Blogger 4, who was building a food 'brand' in the healthy eating niche, described the mutual benefits of promoting other people's work in a shared market:

I think- why not support [name redacted], why not help her...? We're all growing this industry, and everyone understands when you start up you own business, trying to get the business to grow is hard. Why not help each other out as much as possible? (Blogger 4)

All of the references to community building, social networks, and friendly competition help support Stavrositu and Sundar's (2012) hypothesis that blogging is "empowering" to women, *specifically because* it allows them to experience a sense of confident agency as well as "a deep sense of community" (2012: 370). The findings suggest not only that social capital is a crucial element in food bloggers' success rates, but that female bloggers share an almost unanimous enthusiasm for building social capital, and helping others to do so, too.

Mentorship as Valuable Social Capital

Mentorship emerged as a uniquely prized and important form of social capital, allowing bloggers to build out their networks, learn from more experienced writers, and reach new audiences. Several bloggers described with great warmth how they had reached out to personal food writing "heroes" in other blogging communities, and were met with support. Blogger 8 expressed how reaching out to mentors had helped her in the editing and publishing process:

Yesterday I sent an email to a very lovely American blogger [who has] been quite lovely about my Instagram posts recently... and so I just plucked up the courage to ask her advice about writing, and we exchanged messages for about half an hour, and then she said, "Right, send me a PDF of your book... and let's have a Skype call, because I'd be happy to talk to you as a writer and editor, about your book." And I could have cried [with happiness]! (Blogger 8)

Indeed, the social bonds of mentorship seemed to extend beyond national borders for several respondents. Blogger 10, who is based abroad in another European country, but writes in English on "Anglophile topics," described a similar phenomenon of forging deep bonds across borders:

In the UK, I've had a lot of people supporting me, and I think the best ones, who kind of believed in me, and inspired me when I was just starting out - I was just scribbling small notes with my photos, and [food writer name redacted] came to a conference and recommended some writing to look at, and one of the examples was mine! And she gave me great advice - she said, "Write something every day. Even if you don't publish it." (Blogger 10)

Blogger 2 described how forging a friendship with a more successful, published writer (Blogger 9 in this study), helped "catapult" her name into the spotlight with every mention on social media. This sort of promotion was particularly valuable to Blogger 2, as she gains most of her income from selling tickets to monthly supper clubs via her blog:

I've been quite lucky obviously having [best-selling cookbook author, Blogger 9] promote my website was extremely useful to kind of getting the exposure for my project. Getting any mention on Instagram from [name redacted] suddenly gets me like- fifty new followers! And the best thing is that it's a real natural thing. (Blogger 2)

The last quote in particular illustrates how social capital (friendship bonds, reciprocal promotion) can translate into other forms of capital (Krais 1993; Reay 2004) – in her case, potential economic capital in the form of ticket sales from new social media followers. Blogger 2 was explicit about the economic benefit that she gained from her connection to Blogger 9; her experience and that of others in the sample thus support the idea that food bloggers are adept at turning social capital into economic capital, to their advantage.

Rise of Instagram and Social Media Communities

Many of the bloggers voluntarily provided predictions for the future of blogging, often reflecting on the influence that social media channels played in changing patterns of success. Blogger 8, who had recently published her second book after growing her blog over several

years, likened blogs and social media accounts to “online CVs”, suggesting that evidence of a large and loyal audience was perceived by publishers as an asset:

When a publishing house looks at your blog, they've got everything: they've even got a ready, established social network. You come to a publisher now, and you have: a blog with X amount of readers, and an Instagram account with X followers... you might have other accounts - so you come, essentially, like, ready! (Blogger 8)

Blogger 8's reference to her audience and follower numbers present a clear emphasis on the value of social capital in the form of a large, engaged audience in providing opportunities for economic capital (in the form of a publisher deal). In a similar vein, Blogger 3 mused that Instagram in particular was breaking down barriers to entry into the food media sector, making it possible to turn the social capital of a large audience (“followers”) into economic capital, in the form of brand sponsorships, more quickly:

I think social media platforms themselves have started to overtake blogs, because people are realising that actually, if as an influencers you can be paid by a brand to, you know, snap a quick photo on Instagram... I mean, how much easier is that, than, you know, setting up a whole thing at home?! (Blogger 3)

Supporting the observations above, Blogger 2, who had worked in professional kitchens before focusing on her blog, reflected that newcomers to the genre of food media had an easier, and quicker, path to success, thanks to Instagram:

Because of the, kind of freedom to express yourself and share your food and recipes through blogs and social media like Instagram, people can actually... you know, they don't need to kind of do this whole kitchen thing and struggle for years before they get their recognition (Blogger 2)

All of the above quotes implicitly acknowledged the role of social capital, in the form of Putnam's (1995) “network, norms and trust”, play a significant role in allowing food bloggers to accumulate income (economic capital) more efficiently. The many references to Instagram suggested that bloggers with an eye to the future understood the potential of new social media platforms to complement and even challenge the role of blogs; still, all bloggers who referred to using social media saw it as an opportunity rather than a threat.

'Relatable' versus 'Aspirational' Content: Critiques and Responsibilities

A noticeable theme repeated across many of the conversations arose around honesty and “a relatable voice” as a necessary quality to ensure the success of their blog. Although bloggers used different words to express the trait, they agreed that putting an “honest” or “genuine” picture of their own personality, home life, and family, was crucial to building “trust” in their

audience. Several bloggers connected this idea with the concept of a “personal brand”, which they said they cultivated via their blog. Blogger 3 described the advice she was given while completing an online diploma in Food Journalism:

They said, “You should register your actual name as your domain name”... the reason that it’s good to do that is because then you’ve got longevity and you know, you’re writing because you’re really trying to create a brand that is you. That reflects you. (Blogger 3)

Blogger 6 came to realise that sharing “relatable content” resulted in more audience feedback and engagement, after which she decided to build her blog around that particular style of writing:

I shared food from the start, but it was very much what my son and I were cooking, it was often messy... wasn’t necessarily particularly original... but it was our take on it, and we were having lots of fun, it was relatable. And very quickly, my audience kind of responded to a particular type of content. So, recipes, activities, tips... that’s kind of what I focused on. (Blogger 6)

Respondents expressed varying degrees of reflexivity about this trend, with Bloggers 3 and 6 above mentioning the practical, positive aspects of “personal branding” and the “relatable” nature of their blogs. In both cases, the respondents referenced the “bonds” that they created with their audience, suggesting that social capital played a large role.

Reflecting on the effects of sharing personal details online, to cultivate her own “brand”, Blogger 8 expressed that, although she did not feel pressured to produce personal content, she had begun to wonder whether her personal life was “over-exposed” through her choice of “career”:

I do sometimes struggle with feeling maybe over-exposed... My younger sister is very- she’s quite critical. She just doesn’t understand why I put so much on Instagram. She cringes at it, and she thinks it’s “too much”. But I think... it’s what I’ve chosen to do. I’m bewildered at what seems to be a career now, but it is... it is a career because it’s how I make my money. But it is pleasurable. (Blogger 8)

When asked similar questions related to the value of “personal branding”, other bloggers were more critical about the trend, which they termed “aspirational content”. Johnston et al.’s (2014) thesis on television chefs posits that “aspirational” elements of modern culinary celebrities – “a life of leisure, delicious foods, and time to cook them” (2014: 5) – are a key ingredient to their success, because they cultivate their audience to desire their life. Blogger 7, who often co-writes her blog articles with other bloggers and nutritionists (including Blogger 12 in this sample), was roundly critical:

I think because we're just so honest... I just don't think other bloggers are like that? We're both quite big personalities, and quite open about our personalities. And we think that exposing that to our audience is really important, making our audience feel like they know us? We don't want to promote... what's the word... aspirational content. We want to be ourselves - we just want to be with them [the audience].
(Blogger 7)

Here, Blogger 7 drew a clear distinction between being “honest” and projecting an “aspirational” lifestyle. Given that the concept of “aspirational content” implies an engaged, loyal audience, it is fair to suggest that it represents one of the mechanisms of social capital’s influence on bloggers’ success. Several bloggers independently referenced the more nefarious consequences of this trend, citing the “clean eating” movement as one of the niche areas in food media that has recently blossomed thanks to bloggers and “social media influencers” with large followings. Blogger 2 expressed concern about the proliferation of “clean-eating experts”, who promote certain diets and lifestyles in a context of “wellness” and “healing”, often without qualifications:

With the whole clean eating frenzy... you have people who don't actually have qualifications neither as nutritionists nor as a chef... and they give out advice, and they suddenly have millions of followers... and- you know, it's a bit dangerous... as with anything, I think you need some expertise or experience before you start
(Blogger 2)

Blogger 12, who has written on her blog about her past struggles with anorexia, and now uses her platform to provide support for people suffering from eating disorders, was similarly critical of certain bloggers’ complicity in promoting “clean eating” practices without credible, expert support.

I worry about this whole explosion of “clean eating” bloggers, because... I was always told as a journalist, that when you write something - anything, doesn't matter what it's about - you check it, you check it again, you ask the experts... you have a real responsibility with that, you're putting it out to a lot of people, if even one person reads it- you have a responsibility (Blogger 12)

Further reflecting on the possibly dangerous consequences of “clean eating” bloggers promoting radical diets and restrictive eating habits, Blogger 12 concluded that the online communities, brought together by food bloggers, were now so socially powerful that bloggers had a responsibility to recognise the consequences of their influence. The concerns expressed by these bloggers in relation to clean eating seemed to suggest a level of reflexivity with respect to their trade, as well as a sense of responsibility about the effects of building trusting, bonds with their audience communities.

5 DISCUSSION

This research project set out to answer the question: *How do female bloggers build capital in an industry that has historically devalued their place in it?* The qualitative approach allowed this research to explore in depth how different bloggers described their unique paths to success. Several key patterns emerged across the data, and these supported the hypothesis. Analysis of the data demonstrated that social capital, in the form of “networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1995), played a significant role in allowing female food bloggers in the sample to turn their leisure pursuit into careers. Again and again, bloggers described situations in which strengthening social bonds resulted in increased economic capital, in the form of income-generating collaborations, increased audience size, “credibility”, and book deals.

One observation emerged from the data, which the research question did not address, but which it seems pertinent to briefly consider: *Who is excluded from the opportunities presented by the food blogosphere?* As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the sample of bloggers in the study all shared similar educational backgrounds. If one accepts that advanced degree-level education as a reliable predictor for middle class status (Bourdieu 1986; Crossley in Grenfell 2008), the demographics presented in this sample suggest a level of middle-class homogeneity. According to Halpern (2005), “middle-class and professional individuals tend to have significantly larger and more varied networks than working-class or less affluent individuals” (2005: 23), suggesting that they possess a distinct advantage in terms of social capital. Since social capital has been shown to be a crucial building block to success in the blogosphere, the sample’s class background may have predisposed them to be successful, in contrast to bloggers with less education (cultural capital) and class status. Indeed, Vasquez and Chik (2015) have been critical of a perceived over-celebration of digital media’s role in ‘democratising’ access in the culinary realm, warning that, in some cases, “new media innovations only serve to reproduce existing hierarchies” (2015: 235).

This study was designed to investigate gender relations, and its results have shown that food blogging does indeed offer opportunities for women to build capital in an industry in which they are under-represented. This research question did not address potential under-representations of different class groups within the blogosphere, but in light of the observations presented above, further study on class dynamics, and the potential reproduction of class hierarchies in the blogosphere, is highly recommended.

6 CONCLUSION

Blogging, as a popular form of media production, may be on the wane, but its moment of dominance in the history of digital media tells us much about practices of inclusion, capital, and economic opportunity, particularly with regards to gendered labour relations (de Solier 2013). The qualitative research presented here set out to explore how a particular sub-set of

bloggers, female food bloggers, have used the medium to accumulate social capital, in the form of networks, norms and trust (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1995), and have translated this into economic capital, in the form of successful, income-generating careers in the food sector. This study tested the hypothesis that female food bloggers, despite lacking economic and cultural capital in the food industry, successfully leverage their position as “experts” in the field through the accumulation of social capital in the food blogosphere.

An analysis of semi-structured, depth interviews with female bloggers at the peak of their blogging careers enquired as to their experience with gender relations in the industry, and explored how they built social capital in order to become successful. The results presented above provide clear evidence in support of the hypothesis, with bloggers describing bonds of trust between online communities, social media networks, and support from mentors as significant factors in allowing them to build their blogs into successful, income-generating careers. Bloggers also reflected on the consequences of social capital accumulation in the blogosphere, and several addressed the responsibilities that came with being identified as role models to loyal, engaged audience communities.

The interviews conducted as part of this research generated much more useful data than could be addressed within the scope of this project and its research question. The results presented in the analysis above suggest that studying food bloggers can provide deeper insights into the opportunities and consequences of online communities, in particular with regards to class hierarchies and exclusion practices. Interviewing a larger sample of female bloggers might enhance the depth of the data presented above, while extending the sample to include male bloggers, and other digital media “influencers”, could provide additional context and comparative perspectives that this project was unable to address.

Other areas of research that would augment understanding of this population’s influence on wider society include: class representation in food blogging and food media, a deeper exploration of “clean eating” culture and other niche trends, and comparing the experience of experienced bloggers and newcomers to the genre.

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APPENDIX 1: BLOGGER DEMOGRAPHICS

TABLE 1: A summary of food- and writing-related education levels, blog background, and income streams for the sample.

	FIELD & CULTURAL CAPITAL				ECONOMIC CAPITAL
	BACKGROUND		HOBBY Vs. CAREER		
Blogger	What training have you received in the food sector, if any?	What training have you received in writing, if any?	Career change? Motherhood/ career break?	When did food writing become more than a hobby?	What is your main source of income?
1	Self-taught	Self-taught	Career change	2007/8 (earliest)	Book advance, book sales, ad revenue, sponsor partnerships
2	Trained chef	PhD, Film Studies	Career change	2014/5	Supper club tickets (promoted on blog), sponsor partnerships
3	Self-taught	Diploma in Food Journalism	Motherhood	2009/10	Book advance, ad revenue, sponsor partnerships
4	Self-taught	Self-taught	Career change	2015/6	Book sales, cafe sales, product sales, partnerships
5	Hotel school	Self-taught	Career change	2015	Ad revenue, sponsor partnerships
6	Self-taught	Masters, Marketing	Motherhood	2011	Ad revenue, sponsor partnerships

7	Self-taught	Masters, Journalism	Career change	2016	Ad revenue, sponsor partnerships, freelance writing (blog-related)
8	Self-taught	Self-taught	Motherhood	2009/10	Book sales, national recipe column
9	Trained chef (Leiths)	Masters, Languages & Culture	Motherhood	2013/14	Book sales, national recipe column
10	Trained chef	Self-taught	Career change	2010/11	Book sales, sponsor partnerships
11	Self-taught	Self-taught	Career change	2013	Ad revenue, sponsor partnerships, product sales
12	Self-taught	Masters, Journalism	Career change	2016	Ad revenue, sponsor partnerships, freelance writing (blog-related)

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