

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF USING OPINION LEADER IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION: UNDERSTANDING FOOD BLOGGER, FOODIE, AND FOOD EDITOR IN CULINARY BUSINESS IN INDONESIA

*Syarifah Amelia, M. Si.  
Stefanie, S. I. Kom*

## Abstract

The increasing growth of the blog, the virtual community, and social media has directed us to create and use user generated content as our reference in searching for any information. We all become evangelists as we do location tagging, check in, moments upload, pictures sharing, and so on that we think is for our own fun or collection. Culinary places are included in most shared moments that compliment with various qualities of food pictures and comments. In Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, the culinary business is a fast paced changing one, the mixed culture of Jakarta citizens brings a challenge to cater for, thus competition is hard and only the ones with solid concepts can survive. Smith and Zook (2011) explained that social media opens up new channels of communication which gives marketers direct access to customers and opinion formers. Many studies have shown that opinion leaders can significantly influence consumers. Thus, the research wants to examine the use of opinion leaders, specifically in the culinary business. As a result of an actual experience or interaction with your brand, product, or service, your customers have specific information about your business processes and probably an idea or two on how your business might serve them better in the future. Tap into that and your brand advocates will self-identify (Evans and Cothrel, 2014). This phenomenological research is conducted using small sample that consists of marketing communication specialists who have extensive experience in the culinary business, food bloggers, foodies, and food editors based in Jakarta. In the findings, the study will reveal the understanding of the concept of "food blogger," "foodie", and "food editor" and also their roles and contribution in presenting the culinary business to consumers. Thus, the study is expected to give insights into how to use opinion leaders and their differences.

**Keywords:** culinary, foodie, food blogger, food editor, marketing communication, opinion leader.

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Syarifah Amelia, M. Si. and Stefanie, S. I. Kom (email: marsela.stefanie@yahoo.com) are from Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Indonesia.

## Background

The variety of cultural and ethnicities in Indonesia has enriched its culinary assets. The huge population has also supported the development of the culinary industry as most of Indonesians celebrate moments with a feast. In 2011, finally, the Indonesian Government included the culinary industry as one of the creative industry's sub-sectors. The Culinary business has been seen as one of promise and potential in the creative industry sector in Indonesia. The effort has shown its progress as the culinary industry surpassed the fashion sector that previously had been the defending champion in creative industry growth. In 2013, the culinary industry ranked first out of 15 creative economy sub-sectors with the contribution of 208,632.75 billion or 33% into PDB.

In Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, the culinary industry is among other rapidly changing businesses as the cultural heterogeneity of its residents, beside the tight competition, brings the challenge for the business to cater their consumers' need of culinary outlets. Dining in restaurants has been part of their daily agenda, even a lifestyle.

Along with the development of the blog, the virtual community and social media, friends or those who are called "friends" in the social world are bringing stronger influence than any advertising or marketing campaign. Thus, people are directed to become a media or channel to create content and share through social media. However, the phenomenon has supplied abundant information that causes people to look for the most trusted source in the social media.

Innovation and solid concepts are among the priorities in running the culinary business in Jakarta. Culinary business owners are also applying strategies in promoting their food as well as the concept of ambience. Among other strategies are using well known and trusted opinion leaders that become references in choosing the culinary experience. As people become less dependent on

conventional media in seeking culinary references, the business owners tend to choose the food blogger and foodie to promote their menu and restaurants. However, they still face a challenge in choosing the right influencer who exactly represents their target market. Besides, food writers, including food editors, bloggers and foodies, have their own standard and style in writing their reviews.

## Problem Statement, Objective and Significances

Many studies have shown that opinion leaders can significantly influence consumers, but this research will use a qualitative approach instead of quantitative approach. The research examines the use of opinion leaders in marketing communication in the culinary business. In this research, the opinion leaders in the culinary business are categorized as food editor, food blogger and foodie. The general objective of this research is to understand the use of opinion leaders in marketing communication in the culinary business. This research will describe the difference of each opinion leader.

For academic interest, this research is expected to drive further research of online marketing communication. Whereas in practice, this research is expected to give insights on different concepts of each opinion leaders, how to make them interested in our business, and how to optimize the use of opinion leaders in implementing the marketing communication strategy, especially in the culinary business.

## Literature Review

A new marketing era, long overdue, was heralded in when social media emerged as the real game changer. Social media emerged as a real game changer. Social media put customers back at the center of the organization and gave marketers a new set of tools to listen to them and to encourage them to engage with the brand. A golden opportunity has

emerged as organizations realize the possibilities of engaging with customers in new ways so they can become partners driving the business forward (Smith and Zook, 2011).

Smith and Zook (2011) explained that social media opens up new channels of communication that gives marketers direct access to customers and opinion formers. Web 2.0, and soon Web 3.0, facilitates a dialogue; some call it a 'trialogue' (Earls, 2002), as opinion formers and customers and the brand owners engage in conversations. Some of these conversations are within the brand's official online space, and some occur way beyond the brand's space and are just amongst customers without any corporate influence. As a result of an actual experience or interaction with your brand, product, or service, your customers have specific information about your business processes and probably an idea or two on how your business might serve them better in the future. Tap into that and your brand advocates will self-identify (Evans & Cothrel, 2014).

Scoble and Israel (2006) describe that culture is clearly playing a role in how blogging develops. It can be national, ethnic, corporate, or departmental. Where people are encouraged to speak their mind, and those in power trust the people they oversee, blogging flourishes.

## Research Design

This is a qualitative study conducted through a phenomenological analysis method. Max Van Manen said that phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a "something" what it is and without which it could not be what it is (Patton, 2002:482). This study was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. Data collection was done by in-depth interview, observation and literature study. Informants in this research are Hans Danial (Food Blogger), Linda Noviana (Feature/Food Editor), David Mario (Foodie), and Wita Wibisono (Marketing Communication Specialist in Culinary Business).

## Findings and Discussions

### Food Editor, Food Blogger and Foodie

The Food editor is known with the characteristics below:

- Currently, a food editor is not limited to printed but also online media.
- The Food editor is doing a review for publication of coverage results as well as paid review as related to their expertise, they are asked to review a restaurant to be used in the promotion material.
- The Food editor has a good sense in food and is qualified in writing.
- The Food editor often interviews the restaurant owners when reviewing a restaurant in order to complete the news report.

The Food blogger is known with the characteristics below:

- The review is more casual, less formal and subjective. It is purely based on the writer's experiences, different to the food editor who is applying media writing standard (5W+1H).
- A Picture often becomes the main menu instead of the text. Meanwhile, for the food editor, a picture is used as a supplement.
- The Food blogger was recently invited to a similar event that was conducted for the media, however their writing style is not too detailed and more descriptive of the restaurant ambience. Meanwhile, for the food editor the detail of ingredients, cooking steps and other uniqueness of the restaurant are the meat of their writing.
- The Food blogger usually starts writing due to their gourmet hobby, therefore many of them do not understand the food processing and restaurant concept. This may harm the restaurant as the review can be wrong and misunderstand the brand of the restaurant.
- The Food blogger is perceived not to be the right person to cover an event conducted by a restaurant, since although they have many followers or the blogs reach high readership or hits, the blog's readers/

audiences does not represent the target market of the restaurant.

- The Food blogger can be a profession although in Indonesia they are not well paid yet.

- The Food blogger does not rely on food tasting invitation, they are continually seeking new experiences in food, especially new places.

The foodie is known with the characteristics below:

- A food enthusiast, gourmet hobby or culinary tourism.

- The foodie usually shares through their social networks, not a blog.

- The foodie writes testimony in application or culinary websites based on their experience.

## **Culinary Business in Jakarta**

Danhi (2003) explained that there are six main elements that are critical in determining the culinary identity of a country. These elements are geography, history, ethnic diversity, culinary etiquette, prevailing flavors and recipes (Harrington, 2005). Based on those elements, it is a little bit difficult to say the culinary identity of Indonesia as its food differs from one ethnic group to other ethnic groups, from one region to other regions. When it comes to Jakarta, the capital city, which is a melting pot, it is even more difficult to define. We can find any kind of foods in Jakarta. Based on the menu offered, we can find restaurants that keep local identity and taste in Jakarta yet we also find easily the international fast food brands, international franchises and local restaurants that offer Asian and Western cuisine. Those menus are available from street food to the fine dining restaurants.

Today the culinary market is crowded, even over crowded. The market is filled with a lot of players that come from various backgrounds and not all of them have careful preparation. "Natural selection" applies in the culinary business as the players change rapidly. Those who are still standing

have learnt their lesson hard to understand that customers can easily switch their options. Jakartans love something that is becoming a trend. It may happen that one day a restaurant is fully booked, but in the other day the restaurant owners have to face the reality that the crowd has gone as they find a new brighter one.

The development of the culinary business is dominated by those who are offering Western and Asian cuisines (mostly are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Thai), both with the original taste and adjusted to the Indonesian people's taste. Only few culinary business owners are interested to develop their business with full Indonesian menu because although considered as nice and flavored, its visual presentation is perceived to be less interesting. In the era of social media, the interesting visual presentation is considered to be more than important.

Generally, the restaurant business in Indonesia is currently focusing on the visual presentation. Many types of interesting concepts are offered, such as eye-catching restaurant ambience that attracts people to come to the restaurant, although we have to admit that it is not easy to find the restaurant which has both beautiful ambience and good food in one package. However, the good news is Jakartans do not consider it as a big deal because eating can be a part of other activities such as meeting, hanging out or just spending their leisure time, therefore the place or ambience can be the main factor to be considered.

## **Opinion Leader and The Use of Media**

Every opinion leader in the culinary business has different perspectives with their own styles. The food editor has the target for their media coverage, whether daily, weekly, or monthly. On the other hand, the food blogger and foodie are not tied with a formal deadline but they consistently share or post their new culinary experiences. Consistency is required to maintain loyalty in order

to gain trust from their readers or audiences to be the reliable culinary influencers.

Among the food lovers, the food blogger and foodie are already pretty much known. They have many followers in their social media accounts, such as Instagram. Their culinary post often gets a lot of likes and netizens loves their existence. It's may they have an extensive network, they could be their friends, friends of friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and so on, but the important thing is they appear individually, different to the food editor who represents a media company. Food editors are rarely known by netizens, but the Public Relations or Marketing Communication of the restaurant must be aware and trust them pretty well through their media.

The food blogger and foodie make their own media. Advancement of information and communication technology has supported them. The plus point is they become more up to date. With their blog, food bloggers write and share their thoughts. They also maximize the use of other social network to link to their central blog. Food bloggers tend to call themselves as food and travel blogger, as usually they are doing both travel and culinary tourism in their destination. The food blogger has been categorized further into the cooking blogger, baker blogger, and restaurant and lifestyle blogger. Meanwhile, the food editors are not always writing about food, since most of them are working for a feature desk, thus they are called a feature editor. The feature editor usually covers culinary, fashion, lifestyle events, etc.

Naturally, bloggers with perspicacity and a clear voice have emerged and have obtained a following. Some of these have become a new breed of citizen journalist who wields as much power as any major newspaper columnist (Harden & Heyman, 2009). In Indonesia, "food blogger" (why have you used quotation marks?) cannot be regarded as a promising profession even though some people are making it a full time career like a food editor. It is because the

appreciation (or payment) for the food blogger in Indonesia cannot be compared with the food bloggers in other countries like in Singapore. They need greater effort to get more remuneration from the restaurant, endorser, or advertiser, such as making more followers and reviews. On the other hand, the food editor or feature editor has been a dream position among the young journalists because they are always associated with party, travel and hanging out in fancy places.

To be a foodie, a person does not need to be a professional food writer and photographer. The requirement to be the foodie is the passion about food and social media as information platform. Foodie usually refers to the food blogger when hunting a restaurant, but sometimes they also improvise when finding food or a restaurant that may not have been covered by the media or food bloggers. The foodie is sharing without any pay. According to an informant, he shares the information voluntary to get his own satisfactions, such as becoming the first person to try the food, people read and like his posting, and is happy when people finally try what he ate and agree with his point.

Uniqueness and novelty are primary considerations for every opinion leaders to share. In their reviews, the important things that they consider to share are among others the recommended food or beverages, taste, price, location, ambience, and basically everything about the restaurant. Sometimes the food blogger and foodie also write their personal comment. They have the freedom of expression in "their own media". Whereas, food editors are more subject to check and balance and adjust their writing with the character of the media where they work. Most food editors tend to only write positive things about the restaurant and this become one of the reasons why the restaurant prefers to invite them instead of the others.

For the food blogger and foodie, their photo and writing are equally important for their post. They said the delicious food should be supported

with the tempting picture and it would be vain as well if the delicious food with a tempting picture is not supported with thorough information about the restaurant, including the location, price and taste. Therefore, the foodie and food blogger never stop to learn to create an extraordinary photo and review. Their strong social network among the foodie and food blogger make them learning from each other how to taste, describe the food, take a photo shoot, and also build a good relationship with the restaurant. On the other hand, they also compete to make the first review and become popular. Meanwhile, for food editor, the quality of writing becomes the first priority. Although a good picture is complimentary for the whole article, the headline and content are more important for them.

It is a little bit difficult to differentiate the food blogger and foodie. A lot of food bloggers in Jakarta share their post like foodies. They are not waiting for any invitation to an event or request to review a restaurant. Instagram is the social media platform that is being used frequently by the food blogger to share the visual presentation of the food. The instagram post, then, serves as a teaser for their post in the blogs.

### **The Use of Opinion Leader**

Use bloggers sparingly but feed their appetite for the juicy news item. Bloggers in your industry are perfect for “leaking” new product news in advance of an official press release date. Bloggers are highly competitive, and will race to be the first to post a good story (Harden & Heyman, 2009).

The objective of the culinary business in using opinion leaders is to promote the restaurant, not only the food and beverage but also the whole selling points that may attract people to come. Some informants admit that to introduce a new restaurant or new menu, many restaurants invite

food bloggers for tasting, or hire them exclusively to write about the restaurant.

Restaurants may hire influencers to bring a crowd to come, but when a restaurant is in trouble, the use of opinion leaders should be avoided. It is wiser to be quiet and regain the quality back than to work on confrontation that may spread the complaints widely. There are risks with relying on bloggers—they have no editorial review board, and some enjoy leaning toward the anarchistic side—but their impact with key communities cannot be denied (Harden & Heyman, 2009).

Many food bloggers have a writing capacity similar to the food editor, however according to an informant, they are not equal, especially when we are talking about credibility. Inviting a food editor to cover the restaurant is safer as they never review the taste, it is different with the food blogger who mostly comments on the taste. This is harmful if the food blogger does not understand about food tastes and only relies on their own taste. The food editor never mentions the price as well, different to the food blogger who states the food price, and it has to be a consideration that the blogger has less experience about the restaurant concept and the quality of ingredients used in the restaurant.

Currently, young people are active in social media and they share consistently, including about food. That is where Foodie appears as a term. They have been considered by the culinary business owners as foodie can share anything, the good and the bad, based on their limited understanding that may bring the restaurant into a trouble. Moreover if the foodie does not approach the management directly, it is difficult for the restaurant management to identify them as it is common that people come to a restaurant asking for a wi fi password as well as taking pictures of the menu book and the food.

Culinary business owners prefers to use food editors as they usually have a deep knowledge of

food and restaurant, do research before writing and fit with the standard of the media company they represent. They also provide inputs to the restaurant owners and state the complaints (if any) directly to the management, not by spreading it through the social media.

On the other hand, currently, restaurants are also developing the content of events. They are not conducting only food tasting and press conferences but also cooking classes aiming to provide deeper and educative information by sharing the knowledge of ingredients, cooking steps and how to present the food. It also aims to encourage the food bloggers to learn about cooking to enrich their skill in reviewing the food.

## Conclusion

In Jakarta, a lot of new restaurants open, but many restaurants are closed too. It may be caused

by lack attention to their food taste. Good taste for the food and beverages is still the durable selling point for the restaurant, not only the decor concept. Culinary business owners should not only use the opinion leaders but also monitor the conversation between them and their audiences in order to avoid or minimize bad word of mouth.

Relationships with the food bloggers are now considered to be as important as the media relations, especially due to the impact generated by their post in a short time. Building a relationship with food bloggers is also expected to be a strategy to minimize negative posts. In selecting the food bloggers as the opinion leaders, their track record is not only assessed by the hits of the blog page or the number of followers in social media, the content relevancy compared to the demography of the website viewers/readers is considered to be more important.

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