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abstract | *Food photography on Instagram creates various types of digital communities while largely excluding other groups from lower economic backgrounds. Through examining photography theory, socioeconomic patterns, and the impact and influence of various representations of food on Instagram, this article explores the implications of the social media platform's growing popularity through a semiotic lens. In analyzing the marketing functions of Instagram and the creation of cravings along with the innate absence of nourishment in virtual food consumption, this article questions some of the class-based social patterns rising from this endless digital photo feed as well as considers some of the possible societal benefits. From the use of hashtags and their power to influence the culinary industry, to the use of filters to replicate unattainable moments, Instagram serves as both a tool for food-lovers to carefully construct curated digital identities, while disseminating cultural messages about their social class and cultural backgrounds. Despite its ability to unify, the platform paradoxically distances users from personally engaging with those very cuisines and communities they consume online, pushing traditional concepts of food towards an abstract digital era.*

keywords | *social media, food culture, photography, Instagram, gastronomy*

INTRODUCTION

In an age of visual excess, technology creates a pull towards both nostalgia and futurism, leaving many social media users straining to keep up and longing to slow down as they document their lives online. Digital media platforms such as Instagram accelerate and expand social trends at a pace that leaves both markets and minds spinning. Along with the popularity of gastronomy in practice and in study, digital representations of food combine categories to create a pervasive theme throughout social media in Western cultures.[1] With an increasing variety of culinary programs ranging from food-blogging courses to the emergence of professional culinary photography, an insatiable social appetite for food-related subjects may contribute to the success and popularity of digital food images.[2] Established in 2010, the online photo-sharing platform Instagram launched smartphone users into a new paradigm of media sharing, reaching 700 million users in April 2017.[3] The visual nature of Instagram allows users to share quality images of food, restaurants, and a limitless array of food-centric content, producing a spiral of social and economic implications.

Considering semiotic principles and concepts from contemporary food studies, I explore some of the current cultural impacts of the symbolically saturated cyber community of Instagram. I analyze trends, identify typical users, and delve into the latent meaning and symbolic power of these culinary images on both an individual and societal scale. Moving from the smaller scale of individual social media use and identity making to consider groups and communities, I finally address the patterns and symbolic implications for social classes and economic mobility. At each stage and scale, food-related images on Instagram reinforce and potentially challenge certain socio-economic norms. These culinary posts function as digital self-representation, simulation of social belonging, and reinforcement of social class norms.

PICS OR IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

The drive to document experiences certainly is not limited to acts of consumption. The near compulsion that fuels Instagram users to engage in amateur food photography before every bite shows the extent of the desire to capture culinary moments ranging from greasy fast food to revelatory gourmet cuisine. The need to take a snapshot is so strong that for many, a meal can hardly be enjoyed to its fullest extent without the added comfort of knowing that later on, the mouth-watering anticipation of the first bite can be re-lived by the Instagrammer and garner "likes" from friends and strangers alike. Failing to delight all parties, this trend has spurred an increasing number of restaurants to ban cell phone photography in their establishments, including the upscale Momofuku Ko, where celebrity chef David Chang, along with many fellow diners, seeks to preserve the quality of the culinary experience without distractions.[4]

This urge extends far beyond a simple desire to share experiences, but involves a complex process of making

meaning and defining the self. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "The Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents" or rather, to confirm something or someone's presence.[5] While a photograph does situate its contents in the surety of existence, the picture remains somewhat free of other anchors. Through use of photo filters or delayed-posting, the user can infinitely manipulate particulars further away from the original content. Barthes identifies this quality of "absence-as-presence" in photographs that show content while simultaneously remaining undefined.[6] According to Barthes, "from a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."[7] Barthes's reluctance to attribute multiplicity of usefulness to images is perhaps the result of an inability to predict the prevalence of photography in daily contemporary life and its power to create narratives and identities, rather than just to confirm presence. As Barthes also claims in his essay "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," food itself is a language and a form of communication, or rather a "grammar of foods," stating that "…communication always implies a system of signification."[8] In this way, each Instagram post delivers considerable meaning to viewers. While Barthes suggests an underlying message in culinary content, the process of simulation offers another perspective for navigating the ambiguous role of food imagery.

Although some food photographs do seek to merely present an image, a semiotic approach to interpreting these images captures the core of food photography on Instagram: the production of signs through the induction of meaning. As a social media platform, Instagram grants users the ease of specifying meaning through hosting photos, enabling captions to describe the images, and adding both location markers (geotags) and hashtags, which link to other related content. For instance, semiotician Charles Peirce's triadic approach to the systemic relation of signs, called semiosis, applies to the deconstruction of food imagery. For example, one of the most popular types of food posted to Instagram is pizza.[9] Such a commonplace food item itself does not seem to warrant much further examination (*firstness*), but when context is given by the addition of a caption or geotag (*secondness*) revealing that the pizza comes from a particularly popular restaurant, the accompanying hashtag can add further meaning and increase specificity (*thirdness*).[10] The first impression is one of potentiality, the second puts the image into context through a relationship to something else, and the third increases specificity based on other known information, arriving at a possible interpretation.

On Instagram, this process of making meaning creates the sense of being an insider, which allows for inclusion in a familiar experience. Instagrammers seek to both have and prove "authentic" experiences. Part of the intent in taking the picture is to prove, albeit unknowingly, participation in the system of signs that creates pop-culture trends and to reinforce and perpetuate the self-image that the Instagrammer is attempting to digitally portray. This sense of keeping up is an integral aspect of perceived pressures to remain current in the fast moving Internet culture, where foodie trends can become passé before even emerging into mainstream awareness. To contend with a sea of similar pizza pictures, for instance, the Instagrammer must set their pizza snapshot apart—or rather, align it as closely as possible through a series of visual and grammatical markers to indicate that they are in fact enjoying a special slice from the fashionable pizza joint of the moment.

Participation in sign-value systems is deeply rooted in recognizing relationships. Instagrammers are active symbol-makers as they produce icons, or representations of objects, and seek the indexical value of those icons, or the implications they carry. Finally, a symbol emerges from the process, representing a cultural moment, in which the Instagrammer played a part. The end result: a saturated picture of an impossibly decadent slice of pizza, possibly in the hands of a stylish young person with a vivid city scene as the backdrop, creating a hyper-reality which only exists, and therefore can only be captured and reproduced, digitally. The ability for others to replicate this image requires access to a similar location, affluence, and creativity, but many seek to participate for a sense of belongingness and inclusion, if even for the casual fun of being in-the-know.

Although this phenomenon connects strangers and strengthens new social ties, it paradoxically also pushes the culinary world to a visual space beyond the act of eating. While Peirce's semiotic analysis implies a gradual drawing-together of specificity resulting from added layers of meaning, this quest for authentic portrayal, when examined through another semiotic process of representation, creates an almost ironic distance between Instagram users, for instance, and the culinary experiences they attempt to preserve and legitimize. Providing a particularly apt illustration for this interpretation, the concept of simulation allows for a complementary understanding of the manner in which digital representations can replace reality in service of commodification as they gain new meanings.

To examine Instagram food photographs through the lens of French theorist Jean Baudrillard's "Simulation" necessitates a basic understanding of his process of simulation

and the idea of the hyper-real. First, Baudrillard explores the ways in which objects transform from the realm of literal, useful things, to the representative world of symbolic value. In "The System of Objects," Baudrillard writes of an order of simulation in which something reproducible goes through the process of commodification, which is targeted at a drive towards consumption fueled by a "lack." In regards to images, the following process best describes simulation:

> *1 It is the reflection of a basic reality.*
> *2 It masks and perverts a basic reality.*
> *3 It masks the absence of a basic reality.*
> *4 It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.* [11]

This process of simulation, therefore, threatens the difference between true and false, and can easily be applied to the existence of Instagram images, which, through various editing devices, achieve the hyper-real. Eager foodies around the world chase the unachievable ideal photo, which does not exist, except digitally. Again, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes, "To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't."[12] Appropriately, then, amateur food photographers challenge perceptions and limitations alike because technology gives everyone access to the same tools of deception. Therefore, one can give impressions of a false reality so accurately that they achieve creating simulacra, or just a really good picture of pizza that they may or may not have enjoyed at the time or even place implied in the image.

In this interpretation of the world, Baudrillard claims that material objects attempt to fill an immaterial void that arises from a disappointed demand for totality.[13] This lacking "totality" is perhaps a suspicion of falseness, or perhaps results from being subject to witness the representations of "having" that saturate the Instagram photo feed. Images of food serve as a perfect example of removal of the original use-value into commodification of abstract symbols. Food is meant to be literally consumed. While it has long held significance in representing various cultures, landscapes, and lifestyles, the removal of its innate purpose, to be eaten, is an almost radical departure from its basic use. To photograph food, a perishable object, not only immortalizes the temporary, thus rejecting nature, but also represents only its own presence, and therefore signifies the absence for all others viewing it. The result is the image's absolute inability to satiate the viewers, thereby creating lack. Advertising works in a similar way in its ability to fabricate a lack in circumstances where it did not previously exist. These images do, however, spur others to seek out similar experiences and attempt to personally capture what has been shown to them. In this way, Baudrillard indirectly predicted the impact of technology on daily life. In *System of Objects* he writes, "Man has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings, and thus appropriating his actions."[14]

Whether applied to cameras, smartphones, or food itself, this theory accurately captures the somewhat automated manner in which people appear driven to consume or eat for the purpose of the Instagram shot to be gained rather than for nourishment or taste. Someone participating in this system might see an image, perhaps of a cupcake from a famous location like Sprinkles or Georgetown Cupcake, both of which are social-media gold and have been featured on television and various blogs.[15] Instagram participants may then seek out that iconic image, rather than the actual object itself. The underlying current of competition and self-inflicted peer-pressure in these situations contributes to the already present tone of keeping up. Once obtaining the desired object, the Instagrammer's primary purpose becomes digital, not literal consumption, for proof that they belong to a certain group that has experienced this phenomenon. Someone in-the-know would never wait in an hour-long line at Georgetown Cupcake (which has 537,000 Instagram followers) and not take a picture. The completeness of the memory they are crafting would otherwise be imperfect. Hence what writer Jacob Silverman calls the "populist mantra of the social networking age," which insists on photographic evidence to both prove and propagate enviable experiences: "pics or it didn't happen."[16]

IDENTITY AND VIRTUAL BELONGING

The connection between social media presence and identity drives the overall allure of creating a digital representation of not only the self, but also as a catalogue of lived (or simulated) experiences that connote belongingness to a certain social group or movement. According to food scholar Signe Rousseau in *Food and Social Media*, modern forms of social media are essentially "…providing everyone with a virtual megaphone that they can use to carve out their own niche as best as possible."[17] The motivations behind individual choices in image sharing build online identities. An article from *The Telegraph's* food column aptly quips that "social media is peppered with the gastronomic equivalent of selfies."[18] Referring to food presentation, be they products of either home-cooks or professional chefs, this sentiment captures a significant aspect of this trend. Anthropologist Daniel Miller at the University College of London studied a large group of young Instagram users (aged 16 to

18) and noticed several patterns among them in terms of the conscious efforts with which they undertook not only capturing the image, but also with arranging the food to appear to its greatest visual benefit. In his book on social media, he identifies in the chapter "Crafting the Look" three categories of food images. These include images of personally made dishes such as cakes or salads, images taken of food made by someone else, like a display case of macarons at a bakery or a meal ordered at a restaurant, and finally, images of food taken for the express purpose of showing the artistic skill to capture the image.[19] Miller considers this final category the "exploitation of the food to demonstrate the craft represented by taking a good Instagram image of something that otherwise would not have elicited any particular aesthetic appreciation."[20] This could range from a close up image of a piece of fruit to a pile of discarded pistachio shells.

The trio of images—identified through a simple search for #orangepeel—illustrates the three main categories of food photographs Miller identified on Instagram. The first depicts a cake garnished with orange slices that someone baked at home; the second an elegantly plated order of sushi from a restaurant, each piece situated atop an orange slice; and the third an artistic rendering of an orange peel taken with a macro lens.

All three of these Instagram images do more than merely represent the contents of the photo frame. They speak to the photographer's concept of their own identity. The cake, for example, not only self-promotes the skills of baking and decorating, but also sends an important class message about the "luxury of time" that the baker has at their disposal, as food scholar Adrienne Lehrer points out.[21] To share an image of a personally made food item like this dessert speaks on several levels. It implies the Instagrammer has expendable income and time to make, decorate, and share sweets. The second image of sushi suggests an expendable income for dining out and implies an association with cultivated or exotic tastes. The higher aesthetic quality of the plate with a smaller portion denotes a departure from necessity into the realm of recreational pleasure. Lastly, the close up of the orange peel shows an artistry applied to what is essentially a food scrap. With attention to composition, contrast, and color, this image could potentially be captured by anyone with a smartphone and hints at no other economic, social, or taste categories due to simplicity of setting and content. A cursory reading of such food images communicates significant messages about each Instagram user and how they wish to broadcast themselves to the world.

Source: @tejanoidea

Source: @miss_urban_turban

Source: @1_ak_tion

Aside from aspects of social media that are intended for and utilized as a means of connection and communication, social media also functions as an advertising platform for the self. Much like aligning imagery to branding for other commodities, social media has instigated the idea of brand-

ing the self, which is achieved by consistency of content, image style, hashtag usage, and myriad other minute details that signal both adherence to and difference from certain groups or ideologies. Although the content of each photo seems personal, the public nature of the content is inseparable from the digital communities they contribute to, resulting in what researcher of food and communication, Simona Stano, refers to as the intersubjectivity of food, in which an individual "seeks legitimacy through comparison and sharing."[22] The amalgamation of cultural factors influencing the culinary world makes eating "…one of the central spaces for the expression of identity."[23]

Much like the concept of "valorization" in theorist Jean-Marie Floch's *Visual Identities*, Instagram users appeal to a certain market niche or demographic to garner likes or followers, which can function as status symbols. This can be driven by hopes of creating a large enough following to become an "influencer," which comes with potential social and economic benefits, or simply to further secure their own sense of self.[24] Instagram users, for example, can be seen as aligning themselves with values of elegance and luxury, such as those featured in foodie travel blogs utilizing high-end ingredients such as caviar or truffles. According to Floch, the gradations of valorization can be determined by the contrast or similarity between use value and basic value. Something with a connotation of wealth is likely to be farther removed from its originally intended use. For instance, consuming food is a simple necessity, while eating a crostini topped with caviar and shaved black truffles suggests an absolute lack of want and the obvious presence of excess or luxury. Floch claims that representations of excess not only contrast but negate those of practicality or poverty.[25] For this reason, a luxury restaurant with an Instagram account would not post a picture of a comfort-food dish comprised of easily-obtained simple ingredients, as this image would send the wrong message and be "off-brand."

Just as a restaurant would need to carefully represent itself on social media to attract the clientele it wishes to obtain, individuals similarly "brand" themselves towards the same effect. A busy, working parent, passionate about affordable and efficient cooking, will not post images of extravagant meals but rather will focus on economical, simple dishes that may be easily replicated by other parents. This fits more into the scheme of Floch's "critical valorization," which is more targeted to "good cost-benefit or quality-price ratios."[26] This type of image is more likely to be accompanied by a #cookingforkids hashtag or #readyfortheweek, which both commonly show meal preparations with multiple containers whose contents are filled with

Source: @fit.healthy_mama

foods that provide basic macronutrients, such as chicken with broccoli and sweet potatoes. Again, participation in posting such meal preparations to social media speaks to the identity of the users. A sociological study investigating food consumption patterns in social classes based upon education levels showed that "diets in higher social classes are more often in line with dietary recommendations than those in the lower classes."[27] In light of this, such a practical yet health-conscious image would likely come from a middle class, college-educated family. Alternately, a more extravagant post might be followed with #finedining or #gourmet with contents likely limited to a special preparation of a few select ingredients and drastically smaller portions, indicating the superfluous nature of the actual meal and the related affluence of the Instagram user. The role of the hashtag (#) proves greatly instrumental in further defining meaning in both self-branding and identity in food related Instagram pictures.

INSTAGRAM AND THE POWER OF THE #HASHTAG

Images inherently contain the potentiality of plural interpretations. To borrow from Barthes, they are in this way "polysemic," or able to carry more than one semiotic or symbolic message simultaneously.[28] Adding text or captions to an image, on Instagram and in advertising, can add clarity and specificity of meaning. In Barthes's *The Rhetoric of the Image*, he explores how images and linguistic components can work together to create complexities of meaning that neither would be able to achieve separately. Effective advertising comprised of photographic content succeeds in

masking the hidden message by "naturalizing the symbolic message."[29] Not all images, however, seek to subliminally impart suggestions on viewers. Some posts rather purposely call attention to themselves allowing them to fit into the context of a wider theme, while others unknowingly replicate symbols of social status and identity. On Instagram, this typically happens through hashtags.

On Instagram, anyone who clicks on a hashtag is then shown a feed of images that were also given that tag. Instagram users are conveniently able to search for similar content, which is especially helpful for food related images as they often have practical applications such as new recipes, plating techniques, or links to food blogs. Additionally, food communities emerge from common hashtags, developing a web of ideas and resources for interests ranging from gluten-free locavores to vegan bodybuilders. Since Instagram is social as well as visual in nature, users are connected with others through shared interests, desires, and passions. Adding hashtags strengthens and clarifies the meaning and purpose of these groups. Instagram users quickly realized that this model of connection would also work well for branding and marketing purposes. Instagram maintains a running total of times that a hashtag has been used. At 23,536,432 tags, #pizza reigns as the top tagged food item on Instagram, while #foodporn at 108,917,901 claims the top food-related tag.[30]

CREATING CRAVINGS

The hashtag #foodporn is somewhat controversial in the food world and its connotation of edginess is likely part of its massive popularity. In a 2010 article in *Gastronomica*, several leaders in the culinary world discussed the term #foodporn. Food show producer and writer Alan Madison argued that "the use of such a charged word as porn is just intended to attract interest."[31] The widely-used hashtag seems to be applied without much regard to the contents of the picture with the apparent intent being to use the tag to gain more views. The overall trend, however, encompasses anything from pictures of over-saturated, highly artistic dishes to indulgences of fried, cheesy, or fattening foods considered so profane they have been dubbed pornographic. Again, a fitting tag for a massive slice of pizza, dripping with bubbling cheese, becomes almost a visual euphemism or allusion to actual sexuality.

Another popular #foodporn motif comes in the form of vast tablescapes of indulgent specialty items. Similar to Roland Barthes' claim about alluring food imagery in *Mythologies*, these pictures "offer fantasy to those who cannot afford to cook such meals."[32] Given that images tagged as #foodporn typically feature foods considered unhealthy, offering a calorie-free and therefore guilt-free visual binge. As Signe Rousseau writes in *Food and Social Media*, "the web… offers endless opportunities to look at and to fantasize about what we are told is bad."[33] Perhaps looking at images of decadent food provokes a voyeuristic pleasure because food is inherently sensual. Images of food are stripped of any immediate practical utility (or nutritive value) and are therefore reduced to primarily providing visual pleasure. At the same time, the popularization of the hashtag reduces its potential shock value as it becomes absorbed by the hegemonic mechanism of normalizing what is perceived as threatening by deflecting "moral panic."[34] In light of recent body-positive social movements, the use of #foodporn could also function as a rejection of guilt and social pressures of self-restriction and the idealized thin body as a paragon of health and attractiveness in Western cultures. These depictions of excess also imply a certain level of financial security, as many items feature abundance of calorically dense foods that surpass basic requirements. Much of the food related content on Instagram is also categorized as comfort food, or as writer Paula M. Salvio suggests that which attempts "to cultivate a taste for nostalgic memories."[35] In conjunction with use of a hashtag like #guiltypleasure, the addition of #foodporn and #comfortfood makes for an interesting combination of transparency and public accountability, as it also seeks comfort in the company of others' indulgence. Understanding human desires and motivations make certain Instagram users successful at building a large online presence.

INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS

Hashtags in the food world on Instagram also serve two more distinct purposes that can overlap: creation of niche movements or foodie subculture communities, and creation of Instagram users of near-celebrity status, called influencers. A savvy Instagram user who seeks more followers and visibility will logically add popular, trending, and relevant hashtags to their digital images, which will result in more likes and contribute to the trend's momentum. Subcultures and communities sometimes spring from a single well-timed hashtag, and gain momentum when others participate in movements—such as the #whole30 program, with nearly three million tags, where dieters eliminate sugar and certain other refined foods for thirty days.[36] Such movements are often launched by the endorsement of an influencer, who can reach something of a guru status among their communities. These influencers have power, ranging from initiating a hashtag trend to securing the success, or failure, of a new restaurant. Their social media followings are so large that

their posting an image at a new coffee shop, for instance, with a positive hashtag could dramatically boost business.[37]

Instagram influencer and popular food blogger Jackie Gebel boasts over 226,000 followers, many of whom try restaurants she recommends not only for the experience, but also to be part of the trend of posting a popular meal or food item.[38] The strongest food influencers incorporate some type of narrative in their image or text. The story-like effect is similar to a concept Barthes describes in advertising, where greater interest is created by a story rather than an image that stands alone.[39] The Instagram account @_FoodStories_ achieves this without attempting to disguise the narrative and its advertising and branding potential. These types of Instagram users fit into the genre of "food and lifestyle" blogging, presenting idyllic, sumptuous scenes, which could only be enjoyed by the wealthy or culinary elite.

The Instagram posts above may appear to simply be lovely images of desirable food experiences. While the images themselves could be heavily analyzed, on a more superficial level they are both communicating important messages of luxury and branding. A far cry from the messy and largely-unhealthy images accompanying the #foodporn tags, these lifestyle posts entice viewers' imaginations and incite viewers' longing for experiences that will likely remain outside of their grasp. The content, like the examples above, does not necessarily feature expensive ingredients, but rather, relies heavily on setting and background, suggesting an ideal location as a necessary element of a desirable food experience. Barthes writes, "it is not at the level of its cost that the sense of a food item is elaborated, but at the level of its preparation and use."[40] The images above, therefore, suggest the use values of floral-decked pancakes and ocean-side ice cream as conducive to refinement and relaxation respectively. Moreover, they are both sponsored posts, in which Instagram influencers are given either free products, meals, or experiences in exchange for boosting visibility and brand awareness for a larger company. The images above were posted with commentary and hashtags to promote a watch brand (left) and a beach resort (right). Because wealthy companies fund these exceptional food experiences, the attainability of these pictures and the lifestyles they represent become increasingly less possible. This comes back to the idea that advertising creates a lack. As previously mentioned, another apparent aspect of food photography, both on Instagram and other forms of social media, is that it only represents the middle to upper classes, strictly omitting the lower economic classes.

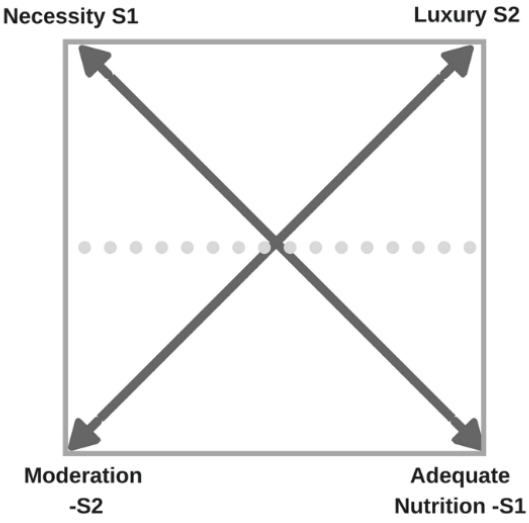
Source: @_foodstories_ Berlin-based food styling team with over 904 thousand followers.

Source: @noleftovers Jackie Gebel food traveler and blogger

THE SQUARE MEAL: APPLICATION OF THE GREIMAS SQUARE TO HUNGER AND ABUNDANCE

Photographing food or recommending innovations for recipes already assumes that viewers' basic needs are met. A fitness guru who spent years perfecting their enviable

The Greimas Square in Relation to Hunger



look would perhaps suggest trying to make avocado ice cream sprinkled with chia seeds and raw cacao powder to satisfy sweet cravings with these "superfood" substitutes. The superfluous quality of desserts in itself implies that the targeted audience has an abundance of food, but the reference to specialty ingredients hints at access to money and living in an area where stores would offer these special ingredients. Hence, food and lifestyle platforms are inherently exclusive of certain income brackets and are restrictive based upon social class.

Through application of the semiotic square as created by Greimas, the exclusory nature of food-centric Instagram pictures can be more clearly illustrated. Building upon the basic semiotic concept of meaning arising from contrast, the Greimas square allows for deeper understanding through the opposition of contradictory terms.[41] I chose four categories—necessity, luxury, moderation, and adequate nutrition—to aid in the visualization of this concept, which depends upon binaries and possible transitions. I created this Greimas square to allow for greater insight into the social and economic divisions among Instagram users and their related ability to engage digitally with food-related content. In this illustration S2, -S2, and -S1 all encompass possible target audiences and participants in digital food photography.

While the implication of these terms, and most signs for that matter, is subjective, marketing patterns suggest that the focus of advertising is pleasure, not poverty. Relating back to Floch's theories of valorization, marketing related to efficiency, health, and indulgence all align with this semiotic square, which dually emphasizes the absence of marketing, and by extension imagery, addressing hunger or poverty.[42] People functioning within the means of luxury (S2), moderation (-S2), or adequate nutrition (-S1) are all potential categories of Instagram users who would likely participate in, or be marketed to through, digital representations of food. Within these three categories, which have some axial mobility within the square, there are different levels of security and affluence. All, however, have their basic nutritional needs met.

Since Instagram is widely used across many demographics, hashtags allow for connections and community building—from the simple sharing of an image of a personally-made sandwich to the specialized rooftop micro-gardener who shares a picture of their crop of heirloom squash. Self-branding allows users to market themselves by projecting or replicating certain qualities such as affluence or health-consciousness, thus aligning themselves with different social or economic groups they wish to emulate. Some may even be able to leverage use of digital editing features on Instagram and trending hashtags to cross into another category, as their digital existence transcends their literal circumstances. For example, many college-aged Instagram users may lack sufficient financial resources to live fantastical food lives, but their basic needs are likely met—and they may have access to certain tools (such as wi-fi and smartphones) that allow them to participate virtually in trends that they are not yet able to participate in financially. Through this alignment with the middle class and bourgeoisie values, social media users may be able to gain some class mobility by engaging the right symbolism. As French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu claims, "…commitment to stylization tends to shift the emphasis from substance and function, to form and manner."[43] If social media users are able to simulate belongingness, with the aid of filters and creativity, they may be perceived as belonging to a certain class, at least on Instagram. Again, the semiotic square delineates this concept of mobility. When basic needs are met some mobility is possible.

The S1 category of necessity does not shift directly to luxury, but rather must achieve "adequate nutrition" before moving up. As Roland Barthes notes in *Mythologies*, the proletarian man is preoccupied "by the problem of bread-winning."[44] Those who work hard to support themselves and their families are often confined to concerns of procuring necessities and are therefore not seeking elevated flavors, colors, or other aesthetic factors. For upper classes, "protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied."[45] *In The Practice of Everyday Life: Living & Cooking*, Michel De Certeau identifies the symbolic

importance of the presence of bread, for example, and what it indicates at meal times. Bread, as De Certeau writes: "is still perceived as the necessary foundation for all food."[46] He further explains that the sign of bread being present upon a table indicates that there is no fundamental lack and "no urgency about suffering or hunger."[47] In this way, the presence and absence of bread, or to extend the metaphor, basic food for survival, is a significant limiting factor in ability to digitally participate in something like Instagram's popular food image culture.[48] This is reinforced doubly by the literal difficulty of portraying hunger or insufficiency on a social media platform in which participating alone suggests a certain foundation of stability. Furthermore, the aesthetic quality of budget meals, prepared to satisfy hunger, tends to be lower. In contrast to the highly stylized meals of the bourgeoisie, these heartier meals such as casseroles or stews, are less physically structured, and therefore considered less photogenic.

To connect back to the Greimas square, take the example of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The destitute Valjean is unable to provide even bread, that basic necessity for his family, and is firmly planted in the S1 category of this semiotic square. Throughout the tale, Valjean is able to transcend the restrictions of his social class from the beginning of the story, but must first pass through the other phases of dietary security to arrive at luxury (S2). In contrast with this classical illustration, modern food accessibility is never advertised. Rather, the superficial lack that people living in relative comfort feel from constant comparisons to media-induced hyper-realities creates a drive to emulate and strive towards excess. Most engaged in the pursuit of satiating this lack is the middle class, whose moderate spending power allows them to attempt to emulate wealth by purchasing novel ingredients and utilizing exotic flavors. These symbols of culture reflect worldly values while implying a rejection of the real wealth or excess that remains inaccessible, such as dining at Michelin-starred restaurants or drinking pricy wine. This attachment to a sense of authentic eating compensates for a greater financial lack.

In Barthes' *Mythologies*, he explores this marketing technique in the section "Ornamental Cooking." He compares the readership of two magazines that feature food photography and recipes, noting that the "middle class public enjoys a comfortable purchasing power: its cookery is real, not magical."[49] This implies that food-related recipes and photos targeted at middle class audiences are at least somewhat practical, as the readers may actually buy and prepare the dishes being featured. The more fanciful depictions of food are targeted towards an audience perceiving the "ornamental cookery" as fictional in its inaccessibility. The consumption was never intended to be literal and is therefore achieved through visual means only.

This concept is closely related to many of the more luxurious, epicurean images posted on Instagram. The typical high angle, hovering above the scene, provides abstract, indirect access to a decadence that will never be realized. More elegant everyday meals or posts targeted towards

Source: @Peachonomics

Source: @TokiUnderground

middle class recommendations for restaurants or recipes, however, show closer shots, more approachable angles, and specific details, rather than overwhelming the senses with the sublime effect of a fairy-tale table-scape. Below are two Instagram images both depicting ramen. One, from an affluent Instagram influencer and "food-curator," shows a high-perspective shot of many bowls of exotic-looking ramen with the added "Inception" effect of the smartphones in the image capturing the moment. The second image, a customer's photo, re-posted by a popular restaurant within a middle class price range, shows an appetizing, accessible, up-close view of the meal. It is an image that may actually encourage a viewer to visit the restaurant and enjoy their own mouth-watering bowl, with chopsticks in one hand, and a cell phone in the other.

These images adhere quite accurately to Barthes's theory regarding marketing and accessibility. The practical interpretation of this idea is that the image on the left creates a feeling of a certain lifestyle, while the image on the right is essentially an artful advertisement for a restaurant, which would surely welcome any paying customers garnered by the popularity of the post. Considering the abundance of restaurants vying for business online, economist Sara McGuire writes, "attractive food photography is essential."[50] The instinctiveness with which Instagram users seem to embrace this sentiment further perpetuates the implied necessity of engaging with digital food images for both individuals and businesses alike. Incidentally, this powerful movement continues pushing those without access to such technology further away from a transitioning world of food engagement centered upon technology and recreational consumption.

CONCLUSION

Digital representations of food, while visually appealing, create a subtle sense of displaced utility. No longer functioning as a means of nourishment alone, this flourishing foodie trend bespeaks a new age of societal interaction with food. Considering that the vast majority of Instagram users participating in and consuming food photography are not in poverty, modern social media shifts towards a new use-value of food imagery as a tool for self-representation, group communication, and commodification. The visual nature of Instagram allows for the transmission of various messages, from expressing personal interests to signaling belongingness to a social class, as well as hosting overt and discreet advertising. Given the wide accessibility of smartphones among younger users from more affluent cultures, the power of symbolism and representation creates enormous potential for creativity and even social mobility. Instagram serves as a broad cultural connector, allowing people across the globe a glimpse into culinary worlds both far and near. While the symbolic complexity depends greatly on the purpose and intent of the user, be they a casual home cook or a trend-setting food influencer, Instagram can provide channels to explore every type of taste. Among the potential drawbacks, however, remains the inseparability of economic privilege and access to participating in this virtual culinary world. While widely regarded as a somewhat exasperating pop-culture trend, a closer examination of culinary content on Instagram provides a ripe platform for societal criticism and serves as a strong reflection for both the reinforcement of class norms and the possibilities of the potentially equalizing power of the digital world at large.

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Note: Trends on Instagram were also referenced, including certain quoted numbers of hashtags for example, by using Instagram.com/explore/pizza. The numbers constantly rise, so this paper most accurately reflects the status of the trends in January 2017.