

FOOD CONSUMPTION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SOCIAL STATUS

by

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ABSTRACT

MARIA SALEEVA. Food consumption, social media, and social status. (Under the direction of DR. VAUGHN SCHMUTZ)

Food consumption practices among different social groups get attention from sociology scholars because of their symbolic meanings. At the same time, food consumption practices in contemporary society are affected by a new phenomenon – social media. This study explores how food consumption practices on social media are interconnected with social status. Data from 20 in-depth interviews with undergraduate students, including photo elicitations, have been collected in order to understand how food consumption practices on social media are used to reflect and reinforce social status. Results of this study show that people use social media as a tool for displaying their cultural tastes and symbolic boundaries that are attributed to their social group.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We are what we eat. Food plays an important role in people's lives. Even though food is one of the main necessities, it is also a way to represent a social status, ethnicity, cultural heritage, religious beliefs, chosen lifestyle, and self-identity (Steim and Nemeroff 1995; Vartanian et al. 2007). Food consumption practices are affected and shaped by cultural and social norms. At the same time, food consumption practices in contemporary society are perhaps affected by a new phenomenon – social media. According to a Pew Research Center report (2018), around 70% of Americans use social media in 2018 compared to 5% in 2005. And while there is no doubt that social media changed the way we communicate, and share information and experiences, we know less about how social media has changed the relationship between food consumption practices and social status. In order to better understand this phenomenon, my research will address the following question: How do food consumption practices on social media interconnect with social status?

In contemporary society, food consumption practices among different social groups get a lot of attention from scholars because of their symbolic meanings. Research suggest that people with more cultural capital, including symbolically valued food consumption practices, can receive respect, be admired, and rewarded because of their taste (Warde 2017). More recently, social media has become a tool for displaying social status, distinction, and symbolic boundaries through cultural tastes. Social media provide people with opportunities to obtain and share their lifestyle and cultural knowledge openly and to display their status through food consumption practices.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of connections between social status and food consumption practices on social media. While most previous research concentrates on distinction and social class reproduction in a family setting, we know little about how social media is involved in these processes. And because food carries a lot of symbolic meanings and value, I argue that looking into food consumption practices on social media is an effective way to study how those symbolic meanings are communicated and displayed for others. Findings from the study can help to fill a gap in the field of sociology by providing a clearer understanding of why people use social media to show their food consumption practices. This research can also help us to better understand how people use social media to display their own social status and evaluate other people's status.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Food Consumption Practices

While food consumption is a necessity, it also has symbolic attachments that people use to “perform the status they want to be” (LeBesco and Naccarato 2008). Flemmen et al. (2017) find that even in a highly egalitarian society like Norway there is a huge difference in taste preferences between social classes. Even though a growing trend in food consumption is characterized by a moving away from “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture towards “omnivorousness” (breaking the boundaries between hierarchical culture), differences in food consumption practices among social classes continue to emerge (Johnston and Baumann 2007). People from higher social classes have more opportunities to explore more sophisticated and cosmopolitan foods because they have more access to legitimate knowledge about cooking and eating (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013).

Food truly says a lot about people who consume it. According to Vartanian et al. (2007), food intake preferences are affected by consumption stereotypes and can be associated with gender and “social appeal to weight and height.” At the same time, Barker et al. (1999) find that people on low-fat diets are associated with attractiveness, intelligence, and middle-class lifestyles, but also with unhappiness, seriousness, and antisocial traits. As a result, social evaluations are often made based on food consumption practices that carry symbolic meanings. Based on such meanings, people may adjust their food consumption practices to appear more attractive, educated, and successful in eyes of other people. As a result, it may be an effective way to obtain a higher social status.

2.2. Consumption and Social Status

Sociologists often define social class based on income, education, and occupation. According to Weber (1978), status captures more than just economic position and refers to a person's degree of social honor or prestige. Thus, he focused on the role of status groups in society that are based on shared morals, culture, and lifestyle. Groups created based on those criteria are more likely to last, because people create boundaries to protect their groups from outsiders. Consumption reinforces the boundaries of status as the consumption practices of elites are symbolically valued, innovative, and only available to people inside a status group (Holt 1998). Consumption is a status marker that is learned, acquired, and experienced strategically to create boundaries. Thus, status is the symbolic dimension of the social class system that is reflected in and reproduced by shared lifestyle and cultural taste (Bourdieu 1984; Alderson et al. 2007).

Symbolic boundaries are used to define and categorize people. According to Lamont (2002), there are three broad types of symbolic boundaries that unify groups—moral, socioeconomic, and cultural. Food consumption practices are a type of cultural boundary that is based on tastes, manners, knowledge, etc. Groups with the same social status create boundaries to differentiate themselves from others and to prevent entry from lower status outsiders. Such boundaries play an important role in separating “us” and “them” and facilitating processes of cultural matching (Rivera 2012).

Consumption as a phenomenon that shows one's standing in society was described by Veblen (1899) as “conspicuous consumption.” This term was used to describe consumer behavior that involves purchasing especially expensive good and services by the upper or “leisure” class to separate themselves from others. As result, the

upper class becomes a “consumption reference group” to which other classes refer when they are trying to acquire consumption practices. Later, Bourdieu (1984) introduced the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” cultural consumption to explain social class reproduction. He argued that people from different classes consume either “high” or “low” culture, and those practices are based on social class and family socialization, making them hard to change. Peterson (1992) extended Bourdieu’s ideas, by arguing that status, in contemporary context, is based less on highbrow consumption and more on omnivorousness in terms of cultural choices. In his view, social status is attained and displayed through cultural appreciation, tastes, and lifestyles, that reflect eclectic sophistication, savvy, and cosmopolitan consumption (Bourdieu 1984; Johnston and Baumann 2007). Yet all these approaches see consumption practices as a meaningful source of social stratification.

Other perspectives emphasize the role of social status in social comparison and evaluation of others. Ridgeway (2014) argues that social status is mainly used to rank people in society by their value compared to other people. People place a lot of value on displaying their social status because it helps them to show their accomplishments, cultural practices, and abilities (Rege 2006; Ridgeway 2014).

According to Bauman (2007), consumption is a “type of social arrangement” that plays a crucial role in social integration, reproduction, and social stratification. Historically, an upper class used practices of better consumption as a social marker to reinforce class distinction. And while consumption of expensive goods signals wealth and status in society, it also signals abilities.

Mary Rege (2006) argues that people consume particular goods to send each other signals about class, success, accomplishments and to show “non-observable abilities” to match with people of the same ability level in personal and professional life. This type of status signaling, or status consumption, can help people to obtain a desirable position in society and to distinguish themselves from the rest. According to Attanasio and Pistaferri (2016), consumption is a more efficient way to measure inequality than income because it measures the quality of consumed goods, not just quantity. And while status consumption is economically beneficial to the society and creates incentives to consume (Corneo and Jeanne 2001), LeBesco and Naccarato (2008) argue that consumption of high-status foods that are associated with a desired class position only create an illusion of mobility.

2.3. Cultural Capital and Food Consumption

According to Bourdieu (1984), the accumulation of knowledge, behavior, and skills is part of the cultural capital which is necessary for social reproduction. In his book *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu suggested that taste is socially constructed and transmitted, and people display their class position by demonstrating their tastes. Status (“symbolic capital”) could be gained in society by using three types of resources – economic, cultural, and social capitals. Cultural capital is an important status resource that can be shown through tastes, knowledge, and consumption practices.

Historically, foods with rich, unusual and mostly bitter flavors were associated with higher status and maturity and were only appreciated by higher classes. At the same time, lower classes look at food as a necessity that cannot be wasted, and they preferred plain, sweet, and familiar flavors. Research supports the idea that taste preferences vary

among different social classes and that taste palates are constructed through family eating practices (Flemmen et al. 2017; Fielding-Singh 2017; Wills et al. 2011).

Cultural knowledge about food does not develop in a vacuum but is rather established in family settings and developed through social interactions. According to Fielding-Singh (2017), parents play a crucial role not only in developing the “right” taste palate that transmits class values but also in teaching restraint and delayed gratification which is associated with high-status food consumption. Parents attach different meanings and values to the food depending on their social class. Meanwhile, widespread information from new technologies and social media gave people from all socioeconomic classes access to greater knowledge about food consumption. Although it is unclear if it helps people from lower social classes to obtain more cultural capital or if it reinforces the legitimacy of food consumption practices and preferences among higher social status groups.

2.4. Social Media and Food Consumption

A recent report from the Pew Research Center (2018) shows that social media users tend to be more educated, have higher income, and are more likely to live in urban areas than non-users, thereby creating a “perfect consumption reference group.” Social media are highly personalized and have a constant presence in many people’s lives. Young adults (18- to 29-year-olds) are the most active users of social media, with up to 90% of them using at least one or more social media platforms. The most popular social media among young adults are Instagram and Snapchat and they tend to use it multiple times per day (Pew Research Center 2018).

Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social media mobile application that allows users to share content, interact with other users, and to comment on other users' content (Alhabash and Ma 2017). Instagram has over 1 billion active users every month, and over 500 million daily active users; almost 80 million of those users are in the United States alone (Omnico Group 2019). The largest and most active group of Instagram users are young adults (18- to 29-year-olds).

Snapchat is a mobile social media application that allows users to share pictures and videos but it has a time-sensitive feature, so users can only access content for 24 hours (Alhabash and Ma 2017). Users of Snapchat can select the audience that can access their content, and most Snapchat users have a smaller number of followers than on other social media platforms. Snapchat has over 190 million daily users and 3 billion “snaps” (photos and videos) are created every day (Omnico Group 2019). Just like Instagram, most of Snapchat users are young adults (18- to 29-year-olds).

New technologies gave people opportunities to “produce and distribute cultural products” such as photo and videos (Schwarz 2010), while social media allowed people to demonstrate their cultural consumption, including their food preferences and practices. According to Schnotz (2005), text description is more abstract than a visual image, so pictures are a quicker and more efficient way to communicate in terms of the experience, thoughts, and feelings about food. The study conducted by Phua et al. (2016) suggests that visual social networking sites such as Instagram are primarily used to demonstrate sociability, show affection, and follow fashion, rather than to share problems or to improve social knowledge. Not surprisingly, the latest research from Pew Research Center (2018) shows the growing popularity of visual social media platforms such as

Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest, whereas there have been no significant changes recently in use of text-based social media such as Twitter.

Food is one of the most photographed subjects on visual social media, with over a billion pictures of food shared on social media. The simple hashtag “food” on Instagram is attributed to over 262 million pictures in April 2018, and a year later this number increased to over 330 million pictures. A recent study by Holmberg et al. (2016) shows that teenagers (specifically 14-year-olds) presented food on Instagram in two ways – one is focused on either “aesthetical features or home-made qualities of the food”; and the second one is concentrated on “food being a part of lifestyle or a situation”. That supports an idea that food consumption practices on social media are not random, but rather used to show particular lifestyles that are correlated with status. Even 14-year-olds in Holmberg et al. (2016) study used food in a symbolic way and looked beyond just aesthetic features.

Images of food consumption on social media can be used to reinforce desirable class position and social status in society. While social media posts became a key part of food consumption for many people, images on social media are often highly curated and used in a way that allows users to manipulate their audience to achieve a certain outcome (Freitas 2017). For example, pictures on Instagram are not “instant”, but rather adjusted by filtering and cropping to achieve the best possible final product (Zappavigna et al. 2016). As a result, visual social media can be a perfect display of status through consumption and a cultural knowledge that reinforces social class distinctions.

Historically, pictures of food were significant sources of information because “knowledge about food is visual” (Carolan 2017). Research even shows that taking a

picture before the meal makes it taste better (Lavis 2017). Indeed, people first judge food by the way it looks, then taste comes after. This is possibly one of the reasons why visual social media is a powerful instrument that allows people to create a desirable image of themselves. Food consumption practices carry symbolic meanings that are attributed to certain social status, cultural knowledge, and lifestyle. Social media allow people to share their food consumption practices with a larger number of online users in order to display their lifestyle, cultural consumption, and create social ties with people of similar or better social status.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the interconnection between food consumption, social media, and display of social status. Qualitative inquiry and analysis are the best for the purpose of exploring this problem. For my study, I used a qualitative method approach that was based on narrative accounts about food consumption and social media use. Use of semi-structured interviews and photo elicitations helped me to gain a better understanding of the relationships between social status and food consumption practices on social media. A semi-structured interview format was the most appropriate in this case because little was already known about this phenomenon (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) and my research aims were primarily exploratory.

Interviews were the best way to collect rich data that helped me to answer my research question because I was able to get information not only about my respondents but also their opinions about the use of social media by other people. Interviews allow a researcher to collect detailed information, so in-depth interviews are often used to explore reasons, feelings, opinions, and beliefs about a particular topic (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Since qualitative research uses specific contexts, opinions, and personal experiences, generalizability is not possible, nor is a main goal or purpose of this study.

All interviews in my study had a three-part structure (see Appendix A). Prior to the interviews, all participant filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix B) with general demographic information such as age, gender, race, employment status, and self-assessment of social standing. During the first part of the interview, the participants were

asked general questions about food consumption and social media use, as well as more specific questions that explored relationships between social class and food consumption practices on social media. The interview questions were open-ended, so participants were able to express their feelings and attitudes in their own words. I asked follow up questions to get participants involved in further discussion about social media and food consumption.

During the second part of the interview, participants were asked to talk about recent posts of food and drinks on social media that they came across and to explain why their social media does or does not have pictures of food consumption practices. This part of the interview led me to a better understanding of how participants choose what to share on social media, and what kind of food pictures are getting their attention.

To collect additional data and to further explore the phenomenon of food consumption practices on social media, I used photo elicitations, or inserting photographs into research interviews, as a research method in sociology (Harper 2002). While most food studies use images produced by the participants, I used pre-existing images of food and drinks that were found on existing Instagram accounts (Power 2003). The main purpose of photo elicitations was to capture assessments and symbolic meanings that respondents associated with food posts on social media. Participants in my study translated photographs into text that was analyzed just as the rest of the collected data (Leavy 2014).

Every photo represents a different type of food and place, the idea behind it is to get participants to talk about their own preferences and evaluations of food pictures on social media. Because every participant was looking at the same pictures, it helped me to

better understand how people connect pictures of food consumption practices with the class, status, and cultural capital of people who they think could post such pictures. After answering questions about each picture, respondents were asked to write down 5 hashtags that they are associate with a picture. Hashtags provided data that illustrates how people attached words and meanings to each picture.

3.2. Participants

My study targeted young adults because they tend to be frequent users of social media and have been exposed to it for a sufficient period of time. My sample was very narrow in terms of age and included 20 college students between the ages of 18 and 21. The mean age of my sample is 18.7. A total of 11 (55% of the sample) females and 9 (45% of the sample) males were interviewed, which closely mirrors the 56% of female and 44% of male students on campuses in the United States (Snyder et al. 2019). 60% of respondents identified themselves as White, 20% as Black or African American, 15% as Asian, and 5% as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. All my respondents are full-time students at UNC Charlotte, while 5 respondents, or 25%, were holding a part-time job in addition to being full-time students. Participants represented a wide variety of majors, some of them were communications, pre-med, nursing, undecided, and biology. Respondents rated their social standing by placing themselves next to numbers from 1 as worst off to 10 as best off. All participants placed themselves between 5 and 8 on the ladder, mostly associating themselves with a middle or upper-middle position in society. 35% are at number 5, 25% at number 6, 25% at number 7, and 15% at number 8.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

# of participant	Age	Sex	Race	Occupation	Social standing
Participant 1	18	Female	White	Student/PT work	6
Participant 2	18	Female	Black or African American	Student	5
Participant 3	19	Male	White	Student	7
Participant 4	18	Male	Black or African American	Student	5
Participant 5	19	Male	White	Student	7
Participant 6	19	Female	White	Student	5
Participant 7	18	Female	White	Student	8
Participant 8	19	Female	White	Student	6
Participant 9	19	Male	White	Student/PT work	5
Participant 10	19	Female	Black or African American	Student	5
Participant 11	18	Female	White	Student	7
Participant 12	18	Female	Black or African American	Student	8
Participant 13	18	Female	Asian	Student	6
Participant 14	18	Female	Asian	Student/PT work	6
Participant 15	21	Male	White	Student	6
Participant 16	19	Male	Native Hawaiian	Student/PT work	5
Participant 17	19	Male	White	Student	8
Participant 18	18	Male	Asian	Student	7
Participant 19	18	Male	White	Student	7
Participant 20	21	Female	White	Student/PT work	5

I recruited participants in a large introductory sociology class during September 2018. I went to class and talked to students about the study and passed along flyers with information about participation. To be included in the study students were expected to be undergraduates, between ages 18 and 40, have an Instagram account, and were able to talk about their experiences with social media. All interested students emailed me to volunteer for the study and I randomly choose 20 participants out of 73 requests that I received. I stratified the sample of volunteers by gender in an attempt to include the same number of males and females into the study. All participants received a \$10 cash incentive in exchange for their time.

3.3. Description of the process

After obtaining IRB approval, interviews were conducted during September, October, and November of 2018. I met with each participant in a private study room at Atkins Library. Each meeting was arranged at least one week in advance. I recorded each interview on an audio recorder and used voice-to-text software at the same time to back up the data. Prior to the interviews, I received a written consent form from all the participants. Interviews lasted between 29 and 53 minutes, with an average interview being 43 minutes. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked general questions. In the second part, participants showed me their Instagram account and explained to me why food was not presented on their accounts. In the last part of the interviews, participants were asked to look at 4 pictures from real Instagram accounts and describe them in as much detail as possible. After talking about each picture, participants were asked to write down 5 hashtags about each picture. At the end of each interview students received their cash incentive.

3.4. Data analysis

After interviews were conducted, I transcribed and analyzed them in NVivo software. I used line-by-line coding to create the codes that were later used to categorize and analyze the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). When additional themes appeared in interviews, I added them to my codes and applied to already coded interviews. Similar or related answers were grouped together under the same code. After coding all interviews, I consolidated 37 codes into 2 major ones “status/distinction” and “social media”. By conceptualizing, or process of grouping similar items, I reduced the amount of data for a

more detailed analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The table below represents the most common and important codes that I used in my further analysis.

Table 2: The most common codes with examples

Code	Description	Examples
1. Status/Distinction		
1.1. Popularity/followers	Use of food consumption practices on social media to gain popularity and followers, and to get attention	"...they would only post a picture if they like it themselves but they probably thinking their followers will like to see it being interested." Respondent #15
1.2. Health	Healthy food consumption practices on social media	"Maybe they are trying to say I am better than everyone else. I am eating healthier than everyone else, like I am not eating fast food. I am eating this healthy quinoa and chicken dish." Respondent #8
1.3. Expensive	Expensive meals and expensive restaurants as measurement of income and class	"I think they are trying to show like I can afford this, or this is a type of food that I like. You know... I spend more money on food like this, rather than just like a burger or something, so I think they are trying to prove the point with this picture." Respondent #2
1.4. Lifestyle	Lifestyle represented by food consumption practices	"I think social media gives you look to what you can expect from that person, so it gives you a little inside before you go on a date. Like you gonna know, if you gonna like that person just based on their social media what they eat, what they like to drink." Respondent #2
1.5. Trendy/unusual food	Any recognition of the food outside of usual every day consumption	"I think more foods that like photogenic, like you would post pictures of sushi, but you won't post a picture of McDonald's. So, I feel like better it looks more you want to post it, compare to like something that is a usual everyday thing that people see." Respondent #14

Table 2: The most common codes with examples (continue)

1.6. Place	Restaurants or places where food is consumed outside of house	“Pretty much only when I go out to a restaurant, I will post picture, or if I cook myself like a really good dinner, I will post a picture of it, but it mainly at restaurants.” Respondent #12
1.7. Travel	Social media posts with food while traveling, or in specific city/country	“There is the burger I ate in Dubai like last year, its really good and I just crave it one time for some reason, so I posted the collage of it.” Respondent #13
2. Social media		
2.1. Snapchat use	Everything that describes use of Snapchat	“I probably would post that on my Snapchat story, like just because I wouldn’t want someone to see that I ate this forever or go back and see it.” Respondent #18
2.2. Instagram use	Everything that describes use of Instagram	“I don’t really remember, but I don’t think none of my like close friends ever put food on their Instagram.” Respondent #17
2.3. Influence	Social media influence on food consumption practices	“Definitely, because if on a given day, I don’t know what I want to eat, and I get on social media and see what someone else is eating, I’m like, its look kind of good, I kind of would eat it right now. You know... That happens to me a lot.” Respondent #4

The pictures that I chose for photo elicitations were intended to represent different situations and people (Appendix A). Picture #1 portrays two burgers, French fries, ketchup, and utensils in a motor oil can. The food looks very ordinary, but the picture is taken at a restaurant rather than in a house. Picture #2 portrays Mediterranean dishes with rotisserie chicken in the middle. Dinner like this could take place at a restaurant or at home and there is enough food at the table to feed several people. Picture #3 portrays an egg omelet, sausage patty, and pieces of avocado on a paper plate. This picture has no

background and is very plain compared to other ones. Picture #4 portrays a nicely set table, with steak and lobster on the background. This picture has the feel of a sophisticated dinner. Each picture represents not just different food, but a different approach to food consumption, and they carry different messages on social media. While pictures were coded separately, answers about pictures were coded under other categories as well. For example, if a respondent was describing a picture as “unique” and “expensive”, I coded it under the picture itself, under the theme “trendy/unusual food”, and under the theme “expensive”.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Instagram vs. Snapchat Use

All of the respondents had both Instagram and Snapchat accounts. Most respondents reported that they spend most of their time on Instagram, followed by Snapchat. This finding aligned with a previous study conducted by Alhabash and Ma (2017), where they found that students use Instagram and Snapchat more often and more intensely than other social media platforms. While time-usage and motivation for the use of Instagram and Snapchat are very similar (Alhabash and Ma 2017), my study shows that food consumption practices vary drastically on these particular social media platforms. All of the respondents preferred the temporary presence of their food on social media (Snapchat), rather than a permanent post (Instagram).

While developing and planning this study, I expected to get rich information from the Instagram accounts of the participants. Unexpectedly, no one in my sample had pictures of food they had posted on their Instagram. Instead, everyone had pictures of food on their Snapchat or Instagram stories. So, everyone in my sample preferred their food pictures or videos to be available for a short time, rather than constantly presented on their social media accounts. One of the respondents even called it “weird” to post pictures of food on Instagram: “...my friends post a lot what they eat on Snapchat but never on Instagram, it’s weird” (Respondent 16, 19-year-old male). This was an unexpected finding, and this phenomenon could be explained by the three main themes that I came across in my interviews – time, impression management, and consumed food.

Time

“I do think Snapchat is more food friendly because it’s not like an actual post that stays on there forever, it disappears” (Respondent 1, 18-year-old female).

It was important for my sample that food does not stay on their profile “forever”, but rather would disappear in 24 hours. The constant presence of food on their account was called “uncomfortable” and “too personal”. This shows that at least at this age group, food is not something that respondents expected to be shared with a large number of people or be accessible for everyone. When food is shared on social media, it is perceived as a temporary thing that could be remembered but could not be easily accessed.

Impression management

Food was presented on social media of all my respondents. There are unwritten rules and expectations about what should be shared on social media and what should stay outside of it. People assume that they are being judged based on their food consumption practices. So, my respondents preferred to share their food consumption practices only with a small number of people who they are usually connected on Snapchat rather than on Instagram.

“It’s ok on Snapchat because there are less people who I know, everyone who I know on Snapchat, all my friends on Snapchat are people that are close to me, people that I know, so it would make sense. I don’t really know how to explain it, but like I guess I am ok with them seeing what I am eating” (Respondent 17, 19-year-old male).

This shows that my participants were very careful about who can see their food consumption practices. Since food is not “prioritized” for my respondents on social media, they are extremely careful about who can access their posts about food. So, my respondents are more likely to use social media that create time and access boundaries, rather than have their food consumption practices available to everyone.

Type of consumed food

Many of my respondents explained differences in food consumption practices on social media by type of consumed food. While none of my respondents had food pictures on their Instagram accounts, they were not against that idea if they had the right type of food pictures.

“It would take a pretty special meal for me to post it on Instagram because I don’t tend to do it, but I’m not necessarily against it, so if I had a really top meal that was fantastic, then I would probably post it” (Respondent 15, 21-year-old male).

“Special” or “better” meals are among meals that participant would share on social media. While the next section will describe in depth what constitutes “special”, “better”, or “unusual” meal, at this point it is important to understand that Instagram is perceived as more legitimate and valuable social media platform. Because of the social position of my sample – students between age 18 and 21 – they prefer to share their food consumption practices on social media accounts, such as Snapchat, that have a smaller number of followers with a similar social position, rather than on Instagram with higher number of followers from diverse social groups.

In the next sections, I will provide support for the argument that food consumption practices on social media can be used by people to gain status and to distinguish themselves from others. Not just the food itself but rather the whole experience of food consumption provides an opportunity for people to show their lifestyle that differentiates them from others in social media space.

4.2. Distinction and Status Gain by Food Consumption Practices on Social Media

From previous research, we know that food can be used by people to distinguish themselves and to show their social standing in society. All respondents talked about importance of food and that *“food is a big part of you”*, but also food as a big part of

“*what you are doing in your daily life.*” At the same time, not all food consumption practices on social media are equally valuable. Social media posts that picture food in the context of place, travel, and certain lifestyles are the most appreciated and expected in the social media space. In terms of the food itself, foods on social media are expected to be “healthy”, “unusual/trendy”, and “expensive.” These themes were most prevalent during the interviews, and respondents did not just want to see particular foods and settings but were also more likely to share them on social media.

“I think it’s kind of like popularity in high school, it’s like, to get to the top, you basically like ‘oooh’ if you eat the most trendiest food you will be more popular. Or like, you have more friends or you have more fun. I feel like that’s how people think, like, if you are not eating the trendy food you are not having as much fun as someone else who is and I feel like social media plays a big impact on that because it’s like, I feel like social media impacts people like really hard” (Respondent 14, 18-year-old female).

This respondent correlated “trendy food” with an amount of fun and popularity of a person in real life. This supports the idea that food consumption practices are not just about food itself, but rather about a lifestyle that could be seen around those food consumption practices.

Showing Lifestyle

All my respondents were talking about “place” when they were describing their food consumption practices on social media. “Place” was used to describe consumption practices outside of a house and most respondents use social media to show that they are out. Some respondents were straightforward about not posting pictures of home cooked meals: *“I would never put a picture of the meal that my mom made on social media”* (Respondent 12, 18-year-old female). Instead, they wanted to share food posts that showed that they are out at restaurants eating a nice meal. For example, Respondent 15

(21-year-old male) said: *“I think the main thing, the fact that people want to show where they are eating.”*

There is a separation between homemade meals and going out to the restaurants. The respondents exclusively wanted to post pictures of their meals on social media only if those pictures were taken outside of the house, and if the place was considered “trendy”, “nice”, or “new.” *“I just usually share just when I go out, or if I am trying like a new restaurant”* (Respondent 11, 18-year-old female).

“Restaurant food” and “trendy places” were among the most likely occurring posts on social media, but even more popular were pictures of food that were taken during travel or any trips outside of the area of permanent residency. Respondent 17, (19-years-old male) said:

“If I am like out of town, I guess, I am more likely to put food on my story. Like, to filter the location where I am at and the restaurant that says like, state and city. I am more likely to do it when I am not close to home.”

Some respondents are excited to *“see people from like different countries that are like eating different foods that you couldn’t find in America”* (Respondent 8, 19-year-old female). This represents their cultural cosmopolitanism and interest to learn about different types of food and culture.

Much like going out to restaurants, traveling is a way of showing a certain lifestyle that is *“interesting”* and *“not everyone just can go.”* It creates a distinction between the ones who can go and ones who cannot. According to Respondent 8, (19-year-old female) pictures of food show *“where you are, like, if you are traveling.”* So, it gives people on social media an idea about lifestyle while traveling and specific places that may be associated with that lifestyle.

While most of the respondents wanted to have their travel pictures posted on social media and often had those pictures saved on their phones, some actually received backlash for having posted such pictures. For example, *“One time, I posted a picture of a dish when I went to France, and my friend called me bougie”* (Respondent 6, 19-year-old female).

This shows that her friend was evaluating her lifestyle by the pictures on social media and when her food consumption practices became different from what her friend expected, she let her know about it. It had no effect on her social media activities, as she told me she continued to share pictures from that trip. Therefore, it supports the idea that pictures of food shared on social media during travel show lifestyle that increase the status of the person and distinguishes them from others.

Unusual/Trendy Foods

While “place” and “travel” were among popular themes during the interviews, respondents spend a lot of time talking about the food itself. “Expensive”, “unusual/trendy”, and “healthy” are frequent themes in describing social media-worthy meals. Respondents were mostly talking about how it is expected for them to post “unusual/trendy” food, that they see a lot of meals on social media that they described as “healthy”, and that “expensive” or “fancy” meals are ones that they want to have on their social media. Respondents were unlikely to share ordinary or everyday pictures of food consumption practices; rather, they expect the food to be anything but ordinary. One respondent stated: *“I would want to post that I am eating a not ordinary meal that you see every day at any ordinary restaurant”* (Respondent 18, 18-year-old male).

Additionally, respondents were saying that basic meals “have no culture”, and nobody would find them “interesting.” At the same time, when they found a social media-worthy meal, they wanted other people to know about it. Respondent 4 (18-year-old male) tried to explain to me why he shared a picture of a “limited-edition coffee” on social media:

Respondent: *“One time I got this limited-edition coffee, I posted it so many times, I wanted people to know I had this limited-edition coffee.”*

Interviewer: *“Why is it?”*

Respondent: *“I don’t know, hmm...maybe I posted it because it maybe someone else up there who wanted it and did not get it, so I was like haha I got it you know.”*

By posting this picture he was trying to distinguish himself from others who could not get hold of that “limited-edition coffee”, and even laugh at them because he was able to share it on social media.

“Unique” or “unusual” foods are the most popular among my respondents on social media, because they wanted everyone to see that they consume different foods and there is a meaning behind this consumption. “Trendy” food suggests that *“you have more fun”* and consuming “trendy” foods is the way to *“to mix with the crowd.”* While “expensive” meals differentiate people because those meals are rare and not everyone can have them.

“If someone eating like a really good filet mignon or something, then you automatically kinda assume a little bit of like, status with that person, just because of the food that they are eating, and you going to think higher of them, and then if someone is eating very basic food, like, you know everyone eats, you are not really going to have different thoughts about them” (Respondent 3, 19-year-old male).

“What I would never post is probably just simple meals like when you live in college, you don’t have the fanciest meals like, if I had a microwavable meal or something that’s not something I would post and that’s funny because it could look same as you could eat fine at the restaurant but the likelihood of people posting it while they are at restaurant is extremely high” (Respondent 15, 21-year-old male).

According to many respondents, “healthy” foods shared on social media to get attention from other users, to show that food trends could be “beneficial” and that some food consumption practices could be “better” than others.

“They are trying to say – I am better than everyone else, I am eating healthier than everyone else. Like, I am not eating fast food, I am eating this healthy quinoa and chicken dish” (Respondent 8, 19-year old female).

At the same time, Respondent 5 (19-year-old-male) told me that he does not like the idea of getting “*out of the comfort zone*” with his food consumption, and he wants “*to keep eating what feels normal to me since I was a little kid.*” While I don’t know how people around him react to his “comfort” food choices, many participants stressed that people who consume very “plain” or “usual” foods are “*not interesting*” and “*close-minded.*”

“If you not using seasoning on your food, I usually think that you like, not as diverse and open to other people so like honestly, I’m usually if someone doesn’t have seasoning on their food I assume that they may be xenophobic or something like that because seasonings is like very international type of thing and if you are not using seasoning like people who do not use seasoning who I generally observe on social media and in real world are usually pretty close minded and stuff like that so I’m kinda tend to associate the two” (Respondent 3, 19-year-old male).

Expensive

Themes of “expensive” and “ethnic” meals were common during the interviews, but photo elicitations made respondents talk about these themes and opened a whole new discussion about personal food preferences on social media. As already explained in the methodology section, I showed respondents 4 different pictures that represented different types of food and places where food is consumed. Respondents were asked to describe the picture itself; to imagine people behind this picture, and most importantly to explain why they would or would not post each picture on social media. Most respondents chose

the same 2 pictures to post; the explanations for their choices were mostly based on the “expensiveness” of the food in one picture and “culture” in the type of food in another.

This is how respondents explained their preferences for the picture with a Mediterranean ethnic meal:

“I think I would post it, more because it shows more like culture, it shows you don’t eat the same thing every day, this is like you don’t eat this every day” (Respondent 2, 18-year-old female).

“Mediterranean one will show that I am pretty cultured and that I have a diverse palate, that my friends are diverse and that I opened to other cultures” (Respondent 3, 19-year old male).

Just like with “unusual/trendy” foods, respondents wanted to post something that is not part of everyday food consumption practices. Ethnic foods were also valuable for respondents because they show that they are open to new experiences, different cultures, and people. This supports the idea that status could be shown by omnivorous food consumption practices. In the same time, respondents spend a lot of time describing a nice meal at an expensive restaurant and wanted to share that picture on their social media. The expensiveness of the picture with lobster and steak got a lot of attention from the participants, as most of them wanted to be able to share a picture like this.

“I think people are more willing to show like steak or meat dishes I don’t know why I think meats are more expensive than other foods” (Respondent 12, 18-year-old female).

“Ooh... This like those fancy dinners. That meat, those things are expensive, that’s expensive. It looks like a nice place. It’s in a nice place, yeah... That looks pretty good, that’s something I would post on my Instagram” (Respondent 13, 18-year-old female).

Suddenly, when the picture looked expensive and unusual for respondents, they wanted to share it even on their Instagram, which did not have pictures of food before. It shows that, while my respondents want to share a picture like this one on their social

media, they also want to have the same lifestyle and consumption practices as the group with which that type of food is associated.

4.3. Authenticity Boundaries

Of course, some of my respondents experienced expensive meals, but none of them bragged about them on Instagram where they have the most followers. That phenomenon supports an idea that, while students want to share their best consumption practices on social media, they also want to be authentic and display a lifestyle that is similar to their friends. During interviews I asked all my respondents who influences their food consumption practices the most, and what role social media play in this process. All my respondents said that social media influence what, how, and where they eat. Surprisingly, they all said that their friends have the biggest impact on their food consumption, while family and celebrities are not perceived as influential at all.

“Yeah its important I kind of follow if there is something that trending you want to follow that you want to mix with the crowd, so I guess I do that whether it food or anything else on Instagram and stuff” (Respondent 13, 18-year-old female).

“Mixing with crowd” and *“trying something because everyone else does”* is important to respondents and they want to look authentic in their food consumption practices by doing so. Because there are certain expectations about how students and this age group should consume, their lifestyle is often following those expectations. As a result, even if they consume better than everybody else in their group, they prefer not to do so, because of possible backlash and loss of status within that particular group.

Many respondents talked about how nice and desirable certain meals looked in that picture, and that they do not see these meals often on their social media. More often

they saw “trendy” food that made it easier to make connections their close peers. They explained it by their age and knew for sure that their food consumption practices on social media eventually would change, but at this point in their life, posting expensive food consumption practices would seem inauthentic.

“If I was older, I definitely post it, I’d say it sort of, you know, showing success. Right now, I would not post it, but in the future, I would” (Respondent 4, 18-year-old male).

Overall, respondents agreed that food consumption practices on social media could say a lot about people. It could show their success, culture, and general status in the social media space and in society at large.

“Because food is very, it tells a lot about a person, their culture. A lot about their status in society, their wealth, their education. Not directly, but like it gives you a general sense of who that person is in that moment in their life, and it just kinda shows what kinda person they are in a general sense” (Respondent 3, 19-year-old male).

During the interviews, I also collected hashtags that people attached to each picture. A total of 100 hashtags were collected for each picture, I used them to create word clouds in NVivo (see Appendix C). The NVivo word clouds are a useful tool in validating the choice of photographs for this study. Each word cloud shows that most of the participants attach the same meanings to the pictures, and while most of the hashtags describe food presented on the pictures, hashtags are also used to attach symbolic meaning to the pictures. For example, while hashtag “steak” was the most popular hashtag among participants for picture #4, hashtags “perfect”, “money”, “expensive”, and “classy” were used by participants as well. This shows that people attach symbolic meanings to the pictures of food consumption practices that they see on social media.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

My analysis led me to a better understanding of how people use social media to distinguish themselves and gain status. People tend to use social media to share their food experiences, such as going out to certain places or consuming specific foods during travel inside or outside of the country. Those food consumption experiences are expected from social media users and help them to gain status. At the same time, expensive and unusual foods are among the most popular posts by my participants, because they just like places and travel opportunities show the very specific lifestyle that helps people to increase their status and to connect with others in social media Space. Importance of this online popularity supported by hierarchy among different social media platforms, where people tend to share different things based on the type of social media and number of followers that varies from one social media to other. The number of followers correlated with the status of the person online, and their food consumption practices are expected to be more legitimate and important as the number of followers is increasing. While this study did not directly investigate the number of followers and food consumption practices on social media, enough data was collected to argue that food consumption practices vary on different social media based on the number of followers and relationships they have.

Analysis of the interviews shows that people take their food consumption practices on social media very seriously. Behind each social media post of food consumption practices, there is a thought-out decision. Type of food or place that person is sharing can produce a lot of information about this person and can show them different ways. Type of social media that people use shows how comfortable people are about their food consumption practices and if they have enough cultural and economic capital to

present their food to a larger number of people. Food consumption practices on social media play an important role in the distinction that exists in online space. Certain food consumption practices on social media, such as travel and eating out experiences, consumption of unusual and expensive meals, and even use of particular social media platforms to share them, are more valuable and a big part of social status that people carefully create for themselves.

Since it is qualitative research, I cannot generalize the results of my study to the other group, population, or other individuals. My sample was very homogeneous with regards to age, SES, and employment. And while it helped to produce some valuable data about social media use, findings could be hard to apply outside of the age group of my sample. Otherwise, my sample is unique and useful because it represented the most active users of social media.

Future research could use more representative sample in terms of age, education, and employment. While everyone in my sample was an active social media user, who spends several hours every day on social media, food consumption practices could be completely different among occasional users. Additionally, more research is needed to better understand how people use social media to demonstrate their cultural consumption and social status in general terms.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND FOOD PICTURES

Social media use

1. Tell me about the types of social media you use.

[prompt: Can you tell me more about how and why you use social media platform(s)?]

Social media and food consumption

2. Do you or your friends ever share pictures of what you eat or drink on Instagram?

If not, why you do not share pictures of food or drinks on social media?

[prompt: Are there certain types of food or drink that you are especially like to share? If yes, why so?]

3. Why do you think people share on social media what they eat and drink?

4. Does what you see on social media influence what you eat or drink? Why do you think this?

Instagram examples

5. Would you be willing to show me your Instagram account? I'm interested to see some examples of posts about food.

[prompts: Describe the picture for me?! Tell me about why you posted this picture?]

If they don't want to or can't share their Instagram, ask...

6. Can you tell me about some recent pictures of food or drinks that you posted or that you came across on Instagram (or other social media)?

7. Are there types of pictures of food or drink that you would not share on social media? Can you tell me about how you decide whether or not to post a picture of food or drink?

Evaluation of food posts

I will show you four pictures of food from real Instagram accounts.

8. What comes to mind when you see this picture?

[prompts: How appealing is this picture? Is this the type of picture you might post? Why or why not?]

9. Tell me about the person you imagine might post a picture like this.

10. What hashtags would you attach to this picture?



Picture #1



Picture #2



Picture #3

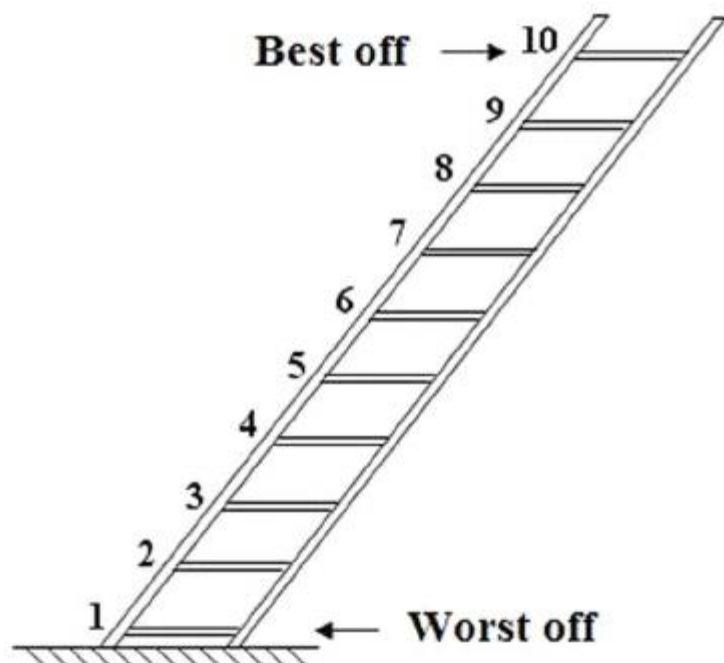


Picture #4

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How old are you?
2. What is your sex?
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Other
3. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received?
 - ☐ Some high school, no diploma
 - ☐ High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
 - ☐ Some college credit, no degree
 - ☐ Associate degree
 - ☐ Bachelor's degree
 - ☐ Advanced degree (MA, MBA, MD, PhD)
4. What is your current employment status? (all that apply)
 - ☐ Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
 - ☐ Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)
 - ☐ Unemployed and currently looking for work
 - ☐ Unemployed and not currently looking for work
 - ☐ Student
 - ☐ Retired
 - ☐ Homemaker
 - ☐ Self-employed
 - ☐ Unable to work
5. Please specify your race
 - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
 - ☐ Asian
 - ☐ Black or African American
 - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - ☐ White
6. Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off - those who have the most money, the most education and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off - who have the least money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job.

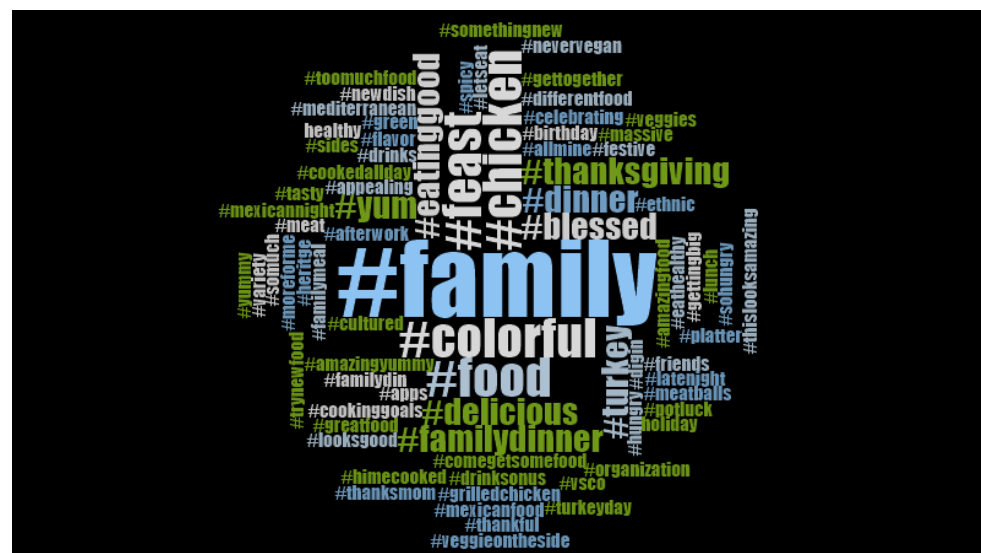
The higher up you are on the ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom. Where would you place yourself on this ladder? Please place an "X" on the rung where you think you stand as this time in your life, relative to other people in the United States.



APPENDIX C: WORD CLOUDS



Picture #1



Picture #2

[illegible]

Picture #4