**Eating Ourselves into Identity? An Investigation into the Relationship between Dining-Out Experiences and Identity Production on Instagram amongst Female Young Professionals**

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## Eating Ourselves into Identity? An Investigation into the Relationship between Dining-Out Experiences and Identity production on Instagram amongst Female Young Professionals

This research paper explores the relationship between eating-out and online identity formation, to better understand the role that dining experiences play in presenting a desired identity to others.

Existing literature has outlined the development of identity, self-promotion, and surrounding symbolism. However, research specifically devoted to the relationship between dining-out choices and identity on social media platform Instagram, is sparse. A significant proportion of previous research focuses on identity, social media and food choices as detached subject areas. The sample for this study is young female professionals aged 22-30. Semi- structured in-depth interviews were used to explore participants' use of Instagram in portraying online identity through eating-out images. Findings reveal that participants use eating-out experiences to portray their identity through sharing the events that appear the most visually attractive and in the most exclusive locations; and that participants often use Instagram as a social reputation reviewing tool for dining-out. Researching dining locations prior to visiting, so they can anticipate how impressive the experience will be. Finally, findings revealed that dining locations develop a commonly shared symbolic meaning, much like consumer goods would. Enabling participants to transfer common associations with dining categories, such as posting a high-end dining experience image onto their Instagram.

Keywords: Instagram, Self-promotion, Identity, Food, Consumption

INTRODUCTION

The UK restaurant market is expected to reach 52bn in value by 2017, as "foodie culture" is exceptionally prevalent in the UK. Subsequently, consumers are

recurrently looking for premium food for every occasion, with a continuously more casualised theme and at all price points (Allegra Foodservice cited by Michel 2014). Further to this, 34-50% of consumers now consider themselves a "foodie" (Mintel 2016) and Allegra Foodservice Director, Steve Gotham (cited by Michel 2014) adds further comment to this:

> "Social media, blogs and review sites have increased consumer knowledge and made food trendy; consumers want to follow the foodie buzz."

Food is more than something that sustains and fuels, it is important for constructing and maintaining identities, cultural differentiation and social boundaries (Culture Decanted 2014). Dining choices are made based on factors including, but not limited to, social group, status, occasion, taste and budget. Therefore, it is vital for restaurants to deliver on the dining out "experience" not just food and drink, as 71% of diners say that the atmosphere is just as important (Mintel 2015a).

Furthermore, restaurants are increasingly looking to social media platforms Instagram and Twitter to promote their businesses, due to a lack of budget for marketing and increased ability to target mass consumers (Mintel 2015a). This is already influencing the behaviour of the dining industry as Food World News (2015) stated: "It's not just the dishes that need to be perfectly presented. Instagramers will also post place settings, menu cards - even images of the bathroom." This paper proposes to investigate and examine the current role that dining-out choices play in constructing online identities via Instagram in Western society. Eating outside of the home is a practice that all humans share, but it is also something used to differentiate on a daily basis (Culture Decanted 2014). The intention is to explore the symbolic differences in eating out choices; investigate the relationship between food and online identity; and identify how British, young professional females, aged 22-30 use it to express, self-promote and reinforce their identities.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Dining-Out and Cultural Practices
revolution, and seems to be common practice globally across many settings for social and business occasions. Fox (2014) verifies the point that eating-out for status, regular eating-out and particular foods for special occasions, was historically predominantly a French institution of the Industrial Revolution. McCracken (1988, p.1) states "Culture and consumption have an unprecedented relationship in the modern world". Common practices have developed, such as 'doing lunch' in the world of business, which is regarded as a crucial operation where the most important deals are made (Fox 2014). Similarly, it is denoted that 'meeting for coffee' is no longer just about drinking coffee, but choosing a specific space, with a particular ambience suited to the occasion and company. New urban consumption trends are therefore said to be related to enjoyment rather than necessity (Karsten et al. 2013). Douglas (1972, p.60-80) discusses the boundaries that have meanings for various social dining events that change, depending on whom the situation is with. It is explained that between breakfast and "the last nightcap", food throughout the day and week comes in an ordered pattern, in other words, "the binary or other contrasts must be seen in their syntagmatic relations".

Although this source is dated, it still applies today as such formation is carried through to other still common cultural practices in Western societies. For example, a roast dinner on Sunday, pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, hot cross buns at Easter and toast, cereal or eggs for breakfast (LeBesco and Naccarato 2012). These depend on a person's culture; however, Fieldhouse (1998) and Scholliers (2001) argue that people are unconscious of their culture. This is internalized so they are not aware that routine behaviours are governed by rules of cultural traditions that make up a person's cultural identity.

## Personal and Social Identity

According to Mead (2013), one interpretation of self-identity is that a person does not begin life with a self, but develops a self (and self-consciousness) through interaction with the world. This is particularly prevalent with the ever- increasing rise of social media usage, set to reach 2.31 billion users in 2016 and delivering 31% global penetration (We Are Social 2008). Currently, it is even easier for personal information to be shared to large online audiences. Self-expression on social networking sites (SNS) allows the development and experimentation of a personal identity. Code and Zaparyniuk (2010) identify identities as situationally contingent, fluid and as being the object of negotiation within the mind of the individual. It is also thought that the chosen presented and perceived identity of the individual, may not match reality or it may be decoded in a different way than was intended (Van Dijck 2013). Suggesting that what one may intend an image they post to Instagram to mean, may be read in a different way, interlinking with one of the objectives of this study.

Murcott (1982) was one of the first sociologists to study social relations within groups and food culture. Barthes (1973 cited by Rylance 1992), along with various other sociologists (Murcott 1982; Mennell et al. 1992; Sloan 2003), focused on consumption of food within the field of sociology. It was suggested that food becomes much like a form of cultural capital, where a person tries to live according to a group they wish to belong to through their consumption habits (Barth 1998). This is still very much applicable and has been made easier by modern-day online social advancements. With a continuous increase of attention on food in mass media, the trend of food being displayed on SNS has continued to grow. This use of SNS could be an indicator of those forming their identities through the information they are sharing with others. For example, a survey in 2013 found that 54% of 18-24 years olds had taken a photo of their food when eating out and 39% posted it online.

As 90 new photos hashtagged #foodporn are uploaded to Instagram every minute, it is suggested that this elevates meals "beyond necessary daily routine to being a competitive sport" (Menulog 2014). This will be explored further in-line with objective one of this research study.  Moreover, Jenkins (2004 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010) suggests that all human identities are social identities; described as an on-going interplay between how individuals identify themselves and how others identify them. In order to identify with others, people look for similarities between groups and themselves. This process of comparison is specified in Social Identity Theory as "internal and external moments of dialectic identification"

(Jenkins 2004 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010, p.88). Individuals tend to belong to a variety of social groups, whether that be friends, family, colleagues or hobby groups. The person's overall self-concept is composed of these adaptations of their multiple identities (Jenkins 2004; Hogg et al. 1995; Ashforth and Mael 1989). These enable people to adopt various roles (Goffman 1959 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010; Van Dijck 2013; Brooks and Anumudu 2015). According to Goffman (1959 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010, p.90), individuals offer an impression of themselves by "performing and observers are the audience that judge the effectiveness or the believability of the performance". The performer then has to live up to the standards by which their actions have been judged. Goffman's (1959) concept may no longer be considered applicable due to the advancements of technology, this now allows consumers to form an identity that they can manipulate in a way that was not once considered possible, making it harder for an "observer" to judge believability.

Correspondingly, Davies (2007, p.549) suggests another perhaps more applicable view of social identity, that people live their lives simultaneously gaining first-hand experience and then "reviewing digitized representations framed within screens". Adding that these narrative and meta-narratives are seen to run on parallel lines; "like auto-ethnographers, people are documenting and re-considering their lives" and manipulating their social identity to portray whatever they wish. De Certeau (cited by Bennett 2009) would describe this as Bricolage, suggesting that there is a capacity for multiple meanings. Also, that consumers can exploit this polysomic potential by adapting and displaying different parts of themselves to whoever they want to be, such as potentially through chosen dining choices. This concept of multiple identities will be studied in direct relation to eating-out choices, as outlined as an objective of this research paper.

## Symbolism in Consumption

According to Peirce (1931 cited by Chandler 2014), we think only in signs. Material objects and experiences that a person chooses to be associated with embody a system of meanings through which they express their self and communicate with others (Olmsted and Dittmar 1994; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988). It has been implied in many pieces of literature that a person is what they have, particularly because material possessions can be viewed as an extension of a person (Natanson et al. 1958; Belk 1988; Olmsted and Dittmar 1994). More recently, Wattanasuwan (2005, p.179) argues that distinctively, a person makes meanings through interpretations and creations of symbolic consumption, from a critical point of view, striving to create a self in this way may be "enslaving into the illusive world of consumption".

However, it could also be agreed that in modern Western societies a social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Giddens 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Slater 1997 cited by Wattanasuwan 2005), which allows for self- creation where people can symbolically acquire ideals they wish to internalize (Mishra 2015), both online and offline. This could stem from a need of self- actualization, which means looking for others who they aspire to be like, to help them get from what they see as their actual self, to reach their ideal self (Lewis et al. 2000). This view could be seen

as very materialistic, suggesting that consumers base their identity largely around material goods, disregarding more intrinsic needs. Maslow's (cited by McGuire 2012) hierarchy of needs takes a less materialistic angle suggesting that a person needs to fulfil psychological, safety, social, and esteem needs in order to get to self-actualization. These contrasting views will be explored further in-line with objective three of this study.

However, McCracken (1988, p.85) adds that people attempt to draw from objects, the qualities that it has been given by marketers to create a common meaning. He adds that they are then able to use it to discriminate between cultural categories of class, status and lifestyle, labelled as "possession rituals". This is where individuals are able to move the projected meaning from the goods, or in the case of this research study, potentially representations of the dining location or food item, into their personal identity. Correspondingly, Slater (1997, p.131-179 cited by Wattanasuwan 2005) asserts, "Consumption is a meaningful activity" and that all consumption choices carry, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings and deeper reasons behind them; these meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared. Although this is a dated source, Chandler (2014) also agrees, that consumption choices are inscribed with deeper symbolic meaning.

## Instagram and Self-Promotion

People want others to hold favourable images of them (Tiryakian and Goffman 1968; Frey 1978; Baumeister 1982) and therefore often engage in self- promotion to achieve this. Leading to a common requirement for luxury items, which is driven by an accepted human need of social approval and showcase of status in Western Society. This concept is particularly relevant to the sample that will be studied and can be applied to dining out experiences, as outlined in objective two. More recently, Thorstein (cited by Bennett, 2009; Almeida 2015) would put this down to conspicuous consumption and how we're "vicariously emulating the dominant class's lifestyle." Thorstein (cited by Gottdiener 2000, p.9) proposed that:

> "Status hierarchy is based on possessions; wealth is honorific and prestige comes from possessing excess."

This can also be applied to the way experiences are photographed and shared online, commodifying the experience and emulating what the experience is thought to represent (Leiss et al. 2005).

Barth (1969 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010) would compare this perspective to nominal identity and the virtual identity, between the name and the experience. It is further described by Code and Zaparyniuk (2010), that a person's nominal identity is who they believe they are (internal dialectic), and their virtual identity is the experience of being that person (external dialectic). It could be that a person may consider themselves as quite a boring eater in everyday settings (nominal identity). However, when online, they promote themselves as regularly eating in lavish restaurants (virtual identity) through experiences they share. This is a concept that will be investigated further at the research stage, as outlined in the objectives.

## METHODS

The main aim of this paper is to identify the relationship between eating-out and online identity formation, to better understand the role that dining experiences play in presenting a desired identity to others.
In order to achieve the aim, the following objectives have been outlined:

1. To identify the way consumers, use eating-out to portray an online identity
2. To investigate the relationship between food and self-promotion on Instagram
3. To explore what different eating-out choices symbolise to consumers (and the effect this has on deciding whether to post to Instagram)

In terms of ontology, this project aims to take a constructivist approach with an interpretivist lens, which allows looking at the way reality is socially constructed in relation to this research topic. As this topic of research is based around the perception and view of the participant, this method is required because it is something that cannot be numerically measured and tested (Holden et al. 2004), making it unsuitable for the positivism philosophy (Donovan 2011).
In order to meet the objectives, it was decided that a qualitative method of in-depth interviews was most suited. A mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative was decided against, as it is often thought that one method can remain dominant, and the other be perceived as an 'embellishment' of the argument, rather than an essential component (Mason 2006 cited by Nicholls 2013)

Therefore, the sole use of this qualitative approach is necessary due to the nature of the study aiming to provide greater understanding in a subject area that needs to delve into the participant's personal knowledge and understanding of themselves. The relationship between dining-out experiences and online identity production via Instagram is a subject area that needs to be more clearly understood and defined, before it can be measured (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Marshall and Rossman 2011; Walker 1985 cited by Nicholls 2013).

Semi structured style in-depth interviews were adopted due to the ability to probe further and expand questioning throughout the data collection. Due to accessibility and availability of the participants, the interviews were carried out via recorded telephone calls, although some participants were available to meet in person or on a video call, not all were, and so for consistency it was opted to carry out all research in the same format. It was opted to study eight UK participants who are young professional females aged 22-30.

The terms "young professionals" refers to those who are no longer, or about to finish studying and are within the early stages of their professional career. They are likely to have more disposable income, allowing them to eat-out more regularly and they are within the life stage of evolving  their identity in their early profession (Singh et al. 2006). As this is a small-scale research project and is restricted by time and a small word limit, the small number means that more time can be spent with each participant and thus will result in more comprehensive, in-depth results (McCracken 1986). Moreover, the intention of this study is not to generalize the results onto the wider human population, but to obtain rich, useful data to generate better

understanding of the topic area.

The 8 participants were selected through the recruitment process of non-probability snowball sampling. The study required participants who are both regular users of Instagram and eating-out. Heavy users of Instagram are those who open the app at least once a day, and they were required to eat-out at least three times  a month. These qualities were determined via word-of-mouth to discover who would be suitable to take part, followed by an invitation sent to each participant via their personal SNS.

The sample group was selected firstly, because Mintel (2015b) indicates that below 35s eat-out the most often, highlighting this age as a key audience to explore. Additionally, the age sample identified for the research is within the millennial category. They are said to eat out the most, as well as checking their smart-phone and social media at least 43 x per day, with regular use of social media to share images. This generation are interested in trying new foods as part of their desire to explore, having grown up in a more multicultural society than previous generations, inspiring them to be open to new styles and tastes, as well as having more spontaneous eating out habits (Mintel 2015c)  All 8 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis is the method to be used to analyse the data, dividing it into emerging topics and themes using a coding manual (Bryman 2004).

## FINDINGS

### Identity Formation on Instagram

As this study aims to identify the relationship between eating-out and online identity formation, to better understand the role that dining experiences play in presenting a desired identity to others, it's important to first identify the way participants consciously or subconsciously view Instagram as a means to form and display their identity. Participants, in some way, all referred to the notion that Instagram allows them to photograph, organise and present their experiences and give others an insight into who they are. For example, participant A describes:

> "You can look at someone's Instagram and learn more about them than a whole evening together."

The harmonisation of the responses regarding the way Instagram is used and who the users allow to follow them, is in-line with the literature that a person's overall self-concept is composed of adaptations of their multiple identities. This is due to belonging to a variety of social groups such as family, friends, employers and also people they don't know, allowing them to adapt to these various roles (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg et al 1995; Jenkins 2004). In combination with the view of what Instagram is, when the participants were asked who they allow to 'follow' them, they described a list of friends, family, employers and people they know less well, or do not know at all. This list was felt to be acceptable because they "would not post sensitive or explicit content on a SNS" and "Instagram holds less personal data than Facebook." The responses of what Instagram is seen as and who the participants allow to see their content, implies that the platform allows the user to perform for various roles all in one place, rather than separately to match appropriate social

contexts. This suggests that Instagram allows for the multiple identities to be combined, instead of forming a separate adaption of the identity for each social group, as implied in the literature (Goffman 1959 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010; Van Dijck 2013; Brooks and Anumudu  2015). Participants B and E had their profiles set to private, however still "accept" people they do not know. They enjoyed "having the option" and would not allow people "too different in age and interests" to have access to their content. This element links with the Social Identity Theory, where in order to identify the self with others people look for similarities (Jenkins 2004 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010). This is also applicable to the other participants in an alternative way, due to their choice of who they follow being based on similar interests or inspiring content.

### Objective 1: To Identify the Way Consumers Use Eating-Out to Portray an Online Identity

**Instagram worthy images?** When discussing the required design of a photograph of a dining-out experience to upload to Instagram, a common response was surrounding the colours and attractiveness of the food and the way it was presented on the plate. Participant F described that they would only post a photograph, "if the food looks really good, if it's a good angle." Similarly, participant H, "it has to look appealing and be laid out creatively." Participant A also added, "if the food is really pretty and colourful," and participant C, "it's got to be something that people will go oh that looks nice." It was also noted by participants A, D, E and H that even if the food "looks a little crap" but tasted incredible, they would not take a photograph and upload it.

Interestingly, their decisions are clearly based around the visual attractiveness of the food, as opposed to the taste and quality, which would traditionally be the most important element of a dining experience. It can be assumed that the notion of not allowing visually unattractive food on their Instagram page allows the participants to deter any negative or undesired opinions by their followers. Such as being associated with what was described as "boring", "everyday" and "average" dining experience content. These statements are consistent with Stewart's (1993 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010) view that uploaded images on SNS are cultural artefacts inscribed with meanings that the user creates a desired self with. Potentially further suggesting, that the participants use dining experiences they consider visually appealing as a way of portraying characteristics of their identity and leave off those they do not wish to be associated personally with.

**Ideal Self-Creation?** Every participant in the study uploads photos of dining-out experiences to Instagram. When asked why they photograph certain experiences, every participant made reference to taking photos of food establishments they consider to be "different" (participants B, C, D, and H) or somewhere "not everyone has been" (A, E, F, G). Also, highlighting that food in chain restaurants either would not be photographed at all, or would not be posted to Instagram. This appears to suggest an attraction to exclusivity. Participant E said they would only post an eating-out experience that was not a "standard day-to-day location", much like participant F who said it would have to be a "really special, or a really unique location". This signifies that the participants have a perception that locations

considered to be more exclusive and less readily available are more desirable and worthy of sharing. Participant B proposes:

> "I wouldn't upload images from restaurants like Nando's and Pizza Express - they are more everyday and samey."

Participants C, E, F and H outlined similar responses surrounding chain restaurants. This was particularly interesting, as all 8 participants also identified that they regularly visit chain restaurants, they just appear to not want to share this visually with their Instagram community. This could be related to Thorstein's (cited by Gottdiener 2000, p.9) theory of conspicuous consumption, indicating that the participants are "emulating the dominant classes lifestyle" due to wanting their followers to hold favourable images of them (Tiryakian and Goffman 1968; Frey 1978; Baumeister 1982) through more impressive and favourable dining experiences, despite 6 of 8 participants openly saying they could not afford to eat in the restaurants they actually post images of every time they eat-out.

Additionally, all 8 participants use filters and editing programs to "improve the appearance" of their dining out images. For example, participant H discussed that filters are chosen to "make the photograph look better than it was" and participant A highlighted the way "people think life is better than it is because of editing and filters." Both owing to the assertion that consumers are aware that they are able to choose the way they portray their identity online and create an idealised image of themselves with their dining experiences, much like other consumer goods, commodifying the dining experience and emulating what the experience is thought to represent (Leiss et al. 2005). Following this, 6 of the participants indicated that they are aware of the opportunity Instagram gives them to portray an ideal-self and the way they can use food as a tool for this. For example, participant F explained:

> "I'm quite aware of the fact that Instagram, more than any other social platform, is the least representative of what my life is actually like… you can sort of play pretend."

Also, participant E described, "Instagram is like all of the best things about you in photos" and continued with "I 100% think through every single post, just because I want to make up this image of myself" and correspondingly participant H, "it's a representation of what I want my life to be like all the time."

In essence, it appears that the participants use eating out to portray an online identity through selecting the events they feel appear most desirable and wish they could visit more regularly, and leave out the dining experiences they consider "everyone to have access to". Insinuating that they make conscious decisions to choose experiences they consider more exclusive and in-line with who they aspire to be, in order to portray an idealised identity. This is particularly prevalent in participant A's response:

> "I could never afford to eat out like that all the time. I only post the nice meals out I have. I wouldn't post boring food, it doesn't say as much as nice restaurant-y pictures."

Objective 2: To Investigate the Relationship between Food and Self-Promotion on Instagram

**Manipulation:** The previous section of ideal-self creation interlinks with the participants ability to manipulate their identity via Instagram, to promote

themselves in a particular light, offering similar results. However, the participants on the whole appearing to be very aware of their own and others ability to manipulate images, has indicated a feeling of scepticism towards who people promote themselves as on this SNS. For example, participant D stated:

> "If people just looked at what I posted on Instagram then they'd probably think I was always having loads of fun when a lot of the time I'm just doing boring things so it's probably a wrong perception. But  then I think people expect that with Instagram…"

In the same manner, participant A advocates, "It's strange how you can create a personality on Instagram that is totally different to real life and people would never know", similar responses were given by participants C, E, F, G and H. This view interlinks with Barth's (1969 cited by Code and Zaparyniuk 2010) theory of nominal and virtual identity. Code and Zaparyniuk (2010) describe that a person's nominal identity is who they believe they are (internal dialectic), and their virtual identity is the experience of being that person (external dialectic) allowing for promoting oneself in different lights in different situations. Barth suggested this view prior to SNS, however it appears to still be relevant to modern society, with the added ability to promote oneself to a larger audience online instead of simply to social peers in a physical setting, potentially even making the theory more applicable than previously.  In relation to food more specifically, this can also be applied to the way the participants referred to only posting what they consider the best restaurants. This suggests they do not necessarily represent a wholly true representation of the participants dining habits. However, they successfully allow the user to self-promote and show their followers the food and locations they consider impressive. It is important to note that the actual dining-experience is not considered easy to falsify, just the ability to use it to exaggerate day-to-day dining habits.

**Status of Restaurants:** Half of the participants appear to be influence by the status of the restaurants. Participants A outlined:

> "If celebs have been, I know it'll be good! I also look at Instagram to see who has been or tagged photos there - it's the best way of seeing what it's really going to be like before you go because it's by people that are more likely to go to good places."

Comparatively, participant E, G and H talked about celebrities and bloggers attending "amazing places" to eat, suggesting that it makes them want to eat there too. This links back to the literature where Van Dijck (2013) stated that due to examples of celebrities' and bloggers self-promotion, many Instagram users (especially young adults) mould their online identities with the aim to reach a level of popularity.

It was also outlined by each of these participants that they would dress differently and spend more time preparing for a restaurant considered high-end and attended by TV stars, celebrities and bloggers. Participant G stated that if they were considering a dining location they would look it up on Instagram and see what pictures are tagged, who tagged it and what the food looks like. This is true to the literature that a person tries to live according to a group they wish to belong to through their consumption habits (Barth, 1998), creating a direct  link between celebrity culture and the notion of self-promotion on Instagram. Participant F adds:

"If you're sharing an experience of an extravagant or more quality dining experience I suppose your social peers think more of you [laughs] than if you're tucking into a McDonald's." This also suggests a disregard for the kind of review that would inform the participant of the taste of the food, again placing higher importance on the reputation and status of the location. This example of personal storytelling and self-promotion (Van Dijck, 2013; Menulog, 2014) is also present in the interviews with participants A, D, E and H who agree that if a restaurant is somewhere they feel "proud" to be they would post it to Instagram and tag the location. This could also stem from the fact that people want others to hold favourable images of them (Tiryakian and Goffman 1968; Frey, 1978; Baumeister, 1982).

**Internalization:** Participants also highlighted that receiving likes and comments on a photo, makes them feel good. Participants A described:

> "I tag the location to everything so that other users can see my photos - that usually gets me more likes too [laughs] I wouldn't take a photo down due to lack of likes, but might be like 'ow why hasn't anybody liked it!'"

Similarly, participants B, C, D, E and H described the positive feeling they get when a photo receives comments and likes and the way in which it allows them to learn what kind of photos are more likely to gather a good reception to    inform future posts. Receiving a positive reception appears to be internalized (Mishra 2015), allowing for self-creation where people can symbolically acquire ideals as those who 'like' it reinforce the behaviour. This is what McCracken (1988, p.85) would label as "possession rituals" where the individual is able to move the projected meaning from the goods, into their personal identity. In turn, promoting themselves as the 'kind of people' who would typically be associated with the socially attractive dining experience.  Additionally, 7 of the participants stated that they always tag the location of the restaurant to both show where they are dining to others, remember their experience themselves and also make their image more visible to users who do not follow them, often resulting in more likes. This notion of enjoying gathering likes on an image appears to reinforce their desire to "impress" their followers and feel good about their personal experiences. This is in line with Cooley's (1902 cited by Gecas and Schwalbe 1983, p.77) looking glass theory, that a self-concept is "formed as reflections of the responses and evaluations of others in our environment." All owing to the fact that the participants are able to use Instagram to only post the dining-out experiences they consider attractive, allowing them to promote themselves as a particular kind of person.

Objective 3: To Explore What Different Eating-out Choices Symbolize to Consumers
**Symbolism:** Throughout the interviews, participants made reference to representations and categories of dining experiences. This appeared to be because, as was outlined in the literature, consumption choices are inscribed with deeper symbolic meaning; these meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared and are used to express the self and communicate with others (Olmsted and Dittmar 1994; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988; Slater 1997 cited by Wattanasuwan 2005; Chandler 2014). For example, participants A, E and H referred to the idea that if celebrities have been to a restaurant they get particularly excited and if not a lot of people have Instagrammed a picture at a restaurant, they would

prepare to be disappointed and potentially even cancel the booking.

This suggests a level of social review that could be compared to Trip Advisor, but less about the actual product and more about its social reputation. For these participants, the act of posting their dining-out image to Instagram appears to be based on self-promotion, according to the review of relevant literature, this could stem from a need of self-actualization, which means looking for others who they aspire to be like to help them get from what they see as their actual self, to reach their ideal self (Lewis et al. 2000). Therefore, if a location is attractive and already gathers social attention, they would be more likely to also share a photograph of it. Additionally, participants discussed cost in relation to how enjoyable they expect the occasion to be, rather than based solely around quality as would usually be associated with cost. Participant C outlined:

> "I would rather pay a bit more for something that's going to be more enjoyable than somewhere that's mediocre and then I'd get a better experience. There's some like 'up-market' or 'posh' restaurants, but they're somewhere you'd go, I'm not going there in what I'm wearing now, I need to go home and shower before I go there and it's a bit more like special. Then there are other places where you'd happily just nip in whatever you're wearing...they do usually correlate in quality and price."

The perception of price symbolising how enjoyable the experience would be was a recurring theme, as well as the higher the price the higher the perceived status of the restaurant. According to the literature, in modern Western societies a social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Giddens 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Slater 1997 cited by Wattanasuwan 2005), this can still be applied to current day as participants implied that cost of a consumer experience affects their enjoyment of the food, occasion and likelihood of sharing an image. In a similar way to restaurants that are considered "high-end", participants alluded to the words "different", "random" and "unique" in relation to restaurants they feel excited to visit on a special occasion. For example, participant C explained that:

> "If it's somewhere you don't visit that often, or it's a little bit unique or different you will be more excited." Moreover, participant F highlighted: "I'd spend more time getting ready and preparing if it's a 'new' or 'different' eating environment and if I know the setting / ambience is meant to be really good."

This was in comparison to chain restaurants that were on the whole (participants B, D, E, G and H) considered an everyday, last minute decision and for a less special occasion. Implying they would not make a special effort to go to a restaurant they consider as a standard "reliable" chain, unless they felt the occasion suited. The "low-end" dining location, as was earlier highlighted, is less likely to be posted on Instagram as the food is said to be not as exciting and less surprising. However, the either "high-end" or "different" dining locations were likely to be photographed and shared. Participants were also asked what they think their dining images say about them, characteristics such as outgoing, adventurous, sophisticated and a 'foodie' were described, further representing the way in which their dining-out choices are being used to symbolise elements of their personality. This supports Pitt-Rivers view (1875 cited by McCracken 1988) of material culture as the outward symbols of

a person's ideas in the mind.


## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that participants use eating-out experiences to portray their identity online, through selecting to share the events they feel appear the most visually attractive and in locations they perceive as more exclusive. This idea of exclusivity, appears to stem from the view that chain or fast food restaurants are 'accessible to everyone,' based on their locations and the manner in which they present food that looks the same every time, allowing anyone to share identical images of it. This owes to a less exciting experience and less of a "proud" and "excited" feeling that would lead to taking a photograph and posting it to Instagram. The participants instead choose to post images of locations they perceive as most desirable to others. These are more unique, offer an experience beyond quality of the food and are often more expensive. This allows the participant to present to their followers the experience they have  had,  along  with   an underlying message revealing the kind of person they think they are. This is a result of the shared perception of the kind of person typically associated with the experience. This suggests that the idea of exclusivity and 'Instagram worthy' dining images is very much based around Thorstein's theory of conspicuous consumption. This indicates that participants are in fact "emulating the dominant classes lifestyle" and desiring their followers to hold favourable images of them (Tiryakian and Goffman 1968; Frey 1978; Baumeister 1982) through impressive dining experiences.

Moreover, they are able to select dining locations based on their culture, class, taste and preferences, to create this combined image of their personality. Participants described that they consider their images on Instagram to suggest they are "sophisticated", "a great photographer", "a foodie" and "adventurous", which were characteristics they believe they embody in real life too. However, they identified that Instagram allows them to create an ideal version of their self, where leaving off their "everyday", "boring" dining experiences allows them to create a more aspirational personal image. This image is someone they aspire to be all of the time, resulting in Instagram allowing them to create an amplified version of their offline identity, through their favoured dining choices.

The findings also demonstrated that participants often look to Instagram as a social reputation reviewing tool when it comes to dining-out. This allows them to look-up dining locations prior to visiting, so they can anticipate how impressive the experience will be in terms of the setting, design of the food and the clientele.

If other users, as well as celebrities and influencers, regularly tag a restaurant with attractive images, the participants feel more drawn to experiencing the restaurant too. This also allows them to both consciously and subconsciously predict how "shareable" the experience will be after their visit. Also, allowing them to predict the kind of reception the image will receive in terms of likes    and comments from other users.  Despite the participants getting excited to share a dining location they really

enjoyed with their Instagram community, it was also noted that they are aware of the way Instagram allows them and others to only post "the best bits," creating an exaggeration of what their life is really like day-to-day. Although this causes a feeling of scepticism towards who other users really are, there is a general consensus that "this is what Instagram is for," accepting that it is a platform where it is much more acceptable to self-promote through purchase choices and experiences.

The results are in line with Van Dijck's (2013) view that due to examples of celebrities' and bloggers self-promotion, many Instagram users mould their online identities with the aim to reach a level of popularity. Particularly as participants highlighted throughout that they would not post an image of their food if they felt nobody would care to see it and if it was not in line with whom they wish their followers to define them as and who they wish to define themselves as.

Finally, this study found that eating-out locations develop a commonly shared symbolic meaning among the sample audience, much like tangible consumer goods would. This is then used to express the self, through deeper symbolic meaning (Olmsted and Dittmar 1994; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988; Slater 1997 cited by Wattanasuwan 2005; Chandler 2014). Despite the literature being dated, the view of consumer goods holding symbolic meaning can be applied to Instagram, as it allows users to commodify an experience and emulate what it is thought to represent (Leiss et al. 2005). Moreover, restaurants that are considered "high-end" in terms of price or reputation and those described as "different", "random" or "unique" are the most likely to be posted to Instagram, if the food and setting is visually appealing. Participants feel that photos of these locations combined on their Instagram page, allows them to portray characteristics of their personality, through sharing the kind of experiences they personally enjoy.

It was also found that fast food and chain restaurants symbolise "everyday" experiences that are not as desirable to post online. Resulting in the conclusion that this form of dining-out is less impressive to share, due to being a commonplace situation. These were referred to as "low-end," in terms of share ability, unless the participants were surprised by an element of the experience and felt this would peak the attention of their online audience. This potentially highlights an opportunity, for this category of restaurant to adapt to these expectations of consumers, in order to compete on Instagram.

In terms of limitations of this research, the participants who made up the sample were all from the advertising, marketing, PR and retail industry. On reflection, this could have influenced the results, as they are likely to be more informed of the uses of Instagram and consumer/celebrity relationships with SNS. Although this led to interesting insights, that may have been more in- depth than if the interviewees were less aware, their professions may impact the way they interact with the platform. Moreover, researcher bias has to be considered. Although precautions were taken to keep this to a minimum, conclusions drawn by the researcher could have been influenced by their investment in and personal experience of the topic area.

This research study was small-scale and only conducted interviews with eight participants. Although this has allowed themes to be determined based on rich data, there is the potential for the research to be extended, in order to further investigate some of the findings. For example, the sample for this study was females aged 22-30, leaving potential for research with an older age sample, as well as through a gender mixed approach. This may produce interesting conclusions that could compliment or contrast this study's findings. This could also be advantageous to identify additional insights that would benefit the UK dining-out industry, such as within a specific restaurant category. More specifically, research into a restaurant chain in relation to Instagram, may produce useful and impactful results to improve Instagram engagement within that dining category.

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