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Citation: Baker, S.A. & Walsh, M.J. (2020). You are what you Instagram: clean eating and the symbolic representation of food. In: Digital Food Cultures. (pp. 53-68). Abingdon, UK: Routledge. ISBN 9781138392595

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You are what you Instagram: clean eating and the symbolic representation of food.

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Abstract

Food and dietary choices operate as a central mode of identification, a way to define the self in relation to what we consume. These modes of identity are increasingly communicated on Instagram using digital photography to present the self visually online. In this chapter we explore the meanings and discourses around ‘clean eating’ on social media. We perform visual content analysis of food images on Instagram to examine the social and cultural meanings of clean eating and food. Drawing upon and developing cultural approaches to social interaction, we employ the concept of the ‘affirmation ritual’ to understand how status and identity are established online. We argue that eating practices and preferences are displayed on Instagram to represent an ideal self to one’s social network. Despite the capacity for user-generated content to resist and reframe social identities, we contend that the curation of clean eating practices on Instagram reinforces the relationship between diet, status, gender and identity.

Introduction

Digital technologies have altered the way we consume food. Whereas food was traditionally consumed in co-present situations, digital technologies function as ‘disembedding mechanisms’ that ‘lift out’ social relations from local contexts of interaction so they can be experienced across indefinite spans of time-space (Giddens, 1992, pp. 21-22). The result is a profoundly different understanding of food and its relationship to physical space. While the

internet allows information to be communicated at an unprecedented rate, social media facilitates social interaction among online communities. Social media sites, such as Instagram, alter how we treat public space. Free from the confines of co-presence, hashtags can be used on these platforms to access like-minded communities at any time and from any space (Baker & Walsh, 2018).

The ubiquity of the digital has transformed how many people consume food, and the meanings and discourses they ascribe to it. People no longer rely on experts to provide information about what food to eat. Instead, they turn to those with influence on the internet to give advice (Baker & Rojek, 2019a). Influencers typically use blogs and social media platforms to document their lives and lifestyles (Abidin, 2014), and to market products and services for social and economic gain (Page, 2012). They have become a common feature of contemporary culture due to a series of technological developments. The prevalence of social media, mobile broadband and digital devices enable users to transmit their message to a global audience. The ubiquity of camera phones allows meaning to be communicated visually in photo and video form. There is a credibility associated with the image with much of the influence of online communication generated through aesthetically attractive photos and videos (Baker, 2014; Baker & Rojek, 2019a, 2019b). These images, and the messages they communicate, reveal much about the social and cultural meanings of clean eating and food. They convey not only the discourses behind the clean eating movement, but how food and the body are used to symbolise the moral character and identity of the user.

In this chapter, we explore how clean eating communities present themselves online. Clean eating is a popular dietary trend that has achieved widespread public attention in the last decade. While there is no single definition of the term, clean eating generally refers to the

consumption of unprocessed food as close to their whole form and natural state as possible (McCartney, 2016); those foods perceived to be ‘clean’ and ‘pure’ (Nevin & Vartanian, 2017). The clean eating movement is defined *in relation* to what it is not with practitioners restricting certain food groups perceived to be ‘unclean’ and ‘impure’. Sugar, gluten, dairy and red meat are the foods most commonly abstained from, in addition to chemicals, additives and preservatives (Allen et al., 2018). The omission of these food groups is largely a reaction to the food system and its perceived failure (Goodman et al., 2012). Some clean eating advocates are purely plant-based, while others eat fish or meat. While diverse diets label themselves as ‘clean’ (for example, vegan, ketogenic or paleo), the clean eating movement is fuelled by a common narrative which constructs modern farming and technology as artificial and impure in relation to an idealised past when food production and consumption was simpler and less refined (Baker & Rojek, 2019a). Clean eating is described as a lifestyle rather than a diet. It is presented as a way of living to be adopted for life instead of a short-term practice designed to achieve weight loss. As such, clean eating becomes central to identity with the term used to express the moral ethos of the consumer.

Food and moral emotions: purity, disgust and contamination

The relationship between food and morality has an established history. Food is of profound theological significance. In Christianity, the apple is a symbol of temptation and original sin, bread and wine the means by which the believer exercises communion with Christ. Ritual food practices involving food preparation and consumption are fundamentally rooted in religious beliefs (Bailey, 2014). Muslims fast during Ramadan, while the dietary laws of Hinduism forbid consuming beef, and Judaism and Islam prohibit the consumption of pork. Prior to the professionalisation of the science of nutrition in the twentieth century, eating practices were

largely defined by these religious beliefs; which provided a moral justification for what was considered to be a healthy diet (Mudry, 2018). Contemporary discourse around food is commonly infused with theological language. Food is described as heavenly, virtuous and indulgent, leading people into temptation and evoking feelings of guilt in its disciples when they indulge in sinful pleasure. Emily Contois (2015) demonstrates how religiosity of this kind operates within dieting approaches that are generally considered to be secular. Scientists and medical experts appropriate the language of Christian Protestantism in order to construct a contemporary theology of weight loss. Diet manuals propagate the belief that weight loss requires conversion, sacrifice and commitment. This is achieved through rituals such as counting calories, tracking ‘steps’ and weighing oneself (Contois, 2015, p. 114). The language of diet literature treats thinness as a form of salvation (Lelwica, 2002) and ‘fatness as a moral failure’ (Contois, 2015, p. 122; Lupton, 2018b). Dieting theology assigns a moral value to food by constructing a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of living. This moral logic postulates that to consume bad food is to be bad with good dietary choices culminating in the morally superior, thin individual. In this context the thin body operates as a signifier for health, self-control and moral virtue, so that you are what you eat both physically and metaphorically.

This binary moral logic underpins contemporary understandings of purity and dirt avoidance. In her seminal work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* ([1966] 2002), Mary Douglas contends that ideas of purity and pollution are integral components of many cultures. She suggests that contemporary western attitudes towards dirt and ideas about defilement differ from pre-modern cultures in two fundamental ways: first, dirt avoidance is perceived to be a matter of hygiene or aesthetics and not related to religion; second, these understandings of dirt are informed by nineteenth-century discoveries of the

bacterial transmission of disease and our knowledge of pathogenic organisms. Douglas claims, however, that while our own conceptions of dirt are a response to recent historical developments, the pollution beliefs that drive dirt avoidance are universal. She explains,

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as *matter out of place*. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity (2002, p. 44 [emphasis added]).

From this perspective, purity is synonymous with social order, and subsequently an object (person or idea) is considered impure or dirty when it violates the social order as ‘matter out of place’. Disgust is commonly felt towards those objects that threaten the social order with disgust sensitivity, and corresponding practices based around cleanliness, predicated on belief (Haidt, 2012). This Durkheimian view of social order emphasises the role of cultural beliefs and ritualised practices in establishing and maintaining symbolic boundaries and group identity.

The Ritualised Dimensions of Identity and Status

The concept of ritual is useful for understanding how status and identity are established online.

Durkheim's later work on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1995) explored the role of rituals in binding individuals to society. Late-Durkheimian understandings of the religious dimensions of secular life, demonstrate the continued role of rituals in creating symbols of group membership and energising individuals with emotional energy (Alexander, 1990, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Collins, 2004). Erving Goffman (1967) notably applied Durkheim's approach to examine the role of rituals in upholding (and breaking) social organisation at the micro level of social interaction. Alluding to the influence of the social situation over individual behaviour, Goffman noted that the object of sociological analysis was, 'not, then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men' (1967, p. 3). But Goffman's application of Durkheim was no replication; it posited considerable vulnerability in social structure, requiring individuals to actively restore social order through ritual interaction whenever disruptions arise (Burns, 1992, p. 31).

While Goffman's work examined standard face-to-face encounters prior to the advent of digital communication, his conceptual framework is useful for understanding self-presentation and status relations online (Hogan, 2010; Walsh & Clark, 2019). Social media is engineered to encourage users to seek affirmation and status as made measurable by metrics, such as likes, followers, reposts and comments (Marwick, 2013). The act of liking or commenting on a post represents a process of affirmation whereby an image is recognised and validated by others. When these metrics occur on those posts using a particular hashtag, they reveal more than status; they function as an online affirmation ritual – beyond the mere process of greeting described by Pate's (2006) 'acknowledgement ritual' – in which members of a particular community affirm one another's identities (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Online metrics operate as a means of symbolic exchange, signifying behaviours that both affirm validation and status. While Goffman's work on face-to-face encounters may initially appear unconnected with such

concerns, his concept of ritual interchange is useful for considering the significance of how status is expressed online. As Brownlie and Shaw (2018, p. 2) have shown with respect to ‘empathy rituals’ on Twitter, Goffman provides a pertinent basis for understanding collective and aggregate expressions of emotions online through the analysis of banal interactions as opposed to more tropicalised concerns (a strategy directly emulating Goffman’s focus on seemingly prosaic face-to-face interaction).

Goffman’s analysis of how acknowledgement and affirmation have become embedded in interpersonal conduct is useful for understanding the emergence and maintenance of digital food cultures on social media. Seemingly inconsequential interactions have been adapted to digital contexts. In the case of Instagram, the act of liking and commenting on posts can be conceived as affirmation rituals staged in a digital domain. For example, clean eating top posts on Instagram tend to represent specific types of foods, namely, raw produce in its unprocessed form and those so-called ‘super-foods’ – açai berries, pomegranates, chia seeds and coconut oil – associated with the clean eating movement. It is these images that are ‘liked’ and elevated by other users to achieve top post status. Considerably more expensive than other varieties, the validation of these ‘superfoods’ as healthy and superior to other varieties frame clean eating as a largely middle class pursuit (McCartney, 2016). The same can be said of the types of bodily images validated on Instagram with a very specific body type ‘liked’ and modelled by others on the platform, as will be discussed further in the findings below. While such acts may appear seemingly unremarkable as a result of their ubiquity, their significance is that they demonstrate what a particular community values. They have a considerable role in social organisation, as Goffman reminds us about seemingly trivial interactions. Affirmation rituals, such as liking, are intensified in the context of Instagram through the mobilisation and visibility of metrics. Here the degree of affirmation is signified by the number of individuals who have engaged

with a given post. In the case of celebrities or influencers with large followings, the degree of affirmation can reach the millions. Indeed, it is the extent to which this interaction becomes asymmetrical that status is elevated and achieved.

Methodological Approach

To examine the social and cultural meanings of clean eating and food, we performed visual content analysis of food images on Instagram. Instagram is a social network app designed to share photos and videos from a mobile smartphone or device. It is one of the fastest growing online social networks, especially among 18-24 year olds (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Similar to other social network sites, users create a profile and upload posts in the form of photos and videos to share with their followers. There is no technical requirement for reciprocity among followers and because Instagram is public by default, anyone can view a user's posts unless they make their profile private. Instagram is configured around the contemporary, documenting images on a user's profile sequentially in the order in which they are uploaded. Posts can be produced, disseminated and consumed instantly from a user's smartphone, as denoted by the platform's prefix 'insta'. This configuration around the present gives the impression of spontaneity, despite the fact that many images are carefully composed and edited before being posted and shared online.

Instagram is a visual medium. The application's interface renders imagery the primary mode of communication, providing users with a series of filters and editing tools (for example, brightness, contrast, warmth) to enhance the quality and affects of their photos and videos. Visual imagery in the form of selfies (self-portrait photograph), photographs, videos, memes, GIFs and emojis are shared on the platform to create, attribute and share meanings with other

users on the social network (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Kaye et al. 2017; Walsh & Baker, 2017). Meaning is achieved through a series of practices including posting, captioning, editing, sharing, commenting, liking, reposting and deleting. Rather than viewing visual imagery as an isolated object, a more comprehensive way of viewing individual posts is to consider how they are positioned ‘within an endless flow of posts, other people’s posts, relationships, people, platforms, visual tropes and popular norms’ (Tiidenberg, 2018). Visual media are frequently used as part of political action or campaigns directed at resisting and reframing bodily norms (Lupton, 2018a), with individual posts contributing to a larger collective political narrative (Baker, 2014). However, despite the potential for user-generated content to challenge normative cultural values and conceptions of self, these visual representations can also reproduce hegemonic ideals pertaining to gender (Döring et al., 2016; Baker & Walsh, 2018) and beauty (Abidin, 2014; Gill & Elias, 2014) with ‘instafame’ generally conferred upon conventionally good looking users on the platform (Marwick, 2015).

Although Instagram privileges the visual, one notable exception of popular text-based communication on the platform is hashtags. Users can add hashtags in the caption or comments section of their posts. If users add hashtags to a post that is set to public, the post will be visible on the corresponding hashtag page. A lifestyle blogger, for example, could upload an attractive picture of themselves in a bikini accompanied by the #cleaneating. The hashtag serves to categorise the post with other images using the #cleaneating hashtag, thereby making it discoverable by a larger social network (beyond their immediate followers) – referred to by danah boyd (2011) as a ‘networked public’. Hashtags also serve another important purpose; they give additional meaning to an image. In the example above, the hashtag makes a connection between clean eating and the attractive image, thereby attributing clean eating as the cause of the subject’s physique (whether realised or not). Hashtags are self-consciously

added by users to ascribe meaning to their posts (Baker & Walsh, 2018). In this regard, hashtags provide a useful way to understand the symbols and discourses attributed to clean eating by the general public.

In our study, we undertook a visual content analysis of the representations of clean eating on Instagram. We examined photographs and videos categorised under the two most popular clean eating related hashtags: #cleaneating and #eatclean. When searching for a hashtag on Instagram, the 9 top posts and the 9 most recent posts are made visible at any point in time. ‘Top posts’ refer to ‘trending hashtags and places’ that depict ‘some of the popular posts tagged with that hashtag or place’ (Instagram, 2017); trending in the context of social media refers to content or topics on a platform that are the most highly accessed or commented on. Instagram’s application programming interface (API) ranks top posts according to the *quantity* of engagement (for example, ‘likes’ and comments) and the *quality* (engagement rate of interaction by followers). ‘Recent posts’, conversely, privilege communication from the standpoint of the producer. This is because posts falling under this category are uploaded onto Instagram chronologically without considering a post’s engagement rate or validation by other users. However, with the exception of ‘likes’ and comments, this method of highlighting posts provides little sense of how a post has been received by the public. The value of analysing top posts for a given hashtag is that this list signifies those images validated by others (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Consequently, our focus on the representation of clean eating on Instagram pertains only to top posts – that is, those posts affirmed by users who viewed or otherwise ‘engaged with’ these particular hashtags. Data were collected over an 8-day period in August 2017. The clean eating movement has an active presence on Instagram (at the time of data collection between 30 and 40 million #eatclean and #cleaneating posts had been shared on the platform). Given that 9 top posts were made visible each day for each of the two hashtags

examined in this study, we collected 144 top posts in total using the #cleaneating and #eatclean. When collecting data, we captured screenshots of the posts including the image and other associated textual information (for example, captions, comments and likes). Only public status images were collected and analysed.

Once we collected the data we analysed the posts to look for common characteristics among the images. Identifying common visual attributes, we inductively settled on 8 codes to classify the posts. These included:

- 1) Glamour Shot was coded if the subject was adorned in makeup or active wear;
- 2) Kissing pout was coded if the subject made a kissing pout;
- 3) Food was coded if the focus of the photo was food;
- 4) Before/After Shot was coded if a collage was used to document a person's physical transformation over time;
- 5) Muscle Presentation was coded if the person posed to show off and provided an exaggerated display of their physique;
- 6) Advertisements were coded if the post was used to advertise a service or product;
- 7) Nature Shot was coded if the image displayed the subject in nature;
- 8) No Category to describe those posts that did not clearly fit into one of the identifiable categories listed above.

Separate categories were also used to quantify the sex of the subject and the number of subjects portrayed in each image. Given the scope of this study on the subject of digital food cultures, we focus on the first five categories listed above.

Findings

Health and Gender

One of the most significant findings emerging from our sample was that the majority of clean eating top posts did not include images of food. Only 24 per cent of clean eating top posts featured food. Those images that did portray food using the #cleaneating and #eatclean hashtags, generally fell into two categories. On the one hand, there were representations of fruit and vegetables in their 'natural', whole, unprocessed form. Aligning with clean eating principles, these images were used to stand in for the body as 'clean' and 'pure'. On the other, clean eating top posts featuring food included images of indulgent desserts. This was surprising given that clean eating tends to involve the consumption of nutrient dense, low-calorie and protein rich foods, such as, green juices, vegetables, egg-white omelettes, fish and lean meat (Lupton, 2018a). Though at first glance these images appeared to undermine clean eating principles by portraying high-caloric and sugary desserts, the hashtags that commonly accompanied these images indicated that the desserts were #healthy, #highprotein, #lowcarb, #weightloss, #vegan, #sugarfree and #crueltyfree, thereby, conveying the desserts as healthy and ethical food choices. The inclusion of indulgent desserts in clean eating hashtags are also examples of 'food porn'. The term is used to describe the enhancement of food related images designed to excite a 'sense of the unattainable by proffering coloured photographs of various completed recipes' (Cockburn, 1977). In all cases, those foods represented using the clean eating hashtags were aesthetically enhanced using filters and editing techniques (e.g., cropping, brightness, colour and saturation) to appear more appealing to the viewer. The representation of these foods on Instagram are not necessarily designed to be emulated by others, they are created to heighten the visual state of food and, by association, the user. In exaggerating the

aesthetic qualities of food, these images draw on forms of idealisation that aim to garner esteem and attention the subject and object of clean eating posts (Walsh & Baker, *forthcoming*).

Despite using hashtags that invoke acts of food consumption, most posts featured images of the body to signify the positive effects of clean eating. The prevalence of the healthy body was exemplified by the presence of three recurring visual themes Kissy Face; Glamour Shot; and the Before/After Shot. These visual tropes were deployed by users to signal self-improvement, specifically related to the subject's physical appearance. In posts of this kind, the body operates as a symbol to communicate and project an idealised version of the self to their networked audience. It is an example of what is termed 'aesthetic labour', the labours involved in looking good, which have an established history of disproportionately targeting women and informing their preoccupation with enhancing and regulating the body (Elias et al. 2017). Though relatively infrequent in our sample, those posts categorised as Kissy Face blurred the lines between exercise and seduction. The subjects, all female, deployed an overt facial expression, protruding the lips while wearing a limited amount of clothing, to present a highly sexualised self. While these images only accounted for 1 per cent of top posts, they project a sexually idealised female face to signify sex appeal and vitality through the subject's seductive gaze into the camera.

An extension of the Kissy Face trope that focuses more broadly on the subject as a healthy individual was the Glamour Shot. The Glamour Shot accounted for 13 per cent of posts in our sample. Rather than being shown undertaking physical activity, subjects were adorned in makeup and posed in tight active wear to convey health and beauty. In contrast to the Kissy Face trope, the body was the focal point of these images (although, once again, the subject was often highly sexualised, gazing seductively at the camera). These posts only featured women, who enacted a version of 'emphasised femininity': heightened physical displays of conventional femininity that appear oriented towards the

desires of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). By representing the female body in overtly sexualised ways, these images resembled the ‘fitspo’ imagery that disproportionately portrays lean women posing in revealing swimsuits and athletic wear online (Lupton, 2018a). In this regard, the Glamour Shot mimicked the style of feminine beauty commonly featured on the cover of women’s magazines in western media (Kang, 1997).

Another prominent type of image that reinforced ideal notions of health was the Before/After shot. Accounting for 13 per cent of posts, images of this kind showcased the subject’s physical transformation through a collage of photos taken before and after a lifestyle change. These posts typically documented women’s weight loss over time, signifying the female subject’s physical transformation into ‘healthy’ subjects as validated by imagery and metrics (for example, text documenting weight loss). There were also commonalities here between clean eating top posts and the images that regularly feature on fitspo websites. Both privilege a specific bodily image: slim, toned, young and generally white (often with tanned skin to give the appearance of health and to accentuate muscle tone – see Boepple and Thompson, 2016; Lupton, 2018a). In this context, a slender, toned body functions as a synonym for health. The after images typically depicted subjects as visibly healthier, happier and more attractive as a result of their lifestyle change. The Before and After shot here communicates the importance of clean eating practices as techniques to achieve wellness and self-improvement.

Idealisation

The analytical categories associated with clean eating all point to pertinent examples of idealisation, which highlight instances where the individual will offer impressions of themselves that remain unrealistically ideal. As Goffman (1959, p. 35) contends, such

performances presented by an individual ‘will tend to incorporate and exemplify the official accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does’ their behaviour as a whole. The Kissy Face and Glamour Shot are categories that offer versions of subjects that are sexually primed and presented for the camera. These images are idealised because they appear staged for dramatic effect; though generally presented as capturing impulsive and unrehearsed mundane aspects of everyday life, most of the images appear to involve a high degree of staging to communicate heightened signs of health bound to sexual attractiveness. While the static Before and After Shot offers an impression of the body that celebrates the starkest transitions in its physical form, these images are successful idealising media because they structurally juxtapose the before shot with the after image, enabling for explicit comparison that exaggerates the differences displayed (the more lacklustre the before shot, the starker contrast achieved by the after shot transformation). Idealisation points to the ways in which strategies for self-presentation become mediated and how the materiality of digital and face-to-face settings represent different varieties of architecture that stage and shape human behaviour. In this context, drawing on Goffman’s theoretical framework grounds our analysis in Durkheimian notions of social structure and thus, helps explain how ritualised behaviours and presentational practice associated with clean eating maintain the normative order of society (Durkheim, [1912] 1995; Collins, 1986).

Individualised conceptions of health

Another significant dimension that characterised clean eating posts collected in our sample was the emphasis on the individual subject rather than groups. 67 per cent of posts featured an individual subject in comparison to a mere 9 per cent including two or more people (the remaining 24 per cent featuring food). Muscle Presentation, in which subjects were shown

flexing their muscles to display physical power and strength, accounted for 42 per cent of clean eating top posts. Subjects were commonly staged in a gym environment while engaging in exercise to communicate the hard work and discipline involved in adhering to a clean eating lifestyle. Here muscle presentation was used to connote more than strength: it was a sign of meritocratic achievement with the self-made ‘man’ (men overwhelming represented in this category) replaced by the self-cured individual – one who has taken their health into their own hands (Baker & Walsh, 2018). In this context the body functions as a powerful symbol, signifying the extent to which the subject has self-discipline and self-control. This emphasis on self-discipline and self-control aligns with western values of responsabilisation and the management of the self (Lupton, 1996, p. 16). The ethos of personal responsibility, and the emphasis on the individual, to which members of the clean eating community subscribe is also manifest in the ‘fitspo’ (fitspiration) culture online (Lupton, 2018a). However, whereas discourse around weight loss and diet has historically focused on regulating women’s bodies, clean eating top posts were represented to a greater degree by men portrayed consuming low calorie and vegetarian food.

While clean eating and meatless diets have generally been viewed as feminine practices, these diets were depicted as a rational choice for men when framed in terms of the individual’s health and environment (Mycek, 2018). The inclusion of hashtags such as #organic, #healthy and #crueltyfree in the captions of these posts upheld the traditional association between reason and masculinity. Other frequently used hashtags that accompanied these posts reinforced themes of responsabilisation as articulated by the words #determination, #motivation and #healthy choices. In promoting the idea that health is an individual choice and responsibility, these posts reinforce ideas of ‘healthism’ that positions health as the result solely of individual behaviour (Crawford, 1980, p. 360). By focusing on the disciplined individual, the underlying

message is that the health solution resides with the individual's determination to 'resist culture, advertising, institutional and environmental constraints, disease agents, or, simply, lazy or poor personal habits' (Crawford, 1980, p. 378). The corresponding hashtags that accompanied clean eating images such as #workhard, #no excuses, #nevergiveup and #healthy choices further obscured the fact that food choices are situated within broader socio-cultural, economic and political contexts.

Conclusion

The proliferation of the digital in social life has had a profound impact on how food is represented, consumed and shared online. Digital technologies afford users with new modes of self-presentation and the capacity to communicate with online social networks across vast temporal and spatial contexts. Hashtags provide spaces for like-minded individuals to interact and can be used by individuals collectively to enact an alternative food politics. The images shared in these online spaces are strong carriers of meaning. They convey not only discourses around food, but the self and society more generally. In this chapter, we have examined how clean eating communities present themselves online by conducting a visual content analysis of top posts pertaining to popular clean eating hashtags on Instagram. Drawing on Durkheim, Douglas and Goffman as a theoretical foundation for this study, we have situated the clean eating movement in existing cultural ideas of purity and defilement. Concepts of clean and unclean food constitute identity at an individual and collective level by defining accepted eating practices and attempting to regulate behavioural norms. We have suggested that the concept of ritual, foundational to these theoretical approaches, is useful for understanding how status and identity are established online via rituals of liking, commenting and sharing. From

this perspective, the clean eating movement can be understood in terms of symbolic boundary-maintenance with clean eating structured around beliefs about health and well-being.

Clean eating practices are displayed on Instagram to represent an ideal self to one's social network. Idealisation was apparent in posts featuring the body and food. Although food images were significantly underrepresented in clean eating top posts, the foods that featured in top posts were used by clean eating practitioners to stand in for an idealised self. At the same time, indulgent food that appeared to undermine clean eating principles was idealised when framed in relation to healthy and ethical principles (for example, organic and cruelty free produce, and sustainable framing practices). Idealisation was particularly manifest in gender display with images for the most part reinforcing hegemonic versions of sexualised femininity rather than challenging gender stereotypes. Conversely, conventional associations between masculinity and meat eating were challenged by imagery of muscular men consuming and advocating vegan and vegetarian practices. While these representations appeared to resist and reframe conventional gendered bodily norms, the hashtags that accompanied these images depicted these dietary practices as a rational choice for the individual's health and the environment, thereby, upholding the traditional symbolic connection between reason and masculinity. This emphasis on the individual in clean eating top posts aligns with Western conceptions of health as an individual pursuit requiring discipline, sacrifice and commitment on behalf of the subject. Akin to religion, clean eating assigns a moral value to food. The representation of clean eating practices on Instagram reinforces traditional hierarchies by affirming and reinforcing contemporary western conventions of diet, gender, health. Those that adhered to a clean eating lifestyle were depicted as superior physically and morally, so that you are what you eat literally and symbolically.

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