Phone Eats First: An Investigation of Femininity Represented in Instagram Posts of Food

Madeline Basirico

Muhlenberg College

Media & Communication Department

Undergraduate High Honors Thesis

April 1, 2019

Dr. Irene Chien

Media and Communications Honors Seminar

1 April 2019

Phone Eats First: An Investigation of Femininity Represented in Instagram Posts of Food

Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of women's online identity curation through Instagram posts involving food, and how those posts can both perpetuate and subvert traditional notions of femininity. This hints at the double standards that still exist for women despite the seemingly democratizing nature of social media, which I argue prevent any post from truly subverting these patriarchal values. First, I examine existing research which I've separated into three different categories: Femininity and Food, Femininity and Social Media, and Food and Social Media, and I explain my understanding of femininity as a concept based on these texts. Then using my working definition, I perform a textual analysis on two contrasting Instagram posts of food, both of which were posted by women. I recognize elements of the posts that read as feminine as well as those which appear to contradict traditional gender roles. I then conducted a focus group with individuals who identify as female and regularly use Instagram to understand the perspectives of women who interact with these types of posts. I showed them the same photos that I already analyzed in my textual analysis to see what they noticed comparatively to the conclusions I drew. This is not meant to be a representative sample or to produce any concrete data, but rather allows for a discussion about Instagram in a setting that mimics the interactive and community-based platform. My research is significant because having a better understanding of identity creation is essential to interacting critically with the media we produce and consume, and identity will always be intertwined with cultural artifacts such as food.

Introduction

In the age of social media, the persona that a user adopts online often represents an idealized version of their self. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow users to express themselves through self-curated profiles that they can then share with online friends/followers, so users tend to carefully pick and choose what aspects of their lives they want their followers to see (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012). These self-portrayals primarily align with cultural trends and often represent traditional gender norms. One cultural artifact which often appears in online posts is food. Representing a person's daily life often includes depicting their hobbies and everyday activities, and sometimes food is showcased as a part of that. After all, food is necessary for the survival of all humans, so eating is an activity that everyone has in common. The traditionally feminized space of the kitchen serves as an interesting point of focus for many women to this day. In this paper, I explore notions of femininity characterized by observations and scholarly research that are prevalent in modern-day posts shared on Instagram. I am particularly focused on the performed femininity expressed through Instagram posts involving food. I will argue that this type of post directly relates to traditional notions of femininity, either by attempting to subvert them or reinforcing them.

Following a compilation of scholars' ideas about these subjects, I examine two shared Instagram posts through a close textual analysis, pointing out specific features that either reinforce or contradict modern standards of projected femininity. In addition I have gathered insight from individuals in a focus group. These qualitative methods have allowed for an approach of the topic through multiple perspectives and to account for individual difference.

With socially constructed concepts, it makes more sense to conduct research in this way as opposed to using quantitative methods.

Food culture has always played a significant part in dictating the roles men and women have in society (Inness, 2001). Traditional gender roles have been perpetuated through the rhetoric and content of cookbooks as well as in the depictions of men and women in food advertising (Inness, 2001). Women were expected to be self-sacrificing and to cook and serve but not to eat. In the early twentieth century, cookbooks instructed women about the types of food they were supposed to make, serve, and eat, but also alluded to the feminine values at the time: daintiness and seemingly effortless labor (Inness, 2001).

In more recent years, digital media has both perpetuated and altered traditional gender roles. Many female individuals have expressed themselves through food blogs, by sharing recipes and personal stories about their cooking experiences (Dejmanee, 2016). These blogs tend to serve as alternatives to hypersexualized depictions of women in the way their authors focus on the creativity and entrepreneurialism of their own work. Despite classifying many of their visuals as “food porn”, they take their own bodies entirely out of their blog persona. This is an example of a subversion of gender roles in the media, with the female bloggers claiming agency over their branded selves. Whether it is intentional or not, people’s online presence exhibits a form of self-expression that brands them to their audience.

Social media appears to serve as an equalizing medium. Anyone with access to a smartphone or the internet can join, and for the most part social networks are free to use. However, the democratizing aspects of social media mask the systematic inequalities that still exist for oppressed groups. Ideally, social networks would give women the ability to represent

themselves instead of being (mis)represented by others. Due to the overpoweringly patriarchal structures that exist within society and are reinforced by digital platforms, women are not able to transcend inequality through their shared photos on Instagram. The platform does not exist in a vacuum, and especially because of the features allowing other users to like or comment on posts, societal power dynamics impact the content. It is embedded in the very design of the app.

Though some posts do subvert traditional gender roles, women still project notions of femininity in pictures of food on Instagram, and this hints at the double standards that still exist for women despite the seemingly democratizing nature of social media.

First, I will identify existing research about femininity and its relationship to food. I will establish some historical background of the construction of women in conjunction to food in addition to illustrating gender roles in food advertising. Then I will highlight scholarship regarding femininity and social media to understand how it connects to food. I will discuss representation of women in mass media, and the construction of the self on social media. I will additionally describe women and creative labor in regards to digital media and competition. I'll then move on to consider research about food and social media, focusing more specifically on online food communities and photo sharing. Looking at who makes up these communities allows us to see where the motivation from these posts stems from and what structures might be informing their decisions. From there I will establish my understanding of the construction of modern-day femininity, and I will support my claims with evidence based on textual analysis of multiple shared posts that appeared on my personal Instagram feed regarding food. Following this, I will reflect on the motivations of young women, having conducted a focus group that concentrates on female Instagram users' posts involving food and drinks.

Femininity and food

Domesticity has historically been classified as a feminine-coded characteristic. Cookbooks in the early twentieth century conveyed expectations of women at the time regarding cooking and food-related matters. The sexist trope that women belong in the kitchen was perpetuated by these recipe books, as they were written for a female audience and included advice for entertaining guests and hosting ladylike gatherings. The cooking literature of the time suggested that women were the only people doing household tasks and preparing meals for their husbands and children. It is important to note that these texts were meant for white middle class women, as upper class women would have had hired help generally from black women. These cookbooks were not intended for marginalized groups

Women have often been characterized as delicate, which is a word used to describe many of the foods they were expected to eat according to cookbooks. They placed a high level of importance on “daintiness” and dainty foods were characterized as women’s dishes (Inness, 2001). “Dainty”, often used synonymously with “feminine”, was used to describe desserts in particular. In terms of food, the word “dainty” refers to dishes that are small and intricately constructed, often having precise details and a sense of fragility. The sugary sweetness of desserts is symbolic of the use of the adjective “sweet” to describe women who are considered demure and ladylike. These desserts were usually elaborate, and the emphasis in cooking literature was on making complicated dishes appear effortless. The illusion of effortlessness is a common theme in constructions of femininity. Today this is represented in the aspiration for perfection in young women, and the notion of “having it all” as a measure of success (McRobbie,

2015). Projecting perfection requires invisible labor, as the time and energy that goes into this act is hidden and goes unrecognized (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

There is a certain level of privilege that exists within the prioritization of daintiness and elaborate dishes. Status in the early twentieth century could be gauged by how successful women were at entertaining, which required time, money, and access. The intricacy and elaboracy of an event could be perceived as a reflection of the patriarch's wealth and success (Inness, 2001). In this way, the labor and effort exerted by women was ultimately erased and went unrecognized. These historical roots still visibly lurk today in the invisible uncompensated labor of self-employed women as they strive for equivalent success to that of men (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

The heteronormative and patriarchal rhetoric used in cooking literature has persisted in society. One trend that has emerged in contemporary popular culture is comparing and describing women in similar ways to foods. The adjectives used to describe food, and colloquially to characterize women, often overlap. An example as of the past couple of years is the popular emergence of the word "snack" being used to describe an attractive person, usually women. This slang term became popular on Twitter in 2017 and has continued to be used in social settings since (Krishna, 2017). A comparison of the female body to food is exploitative in the way it dehumanizes women. Women are objectified when they are simplistically described as non-living entities meant for consumption.

The term "food porn" additionally draws parallels between sexuality and food. Food porn usually describes aesthetically pleasurable images of food which invite viewership and encourage vicarious consumption, much like sexually pornographic material (Dejmanee, 2016).

The term has been popularized in the digital media landscape in recent years, and makes a statement about the image being depicted. It assigns a gluttonous and a sort of taboo label to the image. Tisha DeJmanee's article (2016) examines female food bloggers' use of "food porn" and how it fits into the contradictions with post-feminist discourse. In it she explains, "by substituting food for the body, female food bloggers are able to displace the disciplinary postfeminist gaze from their bodies and direct it toward their creative and entrepreneurial capacity," (DeJmanee, 2016). The women are able to refocus readers into paying attention to the elements they want to represent them, like the recipes or food itself. The removal of the body from photos of the food is interesting, because it displaces exploitation of the female body yet it also erases the effort and labor that has gone into making said food.

Constructions of femininity and masculinity have influenced attitudes about food. There are gendered patterns in food preferences and typically women take a more calculated approach in deciding what foods to consume (Beardsworth, Brynan, Keil, Goode, Haslam, & Lancashire, 2002). Though this can lead to more ethical and nutritional eating habits, it can also have negative consequences. A 2002 study suggested that women are more likely to experience guilt from eating habits and body dissatisfaction due to increased awareness of the details about their food (Beardsworth et al., 2002). It should be noted, however, that this conclusion disregards patriarchal structures which place pressure on women to fit a certain standard of beauty, in addition to imposing a disproportionate level of importance on the female body.

These connections between femininity and food illustrate some of the underlying messages women's Instagram posts of food have. A woman's post that exhibits a homemade dish could reinforce the stereotype of women in the kitchen. When choosing to post with food,

social media users make the decision whether or not to include their own body in the photo. Sharing posts with bodies and disembodied “food porn” hold different connotations in terms of their relationship to traditional notions of femininity. The alignment of women with food is a societal convention that persists to this day. If social media platforms mimic the structures of society, therefore this alignment must exist on Instagram as well.

Femininity and social media

Media scholars often explore the ideas of identity and representation in the digital world. If we view popular mass media as a cultural template, the way people are represented in mass media functions as a reflection of societal attitudes at the time of creation (Charlebois, 2010). Depictions of women in mass media vary extensively and they are largely paradoxical. Disney movies, for example, project contradictory messages about femininity and fulfillment. Many of them perpetuate the traditional heteronormative notion that single women are only fulfilled once they enter a romantic relationship with a man. However, femininity is complex so there are instances that subvert and perpetuate traditional notions in the same context. The ambiguous nature of femininity in reality is reflected in the way it is represented in fictional narratives.

Social media provides women and many marginalized groups the opportunity to represent themselves however they want online, as opposed to others representing them. Alongside the agency of self-representation is concept of branding. Instagram in particular has been widely associated with digital entrepreneurship, as proclaimed “influencers” often have sponsorships and use the platform for financial growth. Women involved in creative digital entrepreneurship are viewed as having equal opportunities to men due to the freedom of

self-employment and the possibilities in online work (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). However, Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska found in their study (2017) that women still feel confined to traditional notions of femininity in their social media presence despite the independence involved in their careers. The women interviewed described the expectations imposed on the way they professionally represent themselves online. Their success is contingent on soft self-promotion, interactive intimacy, and compulsory visibility (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017), elements that are coded as traditionally feminine. Conforming to these expectations requires additional uncompensated invisible labor, a recurring theme in relation to femininity. These imperatives involve conflicting appeals, making female digital entrepreneurs' success a challenging feat, if success is equated with how closely they embody society's expectations.

Aligning online identity with the construction of femininity is not limited to just entrepreneurs, but rather influences a majority of female-run profiles on Instagram. Societal norms penetrate every aspect of curating an identity, alongside the influence of capitalism. Instagram acts as a host for the commodification of female bodies, from the way influencers often profit off of their own bodies to the exponential growth in popularity of posts that have many likes and comments. In 2013, Instagram transitioned to an advertising platform when it was bought by Facebook and since then the company has been selling user activity and information to marketers (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Following this switch, advertisers have been able to target sponsored posts toward very specific audiences based on their usage of the platform, the posts they "like", and products or places they post about. This targeting is commonly considered invasive or creepy. For example, a person can converse with a friend about needing a certain product, and not 20 minutes later an ad for that exact product appears

while they are scrolling through their Instagram feed. Advertisers also take advantage of popular figures on the platform and celebrities in order to launch native ads through sponsorship. Influencers endorse certain products in their posts and align their projected messages alongside that of the brand they are profiting from. Popular culture and current events are often used in marketing ploys, and even social justice concerns, like the body positivity movement are appropriated by corporations (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). This is one of the ways Instagram commodifies the female body, as it redirects the narrative of the movement to satisfy a capitalist agenda. This movement originally grew as a way to combat the patriarchal standards of beauty, but since it's been hijacked by advertisers, it has regressed to promote those same standards under the guise of "social justice". The exploitation of female bodies on social media for profit then distorts our view of femininity and further complicates the already tension-filled narrative. Fitting into standards of beauty is a huge aspect of performing femininity. People constantly comment on the sizes and shapes of women's bodies, which are exploited by advertisers like in the example above, and women often associate that with food. Women might hesitate to post pictures of food to avoid fat-shaming, reinforcing the thin and dainty standard of beauty, or they might post photos of food to subvert that narrative and to denounce fitting into society's expectations.

For purely social users of Instagram, their persona is mostly curated through photos on their profile. Modern society prescribes a narrow classification of feminine beauty, one that is exclusionary and that is amplified on social media sites, especially photo sharing ones such as Instagram (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017). Photo editing is part of the platform's design, which encourages users to share idealized images rather than raw footage. Instagram provides users

with filters and editing tools so that they can sculpt images to fit their personal standards and aesthetic preferences. Women who don't fit the near-impossible standards due to body type, race, social class, etc. experience pressures to alter their online identities to conform. Instagram doesn't exist in a cultural void, and therefore users are subjected to the same types of structural oppression that exist in everyday life. In a study about black women and bodies on Instagram that makes reference to a particular user nicknamed with the hashtag “#teacherbae”, Erica B. Edwards and Jennifer Esposito point out, “In as much as Instagram offers an opportunity for women to compose liberated conceptions of self and creates opportunities for economic self-empowerment, it also serves as a powerful mediator, upholding systems of domination,” (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). This study highlights the conflicting messages about what is appropriate to share online as someone identifying as a black woman. It analyzes public reception of a controversial photo of a fourth grade teacher, Patrice Brown. She posted a photo of herself on Instagram wearing a tight dress and heels in her classroom. The photo went viral, spurring a debate of what is appropriate dress code in the classroom and how much skin women are permitted to show online before being labeled in a negative manner. The study concluded that the cultural artifact provides an example of female bodies, and specifically black bodies being policed under the influences of structural oppression and the male gaze (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). The conflicting messages on the #teacherbae post highlight the dissonance between society's expectations around the exploitation of women's bodies, and the paradox of body exposure in definitions of femininity. As I mentioned above, body exposure and women's relationships with food are closely related due to the complicated standards of beauty that involve weight and body image.

Post-feminist sensibilities penetrate the discourse about femininity and female image. Post-feminism is a complicated movement that brings up a fair amount of controversy. The basic idea of post-feminism is that earlier forms of feminism are no longer relevant due to the changing attitudes of society (McRobbie, 2011), and that women can be hyper-feminine and hyper-sexualized and use that as a source of power and choice (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). It privileges the individual over the collective and suggests that women can make choices independent of structural oppression. Post-feminism fails to take into account marginalized women and presents an illusion of universal utopian equality between genders. This movement has contributed to the tensions in defining femininity, and encourages competition between women as they attempt to navigate contradictory messages about what is “socially acceptable”. Competition is intertwined with the aspiration for perfection that is prevalent in women of this day and age. We see this especially on social media in the way users create an idealized identity, purposely leaving out content that is not visually appealing or particularly interesting (Jones & Nash, 2017). Women then experience pressures to appear flawless online and therefore compromising their authenticity. Perfection is equated with personal success, sparking jealousy and competition between women as well. Women compare themselves in hopes of being the most well-rounded and “having it all”. Inevitably, unattainable perfection leads to low self-esteem and self-beratement in women, furthering hegemonic oppression (McRobbie, 2015). At the surface level, food posts combat this idealized perfection by showing an everyday action of humans, and one that is not traditionally viewed as ladylike. However, the way in which these posts are staged can be inauthentic and further enforce the idea that women can’t show their flaws. An example of this would be if a woman posts a picture of food and then doesn’t actually

eat it, distorting the truth of the moment. It is rare to see a photo posted of a woman after they've finished a big meal, and this likely has to do with body image and seeking to avoid fat-shaming.

The construction of identity is a main component of social networks. It is something to be considered in the creation of any profile to represent oneself. As a result, it makes perfect sense that the question of what constitutes a feminine identity would arise in discussing the features of social media. The construction of femininity is intertwined with self-representation and examining the gendered double standards that exist in society which are then carried over to online communities.

This section is significant to my argument because it highlights numerous examples of oppressive structures and double standards for women on social media. Understanding these is essential to examining the way women's posts of food relate to femininity. Illustrating the nuances of self-representation that exist on social media platforms allows for a comparison to be made between that and reality. These factors contribute to the contemporary understanding of femininity, which is necessary in order to decide whether a post reinforces traditional notions of femininity or not, and furthermore justifies the claim that women's posts of food on Instagram are rooted in patriarchal standards. The general framework of social media imitates society, including the oppressive structures in relation to identity that have been perpetuated for centuries.

Food and social media

The literature about food in relation to social media mostly talks about how the social aspect is ingrained in both experiences. The parallels in sharing a meal and sharing a photo are

what connect the two. Food is essential for living beings and therefore functions as a significant component in the lives of humans. Individuals sometimes develop a preoccupation with food so that it becomes not just an element for survival but rather a source of joy and fascination. The term “foodie” emerged in 1980, describing those with an obsession over food (Ginsberg, 2015). This term has been popularized and reinforced by advertisers using it to market food products. As a prominent feature and source of enjoyment in the lives of many, it makes sense that food would be a common subject of social media posts. Social networks serve as platforms for self-expression, and if food is part of a person’s self-prescribed identity, they may post about it.

A main component of social networks is the emphasis on making connections and interacting with other people online. They act as communal meeting places, where people can transcend physical distance to communicate with immediacy (Bouvier, 2018). The sense of community achieved in digital spaces can match and sometimes even outrank that of physical reality. In her article *Breaking Bread Online: Social Media, Photography, and the Virtual Experience of Food* (2018), Elyse Bouvier highlights the similarities between the social experience of sharing a meal and the act of sharing pictures of food on social media. Though sensory details are removed in the sharing of photos, an experience is still created between people through emotion and imagination, and the immediacy of the internet allows for this to happen in real time (Bouvier, 2018). The act of sharing a picture online becomes a part of a person’s constructed online identity, spurring the question of what this says about the individual posting the image. Bouvier (2018) indicates that sharing these images can be an expression of wealth and status. Having access to food, and particularly aesthetically pleasing or indulgent

food, is a privilege. Food is typically a signifier of a certain social class or lifestyle, and on social media people will often perform as if they are of a high status.

Other scholars have pointed out the communities created through food sharing on social networks. Signe Rousseau mentions how Twitter has been used as a tool for sharing quick recipes as well as activism and public health initiatives (Rousseau, 2012). These instances are not always positive, sometimes promoting unhealthy eating practices or false information. One would think that the introduction of social media would make accessing medical advice easier because of the huge network it creates, yet the breadth of accessible information also includes poor advice, and there is little to no regulation of the truth.

The food communities in digital spaces are also grounds for forming new bonds and relationships. People come together over a mutual connection around food, and they have since the early beginnings of social networking. Food blogs have existed since the late nineties, with *Chowhound* as one of the first of its kind (Rousseau, 2012). Food blogs dramatically changed the game for foodies since now their access to recipes and tips, as well as people who shared their passion, was no longer limited by proximity. Food bloggers nowadays range from food-enthusiasts, to professional cooks, to amateurs who experiment in the kitchen. There is a certain amount of storytelling that goes along with food blogs. Often a blogger will tell an extensive story about a memory associated with a certain dish or its historical background before even revealing the actual recipe. Personal voice and identity, which is so evident on Instagram and Twitter, understandably is a component of blogs as well, considering that blogs are the ancestors of contemporary social networking platforms.

The messages surrounding identity construction on food blogs are just as contradictory as those involving femininity, and even intersect at times. The title figure of The Food Network's *Pioneer Woman*, Ree Drummond, started out with a food blog, and the reception of her success has been mixed. She has enough supporters who have contributed to her cookbook being a bestseller and then the development of her own TV show, but she also has gotten a lot of negative attention (Rousseau, 2012). People are critical of her level of authenticity.

Viewers/readers have pointed out how despite sharing anecdotes regarding her personal life, she appears to exist in a utopian world, never delving into controversial topics of discussion or negative occurrences in her everyday life. This connects to the feminine-coded paradox of performed effortlessness that I described previously, and the pressure for women to come across as “having it all” in terms of work and home balance, which is so prevalent due to conflicting societal messages. The criticism regarding her authenticity is also largely related to her being perceived as a brand rather than an actual person. Ree Drummond's performed perfection is seen as a result of her being commodified and losing the truthfulness in her identity. She profits when she comes across as heroic in accomplishing average tasks so as to target viewers (most likely female) who aspire to achieve the home life work balance that she seemingly effortlessly attains (Rousseau, 2012). The case of Ree Drummond exemplifies the prevalence of hegemonic views of femininity that directly intersect with media involving food. The subjects are so structurally influenced that it is impossible to completely separate femininity and constructions of identity from food and social media.

Ree Drummond's transition from food blog to television parallels the transition and integration of food blog practices in other social platforms. Instagram hosts thousands of profiles

dedicated to food alone. Once again, the equalizing appearance of social media comes into play. Any self-proclaimed foodie with access to a smartphone can be the author of their own food blog on Instagram, and therefore developing an identity to assume in the curation of posts. Social networks are constantly evolving and being updated to satisfy the needs of consumers as well as to remain in competition with one another. Blogs have given way to Instagram, and now Snapchat, another social platform, has influenced Instagram to adapt its features. Snapchat is a photo sharing platform, however it is distinct because of its ephemeral nature. Pictures and videos disappear from one's public profile within 24 hours, and direct messages disappear after a few seconds or after closing the app. Posts created on this app are suggested to be more raw and authentic due to their fleeting presence (Malhotra, Jailanee, & Kheng, 2018). Because the photos and videos are not lasting portrayals of identity, there are lower stakes in curating posts than a platform like Facebook or Instagram. The level of authenticity of Snapchat has been made more complicated with the addition of distorting filters in recent years. Instagram added a "Story" feature in 2016, mimicking Snapchat stories, which are shared for 24 hours with followers/friends (*Introducing Instagram Stories*, 2016). In a 2018 study of the smartphone's role in dining out for young adults in Singapore, a participant suggested that they would use Instagram or Snapchat stories for posting pictures of food that aren't quite that impressive, but which they still want to document and share (Malhotra, Jailanee, & Kheng, 2018). The idea that people would preserve their more exciting and defining moments as Instagram posts rather than their everyday experiences speaks to the careful curation of an identity online.

Decisions about what food makes it onto someone's Instagram profile seem to mostly concern aesthetics. Mia Jones and Jill Nash investigated opinions of what makes an

Instagram-worthy post of food and found that the visual appearance of the food and the attractiveness of the photo are more important than the taste of the food itself (2017). This is interesting, because it suggests that the sense of taste is completely removed in the transition of food from plate to profile. What Instagram users value more than their own consumption experience is the consumption of their photo by followers: their imagined taste of the food is prioritized over reality. The prioritization of sight over taste in regards to food demonstrates the concept of portraying an idealized image online. Representations of experiences can be viewed as more important than the experiences themselves in the digital age. The participants in this study also noted how they would not post images from an outing to a “low-end” chain restaurant in favor of photos from a more special or exclusive dining out experience (Jones & Nash, 2017). This speaks to both the idea of food as a signal of wealth and status, but also to the concept of assuming a romanticized persona on social networking sites. The term “conspicuous consumption”, coined by Thorstein Veblen at the end of the 19th century refers to consumers who purchase things for the purpose of displaying their wealth or aspirations of status rather than to satisfy actual need (*What is Conspicuous Consumption?*, n.d.). Instagram posts of food exemplify conspicuous consumption if we are under the assumption that they privilege aesthetic pleasure over taste.

The connection between food and social media is significant in the way social media is designed, catering to the idea of community which is associated with food and eating. The food-related content that Instagram users choose to post is important in understanding how they want to represent their identity. The structures of oppression associated with food are different from those associated with femininity - femininity is a construct while food is tangible. However,

food on social media is not tangible. Knowing the different ways people can interact with food online allows for greater insight into motivations behind posting and the limitations of Instagram as a platform.

Defining Femininity

“Femininity” is a term that is often used but challenging to define. There are many tensions between different definitions of femininity, because it is not a concrete concept. It is a construction based off of societal expectations and old-fashioned stereotypes. As was pointed out previously, some attributes femininity has traditionally been associated with are domesticity and daintiness. Throughout history, a woman’s role has been considered the homemaker and maternal figure (Inness, 2001). A “feminine” woman would be modest, put-together, and youthful. She would accomplish tasks in the home and dedicate her life to serving her children and husband. The implication of this view is that women are fragile, weak, and submissive. Femininity has evolved over time, and with this evolution contradictions have emerged. Femininity now incorporates several paradoxical ideals, such as body visibility and modesty, along with effortless perfection and hard work. There appears to be a thin line where these qualities meet in the middle, which is considered socially acceptable. But how are women supposed to balance such opposing constraints? The double standards and paradoxes of femininity are imperative to understanding how the concept is problematic.

Another aspect of femininity I’ve laid out is the pursuit of perfection, based on the idea that accomplished women can “have it all” (McRobbie, 2015). This complicates my working definition even further, because it implies that women can be homemakers *and* working

professionals and can juggle numerous activities in their daily lives almost effortlessly.

“Effortlessness” has been a feminine characteristic since the early twentieth century, as we can gather from old cookbooks in terms of popular recipes and advice for women in the kitchen.

Elaborate, decorative dishes were extremely popular, and the cookbooks would give advice on how to present them in a way that veiled all the hard work that went into making them (Inness, 2001). Though effortlessness has been privileged as a ladylike attribute in history, modern society and particularly audiences of digital media have become critical of perfection at the same time that structural forces perpetuate the expectation of perfection. The example of Ree Drummond and the audience criticisms of the lack of insight into negative aspects of her life fits into this duality (Rousseau, 2012). The ideal feminine figure should be able to balance home and work life, but also should be upfront about her struggles in maintaining this balance? People on social media often have a preoccupation with exposing the inauthentic (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). However on a site that involves self-presentation creating an identity, the “authentic” will always be somewhat constructed. Drummond’s association with capitalism and commodification of herself as a figure complicates her position and contributes to her mixed reception from audiences. The atmospheric pressure in the media for perfection still exists for who aren’t profiting from their created identity. Aspirations for perfection permeate all forms of social media due to the socially comparative nature of these sites and the creation of an idealized self-image, particularly for women. The performance of perfection is disguised as an empowering driving force for individual female success, yet underneath it really upholds hegemonic feminine values by erasing the effort and labor that goes into such success (McRobbie, 2015).

As I related earlier from Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska's article, *Gender and Self-Enterprise in the Social Media Age: A Digital Double Bind*, the trends they found in female digital entrepreneurs' methods on social media after interviewing several of them are described as soft self-promotion, interactive intimacy, and compulsory visibility (2017).

Basically these women feel as though to be successful in their respective digitally focused jobs, they must be modest in terms of their successes and to refrain from overt self-promotion, they must build relationships with their audience and communicate personally, and they must be transparent, bringing their private life into the public sphere for the sake of relatability. These trends align with notions of femininity throughout history, and the unpaid extra labor that women have to handle when representing themselves. Modesty has always been a feminized ideal.

Women are discouraged from boasting about their achievements so as not to come across braggish or stuck up. Women are often encouraged to downplay their accomplishments and self-deprecation or beratement is a prevalent device used to do so. Modesty is also frequently discussed in terms of the display of women's bodies. Modern society hypersexualizes the female body, and overt sexuality is viewed as a positive expression of femininity by post-feminists, however the act of displaying one's body still adheres to the male gaze (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). This is complicated to grapple with because dressing and presenting conservatively based on pressures from society also stems back to patriarchal ideals, but this time it is through repression of female sexuality. This places modesty and sexuality in a paradoxical relationship so that any representation of the body, or lack thereof, is subject to criticism.

The idea of relationship building has also been accepted as a feature of femininity throughout history. Women are frequently described as chatty, depicted in mass media as always

talking on the phone to one another, or going to the bathroom together just to talk. I notice on Instagram, women often comment on each others' photos along with "liking" them. The comments are usually complimentary and non-specific, which suggests that this could be a tactic to get others to comment on their posts. Having many comments is beneficial in Instagram's more recent algorithm, so more followers will see a post that has a lot of engagement in their feed. In this vein, women commenting on Instagram posts could fall into the atmosphere of competition for perfection described in *Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times*, by Angela McRobbie (2015).

Continuing with Duffy and Pruchniewska's article (2017), involved in the expectation of relationship-building is approachability. Women are told by society that they must be friendly and accessible, and the women in this article describe the importance of making one's audience feel important as individuals, and as if they have a personal connection. If women don't engage with followers they are seen as aloof and snobby. Alongside this is the notion that one's private life should be shared to an extent on social media. The women in the study feel as though they can increase their relatability by posting about their personal lives aside from their entrepreneurial ventures. Women are expected to be transparent about the private aspects of their lives, yet oversharing is viewed as just as bad (if not worse) than sharing nothing personal. Followers often don't want to like or engage with posts that are graphic, overly indulgent, or too frequent. The balancing act of all of these social media discrepancies may not be limited to just female entrepreneurs. However, factors of all of them can be traced back to traditional stereotypes of femininity. Therefore, they become more visible for women and are more important to the overall success of female digital entrepreneurs than that of their male

counterparts (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). The contradictions illustrate the additional uncompensated labor that women so often are charged with completing.

Femininity is a complex ideal which permeates everyday life and the digital media landscape. In trying to understand their place in society, women may perpetuate patriarchal values through their online identities. Understanding how these traditional and often oppressive notions of femininity find their way into social media posts can help us to expose the drawbacks of social media and its structural inequalities as well as the ways in which women actively reject societal expectations. Femininity as an ideal has been perpetuated because of how ambiguous it is. People are able to mold the meaning to fit contemporary systems such as the digital media landscape because the complex attributes make it interpretable in numerous ways.

This working definition is important in analyzing actual Instagram posts because it serves as a basis for the factors to consider. Many of these feminine characteristics are reinforced by the structure of the Instagram platform itself, suggesting that it would be difficult if not impossible to completely subvert all traditional notions of femininity in a post. To synthesize these concepts further, I will examine two women's Instagram posts and point out aspects that may or may not perpetuate traditional ideas of performed femininity. Though the existing literature about femininity, food, and social media provides a lot of context for posts incorporating all three subjects, none of it examines the particular relationship of these in an Instagram post. Evidence is needed to illustrate how oppressive structures seep into this specific content. Through textual analysis, I can break down my thought process which has been informed by the scholarly works above.

Textual/Visual Analysis

In this section I closely analyze two different Instagram posts featuring food which I selected from the profiles of women who I follow on my personal Instagram account. This is a convenience sample, and in my analysis I don't intend to make any blanket claims about the expression of femininity. I simply wish to observe and interpret potential representations of femininity in the photos at hand. My data is qualitative and serves as a basis for formulating the questions asked in my focus group. I have received written consent from the participants to use their photos, but to protect their identities I refer to them as Participant A and Participant B, and I refer to their respective photos as Figure A and Figure B. Both of these women are regular Instagram users, meaning they use the app almost daily and they post at least once every two months. Both of their profiles are considered social accounts, not aligned with a particular theme or aesthetic but rather a reflection of their experiences and things they enjoy.

Figure A shows Participant A holding up a large pretzel and a large glass of beer, with a plate of what appears to be some kind of sausage and sauerkraut in front of her. The location listed on the post is "Munich English Garden-beer Garden" (Instagram, 2017). The post is dated June 11, 2017, and has 267 "likes" and two comments. Participant A's caption reads "These are a few of my favorite things ~Maria Von trapp & me while devouring these" (2017). Her photo pictures her outdoors at a shaded table, with other people seated at tables and eating and drinking in the background. Participant A is physically present in the photo, and she has an open-mouthed smile on her face. She is wearing a brownish-orangeish shirt with thin straps and the area below her collarbone is exposed. Participant A's lower body is hidden beneath the table in front of her. Since the photo is from June and was taken in Germany, this suggests that it was warm outside.

Participant A positions her body in the photo alongside the food, making the focus shared between her and the food items themselves. They take up equal space in the frame suggesting that they are of equal importance in her self representation. The display of her body may be interpreted as a nod to the contradiction of modesty and hypersexualization of female bodies. Including her body in the post may be considered as an expression of sexuality but placing the food in front of it suggests an effort to maintain a sense of modesty. Her pose pays homage to the stereotypical figure of a German barmaid, displaying a pretzel and beer, but in a way that is still perceived as sexually attractive (See Figure A.1)

Her caption does not indicate a sense of competition or boasting, but rather expresses her individual appreciation for the food and drink in front of her while making a classic musical reference. In this caption, Participant A is exhibiting features that she may consider part of her identity, such as an admiration for musical theatre and a love of stereotypical German food. Participant A showcases the traditionally feminine concept of relatability in the presentation of her interests, and further displays visibility and transparency in her relationship to followers who might see her post. There is a logo shown on the beer glass, but it is not totally visible, nor is there any indication of product promotion or sponsorship. The way Participant A displays her food and drink by holding them up promotes the items themselves but not a particular company or establishment.

One could argue that because Participant A is not shown actually consuming the food, that she is concealing some of the truth in this experience. As an audience, we do not know if she actually ate the food and drank the beer after the photo was taken. It may be considered to be an omission of less aesthetically pleasing elements, or else the aspiration for perfection motivating

this choice. It is likely that this decision along with many of the ones demonstrating aspects of femininity were subconscious ones, due to the ever-present patriarchal structures which permeate society, that are masked by the supposed freedom of self-expression on social media.

Figure B displays a cone of gelato with a spoon sticking out of it. Participant B's hand is holding up the cone, but only a sliver of her hand is visible (Instagram, 2018). The gelato appears to be some kind of vanilla-based flavor with brown bits mixed in, possibly some kind of nut. The gelato takes up most of the left side of the frame, and blurred in the background is the Arno River and Ponte Vecchio with buildings alongside, identifying the location as the city of Florence, Italy. Closer to the foreground, but still behind the gelato, is a street, and participant B seems as though she took the photo on a bridge. The location of the photo is marked as "Gelateria La Carraia", and her caption reads, "I might have posted this photo a while ago on Snapchat, but I had the exact same cone in the exact same beautiful weather today so I think it still counts," followed by the shrugging woman emoji, the one with light skin and black hair (Instagram, 2018). In Figure B in this paper, the emoji is not visible because the screenshot included was taken from a desktop computer, which does not display all emojis. Upon checking the Instagram app on my phone, I could see what emoji it was. This post has 99 likes and 3 comments, and was shared on May 5th, 2018.

Participant B chooses to leave her body out of the post completely and make the food the main focus. This is also in a literal sense because it is the only aspect of the photo that is in focus, with the background somewhat blurred. The fact that she does not include her body in the post relates to the article, *"Food Porn" as Postfeminist Play: Digital Femininity and the Female Body on Food Blogs* by Tisha DeJmanee (2016), and the way she describes how female food

bloggers leave their bodies out of photos, and placing the label of “food porn” on photos in place of the body. Participant B makes an effort to reclaim agency over the female body by disrupting the male gaze and prohibiting the objectification of her own body. However, once again the hypersexualization vs. modesty of bodies contradiction arises, begging the question, “Shouldn’t women be permitted to include their bodies in photos without being objectified?”

Participant B’s caption reads with a tone of mild self-deprecation, but an unapologetic one. This choice could be an example of handling the opposition between perfection and imperfection as feminine values. She acknowledges the crossover between social platforms and frames this as a negative element of the post. This suggests a felt pressure to post about an experience immediately after it takes place, or even during. She recognizes her imperfection in revealing such details, connecting to the notion of visibility in the construction of female identity. Participant B is relating to her audience and not hiding supposedly negative features of her experience. However, the need to explain such details suggests that the pressure of perfection still influences the way she presents herself. Following the mild self-deprecation, Participant B raises herself back up by indicating that she is unapologetic for her pointed out imperfection. The shrugging emoji at the end of her caption further makes this point, and might suggest a disregard for the social pressures that frown upon cross-posting over multiple social platforms and not doing so with immediacy.

The visibility of the city of Florence in the background along with Participant B’s caption indicate a performance of status. Operating with the knowledge that Participant B lives in the United States, the fact that she is in a European city buying gelato (and referencing this as a repeated action) nods toward the concept of conspicuous consumption (*What is Conspicuous*

Consumption?, n.d.). Conspicuous consumption ties into the patriarchally based notion of competition as an aspect of femininity. Women are pressured to outdo other women based on the notion of being in control of one's individual success, but this obscures the magnitude of oppressive structures' influence on all aspects of life, thus limiting the access to self-made success. Figure B showcases an appreciation for lived experiences and in this instance an appreciation of material items. If we look back to Figure A, we'll notice a performance of status as well in terms of tourism, and both girls demonstrate their privilege to travel to foreign countries and purchase goods to consume.

The same question of physical consumption from Figure A is brought up again in Figure B. Do the women actually eat the food in their photos? There is no way of knowing, and this question highlights how momentary photos are. They capture a snapshot of life, but do not encompass or represent every element of one's environment. This is important to remember in reflecting on my analysis of Figures A and B. No matter how closely I examine the Instagram posts, I will never experience the lived moment of when the photos were taken. This is one of the reasons why conducting a focus group in addition to the textual analysis, instead of just speculating about the influence of constraints of femininity, is essential. The focus group allows for more insightful details about the process of curating an Instagram post, particularly one regarding food, from multiple perspectives.

I choose these particular photos to analyze because I feel as though they represent the two major types of food posts I have encountered on Instagram. Typically photos I've seen are either of a person posing next to their food, or their food on its own placed in an aesthetically intriguing space. The biggest difference I notice between the two photos is the inclusion and exclusion of

the body. I argue that this contrasting detail is representative of the massively contradictory messages that women receive about how they should be exploiting their bodies. A factor that stands out in both of these posts is the theme of tourism. Tourism connects to the idea of conspicuous consumption in that being able to travel indicates privilege and wealth. Many food posts are tied to tourism and travel, and I would guess that this is because people often try culturally specific foods when traveling and often indulge on a vacation, so the food they're eating is out of the ordinary or special to them. Food often plays a part in experiencing a culture, so people tend to want to capture food in photos that they can't bring back home with them.

The disparity in the amount of likes on each photo is interesting to me. In my own experiences on Instagram, I have found that photos I post which I am not physically in tend to get less likes overall, and that lines up with the figures below. This is likely due to the participants' respective followers judging photos based on the constructions of femininity. The amount of followers each woman may also play a role, since Participant A has 1,282 followers and Participant B has 635. Speculating why people like the photos that they do could take ages but it's important to note that the photo with the participant's body in it has gotten more traction.

Now that I have thoroughly examined these photos, I move on to the focus group portion of my project. The members of the focus group were shown these same two photos and asked for their impressions and reactions to them. This was done in order to understand how multiple people view the same artifacts. Instagram is a medium which shares photos with an audience, not just individual people (in the context of posts vs. direct messages, private stories, etc.), so imitating this structure to look at a group of people reacting to the posts helps me better articulate how femininity plays a role in the way we not only produce media, but also consume.

Media consumption and production are intertwined in social media and the platform of Instagram and women often fashion their own posts based on what they see, and furthermore based on what posts are received well publicly. A small focus group then serves as a mock audience for these posts and provides insight about the elements that come forth from other perspectives.

Figure A

Figure A.1

Figure B

Methodology

Following the textual analysis I conducted one hour-long focus group. I sought out participants who identify as female and who have personal Instagram accounts. All participants claimed that they interacted with Instagram regularly (at least once a week) and that they posted on Instagram semi-regularly (at least once a month). The participants were four 18-20 year old women who attend Muhlenberg College, and I will refer to them as Participants A, B, C, and D to preserve anonymity. I developed questions to ask them relating to their understandings of femininity, their Instagram habits, and their impressions of posts. They were asked about both their experiences as producers and consumers of media in order to understand how aspects of each side influence one another, and to give me a well-rounded set of qualitative data to analyze. My reasoning for collecting data through a focus group was because interactions with subjects provide richer material with more nuance than that of an isolated individual. They allow for more complex responses and can reveal trends that hold true for all participants (Malhotra, Jailanee, & Kheng, 2018). Theory itself is not enough to gain insight about thought processes that go into social media posting, and there appears to be a lack of existing research exploring the specific subject of food posts on social media and their implications involving femininity. The focus group provides a further sense of humanity to my work, and supplements the analysis I have already provided with more well-rounded data and a better understanding of the actual people behind their social profiles.

Furthermore, I chose to conduct a focus group because I felt as though its structure mimicked that of the Instagram platform in an interesting way. Instagram is an interactive social network, so I wanted to recreate that atmosphere of people responding to one another in my

research. A focus group allows for participants to have a discussion and build upon the ideas of others.

When conducting online research, it is tempting to only gather data from digital spaces and maintain a disembodied position, similarly to comments on social media posts. However, the presence of the body is a major theme in my research, so interacting with actual bodies in a physical space was a factor I wanted to incorporate. As noted in the article *Feminist Research in Online Spaces*, feminist research ethics primarily revolve around face-to-face interactions with subjects (Morrow, Hawkins & Kern, 2015). Additionally, I have established that online identities are usually curated and don't necessarily reflect the whole truth of a person. Therefore, in speaking to the women personally in the same physical space, I was able to see the way they conduct themselves and to understand the disparities between that and their online personas. Furthermore, they shared their own experiences online voluntarily, so the data I gathered was ethical. In media research, the level of accessibility researchers may have to personal content online can sometimes blur the lines of ethics and does not necessarily require subjects of analysis to give consent (Morrow, Hawkins & Kern, 2015). In combining my personal analysis with my focus group, I intended to create more of an ethical dialogue about my topic of study rather than extracting data from social media itself and performing a one-sided analysis. It should be noted that I asked for written consent from the Instagram users whose posts I studied in my textual analysis so that they would not feel exploited. I wanted the focus group session to be as informal as possible to maintain the comfort level of my participants and to evoke genuine responses sharing their true opinions. Instagram is a subjective and social medium, therefore a qualitative

analysis involving the collaboration of different points of view allows for the most nuance and prevents my personal biases from dominating this paper.

Results

There were multiple themes that emerged from my discussion with the participants. My first question asked the women about their idea of femininity, and what general characteristics might classify a photo or social media post as feminine. The first theme that emerged from this question was performed effortlessness and natural beauty. The following exchange exemplifies their thoughts:

Participant A: “There's so much attention around like a woman's natural beauty,”

Participant D: “But it’s not really natural -”

Participant A: “But it's like the complete opposite, that's the irony about it, like it’s probably the most not-natural thing that happens.”

The participants noted the expectation of women to look put-together. Participant A used the phrase “effortlessly planned” to describe this phenomenon.

I then shifted the conversation to talk about Instagram posts of food, and the women were in agreement that in general they would not post pictures of food on their Instagram profiles. Participant D in particular felt that personal Instagram accounts adhere to certain aesthetics, and to post a picture of food on an account that has a primarily personal focus would appear inconsistent and out of place. She said, “Because you get like the aesthetic of your Instagram, like if it’s all certain types of pictures and you’re just gonna throw a picture of food in, and the next day you’re a fitness page, it doesn’t make sense.” However, the participants were

unanimous in their feeling that food posts are more acceptable if they are only temporary, such as on a Snapchat story or Instagram story. The women spoke further comparing the platforms in terms of expectations and the level stakes they felt in posting on each. They all seemed to feel as though posts on Instagram had higher stakes and could be interpreted as reflections of the person posting. Stories on both platforms were recognized as being more effective for posting in the moment and requiring less calculation due to the fact that they are temporary. The participants were adamant about the fact that food posts would get less likes than posts that include their own bodies in them.

Throughout the entire conversation, the participants displayed a level of understanding of the constraints and double standards that influence their activity on social media. The comments they made about disparities in likes due to body visibility were just one of the ways they illustrated this understanding. Phrases like “social construct”, “paradox”, “male gaze”, “standard”, and “image control” were used by the participants. There were several points where the women expressed their frustration about societal expectations.

There was another theme of authenticity that arose in the participants’ responses. They appeared to privilege honesty and candidness in the way people represent themselves on their Instagram profiles. The women praised transparency on Instagram, specifically citing some celebrities. Participant A mentioned a model named Iskra and described her honesty online. “She did a video about like, this is how you pose to make your ass look big, like this is how you pose to do this, this is what celebrities do - literally what she was doing in a video that she posted. I was like, thank you for exposing everybody!” The participants pointed out that every post on

Instagram is calculated, so what users choose to share or withhold is intentional in contributing to their image.

Public versus private representations of oneself were emphasized by the participants. The topic of “finstas” came up, which are fake Instagram accounts that people make to privately to share less serious posts with a smaller circle of friends than they would on their primary accounts. Participant C explained why she has a finsta. “I wanted to be able to like post like the stupid stuff that I can’t post on my real Instagram.” The women pointed out that because finstas still involve curating posts for a specific audience, they still may not be entirely authentic. A regular Instagram persona may be different from a finsta persona, which may still be different from what a person is like in reality. They brought up a newer feature of Instagram and Snapchat that allows them to do a similar thing, which is sharing private stories, which can only be seen by a select group of people rather than all of a person’s followers.

In the focus group, I showed the participants the same photos that I analyzed previously and asked for their impressions of the two posts. One aspect that was brought up was body image and how that plays a part in posting pictures of food. Participant D noted that people may hesitate posting pictures of food or of themselves eating in fear of being fat-shamed. She noted that the woman in Figure A was thinly built and fit traditional standards of beauty, so although she was eating and drinking, people would not comment on her weight. She also concluded that environment has a lot to do with photos of food. Whether or not something looks candid or posed, if it’s in an everyday setting or maybe a fancy restaurant, and if the food is untouched or if the person has started eating already are all factors that the women claimed go into deciding whether or not to post.

The discussion was a full hour long so there is more material than this, yet these were the most relevant and recurring points. I let the conversation flow freely and merely used my questions to guide our discussion, so there were moments where we strayed away from the focus on the intersection of food, social media, and femininity. Less time ended up being spent talking about food than was spent on the subjects of femininity and social media. Now I will compare the content of the focus group discussion with my own impressions and the existing scholarship on the subject. My analysis of the main points of discussion illustrate the way my prior research intersects with the opinions and perspectives of real people.

Discussion

The attitudes of the participants are useful in understanding the different perspectives on matters of femininity, food, and Instagram when compared to my own impressions and that of other scholars. Analyzing the content of the focus group discussion allows for a more nuanced concept of femininity to emerge. The idea of effortlessness in terms of femininity appears to continue to be a huge factor in formulating one's online identity. The girls' thoughts about natural beauty indicated that they have an awareness of the performativity of social media, yet they still feel pressure to present themselves in a certain way online. "Naturalness" is perceived as an aesthetic that a person can perform rather than an inherent quality. The paradox of performed effortlessness that Participant A noted supports Angela McRobbie's claims about the pressure for perfection (2015). The idea of women wanting to "have it all" (or at least to appear so) connects to the participants' initial ideas about femininity, which emphasized the importance of looking "put together". The women's opinions on posed vs. candid photos favored candid

photos, due to their more realistic and less calculated appearance. They praised women who were less posed in their photos due to their level of authenticity. They expressed a desire for authenticity on social media, exemplified by Participant A's comment about the "how to pose" video. The participants valued transparency, relating to the idea of relatability in Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska's research (2017). The female digital entrepreneurs in their study felt compelled to maintain relationships with followers and to remain visible to audiences to develop trust. These notions make users appear more authentic. Though because it is all calculated, as the participants of the focus group pointed out, authenticity could still be just a performance or an aesthetic.

I noticed contradictions in the participants' views when it came to their status as producers versus as consumers of media content. The women reflected on their posting preferences and decision-making process in terms of audience perception. The high stakes the participants acknowledged when posting on Instagram versus Snapchat or Instagram stories expressed their alignment of social media with identity. As producers of media, the women felt pressure to conform to societal expectations. However, there was a sense of judgment when as consumers of media, they spoke about other women caring about likes and their desire for validation. Participant C described her friend's anxieties about online perception. "She gets very, like stressed out when she posts on Instagram because she wants to hit like a certain amount of likes." The women spoke extensively about certain Instagram accounts, whose target audiences are primarily college-age men, that post pictures of attractive women in an exploitative manner, such as @imshmacked, @barstoolsports, and @totalfratmove. The participants described how women are direct-messaged from the accounts offering them a chance to be featured if they pay a

certain amount of money, and the comments sections of these posts are often filled with body-shamers and misogynists. The women seemed to pity those who accept the offer:

“Participant B: But that’s just like such a sad way for like validation.

Participant A: They all need to go to like therapy. These girls need to go to therapy, I’m sorry.”

Women who care too much about their perception on Instagram were viewed as lacking self-respect and desperate.

This contradiction in opinions reflect the double standards that exist for women in society, and exemplify how women can passively reinforce them. Women are expected to have some concern for their social media persona, but having too much is frowned upon. Balancing between the two ends is a way of maintaining the mask of perfection. Being recognized on social media is acceptable when it appears effortless. The contrast between producer and consumer on Instagram partly has to do with the platform’s features of liking and commenting which reinforce societal expectations by assigning a numeric value to validation. The affordances of different social media platforms are what affect the stakes users feel when posting. Stakes are higher when likes and comments are visible rather than a story post on Instagram or Snapchat when people simply view them without publicly endorsing them. The participants claimed that stories are more useful for posting in the moment, so it is understandable that they would prefer this format for posts of food. Food is meant to be eaten, so it disappears the same way a temporary story is gone after 24 hours. This opinion echoes that of the participants in *Smartphones and Social Dining*, who indicated that the ephemeral nature of stories makes them more truthful than full Instagram posts which are carefully curated (Malhotra, Jailanee, & Kheng, 2018).

The participants' points about authenticity in terms of finsta and performativity lined up with my thoughts about curating an identity on social media. There is no way to be fully authentic and to present one's actual self, because Instagram is a platform of self-representation. No one has an objective view of their own self, so it is understandable that people present idealized version of themselves online. This notion is supported by Sofia P. Caldeira and Sander De Ridder as they point out Instagram's editing features, which suggest that the platform is meant for sharing curated and retouched images (2017). The participants were critical of the extent people go to in their idealization of themselves online. How different from their personalities are women's Instagram identities and how much effort goes into the curation of this? If it's too much, the women are considered to have low self-worth, and if it's not enough, the women can be viewed as unpopular or socially ignorant. This is yet another contradiction of femininity that exists in the way women view another, perpetuating the systems of oppression that have kept the contradictions in place for so long.

The women brought up the issue of body image regarding the posts I shared with them, which is a factor I had not thought about upon my initial analysis of the photos. It is obvious that one post includes the person's body and the other does not, and this difference reflects the common contradiction of body exposure in terms of femininity. Yet the participants took this a step further and considered whether or not the inclusion/exclusion of the body could be related to how comfortable the users are with their bodies. Body image as a consideration in posting intersects femininity, food, and social media even further. The participants noted that someone less comfortable with their body may not post a picture of themselves eating in fear of being fat shamed or ridiculed. If a photo with a body in it tends to get more likes than one without, yet the

fear of body shaming prevents some women from posting a picture of themselves eating, then traditional standards of beauty (which favor women who are slim) continue to be upheld. In addition, the act of consuming food can be interpreted as “unladylike”. These constraints reflect the limitations of the construction of femininity once again.

The most striking element of the focus group was the way the participants interacted with the platform of Instagram in a critical way. There were numerous instances when the women pointed out a societal construct or constraint that limited their freedom on social media. The patriarchal expectations imposed upon them have not gone unnoticed. This leads me to believe that most women understand that they often feed into societal expectations, though they likely do not want to. This is because of structural oppression and the design of Instagram’s structure to mimic everyday life, and to serve as a tool to make comparisons to other people. Especially in terms of likes and followers, Instagram’s platform has built in ways of equating one’s status to a number, almost serving as a rating of validity of a person. I would theorize that women continue to play into and subsequently reinforce the constraints of femininity because they are so contradictory and muddled. It is difficult to break away from society’s expectations when they are so ingrained in structure. The oppressive aspects of femininity are perpetuated through Instagram’s framework, making it nearly impossible to escape the limitations imposed upon women.

Conclusion

The conclusions I’ve drawn from compiling my research are as follows. Femininity is an ambiguous term and remains challenging to define even after considering a substantial amount of

scholarly research about the subject. I speculate the reason it is so hard to pin down is because the assignment of gender is a social construction, so there are not physical characteristics or biological tendencies that can lead to a fully formed conclusion of what femininity is. Another reason for the challenges in defining femininity is how impermanent labels of identity can be. Our social landscape is constantly changing, and as people continue to assign new labels to characteristics, older concepts of identity eventually become outdated. Femininity has outlasted societal changes because of how unclear it is. People are able to mold the meaning to fit contemporary circumstances and decide for themselves what makes something feminine or masculine.

That's not to say that researchers shouldn't still examine femininity as a topic, though. It is important to investigate the structural oppression that has and continues to inform the development of the construction of femininity. Ambiguity leads to possibility, but also holds the potential for manipulation. If femininity can be defined in any way we want to, then oppressors can hide their dominance behind a mask of freedom of choice. The bottom line is that structures of oppression permeate all aspects of society, so shedding light on spaces where they hold implicit influence is the first step in beginning to undo those systems and work toward equality. Also recognizing the marginalization groups have experienced is necessary in breaking down power structures. Blindly saying genders are equal or races, classes, etc. disregards the extra labor that has gone into achieving equality, and it does nothing to break down systems of oppression that will continue to cycle.

Synthesizing the focus group data has led me to conclude that people in general are aware of the constricting ideals of femininity and how they are incorporated in social media. The issue

is not knowing how to dismantle larger systems of oppression which have been reinforced for centuries. A couple of the participants in the focus group mentioned that every once in a while they try to take a break from social media when they feel as though it is causing them more stress and negativity than they would like. Taking a step out of the fabricated digital world allows for some perspective on unrealistic expectations that social media might influence one to have. However, this is not to be taken as a suggestion that oppressive structures of unrealistic standards only exist digitally. They infiltrate all aspects of social interaction, thus taking a social media break alleviates “symptoms” but doesn’t provide a solution. We need to continue to study smaller spheres of society in order to see the bigger picture and to take steps in tackling oppressive structures. The role of social media users as simultaneous producers and consumers complicates the way people understand societal expectations. The contradicting opinions that emerged in the focus group stem from having the two roles, and these contradictions mask the perpetuation of oppressive structures.

The participants continue to perpetuate traditional notions of femininity, perhaps inadvertently, despite their apparent knowledge of their own oppression, echoing the numerous contradictions within my working definition of femininity. The ambiguity within the concept of femininity overall is mirrored in the participants’ social media activity and personal beliefs. Their actions as producers of media and judgments as consumers of media are in tension with one another, reflecting society’s tension-filled expectations of women. Understanding that many women have some level of awareness of oppression existing on social media is essential to proceed in dismantling those structures. Further research about the disconnect between the

perpetuation of societal standards of women and their knowledge of such standards is necessary to incite action and make progress.

Limitations of my study include sample size, reliability, and demographic of subjects. My sample is not representative of a larger population and was not selected randomly. My textual analysis might have been influenced by the fact that I know the subjects, so I wonder if I would uncover the same details in the posts of strangers. The race, class, and education level of the subjects is the same, so I would be interested to know if the same conclusions could be drawn from a more diverse sample. Another limitation is the use of qualitative methods versus empirical research. I may have been able to make different claims about my topic had I employed the use of numerical data. Regardless, the information I did discover is useful in understanding the influence of patriarchal structures in formulating one's sense of identity.

Social media reflects structures in society as a whole and does not exist separately from systems of oppression. Identity construction is a huge component of social networking sites, so having a better understanding of identity creation is essential to interacting critically with the media we produce and consume. People develop online personas that align with popular values, therefore as those values change so do people's self-representation. Online communities bring people together and conversely reinforce power structures that exist in the outside world.

Finally, food will never be separate from issues of identity because it is a cultural artifact and acts as a signal of social status. Posts of pictures of food on social media signify that people care enough about food to share as a component of what makes them, them. Social media only provides a limited glimpse at people's personalities, so despite the seemingly frivolous attitude that surrounds social networks, these posts can be quite revealing about someone's personhood.

My research is significant because having a better understanding of identity creation is essential to interacting critically with the media we produce and consume, and identity will always be intertwined with cultural artifacts such as food. Femininity, food, and social media are interrelated concepts that culminate in women's posts of food on Instagram. Through these posts, the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in some capacity is inevitable due to Instagram's framework and the platform's position as a microcosm of society as a whole. Though some users make an active effort to subvert traditional notions of femininity, even those posts contain elements reinforcing patriarchal standards, simply because of the platform's affordances and structure.

References

- Beardsworth, A., Bryman, A., Keil, T., Goode, J., Haslam, C., & Lancashire, E. (2002). Women, men and food: the significance of gender for nutritional attitudes and choices. *British Food Journal*, 104(7), 470–491. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00070700210418767>
- Bouvier, E. (2018). Breaking Bread Online: Social Media, Photography, and the Virtual Experience of Food. *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries*, 97, 157–172.
- Caldeira, S. P., & De Ridder, S. (2017). Representing diverse femininities on Instagram: A case study of the body-positive @effyourbeautystandards Instagram account. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 321–337. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.9.2.321_1
- Charlebois, J. (2010). Media Representations of Femininities in *Gender and the Construction of Hegemonic and Oppositional Femininities*. Lanham, MD, UNITED STATES: Lexington Books. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/muhlenberg/detail.action?docID=653890>
- Conspicuous Consumption - What is Conspicuous Consumption? (n.d.). Retrieved December 12, 2018, from <http://www.conspicuousconsumption.org/>
- Cwynar-Horta, J. (2016). The Commodification of the Body Positive Movement on Instagram. *Stream: Inspiring Critical Thought*, 8(2), 36-56. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/stream/index.php/stream/article/view/203>

Dejmanee, T. (2016). "Food Porn" as Postfeminist Play: Digital Femininity and the Female Body on Food Blogs. *Television & New Media*, 17(5), 429–448.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415615944>

Duffy, B. E., & Pruchniewska, U. (2017). Gender and self-enterprise in the social media age: a digital double bind. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 843–859.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291703>

@elianaroseen. (2017, June 11). These are a few of my favorite things... [Instagram post].

Retrieved from

https://www.instagram.com/p/BVN2vORgaPT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Edwards, E. B., & Esposito, J. (2018). Reading the Black Woman's Body Via Instagram Fame.

Communication, Culture and Critique, 11(3), 341–358.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcy011>

Ginsberg, K. (2015). Instabranding: Shaping the Personalities of the Top Food Brands on

Instagram. *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 6(1). Retrieved from

<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1131/instabranding-shaping-the-personalities-of-the-top-food-brands-on-instagram>

Haferkamp, N., Eimler, S. C., Papadakis, A.-M., & Kruck, J. V. (2012). Men Are from Mars,

Women Are from Venus? Examining Gender Differences in Self-Presentation on Social Networking Sites. *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, 15(2), 91–98.

<https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0151>

- Inness, S. A. (2001). Paradise Pudding, Peach Fluff, and Prune Perfection. In *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*. Iowa, UNITED STATES: University of Iowa Press. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/muhlenberg/detail.action?docID=837030>
- Inness, S. A. (2001). Introduction:: Thinking Food/Thinking Gender. In *Kitchen Culture in America*(pp. 1–12). University of Pennsylvania Press. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16xwbbc.3>
- Introducing Instagram Stories. (2016, August 2). Retrieved December 12, 2018, from <https://instagram-press.com/blog/2016/08/02/introducing-instagram-stories/>
- @jennalauren2697. (2018, May 5). I might have posted this photo... [Instagram post]. Retrieved from URL https://www.instagram.com/p/BiZ4R9uDGx5/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
- Krishna, R. (2017). Someone Suggested Calling Pretty People Snacks And It's So Cute, You Have To Do It. (n.d.). Retrieved November 27, 2018, from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/krishrach/qt-fucking-guacamole-and-tortilla-chips>
- Kudrowitz, B. (n.d.). Dishes Worthy of Instagram, but Not Your Appetite - NYTimes.com, 5.
- Looft, R. (2017). #girlgaze: photography, fourth wave feminism, and social media advocacy. *Continuum*, 31(6), 892–902. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2017.1370539>
- Malhotra, P., Jailanee, F., & Kheng, R. (2018, May). Smartphones and Social Dining. Paper presented at the 68th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Prague, Czech Republic.

McRobbie, A. (2011). Beyond post-feminism. *Public Policy Research*, 18(3), 179–184.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-540X.2011.00661.x>

McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times.

Australian Feminist Studies, 30(83), 3–20.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485>

Mia Jones, J. N., & Costello, J. (2017). Eating Ourselves into Identity? An Investigation into the Relationship between Dining-Out Experiences and Identity Production on Instagram amongst Female Young Professionals. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5 (2), 156-175

Morrow, O., Hawkins, R., & Kern, L. (2015). Feminist research in online spaces. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 22(4), 526–543. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.879108>

null, L. edited. (n.d.). german girl in traditional costume with pretzel and beer on... Retrieved

March 2, 2019, from

<https://www.istockphoto.com/ie/photo/german-girl-with-beer-and-pretzel-gm852319234-140042949>

Rousseau, S. (2012). Food for Sharing in *Food and Social Media: You Are What You Tweet*.

California, UNITED STATES: AltaMira Press. Retrieved from

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/muhlenberg/detail.action?docID=950441>

Rousseau, S. (2012). Twitter Feeding in *Food and Social Media: You Are What You Tweet*.

California, UNITED STATES: AltaMira Press. Retrieved from

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/muhlenberg/detail.action?docID=950441>

Salisbury, M., & Pooley, J. (2017). The #nofilter Self: The Contest for Authenticity among Social Networking Sites, 2002–2016. *Social Sciences*, 6(1), 10.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6010010>

Wagner, C., & Aiello, L. M. (n.d.). Men eat on Mars, Women on Venus? An Empirical Study of Food-Images, 5.