



Adolescents' presentation of food in social media: An explorative study



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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore how adolescents communicate food images in a widely used social media image-sharing application. We examined how and in what context food was presented and the type of food items that were frequently portrayed by following a youth related hashtag on Instagram. The hashtag #14år ("14 years") was used to find adolescent users on Instagram: these users public photo streams were then searched for food items they had shared with others. Food items were identified and categorized based on type of food and how the food items were presented. Most of the adolescent users (85%) shared images containing food items. A majority of the images (67.7%) depicted foods high in calories but low in nutrients. Almost half of these images were arranged as a still life with food brand names clearly exposed. Many of these images were influenced by major food marketing campaigns. Fruits and vegetables occurred in 21.8% of all images. This food group was frequently portrayed zoomed in with focus solely on the food, with a hashtag or caption expressing palatability. These images were often presented in the style of a cook book. Food was thus presented in varied ways. Adolescents themselves produced images copying food advertisements. This has clear health promotion implications since it becomes more challenging to monitor and tackle young people's exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods in these popular online networks because images are part of a lifestyle that the young people want to promote. Shared images contain personal recommendations, which mean that they may have a more powerful effect than commercial advertising.

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1. Introduction

Food practices reflect social and cultural values (Neely, Walton, & Stephens, 2014; Roper & La Niece, 2009), and as food plays an essential role in everyday life, there is much scope to consider the social aspects of young people's food practices as important elements of their wellbeing and health (Neely et al., 2014). In order to gain a better understanding of what food means to adolescents it is necessary to study their communication regarding food, particularly what food-related messages they choose to present to one another. Adolescents today communicate to a large extent via social media applications and services (McBride, 2011), and the Internet has become a growing part of children's foodscape (Brembeck & Johansson, 2010). These newly emerged channels give us a

unique possibility to observe adolescents' dietary communication. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation, Boyd (2014) argues that what adolescents convey to others in social media is a matter of what they choose to share in order to make a good impression and also what they unintentionally communicate as a result of the medium and the interaction.

Experimental studies have demonstrated that peers in a social media setting can influence children and adolescents to adjust their candy intake (Bevelander, Anschutz, Creemers, Kleinjan, & Engels, 2013) and choose unfamiliar foods (Bevelander, Anschutz, & Engels, 2012). Research in neuroscience also indicates that images of food can affect appetite-related brain activity (Beaver et al., 2006; Killgore & Yurgelun-Todd, 2006; Schienle, Schäfer, Hermann, & Vaitl, 2009).

With the increase in the possibilities for image based communication, Swedish adolescents have moved away from text based communication (Findahl, 2014). It has been reported that most Swedish adolescents (91%) aged between 13 and 16 years use social

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media and that Instagram, a mobile-based image based application, was the most used service, utilized by 75% (85% girls and 64% boys) of young Swedish people (Swedish Media Council, 2015). A similar smartphone-facilitated social media trend has been noted in the US, where 52% of teens aged 13–17 years old are reported to use Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2015). As of December 2014, only four years after its launch, Instagram had around 300 million monthly active users worldwide (Instagram, 2014b).

When it comes to analyzing food related content in social media specifically (as opposed to online media in general, such as websites), there has been limited research. Some researchers have investigated how food is expressed and communicated in online communities and blogs (e.g. Lynch, 2010; Simunaniemi, Sandberg, Andersson, & Nydahl, 2011), while others have nutritionally analyzed recipes on popular food blogs (Schneider, McGovern, Lynch, & Brown, 2013). When analyzing images shared on Instagram, researchers observed that a substantial proportion of these were of food items (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). Previous research has used Instagram tags (Sharma & Choudhury, 2015) or likes (Mejova, Haddadi, Noulas, & Weber, 2015) to study food communication on shared images on Instagram, but to our knowledge there are no studies that have analyzed how food is presented visually.

The present study aims to explore how adolescents portray food in a widely used image-sharing application. We examine how and in what context food was presented, how the uploader describe the images, and the type of food items that were frequently portrayed by following a youth related hashtag on Instagram.

2. Material and methods

A content analytic approach to the analysis of Instagram images was employed. Krippendorff (2004) contends that content analysis is a research technique for the systematic study of communication. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005), argue that content analysis is a replicable method for analyzing both visual and written content. This approach is suitable because Instagram images are multimodal productions containing both visual and written content. We considered both the images and written descriptions provided by the uploaders. In the present study, almost all (94.6%) of the images contained hashtags or captions. See Fig. 2 for fabricated examples that typify the Instagram images. Content analysis is regarded as an unobtrusive method, because materials are examined after they are produced (Krippendorff, 2004). By using already available data we avoided the risk that our data collection method intruded in the research context. Although content analysis, by itself, does not establish how viewers apprehend or value what they see, it indicates what is given importance or salience (Leeuwen & Carey, 2001). Content analysis thus offers a quantified dimensional description of fields of representation.

Data derived from social media and the Internet is considered to be in the public realm if it is not password protected or when a subscription is not required to access the content (Hookway, 2008). The Association of Internet researchers (AoIR) (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), recommends that when conducting research into online social network services, researchers should investigate how content privacy is defined in the terms of service (TOS) agreement. Instagram (2014a) state in their privacy policy that information or content that the users voluntarily disclose for posting to the service becomes available to the public and that user content may be used and altered by others. In other words, uploaders provide a copyright release by using the public section of the service, there is no expectation of privacy. However, despite this adolescents can be viewed as a vulnerable group in society and adolescents may not be fully aware of the consequences of sharing

personal information publically online. Personal information transmitted online can quickly be shared with a wider audience than was anticipated by the uploader. Which can have unforeseen and long-term consequences (Fritz, 2014). Thus, following recommendations by Moreno, Goniou, Moreno, and Diekema (2013), we do not present unique combinations of images that were linked to one individual. Instead, in the following presentation, fabricated examples using the first author's Instagram account were created to illustrate the results, see Fig. 2. The study protocol was evaluated by the regional ethical review board in Gothenburg (DNR: 468-14).

2.1. Instagram

Instagram is a free mobile application which permits users to upload images and videos, edit the media by adding different filters and share the images within the user's social network and via a metadata hashtag which functions as a label and as searchable keyword (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013), enabling other users to find the material. The user can also assign a caption to the image. Similar to other online social networks, such as Facebook, users of Instagram are able to comment and 'like' each other's images. Instagram account holders must be at least 13 years of age (Instagram, 2014c).

2.2. Sample

We utilized a user generated age-related hashtag in Instagram to identify adolescents' photo streams for analysis. Following a hashtag label allowed us to explore adolescent communication patterns without interfering with the production of the images. The hashtag #14år (Swedish, Danish and Norwegian for "14 years") was used as the searchable label. We tested several different hashtags to identify adolescent users. Hashtag 14år (#14år) was chosen as it is a good indicator of the age of the user, mostly predicting adolescents who recently turned 14 years.

The third party web-application Statigram was used to track, manage and analyze the images generated via Instagram, as Instagram is primarily a mobile-based service. The selection of accounts was based on identifying images appended with the hashtag. In Statigram the hashtag was found to have been applied to 3479 images as of March 2014. However, as users change their privacy settings from public to private, delete their accounts, or change their user names, 1358 images were not retrievable. As some accounts contained several images appended with this hashtag, 409 images were removed because the uploader had applied the hashtag to multiple images. Thus, 1712 Instagram accounts were available. When these accounts were identified, we excluded 711 accounts since they, based on written and visual profile information, were judged not to belong to an adolescent user. For example, the hashtag could relate to a user's pet turning 14 years or images of couples celebrating 14 years of marriage. Only users who could be identified as adolescents (i.e. including information about their age in their profile) were included in the study. Thus, 1001 Instagram accounts were eligible for analysis (see Fig. 1.).

Each account was searched for images visibly showing food for human consumption. In accounts with such images, the first food image prior to the hashtag was selected for analysis. To avoid an overrepresentation of birthday related images, the selected image had to appear at least two days before the tagged image (#14år). Estimation of Instagram users' gender, and language, was done using textual profile information (bio-information), profile photos, and uploaded images in their stream (e.g. 'selfies').

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