

# #INSTAFOOD – A FIRST INVESTIGATION OF THE “SOCIAL EATER” ON INSTAGRAM

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## ABSTRACT

The user base of social network sites has grown largely within the last years. Due to the increasing utilization of smartphones and the mobile Internet, users are able to share details of their everyday life independent of time and place. Thereby visual communication becomes particularly popular, reflected by the remarkable growth in social networking platforms such as Instagram. It enables users to modify their mobile photos and videos and afterwards share them with a community. Whereas the Instagram content is mostly dominated by portrayals of users themselves or in company with other people, a considerable part of the shared content appears to be “food”-related.

The current study investigates the extent and the underlying motives of the evolving “social eater”-phenomenon on Instagram as a popular social media platform. Due to the fact that impression management is referred to as one of the central motives of participating in social network sites, it is suggested that motives of “food”-sharing on Instagram are of a self-presentational nature as well. A quantitative survey of 1,847 German Instagram users has been conducted in order to examine the extent of the phenomenon and well as the self-presentational motives underlying the activity of “food”-sharing on Instagram. The results show a considerable appearance of “food” as a social subject and the dominance of identity-related motives. Considering these motives, the research develops communication strategies on how companies in the “food”-sector could present themselves and interact with the “social eater” on Instagram in the best possible way.

**KEY WORDS:** instagram, food, social eater, social media marketing, impression management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENON OF THE “SOCIAL EATER”

“Photos and videos have become key social currencies online”. That is what Rainie, Brenner and Purcell (2012, S. 1) conclude within their study about the formation and distribution of contents within the internet. The user base of social network sites has grown largely within the last years. Due to the increasing utilization of smartphones and the mobile Internet, users are able to share details of their everyday life independent of time and place. Thereby visual communication becomes particularly popular, reflected by the remarkable growth in social network platforms such as Instagram (Tippelt & Kupferschmitt, 2015, S. 443). The Photo-Sharing-App now comprises more than 500 million active users (Instagram, 2016).

Instagram enables users to modify their mobile photos and videos and afterwards share them with a community. Whereas the Instagram content is mostly dominated by portrayals of users themselves or in company with other people, a considerable part of the shared content appears to be “food”-related. According to an analysis (n=50) of Hu,

Manikonda and Kambhampati (2014), 10% of the analyzed Instagram photos show “food” content. Also Coary and Poor (2016, p. 1) speak of an emerging “foodtography mainstream” on Instagram. Nestlé Germany refers to people who share their “food” on Social Media Platforms as “social eaters”, stating that in Germany “almost every second person (46%) has already captured a photo of his “food” and shared it online [...]” (2016, own translation). In consideration of the above-explained findings, the current study is conducted in order to investigate the phenomenon of the growing group of “social eaters” more deeply. Due to the fact that impression management is referred to as one of the central motives of participating in social network sites, it is suggested that motives of “food”-sharing on Instagram are of a self-presentational nature as well. A quantitative survey of German Instagram “food”-poster has been conducted in order to examine the extent of the phenomenon and the self-presentational motives underlying the activity of “food”-sharing on Instagram.

During the course of this paper, the reader will be introduced to the social network site Instagram in chapter 1. In the first step, the evolution of the mobile photo

application as well as its main functions will be described, which is followed by facts and numbers about the user community. Subsequently the theoretical approach of the three motives of impression management identified by Leary and Kowalski (1990) will be elaborated in chapter 2, based on Goffman's (1959) Impression Management Theory and the Theory of Symbolic Self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Chapter 3 presents the research question as well as the methodological approach and sample characteristics of the present study. Chapter 4 is dedicated to portray and discuss the first results of the research with regard to the research question. Based on the specific functions of Instagram introduced in chapter 2 and the theoretical framework elaborated in chapter 3, the last chapter illustrates chances and recommendations that result from the phenomenon for companies of the “food”-sector.

## 2. INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a mobile application, which enables its users to share photos and videos with their Instagram community, as well as other social network platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. The photo sharing application was launched in October 2010 and initially only available within Apples store for iPhones. In April 2012, it became available for the Android operating system and within the same year, Facebook acquired it for \$ 737 million (Heise online, 2012; Instagram, 2016; Pettauer, 2015).

Photos and videos can either be captured directly within the application or retrieved from the data storage of the corresponding mobile devices. As opposed to other social network sites, Instagram users are able to modify their content with the help of image editing and filter functions, before sharing it online. Furthermore, users can add a location information to their posts as well as a picture caption, which frequently includes so-called “hashtags”. Hashtags initially became popular as a key function of the social network platform Twitter and can be defined as key words, sentences or abbreviations that are prefixed with a hash (#), e.g. #instafood. With the help of hashtags, users cannot only highlight certain information within their posts, but also retrieve an overview of all posts within the Instagram community that contain the same hashtag and therefore are likely to be related to a similar topic (Herwig et al., 2009, p. 5; Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati, 2014, p. 1-2; Landsverk, 2014, p. 316).

Instagram users can follow other users in order to see the contents they share and are therefore referred to as “followers”. The Instagram network functions in an asymmetric way. As Hu, Manikonda and Kmbhampati (2014, p. 2) explain: “[...] if a user A follows B, B need not follow A back”. Users either create a public profile, which can be accessed and followed by any Instagramer or a private profile, where permission to follow is given on request to another user. Users can see the contents shared by the accounts they follow listed within the “newsfeed”, the core site of Instagram. They have the possibility to

react on a photo or video by marking it with a “like” or using the comments function to place a comment below the picture (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati, 2014, p. 2; Pettauer, 2015). Furthermore, Instagram is one of the most popular social networks for so-called “Influencer”. Influencer are characterized by a huge amount of follower and therefore impact a wide range of Instagrammer with their content. Although their impact is comparable to that of a celebrity, they are frequently perceived as more authentic, due to their independence and expertise within a certain area (Nguyen, 2016; tobesocial, 2016).

The Instagram community recorded a rapid growth since 2010 and has been more than doubled within the past two years. Over 500 million monthly active users are currently taking 95 million posts and 4.2 billion likes per day (Instagram, 2016). The social network sites do not publish country-specific user data. According to Instagram Manager Levine at the *Digital Life Design Internetkonferenz 2016*, 9 million users are located in Germany (Beer, 2016). Studies show that over two thirds of German Instagram users are in the age between 14 and 29. With respect to this age group, Instagram is the most frequently used social network site after Facebook (Tippelt & Kupferschmitt, 2015, p. 444-446).

**Table 1.** Worldwide monthly active users of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter

Social network site	Monthly active users (mio.)
Facebook	1,719 (June 2016)
Instagram	500 + (September 2016)
Twitter	313 (September 2016)

Source: Facebook, 2016; Instagram, 2016; Twitter, 2016

## 3. THEORETICAL APPROACH: THE THREE MOTIVES OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Researchers agree on the fact that the motives underlying participation in social network sites are mainly of self-presentational nature. The term self-presentation originally refers to Goffman's (1959) Impression Management Theory, which states that individuals targetedly control their interaction with the environment, in order to create a desired impression on an audience. Especially social network sites like Instagram enable a high level of control by offering various profile and interaction functions. While Goffman's audience-centred approach focuses on interpersonal processes, it is also known that – in consciously creating impressions in the form of e.g. a detailed profile of oneself within a social network site – there is a self-reflexive process involved as well. This suggests to consider the Theory of Symbolic Self-Completion by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981). According to them, individuals set themselves certain “identity goals” and express self-definitional symbols in order to realize

them. Thereby it is required that these self-definitional symbols are recognized by the environment in order to be realized. Instagram and similar network sites facilitate this process, because they enable participants to monitor the recognition by the audience providing their content with a “like” or a positive comment.

Consequently, there is an audience-centered approach of managing impression on the one hand and the individual-centered approach of managing identity on the other hand, which can be related to taking actions on social network sites. Because of the self-reflexive process going along with self-presentation, more recent literature on impression management suggests that the traditional impression management approach should also include the above-explained individual-centered approach (Rüdiger & Schütz, 2016, p. 7). This leads to Leary and Kowalski (1990), who developed a model of impression management that attributes interpersonal *and* intrapersonal motives to the impression management process.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) identify three motives underlying impression management: *Social and material outcomes, self-esteem maintenance* and the *development of identity*. The first motive is considered as interpersonal motive, reflecting the traditional approach of achieving a desired outcome by communicating the right impressions. Additionally, the authors elaborate self-esteem maintenance and the development of identity as further intrapersonal motives of impression management. Individuals can regulate their *self-esteem* in two ways: On the one hand, self-esteem can be strengthened or weakened by the reaction of an audience towards an individual’s self-presentational behavior. Therefore individuals usually are motivated to create a positive impression in order to receive a self-esteem strengthening reaction of their environment. Secondly, self-esteem is also affected by the individual’s own evaluation of the success of its self-presentational behavior. The third motive refers to the process of developing towards identity goals by displaying self-definitional symbols as Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) describe it. Because of the abovementioned self-reflexive process that goes along with building impressions Leary and Kowalski (1990) state: “ [...] people sometimes ‘self-symbolize’, that is, engage in public behaviors that indicate the possession of identity-relevant characteristics” (1990, p. 38).

Furthermore the authors propose that one impression management action can serve two or all three motives at the same time: „For example, self-presentational behaviors that obtain rewards from others are often those that raise self-esteem and establish desired identities as well” (Leary und Kowalski, 1990, p. 38).

#### 4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

With respect to the relevance of investigating the evolving social eater phenomenon on Instagram, the research question underlying this paper will be the following: How

can the presence of “food”-related contents on Instagram be described and explained and which chances and courses of action result from the phenomenon for companies of the “food”-sector?

- 1) How can it be described with regard to its extent?
- 2) Which motives underlie the activity of “food”-sharing on Instagram?
- 3) Which chances result from the phenomenon for companies of the “food”-sector with a view to Instagram presentation and interaction with the consumer?

In order to build an appropriate data basis for answering the research question, a cross-sectional study design was selected. The data collection followed by a standardized survey in collaboration with Appinio – a German market research institute. Appinio enables mobile market research with the help of a mobile application. By querying various attributes of users within its panel, Appinio creates so called “consumer profiles”, so that specific target groups (e.g. with the attribute “Instagram user”) are available for research purposes. After the completion of the mobile survey, the raw data can be downloaded in various formats (Appinio, 2016). A mobile phone survey enables participation independent of time and location and directly goes in line with the trend of smartphone use in daily life. Collecting data about behavior and motives of Instagram users with the help of a smartphone application therefore was considered as most suitable.

Out of a basic population of German Instagram users, 1,847 Appinio users with the attribute “Instagram user” have been surveyed. The gender distribution of the sample showed an almost equal amount of male (48.5%) and female (51.5%) participants. More than half of the sample was in the age groups of 14-17 years (29.2%) and 18-24 years (44.5%). With reference to data from the German Federal Statistical Office, the sample is characterized by geographic and demographic representativeness, except for the age distribution (approximately 74% are 14-24 years old), which can be explained due to the young user base of Instagram.

**Table 2.** Sample overview: Age groups and gender

n = 1,847			
Age group/ gender	total	female	male
<b>total</b>	100%	51.5%	48.5%
<b>14-17</b>	29.2%	15.5%	12.7%
<b>18-24</b>	44.5%	42.0%	20.5%
<b>25-29</b>	14.6%	5.9%	8.8%
<b>30+</b>	11.7%	5.2%	6.5%

Source: Own research

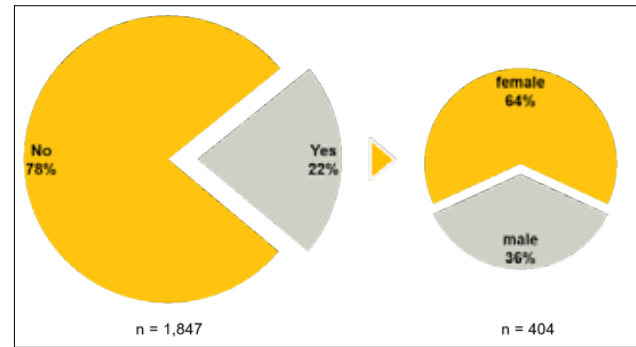
## 5. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following chapter presents the parts of the first findings of the abovementioned study and discusses them with respect to the research question and the theoretical approach outlined in chapter 3. In orientation on the sub questions, chapter 5.1 addresses the extent of the “social eater” phenomenon and the motives of the “social eater”. Chapter 5.2 elaborates chances and courses of action for companies of the “food”-sector with regard to the company’s own presentation and interaction with the “social eater” on Instagram.

### 5.1 The extent of the “social eater” phenomenon and motives of the “social eater”

Of 1,847 participants, 22% spend time on “food”-related content. In comparison to the sample, where males and females were represented equally, a larger group of female “social eaters” (64%) becomes apparent (figure 1).

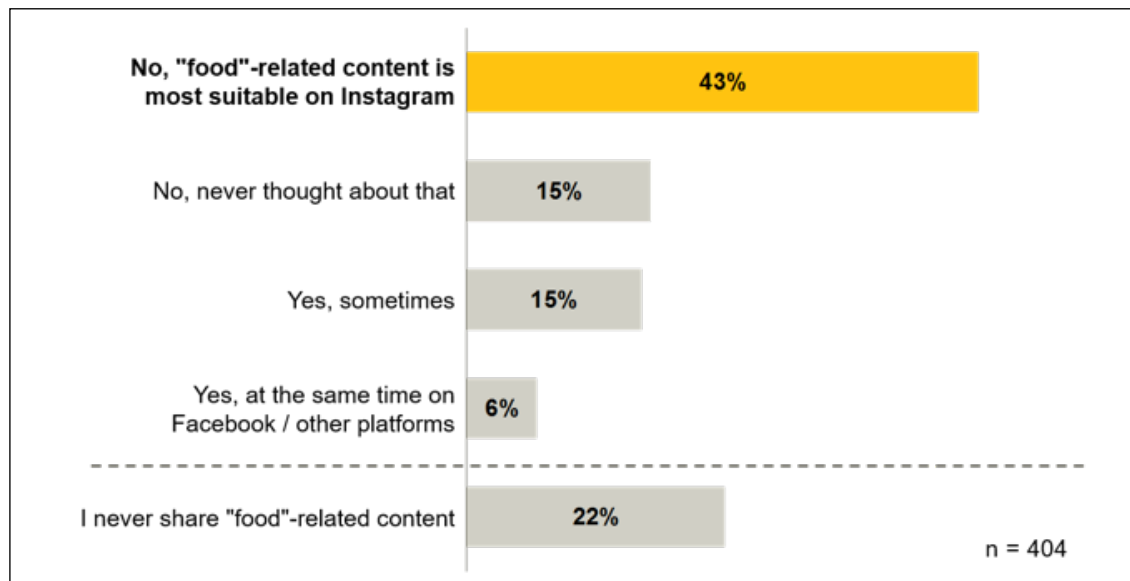
**Figure 1.** Do you spend time on “food”-related postings on Instagram?



Source: Own research

Furthermore, the participants were asked if they share their “food”-content also on Facebook or within other platforms. But although there is the (technical) possibility to simultaneously share contents on other platforms while sharing them on Instagram, participants consider Instagram as the most suitable platform to share “food”-contents (figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Do you share your “food”-contents equally with your Facebook friends or within other platforms?



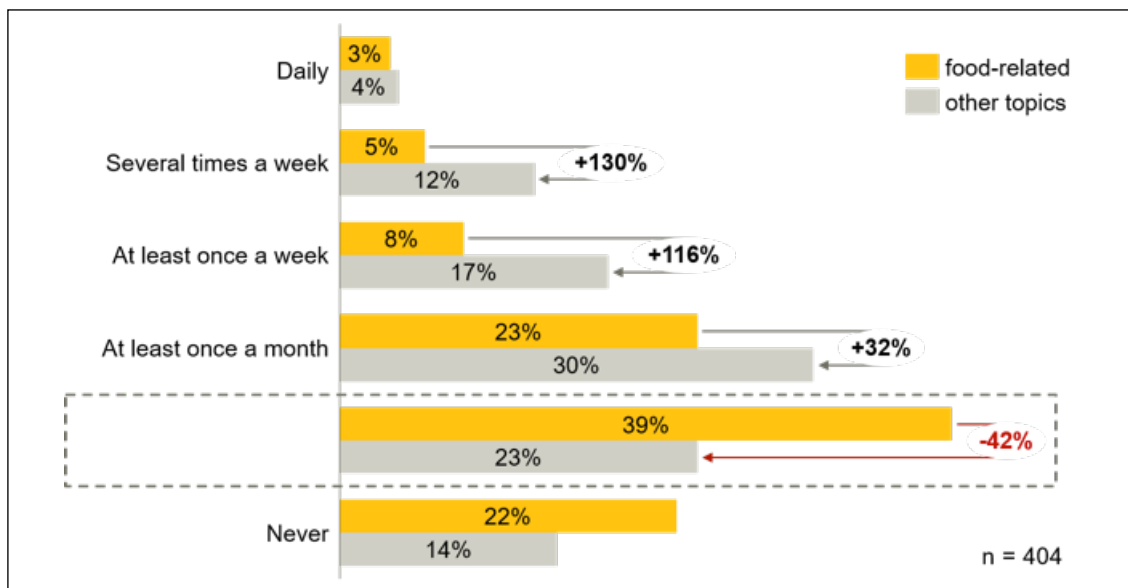
Source: Own research (results rounded)

Even though social eaters mainly use Instagram for sharing “food”-related content, another result regarding the extent of the phenomenon expose something else to consider:

Within the scope of the study, participants were also asked how often they share “food”-related content and how

often they share contents on topics that are not “food”-related. When comparing the frequency of “food”-posts and the frequency of posts on topics that are not “food”-related, it becomes apparent that posts concerning other topics are taken even more frequently (figure 3).

Figure 3. Frequency of “food”-posts in comparison to posts related to other topics

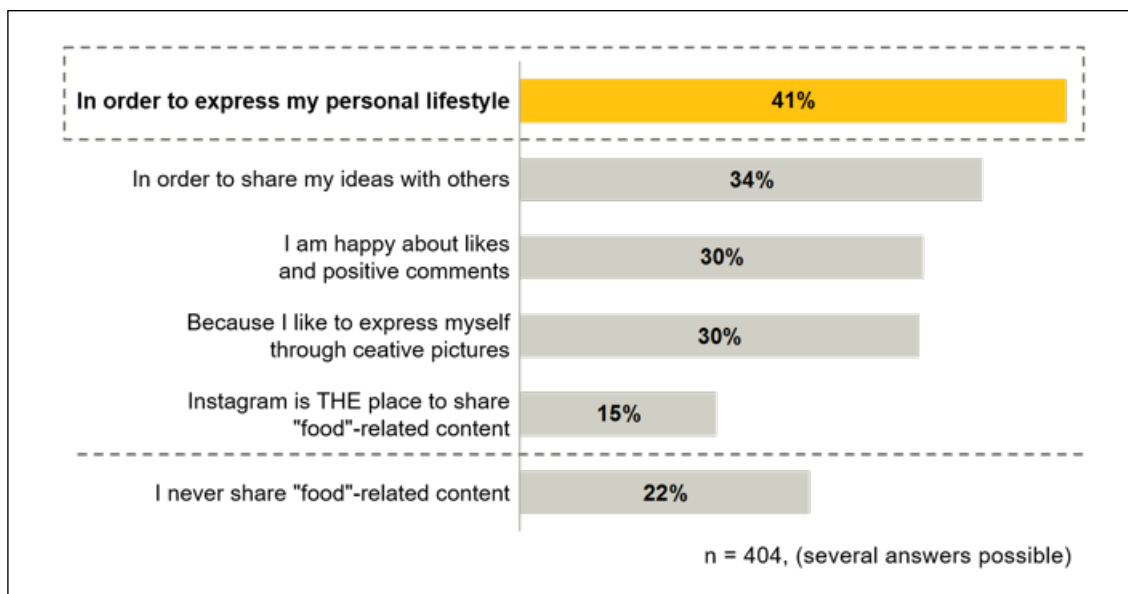


Source: Own research

Participants were also asked for the reason they share “food”-related content on Instagram. The most frequently chosen reasons were to express personal lifestyle and

ideas, indicating that rather individual-centered motives underlie the food-posting activity (figure 4).

Figure 4. Why do you share “food”-related content on Instagram?



Source: Own research

With respect to the findings presented above, the sub-questions (1) and (2) of the research question introduced in chapter 4 can be answered in the following manner: The “social eater” phenomenon clearly becomes apparent on Instagram, which – according to the surveyed Instagramer, seems to be the preferred platform in comparison the other social network sites. With regard to the extent of the phenomenon it can be said that posts related to other topics are even taken more frequently, which leads to question the designation of Instagram as a platform for an evolving “foodtography mainstream” (chapter 1), indicating that there is a hype on “food”-related topics. At the first sight, “food”-posts rather seem to occur as a part of the overall

posting activity of the Instagrammer. The investigation of the motives of “food”-sharing support these results: In sharing their “food”-consumption, the majority of participants is not motivated by a social reward from the side of the Instagram community (Instagram as THE place to share “food”-related content), but rather by the intrapersonal motives if expressing lifestyle and personal ideas. This suggests that further research should be conducted in order to deep dive into what is happening in the offline context with regard to “food” consumption. Recent studies, for example from Nestlé Germany (Nestlé Zukunftsforum, 2015, p. 21-29) note that especially the younger generation is becoming more conscious of their consumption. A growing responsibility

for “food” consumption regarding personal health, but also moral and ethical values is recognized, which leads to “food” consumption becoming more a statement of personal lifestyle. This suggests that “food” is increasingly becoming a part of the identity of a person and could also explain the findings of the present study.

## 5.2 Recommendations for company presentation and interaction with the “social eater”

It is well known that nowadays’ omnipresence of advertisement results in an information overload, which leads to a lack of openness and attention towards advertising on the side of the consumer (Stöckl, 2010, p. 157-160). This also applies to the “food”-industry: With 5,800 businesses (> 20 employees) and 170,000 different products, the “food” sector is the third largest industry in Germany (BVE, 2016). Additionally, the out-of-house market comprises 180,000 businesses (Ingold & Minhoff, 2015). Further results of the present study show that 39% of “food”-interested participants already follow a company of the “food”-sector on Instagram. Only 13.4% stated not to be interested in company contents. Considering these results, Instagram reveals the opportunity for companies to present themselves where openness for company content still exists. Based upon the findings of the present study and the theoretical basis elaborated in chapter 3, the following text will outline the chances and recommendations resulting from the “food”-posting phenomenon for companies of the “food”-sector.

### 5.2.1 Visual communication

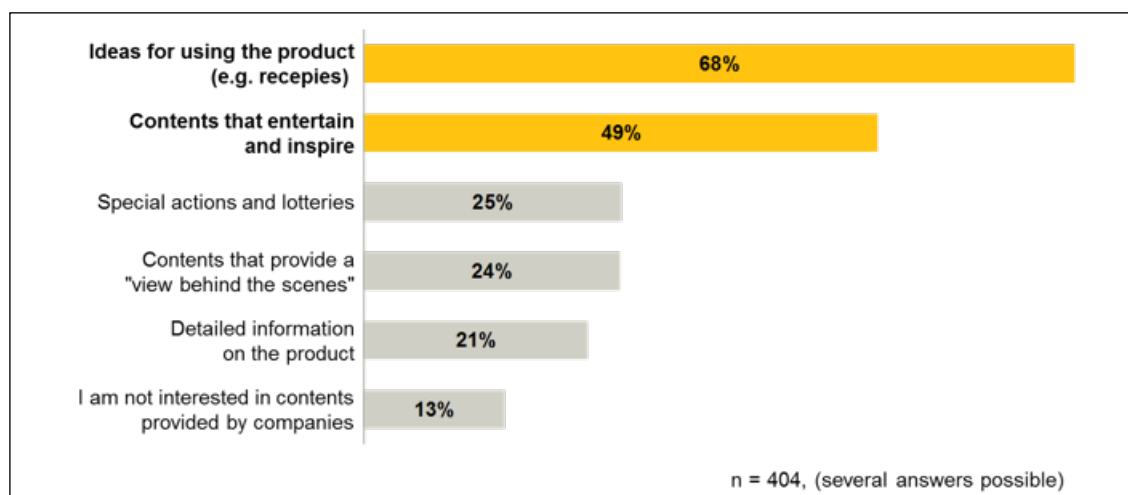
Within the omnipresence of advertisement, pictures are superior, because they enable to scan information more selectively (Stöckl, 2010, p. 169). As previously illustrated in chapter 2, Instagram posts are “restricted” to a simple, uniform design, which facilitates information reception.

The visual content is always in the center of the post, which meets the consumers’ tiredness of information reception. The more “strenuous”, textual information rather plays a subordinate role. Although posts frequently comprise extensive picture captions, consumers can quickly draw conclusions regarding the topic of the post from hashtags, which are highlighted in blue. Thus, for companies of the “food”-sector it is recommended to consider the visual content as the central message. Textual information should have a complementary function and a limited number of thematically related hashtags should be used.

### 5.2.2 Added value instead of advertising

The openness towards company contents on Instagram can further be explained and supported by considering the preferences of the “food”-interested Instagrammer. While only relatively few participants indicated to be interested in detailed product information or special actions and lotteries, ideas for using the product as well as contents that entertain and inspire appear to be preferred by the participants in terms of company contents (figure 5). Hence, it can be suggested that the interest of the Instagrammer does not lie in particular product offerings, but rather in contents that go beyond product presentation and information and provide the consumer with an added value. Therewith parallels can be found between the reasons why the “food”-interested Instagrammer share “food”-related topics (in order to express their personal lifestyle and share ideas; figure 4) and the kind of content they expect from companies of the “food”-sector. As it can be observed in case of the individual Instagrammer, companies should focus on contents that are related to the company identity and that are inspiring, thereby creating a benefit for the consumer. The communication should take on a “below-the-line”-character, that is a personal and unconventional character, in order to prevent the impression of advertisement on the consumer side and rather emphasize the uniqueness of the brand to facilitate brand loyalty (Carter, 2003, p. 87; Esch, Krieger & Strödter, 2009, p. 87).

Figure 5. Which contents of “food”-companies on Instagram would you be interested in?



Source: Own research

### 5.2.3 Closeness and relevance to everyday life

According to the results of the present study, nearly 80% of those participants, who are interested in ideas for using the product, indicate to try for themselves what they see on “food”-posts. It can be assumed that e.g. recipe suggestions from the side of a company of the “food”-sector are likely to have an impact on consumer behavior in the offline-context. Taking into consideration the findings regarding the first part of the research question, it can furthermore be concluded: Like the “food”-interested Instagrammer themselves share “food”-contents as part of their everyday life, companies should design their Instagram content in a way that consumers can easily integrate them into their daily life. Thereby organizations can not only meet the considerable interest of the Instagram user community in ideas for using their products, but also shape the contexts of usage.

### 5.2.4 Brand hashtags

Results of the present study show, that 24% of the “food”-interested Instagrammer (n=404) use a brand hashtag when their “food”-posts shows a brand. Instagram’s search function enables businesses to selectively search for hashtags associated with their brand name and thereby observe usage types and contexts created by the customer. With respect to the theoretical findings in chapter 3, companies can also take the opportunity to react on “food”-posts, thereby supporting the realization of self-definitional symbols: Considering the findings regarding the motives of the “food”-interested Instagrammer, the identity development motive was strongly supported by the participants. It can be suggested that a positive reaction on a brand-related “food”-post, which then already is a part of the Instagrammer’s self-symbolizing action, will facilitate its social realization. By reacting e.g. with a positive comment on a brand-related post, companies can take part in the identity development of their young target group on Instagram and foster an early identification with the company brand. It is therefore particularly important to motivate consumers to brand-related posts. According to the survey results, 54.2% do not use a brand hashtag so far. Although it needs to be considered that participants were relatively uninterested in special actions and lotteries (figure 5), it can be recommended to occasionally work with incentives that motivate consumers to use brand hashtags, in order to take advantages from the abovementioned identity-related processes.

### 5.2.5 Influencer

More than half of the participants (55.2%) state to follow a famous “food”-Instagrammer. Thus, it is recommended to identify and observe those influential Instagrammer that are relevant for the organization’s product or service. According to the theory of symbolic self-completion, individuals display symbols, which are defined and can be

understood by their social environment. It can be suggested that famous “food”-Instagrammer, who influence a large amount of followers with their contents, have an impact on which identity symbols will be understood. Therefore, companies should consider a collaboration with influencers that possess a high impact on the appropriate contexts of usage. In the case of a collaboration, it is important to maintain the authenticity of the influencer, as it is one of their most important characteristics (tobesocial, 2016). The design of the communicated content and the integration of the company’s particular product should be left to the responsibility of the “food”-influencer.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Conclusively, the research question underlying the present paper can be answered in the following way: The phenomenon of the “social eater” on Instagram clearly becomes apparent as part of the overall self-presentation of the “food”-interested Instagrammer. With respect to these findings, Instagram cannot be referred to as a platform for an evolving “foodtography mainstream”. “Food”-posting is rather driven by interpersonal motives (e.g. identity development), which can be related to the changing consciousness for consumption within the younger generation that also is reflected within the German Instagram community.

In spite of nowadays’ information overload, the openness for company content on the side of the Instagram user reveals promising chances for companies of the “food”-sector. Organizations can use the knowledge and insights about the phenomenon gained within the scope of the present study in order to properly position themselves in Instagram in terms of the company’s presentation and interaction with the “social eater”. With regard to Instagram content, companies are recommended to create an added value for the consumer, by offering inspiring content that is characterized by relevance to everyday life consumption and that emphasizes the specific brand character of the organization.

Furthermore, companies of the “food”-sector can use the present findings to improve their interaction with the “social eater”. By applying the specific functions of Instagram, such as hashtag and comment functions, they can take the opportunity to shape usage contexts of their products as well as the identity development of the consumer in relation to their brand. In the view of the strong presence of so-called influencers, organizations should identify relevant “food”-influencer and consider a collaboration. Thereby they can take the chance to benefit from the impact influencers possess on a wide range of consumers and their authenticity in terms of the consumption of their products.

The first results of the conducted study raise further questions with regard to the extent and motives underlying the “social eater” phenomenon. Of further interest is, for instance, if the collected data reveal a correlation between

“food”-posts and post related to other topics. Moreover, additional analysis by SPSS is planned in the area of type identification. It is of special interest for companies of the “food”-sector, if the group of “food”-interested Instagrammer can further be divided into specific user types. How these differ in terms of their motives, preferences and other variables queried within the scope of the present study is of particular importance, because this knowledge would enable companies to design their presentation and interaction with the “social eater” more specifically.

Overall, the findings of the presented paper demonstrate a considerable progress of the current state of research around the “social eater”. This work achieved a first characterization of the phenomenon, in order to elaborate an orientation for companies of the “food”-sector in terms of their own presentation and interaction on Instagram. Thereby the present paper reveals linkages for further research regarding a more specific investigation of the “social eater” phenomenon.

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