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From Wooden Boards to Flip Flops: Depictions of
Dining on Instagram**

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Abstract

The output is creative project comprising of a short web article and images curated from the Instagram accounts of M&S food, Jamie Oliver, and We Want Plates.

Research process: This article explores how the concept of authenticity is mediated through popular food images on Instagram, offering a semiotic reading of photographs curated from various Instagram accounts, utilising images from professional and amateur image makers. The article explores the influence and scope of these images, drawing conclusions about the cyclical and participatory nature of image production on social media, and the relationship between visual myth-making and the perception of authenticity.

Research insights: In a social media age, we are no longer passive consumers of the aspirational image; we are content creators who participate in myth-making. This project continues my research into how food and dining are visually represented in popular culture, and the idealisation of domestic and social life. Where previous projects have focussed on cookbooks as the vehicle for communicating these images, this project focusses on social media as the platform.

Dissemination: The article was published by InMedia Res on 24th Sept 2021, as part of their 'Authenticity' series.

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From wooden boards to flip flops: depictions of dining on Instagram

How is an authentic dining experience connoted through contemporary food photographs? According to Richard Tressider (2010) in his paper on the semiotics of Marks and Spencer's food advertising, a common trope is to use a 'rough wooden platter' or a 'distressed wooden table', to connote a sense of 'the authentic, original, or organic.'

A quick look at the official Marks and Spencer Instagram account confirms this, as do many celebrity chef's Instagram feeds, such as Jamie Oliver's. These mainstream food images evoke communal myths about how we live and how we eat, conjuring idyllic domestic settings and aspirational homes. The pictures suggest rustic yet elegant dining spaces, spacious kitchens, and beautiful gardens.

One of Instagram's main draws is its participatory nature. We are no longer passive consumers of the aspirational image; we are content creators who perpetuate and participate in myth-making. Amateur photographers and enthusiastic foodies perform carefully crafted and curated versions of the dining experience. Food is styled and presented on an assortment of surfaces which connote the authentic, the natural, or the organic, from a patinaed tin plate, to a weathered piece of slate.

This trope, with its aesthetic roots in visual culture, has been incorporated into mainstream food service, resulting in restaurants and pubs competing for more inventive ways to serve food. The Instagram feed 'We Want Plates', which is devoted to documenting this practice, explores the comic possibilities that exist between the myth and the reality. Enthusiastic amateurs contribute photographs of their own authentic dining experience which show food dripping, sliding off of, and seeping into wooden boards and slates. This element of competition has led to more outlandish objects appearing on the dining table, from the bizarrely inappropriate (selection of meat on a clipboard??) to the ludicrous and unsanitary (dessert in a flip flop??!)

These scenes, captured in poor lighting conditions, with little attention to composition and styling, provide a hilarious document of the stark reality. They unwittingly parody the more serious, mainstream food images of popular culture, highlighting the potential for absurd results when 'style over function' decisions are taken to extremes. They gently ridicule our obsession with, and romanticisation of these rustic boards and slates, and our pursuit of the aspirational lifestyle.

References

Tresidder, R. (2010) *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol 30. Reading food marketing: the semiotics of Marks & Spencer advertising?!

Images appropriated from the following Instagram accounts:

<https://www.instagram.com/marksandspencer/>

<https://www.instagram.com/jamieoliver/>

<https://www.instagram.com/wewantplatesofficial/>