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#tableforone: Exploring representations of dining out alone on Instagram

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Abstract

In contemporary western society connections with others have become more fluid. This fluidity, in turn, impacts how people think about, understand, and engage in leisure. For instance, more people are choosing to partake in leisure practices that have traditionally been done in the company of others, alone. Yet people who choose to engage in solo leisure may face stigmatization for doing so. With these ideas in mind, the purpose of this paper is to examine representations of dining out alone on Instagram associated with #tableforone. Our findings illustrate how people use #tableforone to represent the importance of valuing alone time and treating oneself. Our findings also demonstrate the ways #tableforone can be used to confront the stigma tied to engaging in public leisure practices alone.

Key words: solo leisure, dining alone; social media research; Instagram; #tableforone

#tableforone: Exploring representations of dining out alone on Instagram

The social context shaping understandings of leisure in western society has become increasingly complex in recent years. Within the past decade, there has been a rise in the number of people living alone (Euromonitor International 2008; Klinenberg 2012; Statistics Canada 2012; Statistics NZ n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau 2012) and an increase in the number of people identifying as single (Cobb 2011; Office for National Statistics 2014). These social trends are emblematic of what Bauman (2003) has referred to as a “liquid modern society”, wherein bonds and connections with others have become more fluid. This fluidity, in turn, impacts how people think about, understand, and engage in leisure.

In an article, *The Undeniable Pleasure of Doing Things Alone*, Bielski (2015) noted that more people are choosing to engage in certain leisure practices (traditionally done in the company of others) alone, such as solo travelling and solo dining. She referenced a study conducted in the United States by the reservation system OpenTable (2015) that found a 62% increase in the number of restaurant reservations made for one in the United States between 2013 and 2015. The growing number of people making restaurant reservations online through various smart phone applications is indicative of how leisure has become increasingly digitized in a liquid society. Many people are seeking a more personalized and streamlined dining experience (cf. no author, 2016, Dec 2) made possible through reservation apps that allow users to search for restaurant availability by geo-spatial location, explore menus and consumer reviews, and easily manage bookings and cancellations through their mobile devices. In addition, the ubiquity of digital devices contributes to the fragmentation of relationships in a liquid modern society, given that individuals can connect with others through various channels at almost all times, even when they are physically alone (Lupton 2015).

Despite these trends, previous research has suggested that people who choose to engage in solo leisure practices, such as dining out alone, may face stigmatization for choosing to do so (cf. Ratner and Hamilton 2015). However, in a liquid modern world, where the proliferation of digital devices has changed how people engage in solo leisure pursuits, we question whether the stigma surrounding certain types of solo leisure is lifting? With this question in mind, the purpose of this paper is to look at representations of dining out alone on Instagram associated with #tableforone. To set the context for our analysis, we first introduce Bauman's (2000) notions of solid and liquid modernity, before describing current social trends that contribute to the shifting practices and understandings of leisure in a liquid modern society.

Literature Review

Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) considered liquidity and fluidity as fitting metaphors to draw on to grasp the nature of contemporary life. He argued western societies have transitioned from a solid, hard, and stable modernity to a light and inexorably transient condition; a condition and time characterized by uprootedness, uncertainty, and fragmentation. Such fluidity gives rise to new mobilities, flexibilities, and freedoms that change the structures guiding behaviors as part of everyday life, including leisure.

According to Bauman (2000), modernity, in its solid phase, was associated with temporal control and mastery of space. Boundaries were constructed to affirm the stability and fixedness of institutions, whereby the masses could be controlled, surveyed, and managed (Lee 2014). Tight and impenetrable, these boundaries shaped societies' norms and perceptions of rational behavior (Bauman 2000). Western societies marched forward, rooted by Fordism, in the pursuit of progress and a promise of an attainable utopia. As an era imbued with heavy capital and

routines, the solid phase was an eternal state of “perpetual, monotonous and irrevocable sameness”, in which change was only a transitory side effect (Bauman 2005, 66).

In the 1960s the boundaries of the solid era were no longer perceived as sustainable and were eventually made irrelevant by unrestrained mobility and the exponential growth of consumptive desires (Bauman 2000; Lee 2014). In his interview with *Tourist Studies*, Bauman explained that people’s loose ties with place (physical, geographical, social) perpetuated, and continue to perpetuate, a lack of commitment to others and a temporariness that now marshals ways of being in the world (Franklin 2003). Within this liquid modernity, social cohesion is replaced by disintegration, tight communities by loosely coupled networks, and solidarity by individualization. Moreover, rather than an establishment of traditions and routines, there is an on-going melting of social structures, communication habits, and personal and work relationships (Vogel and Oschmann 2013).

Campbell (2013) argued that the liquefying of institutions and ethical boundaries (e.g., laws, limits, and rules) has been necessary as many of their consequences were profoundly unjust, entrenched with inequality and hierarchy. Such liquification – or what Bauman referred to as a pointillization of time – encourages people to look at life “as an individual life” (Campbell 2013, 30) that extends unprecedented opportunities, such as mobilizing individuals who once may have been marginalized or immobile. Yet, at the same time researchers and theorists warn that a liquid life presents challenges and dangers that have not been encountered before (cf. Franklin 2003; Bauman 2008; Campbell 2013; Davis 2013). For instance, individualization and the “hurried life” supersedes a life that is lived collectively and towards caring for others (Davis 2013; Lee 2014). Nevertheless, this passage from solid to liquid modernity implicates shifting social trends that

shape the meanings and understandings of leisure practices and spaces, a discussion we turn to next.

The liquidizing couple: Shifting social trends in western societies

Within a fluid society, people can organize their lives both within and outside of couplehood in diverse and flexible ways. For example, over the past few decades in many western countries there has been a growing number of couples choosing cohabitation over marriage (Statistics Canada 2011), a steady rise in divorce rates amongst heterosexual couples (Office of National Statistics 2017; Statistics Canada 2011), and an increasing number of same-sex marriages (Statistics Canada 2012). Another trend adding to this complexity has been the growing number of people living alone in western countries. For example, in 2013, Statistics New Zealand (n.d) reported that 11% of the population lived alone. Similarly, in the 2010 United States census, single-person households represented 27% of all households, about one in seven of the adult population (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), while Canadian census figures released in 2016 show 28.2% of Canadian homes are single person dwellings – a significant increase from 7.4% in 1951 (Statistics Canada 2017). Moreover, the number of single-person households is predicted to grow faster than any other household type, globally, between 2016 and 2030, with a forecast of 120 million new single person homes established over this period (Euromonitor International 2017). Contributing to the rise in people living alone are various social and demographic factors. For example, in western countries a growing number of young adults (particularly women) are choosing to postpone marriage and start families later to spend more time focusing on their education and establishing a career. Population aging has also contributed to the growing number of seniors living alone in many western countries (cf. Statistics Canada 2011; 2017).

Along with the rising trend of living alone, there appears to be a growing number of people identifying as single. By *single* we mean people who are not involved in a relationship (whether divorced, widowed, or always single) (DePaulo, 2006). For instance, the United Kingdom reported that 35% of its citizens identified as single in 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2014), while Cobb (2012) estimated single people represent approximately 40% of the Canadian population.

As these trends illustrate, people in western societies are choosing to configure their lives in increasingly diverse ways (e.g., whether that is by living alone and/or remaining single) and these diverse configurations have become symbols as well as common social/civil statuses of late modernity. But how do these diverse configurations, indicative of late modernity, shape how we think about and engage in leisure practices and spaces?

Solo leisure

Considered most broadly, research related to solo leisure experiences appears to be predominately housed within tourism studies (for exceptions see Brown and Penney 2014; Coble, Selin, and Erickson 2003), where there has been an interesting and noticeable shift in travel patterns from tourism experienced in groups (or as a family), to tourism undertaken individually (cf. Bianchi 2016; Chiang and Jogaratnam 2006; Heimtun 2010; Heimtun and Abelsen 2013; Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Seow and Brown 2018; Wilson and Little 2005). These studies map out solo traveler typologies and motivations (cf. Bianchi 2016; McNamara and Prideaux 2010), constraints and barriers of solo travel, particularly for women (cf. Chung, Baik, and Lee 2017), the types of holidays that people independently engage in (cf. Heimtun and Abelsen 2013), and the overall experiences of solo women tourists (cf. Heimtun 2010; Obenour 2005; Seow and Brown 2018).

Related to spending leisure time alone, leisure scholars have focused attention on understanding the impacts of more individualized leisure time, including how it can contribute to a decline in social capital and an erosion of civic engagement within societies (Hortulanus, Machielse and Meeuwesen 2006; Putnam 2000; Toepoel 2013). For instance, leisure research has focused on the challenges of locating “somebody to play with” and how this implicates the ways individuals use and structure their own free time (Jenkins and Osberg 2005, 114). More recently, Glover (2018) detailed the pervasiveness of social isolation in society. In his discussion, he noted the irony that social isolation is a serious problem, given that digitization has made it seemingly so easy to stay connected with others.

Other leisure research has explored the ties between single life and solo leisure. For example, McKeown (2015) used autoethnography to analyze her own experiences negotiating single life, dating, and leisure as an adult woman. She found gendered ideologies and expectations influenced her experiences of singlehood and her desires for partnership that in turn affected the decisions she made when dating. Heimtun (2010) also considered experiences of single women, investigating their experiences dining out alone while on vacation. In part, her findings suggested that a lack of company (and thereby the lack of *in situ* bonding social capital) while travelling and dining alone contributed to women feeling lonely and socially excluded. Separate from these two studies, there is seemingly limited leisure research that has considered the ways people can engage in leisure (traditionally done in the company of others) alone, like dining out, and how these experiences may be stigmatized, including how these experiences of stigmatization are connected to singlehood.

Outside of the leisure discipline, research from the fields of sociology, marketing, and psychology has looked at whether the stigma of doing things alone influences people’s leisure

choices. For example, Goffman (1971) explored the ways people who participate in public pursuits alone or as a “single” and not as a “with” can face vulnerabilities in doing so. More specifically, Goffman explained, “if others seem willing to accompany one and are relatively at ease in this participation, then it is taken that one’s antics cannot be a sign of extreme aberrancy” (1971, 21). As a result, people who engage in public activities alone have to put in effort to demonstrate an acceptable purpose for doing so, because as Goffman continued, “To attend alone is to expose oneself as possibly not being able to muster up companionship... To participate in a with saves one from being seen as unaccompanied” (21).

Ratner and Hamilton (2015) explored how judgment can shape the choices consumers make related to engaging in public hedonic activities alone. They found that consumers are less likely to show an interest in taking part in public-hedonic activities alone than with others. Yet, they also found consumers are just as likely to partake in private-hedonic activities as well as utilitarian activities (e.g., going to the grocery store) alone as well as with others. One of the reasons they noted as to why people are less likely to engage in public leisure activities alone is because people assume other people will make negative inferences about their social connectedness (i.e., lack of friends or people to engage in those activities with). Interestingly, they also found consumers often overemphasize the amount of enjoyment they think they will have when engaging in leisure activities with others.

Other studies have considered the perceptions patrons have about those who participate in public leisure alone. For example, DePaulo (2008) explored perceptions people have of individuals dining out alone compared to perceptions of people dining out with others. Her findings indicated that people are no more likely to have negative perceptions of people dining out alone than people dining out with others. As such, her work challenges whether there is, in

fact, a social stigma tied to doing things alone, such as public dining, because it troubles the assumption that people are making negative inferences about solo diners, suggesting that being alone is not the determining factor influencing people's perceptions. Similarly, Gilovich, Medvic and Savitsky (2000) found people tend to overemphasize how much their actions, behaviors, and appearances are noticed by others, a phenomenon they referred to as the "spotlight effect." They explained this effect, stating: "People tend to believe that the social spotlight shines more brightly on them than it really does" (211). While perceived stigma by others has been shown to influence people's choices to engage in public leisure activities (cf. Ratner and Hamilton 2015), it appears people are less concerned about the ways in which others engage in solo leisure, including dining out alone.

In addition to perceived stigma, in a digital society (Lupton 2015), digitization may influence solo leisure practices. In western countries, digital devices have become embedded in people's everyday lives (Hine 2015), so much so that we are "entangled with the digital throughout our waking (and sometimes sleeping) hours" (Lupton 2015, 165). In the last decade, the utilization and influence of social media sites (SMSs) has enabled people to produce and share knowledge, emotions, and experiences far more widely than in the past (Jacobsen and Munar 2012; Kietzman et al. 2011; Volo 2010). Meraz explained that SMSs are "architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community" (2009, 682). These new mobilities, afforded by digital devices, make creating and sharing content with others simple and instantaneous. They also make it possible for people to connect with one another through various channels at almost all times, even when a person is physically alone (Brabazon 2017; Lupton 2015). Despite the ways digitization can influence people's everyday lives, including their leisure (cf. Schultz and McKeown 2018; Silk, Millington, Rich

and Bush 2016), it remains unclear how digitization shapes and influences people's solo leisure experiences, and whether the use of mobile devices when engaging solo leisure can help mitigate and/or challenge the stigma of doing things alone? To further explore these ideas and the connections between solo leisure, digitization, and social stigma, we consider experiences of dining out alone represented on Instagram using #tableforone. In what follows, we explain our choice to use Instagram as the platform through which to conduct this research, as well as how we collected and analyzed the data, before sharing our findings.

Social Media Research

SMSs provide social researchers valuable resources “for understanding the practices, self-disclosed lived experiences, and aspirational identities of subpopulations” (Laestadius 2017, 585). Indeed, these platforms enable researchers to move beyond a single physical space, towards a more fluid, mobile, and connective form of data collection (Jordan 2009; Hine 2015). With this in mind, we chose to conduct our study through the SMS, Instagram.

Instagram as a research context

Since launching on October 6th, 2010 as an iPhone app, Instagram has become one of the largest online SMSs, with more than 800 million active users worldwide. Instagram users are distinctively positioned as a community who “capture and share the world's moments” through user created and generated photographs and short video clips (Instagram 2018). Instagram's uniqueness as a SMS stems from the type of information it brings together (e.g., imagery, captions, hashtags, and comments), and the ways users can engage with the platform (Highfield and Leaver 2014; Laestadius 2017). For example, the interactive and user-friendly platform allows individuals to create their content directly in their mobile phone. Once the photo or video has been captured, users can edit, apply filters, attach a caption, link it to a location, and tag

friends to share their content with others. Users can also ‘tag’ their images with identifying words (i.e., hashtags) to make it easy for other users to search for specific themes, topics, or debates among their social media communities (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2016).

Instagram has also been shown to have a unique user-base when compared to other SMSs. In particular, Instagram is used most predominantly by younger adults under the age of 30 and by a greater number of women than men (cf. Duggan 2015). These users (similar to Facebook and Twitter) can select to ‘follow’ other registered users to view their profiles, images, and videos, thereby creating an audience for consumption and production of content (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016). Furthermore, Instagram offers functionalities like direct messaging, Instagram ‘stories’, and different hashtag features (cf. Popper 2017, Dec. 12) that allow users to follow a specific hashtag the same way they might follow an individual user.

Despite its popularity as a SMS, Instagram when used as a research context (unlike Facebook and Twitter) has received little attention from scholars working across academic disciplines. In particular, qualitative approaches to conducting research through Instagram remain limited (for exceptions see Carah and Shaul 2016; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016; Gibbs et al. 2015; Laestadius 2017; Marwick 2015; Tiidenberg 2015). However, Laestadius explained, “Instagram’s emphasis on image creation yields this rich and, in turn, also highly interpretable data that are well-suited for qualitative research” (2017, 578).

Despite its potential, there are several limitations of using Instagram for qualitative research that are important to consider. Specifically, Manovich identified that social media “data are not a transparent window into people’s imaginations, intentions, motifs, opinions, and ideas” (2012, 466), and users often post content that has been created with a primary intention to solicit likes and comments from their followers. Moreover, Instagram’s own terms of use and its

community guidelines shape and limit the type of content people post (e.g., ban on photos of breastfeeding women) (Laestadius 2017). Thus, Laestadius recognizes that although Instagram data affords valuable insights about self-disclosed lived experiences, this kind of data is perhaps less valuable for researchers seeking an “objective and broadly generalizable assessment of opinions and experiences” (2017, 585). As such, in the following section, we describe our approach to data collection and analysis through Instagram. We also outline a few of the ethical considerations we adhered to when deciding how to disseminate our findings.

Collecting, analyzing, and representing user content

To collect Instagram data for this paper we used Picodash, a social media management tool created to help search, curate, and analyze Twitter and Instagram content by location, hashtags, or users (Picodash n.d.). We chose Picodash because it complied with the Instagram platform and Application programming interface (API) policies (Picodash n.d.). To extract data (which Picodash does by connecting directly with Instagram’s API) we used the Picodash ‘search by hashtag’ feature to collect all public posts associated with #tableforone. Data linked to this specific hashtag (e.g., user handle, date and time stamp, photo, caption, other hashtags used, likes, and comments) were retrieved and exported into an Excel spreadsheet. We used this exported spreadsheet to filter out posts by date, extracting only content that was created and shared on Instagram between March 1st and 7th of 2017. We chose this week in March because it was removed from religious and commercial holidays that might have implications for leisure and consumptive behaviors (e.g., Christmas, Valentine’s day, respectfully). We were also interested in comparing the ways the hashtag was used across days of the week (e.g., weekday vs. weekend).

When our data collection process was complete, we had 193 posts associated with #tableforone, a comparable dataset to other qualitative studies that have used Instagram (cf. Carah and Shaul 2016; Laestadius 2017). To provide users with time to reflect on the content they posted, remove posts, or make profiles and posts private, we chose not to collect the data for this study in real-time. Instead, data collection was completed retroactively, several months after the selected dates in March. During analysis, if posts were no longer publicly available or an account was no longer active, we removed the post from our dataset.

Additionally, we removed any posts associated with #tableforone posted by businesses and posts that were not communicated in English. We also eliminated posts where #tableforone was only present in the comment section of the post instead of within the main caption. We made this choice because a hashtag that is posted in the comment section of a post can come up in hashtag searches, even if the original post is unrelated (Laestadius 2017). Furthermore, hashtags only present in comments, “raises questions of intentionality and meaning, as well as privacy if the original user did not intend for their post to be searchable” (Laestadius 2017, 584). We chose not to analyze comments and likes attributed to each post, as they are not static and can change over time, potentially shifting the meaning of the post (Laestadius 2017).

After filtering the data, we were left with 161 posts. To analyze these posts, we employed inductive thematic analysis techniques (cf. Braun and Clark 2006; Glesne 2016; Schwandt 2007). An inductive approach allows the data to dictate themes emerging from the Instagram content, rather than pre-established a priori themes. To begin, we divided the dataset in half and worked separately to familiarize ourselves with the data, as well as to generate initial codes based upon the visual and textual elements within each post. We then came back together (virtually via FaceTime) to share and discuss what we had found, and to review and flesh out the themes that

had emerged across the full dataset. After this second phase of the analysis was complete, we were left with three overarching themes: (1) Valuing alone time; (2) Treating yourself; and (3) Confronting stigma.

In representing each theme, we first consulted Instagram's terms of use regarding reproduction of text and photos from public accounts. The current terms state that once individuals have voluntarily "shared User Content or made it public, that User Content may be re-shared by others" (Instagram 2018). However, similar to Tiidenberg (2016), we removed identifying markers from posts including profile links, user names or handles, friend-tags, or geo-tags (e.g., business locations) in our write-up of the findings. As a further safeguard, we decided not to re-share photos where faces (either the person who posted or someone else) and brand/restaurant identifiers were visible. In addition, to represent individual insights from posts we chose to use pseudonym Instagram handles (e.g., @instadiner95) that signify the number (of the post) affiliated with the overall dataset. When possible, we did indicate whether the content was posted by a man or woman (e.g., @instaguy22; @instagal56). However, it is important to note that although Instagram users are more likely to be women under the age of 30 (as previously referenced), when we looked at user profiles to discern age, gender, and relationship status, many profiles and posts did not include overt disclosures of these identity factors. Thus, although it is likely that younger women who identified as single created many of the posts we analysed; a limitation of this study is that we were not able to analyze the data with these identity factors in mind. To analyze the ways intersecting identity factors influence representations of #tableforone (which is beyond the scope of this study), future research should adopt different research approaches and explore additional data collection methods.

Findings

In this section of the paper, we contextualize the three overarching themes that emerged from our analysis of Instagram posts associated with #tableforone: (1) Valuing alone time; (2) Treating yourself; and (3) Confronting stigma. To do so, we draw on textual examples (hashtags and captions) as well as visual examples (photos and memes) from the posts we analyzed.

Valuing alone time

Many of the Instagram posts tagged with #tableforone featured a caption, photo, and/or additional hashtag(s) that revealed a strong emphasis on valuing time alone when dining out by oneself. For example, several posts included hashtags like #allaboutme, #metime, #mommytime, and #nocompanyneeded that highlighted the importance of making time for one's self to enjoy a meal and/or drink when out. For instance, @instadiner102 shared a post using a succession of hashtags (#metime #bookdate #momosa #meparty) to illustrate the joy and excitement that might be attributed to spending time alone (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Valuing alone time @instadiner102 #tableforone #metime

Similarly, this excitement was expressed within posts through captions like: “Finally the weekend!!! Some me time!!!!” (@instagal95) and “Shh don’t tell the kids I eat before I get home [followed by three tears of joy emojis]” (@instagal141). In other instances, users included a combination of hashtags within a caption to indicate the value of making time to be alone. For example, @instagal56 shared a photo of her meal, and explained, “Fondue and wine! #qt with #memyselfandi.”

User content also depicted the importance of going on dates with yourself, integrating hashtags like #dreamdate #lonedate, #romancingmyself, and #datingmyself. As an example, @instadiner85’s content included a selfie and a caption that jested: “Sometimes you go on a date. With yourself. And you still can’t but help roll your eyes. At your own bad joke. Good times.” Similarly, @instadiner101 posted a meme with a cartoon image of a whale with a slogan that read, “Date Night With My Favorite Whale...Me.” This meme was accompanied by the following caption:

“My favorite uncle had a favorite saying, ‘I’m hanging out with my favorite person...me!’ It took me almost 35 years to understand what he meant. I like hanging out with myself. I’m pretty entertaining. I don’t know if other people would agree but who cares.”

Related to valuing alone time, some posts using #tableforone associated emphasized the importance of taking care of self. More specifically, #takecareofyourself was a specific hashtag that surfaced in our analysis multiple times. This notion of self-care also emerged in posts using other hashtags to convey fitness and health goals (e.g., #eatwell; #healthyeating; #cleaneating). In relation to a photo of a meal, @instadiner06 highlighted fitness goals by explaining that “Today is a NO GYM day...but staying healthy with this tasty salad on my Tuesday...” Similarly,

when making reference to his solo dining experience, @insaguy22 advised, “When #diningalone always #eatwell...”

Some of the content about taking care of self was connected to fostering mental health and wellbeing (e.g., #reboot; #destress; #myowntrip; #zen; #relaxing). In several of these posts, users indicated the importance of engaging in other solo leisure activities (e.g., journaling, collaging, travelling, biking, etc.) beyond dining out alone for personal wellness. @instadiner183 posted a photo collaging at a café with a sequence of hashtags illustrating the importance of care towards self: #takeabreath #exhale #collage #bulletjournaling #metime #lifeiscrazy #craftingismytherapy (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Valuing alone time @instadiner183 #tableforone #reboot

Treating yourself

In addition to #tableforone being closely connected to valuing alone time with one’s self, we found people used #tableforone to connect with doing something special for themselves. For example, @instadiner161 captioned a photo of a sushi meal with, “Spoiling myself tonight.” Similarly, @instadiner108 noted in the caption beside a photo of a meal and drink: “Happy Friday! ALWAYS treat yourself.” Many of these posts included additional hashtags like: #treatyoself, #treatyourself, #doingitup, #spoiled, and #indulge. At times, posts referenced

#finedining (see Figure 3). In these instances, it is evident there is some level of self-indulgence on the part of the Instagram users as hedonic experiences, like fine dining, are likely costly.



Figure 3: Treating yourself @instadiner20 #tableforone #finedining

Other individuals shared posts about treating one’s self through photos featuring desserts and hashtags related to indulging (e.g., #lookatallthatsugar; #carbsoncarbs; #everdayisacheatday; #extrabutterplease). @instadiner54 indicated being in “heaven” after waiting a month to finally have tried the sugary coated beignets of a local French café. Similarly, @instadiner155’s caption described treating self and questioning, rhetorically, with humour: “Being an adult means you can choose to have desert [sic] for dinner... right? Because if this is wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

Moreover, people shared content with #tableforone to acknowledge their broader enjoyment of food as leisure. We found many users included photos of the food and drinks they were enjoying, followed by hashtags such as #instagood, #bonappetit, #getinmybelly, and #yummy. Users also often labeled these posts with #foodie, #foodstagram, #foodporn to identify

their solo dining pursuit as one specific to a food or culinary experience. For instance, @instadiner71 shared a photo of Sunday brunch, denoting the experience with some of these food related hashtags (see Figure 4). Many of these food posts, and self-acclaimed foodies, detailed descriptions of their meals, listing ingredients or unique qualities (e.g., #cured; #fresh; #organic) to distinguish these food experiences as special or different.



Figure 4: Treating yourself @instadiner71 #tableforone #foodie

Indeed, in these particular #tableforone posts, going out to dinner alone is demonstrated in two ways; savoring a meal alone, whilst also engaging in a leisure practice of sharing what you are eating with potential followers in a digital leisure space (i.e., Instagram). Ironically, this overt practice of reaching out to others via Instagram, calls into question the meaning of ‘being alone’ – an idea we come back to in our discussion, but that also contributes to our final theme.

Confronting stigma

We found #tableforone was also used to represent experiences confronting stigma when dining out alone. More specifically, stigma was reflected in feelings of being mistreated or disadvantaged in some way while dining out alone. Alongside a photo of a single dinner place setting, @instadiner08 remarked, “I think it was the unceremonious way in which the server

pulled away the other place setting that charmed me the most. #tableforone #wahwahwah.”

Comparably, @instadiner63 shared a photo depicting the location of a table for one behind a column, captioned by: “Could they make this #tableforone any more #brutal #damn.”

We also found Instagram posts that chose to confront (and trouble) the stigmatization of dining out alone in other ways. In particular, we found many posts where users expressed a level of pride, contentment, and fulfillment about their choice to dine alone (e.g., #independentwoman; #Iisthemostpeacefulnumber; #nocompanyneeded). Moreover, several of the hashtags used in conjunction with #tableforone echoed sentiments of bravery and confidence (e.g., #notafraidtoeatalone; #fearless; #bravethecity; #iknowwhatibringtothetable). In disrupting this stigma, and thereby the shame or fear often associated with dining out alone, Instagram users explicitly shared content that discredited these fears. For instance, @instadiner1161 explained, “I have never been opposed to eating by myself. I love people watching and having time to think all the thoughts.” Similarly, @instagal152 posted a photo of her meal with a caption that declared, “I know what I bring to the table, so trust me when I say I’m not afraid to eat alone” followed by #fearless. Using the exact same wording, @instadiner120 shared a meme about eating alone, and captioned it with the comment “Boy bye [hand waving emoji]” (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Confronting stigma @instadiner120 #tableforone #notafraidtoeatalone

In addition to commenting on the stigma of doing things alone, we also found many posts included references to the stigma tied to singlehood (e.g., #spinster; #singleandfailingtomingle; #catlady; etc.). The relationship between dining out alone and single life was evident in @instadiner43's post about being single and trying to date, sharing a distraught-looking 'selfie' followed by the caption: "The face you make when you get #stoodup. Or what is the new hip term these days?? I got #ghosted. Who got some #cats I can #love? #willcatsstandmeup? #imgonnagetmeawholelitter." In a similar vein, @instagal96 captured a photo that described her experience of being "single AF" (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Confronting stigma @instagal96 #tableforone #foreveralone

Finally, many users celebrated the fact that you can live well, and enjoy life, doing things alone – like dining out alone. This idea of celebration was illustrated using hashtags such as #yolo, #lifeisforliving, #celebratinglife, #behappy, #goodlife and, more directly, when individuals outlined the benefits of doing things alone. For instance, @instadiner41 identified a dining out alone tip: “Pro tip: go alone and skip the line.” Relatedly, @instagal30 shared, “#singlelife: eat whenever I want.”

Taken together, our findings illustrate the various ways people can use #tableforone to represent their experiences valuing alone time, treating self, and confronting the stigma of dining out alone. We turn next to a discussion of these findings, highlighting what can be gleaned from the content of the Instagram posts and this research more broadly.

Discussion

Our analysis of #tableforone highlights the ways people can engage in food and leisure practices and spaces within contemporary society in complex and diverse ways. More specifically, our findings support the notion that people can and do find enjoyment and pleasure in engaging in leisure practices alone that have been traditionally done in the company of others (Bielski 2015). Moreover, people can focus on self through solo leisure pursuits, like dining out alone. This focus on self is reflective of liquid modernity, where individualization, including values such as self-expression, self-development, autonomy, privacy, and choice, are emphasized (Bauman 2000; DePaulo 2015; Vogel and Oschmann 2013).

Recently, scholars have questioned the shift from a solid to liquid society, as some of its consequences (e.g., decline in social capital, erosion of civic engagement, increasing social isolation) represent predominant social problems (cf. Glover 2018; Hortulanus, et al. 2006; Putnam 2000). Our findings provide a new lens to think about and understand leisure practiced in solitude. While previous research has suggested the individualization of leisure time can keep people from forging meaningful relationships (Putnam 2000; Toepoel 2013), our findings reveal the ways individualized leisure time, like dining out alone, can also nurture the relationship a person has with themselves; arguably the most important relationship a person can have

Related to these ideas of experiencing enjoyment through solo leisure, like dining out alone, our findings also illustrate the strong ties between food and leisure. Findings suggest the enjoyment and pleasure that stems from dining out alone is a layered leisure experience that involves not only the consumption and appreciation of food, but also a sharing of these food experiences with others in a digital leisure space (i.e., Instagram). In this way, these findings illuminate a paradoxical relationship between doing things alone, while simultaneously seeking

connection(s) with others by sharing representations of those experiences through social media. Indeed, digitization has made it possible to be connected to others, at almost all times, and often through multiple mobile devices (Lupton 2015; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). Mobile devices have made the necessity of physical space, proximity, and time (components that were previously required to form and maintain connections with others) obsolete (Bauman 2003; Brabazon 2017).

Brabazon (2017) noted how the ways we connect to others are related to the concept of deterritorialization. She explained that deterritorialization refers to the ways people, who have access to a mobile device, can gain access to their social network from almost anywhere in the world, and establish points of connection without having to share physical space with the people with whom they wish to be connected to. The Instagram posts themselves and the ways people can engage in dining out alone while simultaneously seeking connections with others certainly demonstrate this idea. However, why do people choose to do so? We can gain some insight into this choice from our findings.

Prior to the proliferation of mobile devices, a solo diner may have brought a book to read when dining in a restaurant alone. Yet, Hay (2015) noted, “It is rare even today for the single diner to dine alone, as mobile devices...have replaced the book as their preferred dining companion” (2015, 200). Indeed, mobile phones have become extensions of bodies (Lupton 2015). Lupton explained, “The boundaries between self and Other, human and machine, body and technology have become ever more blurred” (2015, 167). In this way, mobile devices may offer security when facing situations that are perceived as uncomfortable, which may include dining out alone. But are these devices perceived as a security measure because they provide solo diners with “substitute communities” (Bauman 2001) and much-desired companionship?

Bauman (2001) discussed the notion of substitute communities or “peg communities” (a term based upon two-hour communities formed in a cloakroom of a theatre) and warned of their possible dangers. He suggested, “People do long for communities they miss. They want the real stuff, but real stuff being unavailable, they settle for substitutes” (Franklin 2003, 214). Peg communities are filled with people who will never meet again; producing transient and short-lived bonds (Bauman 2001). That said, are SMSs, like Instagram, and trending hashtags (which can now be ‘followed’ by individuals) creating these peg communities or “ghost ties” (Glover 2018, 30) that reify the social challenges of a fragmented world? Or, do these liquid connections provide people with the courage needed to engage in (traditionally) social or group-based leisure activities in solitude?

Choosing to use a mobile device when dining out alone is also influenced by the focus on productivity in western cultures, where it is valued to be/appear busy. The value placed on a busy or “hurried life” life is suggestive of a liquid modern world (Davis 2013; Lee 2014). In an article by Ross (2017, June 23), describing her experience of dining alone, she explained how she associates mealtime with productivity time. She shared, “Eating out alone, without a friend or computer or anything to occupy my hands and my time, sends red-alert signals to my psyche that I am wasting precious minutes which could be spent working or socializing or entertaining myself.” Our findings echo this idea. For example, in multiple posts that we analyzed, users shared photos of their meal, alongside a book, notepad, and/or computer. Bauman (2003) has referred to this eagerness to appear busy using mobile devices, in his book *Liquid Love*. He suggested, that in doing this, people can defuse “the pressure that non-virtual closeness is in the habit of exerting” (2003, 63). The discomfort of being alone may influence a person’s choice to

connect with others through social media during moments of solitude. But from where is such discomfort derived?

Our findings illustrate that some users perceived there to be a level of “fearlessness” or courage that was needed to dine out alone. Use of phrases like, “I’m not afraid to eat alone” makes it clear that solo diners may perceive a level of discomfort while dining out, lending support to research on the stigma of dining out alone (Gilovich et al. 2000; Ratner and Hamilton 2015). Perhaps these perceptions of discomfort are seeded in experiences of stigmatization – like we saw from @instadiner63 who was upset by the “brutal” location of a table for one that was positioned behind a column at a restaurant. Although it is not possible to know whether users assumed they would be judged by others for dining out alone, this research does reveal the ways stigma can be reproduced by people choosing to partake in solo leisure activities. For example, our findings illuminate the ways people can reproduce stigma tied to being alone (e.g., #catlady; #foreverlonely) through their posts related to #tableforone. It is important to note, given the research context, it is difficult to denote the true intent behind the use of these hashtags; yet, our findings do suggest that stigma tied to dining out alone can stem from solo diners themselves. Future research could endeavor to explore the meaning of such posts, and solo diners’ perceptions of their leisure activities to further understand underlying stigma and/or perceived stigma.

Importantly, our findings also demonstrate how individuals can celebrate doing things alone (e.g., #datingmyself; #independentwoman; #goodlife). These celebratory and positive representations on Instagram work to normalize the choice to engage in leisure activities alone. By sharing their thoughts on the experience of doing things alone (e.g., as an enjoyable experience), Instagram users help to counter assumptions about what the experience is like (e.g.,

something to be feared because you are alone). In turn, our findings illustrate the ways #tableforone can be used as a form of political practice (cf. Shaw 2001), helping to disrupt and dismantle assumptions that being alone means lacking social connections (whether that is friends and/or a romantic partner).

Conclusion

The frequent usage of hashtags like #tableforone on SMSs like Instagram confirms how people are exploring new ways to relate to leisure and food. User-generated content positions dining out alone as an enjoyable leisure practice. People who participate in solo leisure activities, traditionally done in the company of others, can do so with more confidence and less fear – with or without the ‘security’ of their mobile devices. Yet, as our findings also suggest, some stigma does remain. Future research could investigate the relationship between dining out alone and different stigmas, including the stigma tied to singlehood (i.e., singlism) (cf. DePaulo 2006).

To foster solo leisure experiences, and to continue to mobilize individuals who have been (and sometimes still are) marginalized for being alone, leisure spaces like restaurants, must work harder to challenge stigma tied to engaging in leisure alone. For instance, a more deliberate staging of tables and patron seating may foster a more inviting environment for people who choose to dine alone. Hay (2015) has also highlighted some possibilities for how restaurants can become more inclusive of solo diners (e.g., communal table seating, individual confirmed or reserved tables, restaurants that cater specifically to solo diners). Additionally, leisure spaces that support individualized participation can promote this through SMSs and hashtag communities (e.g., #tableforone #solotraveller).

Furthermore, in an ever-increasing mobile time, we recognize virtual lives (and representations) require deliberations of virtual/real, online/offline binaries (cf. Cousineau,

Oakes, and Johnson 2019). To do so, future research related to experiences of dining out alone, or solo leisure more broadly, could employ strategies that allow for the exploration of “the textures of social life which result as people combine online and offline experiences in complex, and unpredictable fashion” (Hine 2015, 13). Likewise, greater attention could be paid to the various types of solo leisure (e.g., solo movie or concert going) engaged in by individuals, and the ways in which different intersecting identity factors (e.g., age, gender, relationships status, race) may influence these practices and experiences.

In closing, when people redefine traditional boundaries of leisure it can embolden others to do the same (DePaulo 2015). As this research illustrates, people can and do experience both happiness and pleasure from engaging in solo leisure pursuits, like dining out alone. In a liquid modern world, one does not have to be a lonely number.

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